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**Leading with Stage Fright:
Female-Identifying Leaders Navigating Imposter Feelings in the For-Profit Sector**

by

Keeley Norton

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership

St. Catherine University

St. Paul, MN

December 2021

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Acknowledgements

I have many to thank for the completion of this paper. First, to my participants who so openly shared their stories with me for all of us to learn. I am so grateful for your voices, your insights, and your leadership. Next, to my research advisor, Sharon Radd, for her ongoing support. Sharon, thank you for always believing in me and pushing me to do my best work, but also for encouraging me to slow down, take breaks, and enjoy the process of learning, challenging, growing. To my MAOL classmates, who gave feedback, reminded me of deadlines, and shared many laughs and encouragement along the way. To my friends and family, who always listened and supported me throughout my MAOL journey.

To my husband, who I married exactly one week after sending this thesis to my defense committee, for giving me endless support as I completed this project. Thank you for your compassion, your humor, and all the slack you picked up on my behalf when I spent my nights reading, analyzing, and writing.

And finally, to the books that gave me an escape when I needed a break from school. There are too many to fully list, but especially the ones whose characters lent me their names for my pseudonyms: *Home Before Dark*, *Know My Name*, *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder*, *The Four Winds*, *The Mary Shelley Club*, *Shipped*, *Finlay Donovan Is Killing It*, *The People We Meet on Vacation*, *Survive the Night*, *The Ex Talk*, and *The Night Swim*.

Abstract

The imposter phenomenon refers to one's persistent feelings of self-doubt, despite any external evidence of success, and fear of being discovered as a fraud (Clance & Imes, 1978). Research shows women experience imposter feelings more frequently than men, and experiences with imposter feelings can have a negative impact on job performance, career trajectories, and mental well-being (Hirschfeld, 1985; McGregor et al., 2008; Kumar & Jagacinski, 2005; Cusack et al., 2013; Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016). However, few studies attempt to understand the full impact of imposter feelings on leaders or how leaders manage these feelings in order to effectively lead. This study sought to understand the imposter phenomenon in female-identifying, for-profit leaders and explores the experiences of ten women leaders who have experience managing imposter feelings in their careers. After conducting interviews with each woman and analyzing them using Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory, three overarching themes emerged: *Triggers of Stage Fright*, *Impact of Imposter Feelings on Performance*, and *Imposter Feelings and Impression Management*. These themes, and the sub-themes within each, illustrate how imposter feelings can serve as a leadership barrier to women and must be effectively managed.

In his play *As You Like It*, Shakespeare (1599/1936) famously wrote, “All the world’s a stage/And all the men and women are merely players” (2.7.139-140). In his work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman (1959) echoes a similar sentiment, arguing every human interaction is like a play, where those interacting are actors, playing roles and acting as idealized versions of themselves in those specific parts. If the world is a stage and every interaction is a performance, we must ask the question: What happens when someone feels stage fright in their role, and that role is her everyday life? Further, what happens if the role that gives one stage fright is leadership, a role that involves high stakes decision-making, leading teams of people, and creating strategies for the future? If a leader experiences stage fright just by, well, leading, how does it impact their performance, the other actors, the audience?

The imposter phenomenon, also known as imposter syndrome, is a type of stage fright, and it can be a leadership barrier to many (Neureiter and Traut-Mattausch, 2016). Imposter phenomenon refers to “a pattern of behavior wherein people (even those with adequate external evidence of success) doubt their abilities and have a persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud” (Mullangi & Jaski, 2019, p. 403). Imposter phenomenon is increasingly more prevalent in the media and academic studies, linked to job burnout, anxiety, and productivity barriers at work (McGregor et. al 2008; Lane, 2015; Vergauwe et al., 2015). It is important to understand how leaders can successfully manage these feelings to effectively lead. In my study, I use the term “imposter feelings” to describe the feelings one has when experiencing the imposter phenomenon, such as feelings of self-doubt, attributing success to luck or chance, or fear of being discovered as a fraud.

This thesis argues that the experiences women leaders have with imposter feelings create a unique barrier to leadership performance. Imposter feelings can generate a feeling of stage fright in one’s leadership role, and this stage fright can negatively affect one’s performance by

limiting productivity, impacting leadership identity, and affecting one's mental well-being. However, leaders can employ a variety of coping mechanisms to minimize these feelings and create a more effective leadership performance.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to identify how female leaders in the for-profit business sector navigate their experiences with imposter feelings to effectively lead. While many researchers have tackled imposter phenomenon regarding therapy techniques, academic settings, or work in general, few have explored imposter phenomenon within the context of leadership, using leaders with imposter feelings as their data source. Studies show women experience higher rates of imposter phenomenon than men. As women take on leadership positions in often male-dominated fields, my study seeks to understand their experiences with imposter feelings, how they have managed them, and with what result.

This study will address an existing gap in literature. Though researchers have studied the imposter phenomenon for years and it has gained increasing traction in the media, less is known about how imposter feelings affect for-profit leadership and how leaders, especially women, can effectively cope with and overcome them. In addition to addressing this gap, the results will also offer information about leadership and imposter feelings that may be useful for anyone experiencing them, or anyone working closely with those who do.

Positionality/Reflexivity Statement

I am a white, able-bodied, straight, cisgender woman, and I bring all these identities to my research as the lens through which I interact with the world. Additionally, I have struggled with imposter feelings throughout my academic and professional careers. As a first-generation college student, I felt out of place during my undergraduate academic career, often worrying that I did not belong there. Despite graduating with high academic honors, taking on internships,

leading one of the campus's largest organizations, and working throughout college, I fell into a routine of questioning myself, downplaying any aspects of my identity that I felt "othered" me from my peers, and worrying I would someday drastically fail. These feelings continued into my career, where I found myself questioning my judgment and becoming convinced someday my bosses or coworkers would wake up to the idea that I was not nearly as talented as they thought.

I often feel that my imposter feelings stand in the way of my own leadership, impacting my self-confidence, sense of belonging in the spaces I work and study, performance, and mental and emotional well-being. I acknowledge I have privilege in many ways, and I also acknowledge that my own imposter feelings sometimes limit the opportunities I take. As I began the MAOL program at St. Kate's and began taking on leadership roles in my office and community, I started wondering where these feelings were coming from, if they were true, and if others felt the same way I did. It was only a few years ago that I came across the term "imposter syndrome", and the realization that many others felt the feelings I had tried to bury was eye-opening to me. I became increasingly curious with how these feelings impacted leaders and how they managed them in their everyday lives.

The experiences I have with imposter feelings inspired me to conduct this research, and they also informed how I approached the topic. They allowed me to form connections with my participants and perhaps helped them open in ways they would not have with another researcher. I have tried to limit the ways my own experiences or bias could impact the results of this research. Acknowledging my own viewpoint has been central to the set-up in this project and is something I examined within every step of it. I did this by keeping a memo journal throughout my research project where I could reflect on each interview and data analysis experience and identify the areas my own bias may have impacted it. This running journal helped me practice awareness of my own opinions and bias so I could reduce it as much as possible. In my findings,

I relied on my interviewees' own voices as much as possible and looked for common phrases or words within passages when triangulating data. This allowed for my research to focus on the voices of my participants rather than my own. I also worked closely with a research advisor who is aware of my personal experiences and could act as an external audit to make sure my own experiences were not overly impacting my research.

Conceptual Context

My research question asks, "How do female-identifying, for-profit leaders who have experienced imposter feelings manage them to effectively lead?" This section reviews current literature on the topic of imposter phenomenon and its relationship to women, work, and leadership. It also identifies gaps in current literature.

Defining Imposter Phenomenon and Imposter Feelings

This section provides definitions for imposter feelings for my study and discusses imposter traits associated with those grappling with the imposter phenomenon. Imposter phenomenon, also known as imposter syndrome or imposterism, refers to one's persistent feelings of self-doubt, despite any external evidence of successes, and fear of being discovered as a fraud. Clance and Imes (1978) first coined the term imposter phenomenon to describe "an internal experience of intellectual phonies" (p. 1). Clance and Imes (1978) used this term in their discussion of high-achieving women who faced significant self-doubt about their successes.

Since Clance and Imes (1978) first wrote about the imposter phenomenon, other researchers have continued to explore the phenomenon in the context of academics, work, gender dynamics, psychotherapy, and more. While Clance and Imes (1978) described the phenomenon as unique to women, further research has shown it is something that can impact all genders but presents more frequently in women than in men (McGregor et al., 2008; Kumar & Jagacinski, 2005; Cusack et al., 2013). Literature suggests that imposter feelings can affect up to two-thirds

of people in certain settings, though its prevalence could be underestimated in certain areas dominated by cultures of silence, such as in higher education (Gravois, 2007; Evans et al., 2018). Imposter feelings may be heightened by aspects such as perfectionism or social inequities (Vergauwe et al., 2015; Mullangi and Jagsi, 2019). As imposter feelings take their toll, people experiencing them may feel heightened stress, anxiety, and burnout, and as a result procrastinate, halt productivity, and feel insecure (Neureiter and Traut-Mattausch 2016; Hirschfeld 1985; Mullangi and Jaski, 2019). Further in the literature review, I discuss these aspects in detail, starting first with the definition of imposter feelings and imposter phenomenon traits.

Definition of Imposter Feelings

In my study, I refer to the term *imposter feelings* as a demonstration of the imposter phenomenon. *Imposter feelings* refers to experiences in which one doubts their abilities, successes, or talents and has a persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud, despite any external evidence suggesting otherwise. Those managing imposter feelings may also attribute their successes to luck or chance rather than hard work or qualifications. The study uses the term *imposters* to designate those who are experiencing or have experienced imposter feelings.

Imposter Phenomenon Traits

Literature discusses three overarching traits of imposter phenomenon: believing others view imposters as more competent than they are, fearing others will discover they are frauds, and difficulty internalizing success (Leary et al., 2000). To imposters, these feelings are persistent and deeply held beliefs. Leary et al. (2000) summarizes the imposter paradox as, “Imposters supposedly fear that others will detect their inadequacies, yet they derogate themselves, externalize their successes, dismiss praises, and even openly admit that they feel like a fraud” (p. 727). This section discusses these paradoxical traits to provide context for the imposter phenomenon and one’s experience with it.

The first trait, believing they are less competent than others perceive, drives imposter feelings and fears. In their initial study of the imposter phenomenon, Clance and Imes (1978) describe, “Women who experience the imposter phenomenon maintain a strong belief that they are not intelligent; in fact, they are convinced that they have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise” (p. 1). Similarly, Leary et al. (2000) discovered those with high imposter scores tended to give themselves low scores on self-appraisals, but they would also indicate a belief that others would score them higher. Those managing imposter feelings may find themselves constantly comparing themselves with others to judge their own competence (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017).

Though studies have shown imposters are less likely to cheat their way to success than non-imposters, feelings of fraudulence continue to haunt imposters and have affective impacts (Ferrari, 2005). Since imposters believe themselves to be frauds despite successes, they face persistent fear that others will discover they are not as capable as they seem. This can affect how one portrays self-confidence. In a study involving test-taking, Leary et al. (2000) found participants expressed greater confidence in themselves when they believed the scores would be private rather than shared with the researchers. Leary et al. (2000) theorized downplaying one’s abilities may lower expectations and be a way to protect one’s self-image in the face of potential failure. By setting lower expectations, imposters are less likely to fail, and thus (they believe) less likely to be discovered as a fraud. In contrast, some imposters go to great lengths to avoid failure and put pressure on themselves to constantly perform, adopting perfectionist or neurotic tendencies (Vergauwe et al., 2015; Hirshfeld, 1987; Cusack et al., 2013).

Finally, imposters have difficulty internalizing their successes (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017). Imposters doubt their own abilities, even when they have adequate external evidence to support their competence. People managing imposter feelings may have difficulty accepting their

success in forms of accolades or feel extreme discomfort when referred to as an expert in their field (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017). Lane (2015) describes, “[Imposters] are caught in a cycle in which they require external sources of validation (e.g. praise, comparisons to the performance of others) to feel competent, and yet, when they receive such validation, they engage in discrediting behaviors that prevent them from internalizing it.” (p. 125).

Imposter Phenomenon and Women

Research shows that imposter feelings affect women at higher rates and in different ways than men. This section discusses the connection of the imposter phenomenon to women, how it presents more frequently in women, and the ways in which women experience imposter feelings in different ways, such as seeing themselves as less intelligent and having a greater fear of success. Women also have unique cultural expectations of them, including in the corporate world, which can heighten their imposter feelings.

Clance and Imes (1978) were the first to identify the imposter phenomenon and connect it to women. They discussed how women were more likely than men to project feelings of their success outward, attributing success more strongly to luck or temporary effort rather than talents, accomplishments, or ongoing hard work (Clance & Imes, 1978). Further research has endorsed these findings and explored how imposter phenomenon presents more frequently in women than it does in men. Several researchers have compared men and women in their results and found women score higher rates of imposter feelings in both the workplace and academic settings (McGregor et al., 2008; Kumar & Jagacinski, 2005; Cusack et al., 2013). Similarly, Legassie et al. (2008) studied imposter phenomenon in medical residents, finding that women and those born outside the United States reported higher rates of imposter phenomenon.

Along with higher rates of imposter phenomenon, women also experience imposter feelings differently than men. Women with imposter phenomenon often see themselves as less

intelligent than their peers and struggle to connect competence to learning. Kumar and Jagacinski (2006) studied the connection between imposter feelings and achievement goals. In their study, they found women reported lower confidence in their intelligence. Additional findings showed a rejection of simple improvement and learning as a basis for feeling competent (Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006). Further, they explain, “[S]imple improvement of a task is not seen as producing feelings of competence for women who have imposter fears; instead, they must outperform others to feel competent” (Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006, p. 156). In their study, they found women imposters did not strive for goals the same way men did because of differing views on intelligence and learning.

Additionally, women tend to set lower achievement bars for themselves and may experience greater anxiety when they excel. Women with imposter feelings report greater fears of success. Fried-Buchalter (1997) found fear of success is greater among female managers than male managers. While fear of failure measures were equal between men and women, Fried-Buchalter (1997) notes that women often set lower aspirations for themselves, which possibly affects their more moderate scores. However, when faced with negative feedback, women with imposter feelings tended to show more resilience than men with imposter feelings (Badawy et al., 2018). This suggests that while women have more imposter fears than men, and greater fear of success, when faced with challenges that trigger their imposter feelings, they are more likely than men to find effective strategies to overcome the setbacks and improve.

Cultural Norms as Related to Women and Imposter Phenomenon

Society places a unique pressure on girls, which can lead to insecurity, self-criticism, and other negative behaviors (Pipher, 1994). As girls grow up, this insecurity can manifest in women as imposter feelings. In her book *Reviving Ophelia*, Mary Pipher (1994) describes the societal and cultural pressures put on early adolescent girls, noting how mainstream media often belittles

and oppresses young women. The pressure can cause insecurity in pre-teen and teenage girls, leading to eating disorders, lack of confidence, depression, and other affective disorders (Pipher, 1994). Pipher (1994) attempts to warn families about the negative effects of media consumption, which can give girls unhealthy role models, put unnecessary pressure on them, and give them unrealistic expectations of how to look and act.

The pressure Pipher (1994) discusses has been even more exacerbated by the rise of social media. Social media allows for a curated, highlight reel of one's life, and observers may find themselves comparing their own lives against these snapshots and idealizing the unattainable. For example, Mills et. al (2018) discusses social media, specifically posting images of themselves to various sites, related to women feeling more anxious, less confident, and less physically attractive afterwards. This was even more harmful when women posted retouched photos of themselves, giving them an unattainable standard for comparison. Primack et. al (2019) also discusses the harmful effects of social media, noting how negative experiences with social media led to people feeling more isolated, and Vogel et. al (2014) discusses how frequent Facebook use relates to lower self-esteem and poorer self-evaluations. Guillaume et. al (2019) connects social media to imposter feelings, noting that academics with imposter feelings felt more pronounced effects when scrolling through academic Twitter and comparing their own accolades to those of their peers. Guillaume et. al (2019) explains, "Engagement in social media led us to question our legitimacy as scholars and perpetuated imposter phenomenon...[V]iewing posts by friends and colleagues regarding their latest publications, book contracts, or conference acceptances make us feel like imposters" (p. 132). While their study was not unique to women, it paints the picture of the harmful impacts social media can have on one's self-doubt and self-worth.

Media, cultural norms, and expectations of women's roles may contribute to feelings of being a fraud when female-identifying leaders have strong career aspirations. Often, society does not place the same career aspirations on women as it does on men, which can cause women to feel uncomfortable when they yearn for something outside cultural expectations (Carbajal, 2018). In one study, a woman battling imposter feelings noted she feels uncomfortable striving for leadership roles because she was taught to exemplify humility as a Christian American woman, which feels counterintuitive to exerting confidence needed to achieve higher positions (Dahlvig, 2013). Women striving for careers may also be painted as power-hungry or cold, and this image may deter women from climbing the corporate ladder. Clance and O'Toole (1988) illustrate the negative stereotype given to working women as a "hard-driving career woman who is not 'feminine', has no close relationships, and ends up alone" (p. 6). When society paints stereotypes like this on career-driven women, they may feel uncomfortable aspiring to these positions.

Women with careers often face the burden of juggling multiple roles, both in and out of the workplace (employee, mother, spouse, housekeeper, friend, etc.). When women feel pressure from society to perform each role perfectly, it can feel impossible to live up to these expectations (Cusack et al., 2013). This internal struggle and feeling of defeat could further feelings of fraudulence.

Additionally, our culture socializes women to behave in ways that keep them from being seen as meaningful contributors (Mullangi & Jagsi, 2019). Women often phrase suggestions as questions rather than statements to generate consensus, which is a way to create credibility by avoiding abrasiveness (Johnson, 2017). Another study shows that women tend to minimize salary expectations and ambitions to boost relationships in mixed-gendered offices (Bursztyn,

2017). These learned behaviors, along with the societal pressures previously discussed, can lead to uncomfortable feelings of imposterism when women act outside these norms.

Corporate Culture as Related to Women and Imposter Phenomenon

Lack of representation of female leaders contributes to women's imposter feelings. When women work in male-dominated fields or organizations that favor more traditionally masculine leadership traits, women may feel less comfortable with their own leadership styles. Corporate culture in for-profit organizations historically leans towards more masculine leadership styles and has fewer female-identifying leaders, which both may contribute to imposter feelings (Carbajal, 2018).

Corporate culture often leans toward masculine views of leadership, with which many women may have trouble identifying. Carbajal (2018) notes, "The model of leadership has been traditionally consistent with masculine characteristics. Women might be more relational...in their approach and thereby be dismissed because they are perceived as weak" (p. 15). When organizations value power, hierarchy, and domination over more traditionally feminine aspects like cooperation or intuition, women who use the latter style may feel their leadership is inadequate. As a result, "women may choose to disengage from leadership...to escape the masculine, normative expectations of executive leadership" (Dahlvig, 2013, pg. 97). For those who do seek leadership positions, they may try to adopt leadership styles less natural for them in order to fit into organizational norms (Cabajal, 2018). This too can backfire though; women can be penalized for exerting power and speaking up in meetings, whereas men who act in the same way are instead praised (Brescoll, 2011). This forces women to frequently act in a juxtaposed space as they attempt to navigate multiple pressures.

Additionally, lack of female representation contributes to women's imposter feelings across industries. Ladge et al. (2019) discuss how women entrepreneurs suffer greater imposter

feelings because of lack of representation and lack of mentors in their field. Ladge et al. (2019) explains, “When women entrepreneurs see few female role models to look up to, they may begin to believe their success as an error; if it were possible for them to succeed on their own merit, they would see other women succeed too” (p. 620). Without mentors, women may not feel they have a place in leadership positions.

Summary

While imposter feelings are not unique to women, women experience the imposter phenomenon in ways that are distinctly different from how men do. These feelings may connect to the pressure placed on women, which starts as insecurity of young girls and grows into role confusion and competing identities in women with careers.

Impacts of Imposter Feelings at Work

Imposter feelings can be somewhat of a double-edged sword to leadership. The perfectionist tendencies of imposters can create motivated and dedicated hard workers; however, these same tendencies can significantly degrade one’s abilities to endure as an employee and leader (Gottlieb et al., 2019). Rice and Liu (2020) note while perfectionist tendencies can create high striving, detail-oriented employees who produce quality work and are valued by supervisors, the same characteristics in extremes can show warning signs of personal and occupational difficulties, such as being overly critical to supervisees or having difficulty taking breaks. While few studies have specifically examined the relationship between imposter phenomenon and leadership, some have explored the relationship between imposter phenomenon and work. Those struggling with the imposter phenomenon may see negative impacts on their work as it limits job performance and serves as a barrier to career advancement. Additionally, imposter feelings can negatively impact organizations through staff burnout, turnover, and engagement.

Impact on Job Performance

Imposter phenomenon can negatively impact one's ability to work efficiently and confidently. To illustrate the effect of imposter phenomenon on work, Hirschfeld (1985) describes:

Jane often spends twice as long as necessary on everything she does, from the smallest memo to the most important assignment. Jane fears that if she slows down, people will realize that she is not as bright and competent as she seems, so she takes work home most nights, puts in hours on the weekend, and suffers from severe anxiety during her brief vacation. (p. 44)

This description fits other researchers' views of imposter phenomenon in the workplace, which can hurt productivity, decision-making, and performance in general.

Impact on Productivity. Imposter feelings at work can impact one's productivity in a number of ways. Rather than putting all one's effort into work, imposters often spend a great deal of time second-guessing themselves, rechecking work, or over-preparing for tasks. Hirschfeld (1985) discusses how imposters overthink even the most mundane tasks because they do not believe they are well-suited for their jobs and thus not capable of performing. She also discusses how some who struggle with imposter phenomenon procrastinate their work, especially a new project because "they fear that it will reveal their incompetence to others" (Hirschfeld, 1985, p. 45). Since imposters do not feel gratification from past successes, they tend to lack confidence needed to start new tasks. Similarly, Hutchins and Rainbolt (2017) discovered patterns of lowered productivity among academic faculty who experienced imposter feelings. The participants in their study reported struggling to produce scholarly work because of imposter concerns, feeling unmotivated after comparing themselves to colleagues, and second-guessing their expertise (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017).

Impact on Decision-Making. Those experiencing imposter feelings, intimidated by their peers or lacking confidence in their abilities, may also struggle to make decisions. Imposters often avoid risks because of underlying feelings of fraudulence. To avoid failure, they over-prepare for tasks by gathering significant information first, taking too long to make decisions, or failing to grasp opportunities (Hirshfeld, 1985, p. 46). Some prefer to avoid decision-making altogether because they fear making the incorrect decision will result in discovery of their fraudulence (Lane, 2015).

Other Job Performance Impacts. One's job performance may also be affected by other impacts of imposter feelings, such as difficulty communicating. Lane (2015) studied the effect of imposter feelings on young adults transitioning into careers. In addition to work avoidance, imposter fears created certain communication barriers for early career adults, such as fear of talking to supervisors and picking up nervous tics when speaking. Participants reported habits of stumbling over words, looking at their feet, or other nervous habits, which they felt "betrayed their internal feeling of inadequacy" and caused them to "misrepresent themselves while at job interviews, meetings, or classes" (Lane, 2015, p. 123).

Imposter feelings may also impact job performance by contributing to lowered job satisfaction and organizational citizenship commitment. Vergauwe et al. (2015) studied the impact of imposter feelings on work attitudes and found imposter tendencies negatively related to both job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behavior. Vergauwe et al. (2015) explain:

[E]mployees with strong [imposter phenomenon] tendencies (i) are rather dissatisfied with their jobs, (ii) report less [organizational citizenship behavior], and (iii) express a stronger intention to stay in the organization because the monetary, social, and psychological costs associated with leaving the organization are perceived as too high. (p. 578)

Though imposters may still be highly engaged with their jobs, their engagement may come from a source of being afraid to leave or seek promotion rather than genuine interest in their work.

Impact on Career Development

While experiences with imposter feelings certainly impact one's ability to lead and advance their career by affecting job performance and well-being, they also can limit one's career aspirations and create a barrier for leadership effectiveness. Neureiter and Traut-Mattausch (2016) studied the relationship between imposter phenomenon and career development and found imposter feelings had negative effects on career planning and striving. They note:

As imposter feelings develop from low self-esteem and a high fear of failure or success, participants suffering from the [imposter phenomenon] may not have seen ways to take the next steps, thereby showing less clear plans or strategies for their career. (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016, p. 10).

Those managing imposter feelings tend to get comfortable where they are and face significant fears or anxieties at the thought of changing careers or roles. This aligns with other research that has suggested imposter feelings may be triggered by risk-taking or navigating new experiences (Lane, 2015; Hirshfeld, 1985). As Neureiter and Traut-Mattausch (2016) describe, an imposter's "first priority is to secure a job and maintain the perception that they are good at the job they have" (p. 10). Career planning beyond that can feel like an overwhelming task.

These studies demonstrate how imposter feelings can impact all forms of work, including productivity, decision-making, involvement in the workplace, and career aspirations in general. This is especially important to consider in the context of leadership, where these tasks can have a significant impact on one's role and community.

Impact on the Organization

When imposter feelings have a negative impact on employees, they are also then having a negative impact on organizations. Organizations may see less engaged employees, less productive employees, and less effective employees when they are managing imposter feelings (Vergauwe et al., 2015; Hirshfeld, 1985; Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017). A study in Forbes suggests that disengaged employees can cost employers 34% of their annual salary because of their lack of engagement (Borysenko, 2019). Additionally, researchers have linked imposter feelings to employee burnout, which Deshmukh et al. (2021) describe as “emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and cynicism secondary to prolonged work-related stress” (p. 94). In their study, 59% of those surveyed who reported experiencing imposter syndrome also showed signs of burnout (Deshmukh et al., 2021). According to Borysenko (2019), burnout is responsible to a high level of employee turnover, ranging from 20% to 50% or more, depending on the organization.

As this section discussed, those with imposter feelings are not the only ones who feel their affects; the organizations who employ them may also see financial losses due to the impact of imposter feelings on productivity, burnout, and, thus, turnover. O’Connell and Kung (2007) discuss how employee turnover leads to both financial loss as organizations spend money recruiting, hiring, and re-training along with loss to organization morale as other workers take on additional workloads during this period and navigate new coworker relationships. Organizations must address imposter feelings to avoid the costly impacts they can have. Additionally, organizations should consider the well-being of their employees with imposter feelings, which I discuss in the following section.

Impact of Imposter Feelings on Well-Being

Experiences with the imposter phenomenon can severely degrade one's well-being, which affects their relationship with work and their personal lives. In their discussion of imposter syndrome, Clance and O'Toole (1988) note that while imposter feelings do not necessarily prevent success, they are still important to consider and treat because imposters do not have a full grasp on their competence levels, thus are not fully empowered to internalize strengths, accept defeats, and enjoy their work. Further, they may turn down opportunities to advance or not even attempt to accomplish their dreams. This can damage mental health and not allow them to experience joy in their work. This section discusses the affective impacts of imposter feelings on one's mental well-being.

Heightened Anxiety and Stress

Those with imposter feelings may also feel other psychological stresses such as anxiety and fear. Anxiety stems from fear of being found out as a fraud or fear of firing, demotion, or failure. Studies have found those with imposter feelings report higher rates of anxiety than those without (Cozzarelli & Major, 1990; Topping & Kimmel, 1985; Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006; Lane, 2015; Guillaume et al., 2019). Similarly, in their study of academic faculty and imposter feelings, Hutchins and Rainbolt (2017) note participants in the study viewed their imposter experiences as emotionally unsettling, disruptive, and creators of adverse psychological outcomes, such as heightened stress. Though anxieties may subside temporarily when one completes a task, it often returns at the thought of new tasks or future evaluations (Lane, 2015). Some also experience stress surrounding the feedback they receive after task completion, and studies also show imposters are more likely to have more negative reactions to failure (Cozzarelli & Major, 1990; Badawy et al., 2018). However, adverse psychological effects in imposters do not only stem from moments of failure; some also experience guilt surrounding their successes, which they believe they do not deserve (Clance & O'Toole, 1988; Lane, 2015). Lane (2015)

describes the guilt those with imposter feelings experience when receiving praise, explaining, “Participants reported guilt when receiving praise for achievements that they felt were unearned or when outperforming peers or colleagues” (p. 123). This guilt can also contribute to anxious feelings or stress.

Depressive Feelings

Research also connects imposter feelings to depression. McGregor et al. (2008) conducted a study of 186 students to determine the link between the two, which yielded a positive correlation between imposter phenomenon scores and Beck Depression Inventory scores. It is notable that their research does not suggest causation between imposter phenomenon and depression but instead points out a relationship between the two. Their data suggests imposters may experience symptoms similar to individuals with depressive disorders, and they also theorize one’s imposter thoughts may be masking symptoms of depression (McGregor et al., 2008). Further, they explain, “Individuals who feel like an imposter may not achieve as much as they are capable of because depressive symptoms may impede their productivity” (McGregor et al., 2008, pg. 47).

Emotion Exhaustion

The stress of mentally managing imposter feelings can lead to emotional exhaustion. In the work environment, this can lead to employee burnout (Hirshfeld, 1985; Gottlieb et al., 2019; Legassie et al., 2008). In a study on imposter phenomenon and work outcomes, Hutchins et al. (2017) found the imposter phenomenon was positively related to emotional exhaustion and negatively related to job satisfaction. They found those struggling with imposter feelings often use avoidant strategies to ignore the negative thoughts or use mental resources to distract themselves from, rather than address, the feelings. This can be considered a poor investment of mental resources, leaving imposters with fewer resources to complete tasks or effectively

manage their feelings, thus increasing their risk of emotional exhaustion (Hutchins et al., 2017). They explain, “Imposter may experience low job satisfaction...from the emotional exhaustion they experience from ruminating on imposter feelings” (Hutchins et al., 2017, pg. 11). As imposters become emotionally exhausted, they are more likely to experience burnout within their careers.

Overcoming Imposter Feelings

While the impacts of imposter feelings on wellbeing can be overwhelming, it is important to note that imposter feelings can be temporary and literature discusses multiple ways to tackle them. While Clance and Imes (1978) discussed various therapy treatments that could lessen imposter feelings, including group therapy sessions, individualized exercises, role-playing, and “homework” techniques to practice outside therapy (p. 246). In a following study, Clance and O’Toole (1988) discussed the need to explore one’s socialization of femininity and shame associated with it through therapy sessions. Other researchers also suggest formalized processes for individuals to overcome imposter feelings, such as individualized coaching programs or formal training sessions in the workplace (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016; Ramsey & Spencer, 2019).

Further discussions have suggested more informal coping mechanisms for individuals to overcome imposter fears. In their study of academic faculty struggling with imposter feelings, Hutchins and Rainbolt (2016) noted mechanisms such as social support. This included seeking both instrumental (advice, suggestions, resources) and emotional (listening, expressing empathy) support from peers or colleagues. They also made an important distinction that some stress relief factors listed by participants only provided temporary relief, such as managing stress through alcohol, working harder, or avoidance of the feelings (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2016). They suggest active coping strategies, which involve direct action to remove stressful events from one’s life

rather than just avoiding them. Other researchers describe other active coping strategies, usually as suggestions in their study implications, such as journaling or seeking mentors (Hirschfeld, 1985; Ladge et. al, 2019).

Others have called upon the need for societal change to truly eradicate imposter feelings, suggesting that social inequality and comparison are the root causes of imposterism. Ladge et. al (2019) calls for society to recognize the various paths to success, especially for women seeking jobs in male-dominated fields. Mullangi and Jagsi (2019) suggest improving diversity in senior positions to combat bias and create more role models for women or people of color as a form of encouragement and creation of role models. They also discuss the need for organizations to actively work towards pay parity, allocating resources towards women, and recognizing the ways women meaningfully contribute (Mullangi & Jagsi, 2019). These ideas, along with the things people can do on an individual level, can help one overcome imposter feelings and ensure less people develop them in the first place.

Imposter Phenomenon and Leadership

While literature discusses the impacts of imposter feelings on work and well-being, a few studies also suggest its impact on leadership. For example, literature notes those with imposter feelings have lowered motivation to lead. In their study on career aspirations, Neureiter and Traut-Mattausch (2016) also researched the effect of the imposter phenomenon on one's motivation to lead and found it was negatively impacted. They explain imposters avoid striving for higher positions because they fear failing in a higher position, particularly one that is more visible. Imposters fear rejection from colleagues and may seek employment elsewhere rather than applying for a promotion at their own workplace (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016). Leadership is a vulnerable, public position in many organizations, so imposters, who struggle to

internalize abilities and fear being found out as frauds, calculate leadership as too high of a risk.

Neureiter and Traut-Mattausch (2016) explain:

People with imposter feelings, despite having entered the labor market successfully, will not strive for a leadership position. Even if they have all the required strengths, they will not risk being exposed as less capable, which becomes more likely under growing responsibilities. (p. 11)

For many with imposter feelings, the idea of taking on a leadership position can feel too vulnerable and overwhelming.

When those with imposter feelings do assume leadership positions, their own self-doubts may affect their subordinates. Hirshfeld (1985) explains, “As managers, imposters are overly critical and minimize what has already been accomplished, placing the maximum value on what is yet to be done” (p. 46). Though managers with imposter feelings question their own expertise internally, they often react externally by putting more pressure on their employees. They may be too rigid in their leadership, struggle to set short-term goals, not offer appropriate feedback or praise, or project their own feelings of inadequacy onto the organization itself (Hirshfeld, 1985). Others may not be tough enough because they lack confidence to exert authority, struggle with delegation, and avoid making important decisions (Hirshfeld, 1985). Overall, imposter feelings can affect all aspects of one's career development, from hindering the want to grow to impacting their leadership performance when they finally reach a higher position.

Though literature approaches the topic of imposter phenomenon and leadership, I believe it could go farther to look specifically at leaders managing imposter feelings in their roles. Much of the existing literature focuses on academic settings (particularly those in graduate professional programs, such as medical schools) or studies the psychological effects of imposter phenomenon in regard to therapy practices. Existing studies may contain cross sections of working

populations of various roles, but very few move beyond identification of imposter feelings. For example, Hirshfeld (1985) briefly discusses the negative effects of imposter feelings on managers but does not provide context for the setting or specifically speak to managers dealing with these feelings to understand how they are triggered or managed. Similarly, while Hutchins and Rainbolt (2017) study people with imposter syndrome to discover more about antecedents and coping mechanisms of imposter feelings, their study looks specifically at academic faculty, who may face different challenges and have distinctly different experiences than those leading in the for-profit sector.

My study hopes to fill these gaps. As discussed earlier, Neureiter and Traut-Mattausch (2016) note how imposter feelings can create a barrier for leadership striving, meaning those experiencing imposter phenomenon tend to have lower career goals and may avoid leadership opportunities. Given the prevalence of the imposter phenomenon, and the evidence one can overcome it, it is important to understand how leaders with these experiences manage the feelings to effectively lead. My study poses this question directly to leaders, looking to their personal experiences as evidence on how real, everyday leaders in the for-profit business setting mitigate imposter feelings to effectively lead.

Theoretical Framework

For my study, I use Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory as its theoretical framework. Goffman discusses this theory in his 1959 work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, where he describes life as a never-ending play in which people are actors (Goffman, 1959). This section discusses Goffman's theory as a framework for my research and how it can be used to understand identity and perceptions.

Goffman (1959) presents two main concepts as the basis of one's identity and navigating perceptions of others: expression and impression. Expression refers to how one presents their

identity, such as their actions, communication, or appearance. Impression is the perception one receives from another; one's expression leaves an impression on another (Goffman, 1959).

Goffman then expands on these concepts using the metaphor of a theatrical performance. He describes how one creates an expression by acting as a character, or playing a role, in a given interaction, just as a performer in a play would. As a performer, one's goal is to successfully convey their role to their audience, who has an impression of the performance. The performer hopes to create a favorable impression on their audience.

The Dramaturgical Theory uses the theater metaphor to explore various aspects of identity expression and impression management. For the purposes of this study, I employ two main theoretical concepts from Dramaturgical Theory: *performance* and *impression management*. The following sections discuss the nuances of performances, which is where performers use expression to portray their roles (and thus themselves) to their audiences, and impression management, which are strategies performers employ to maximize the impact of their performance and attempt to gain favorable audience impressions.

Performances

To describe the Dramaturgical Theory, Goffman (1959) expands upon his theater metaphor by explaining how the expression of identity is akin to a performance. The performance has several aspects that will leave an impression on the audience, including front, back, and idealization, which I explain here.

Front

Goffman (1959) refers to the front as the part of the performance in which one is observed. He describes, "Front, then, is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance" (Goffman, 1959, pg. 22).

The front includes things such as the setting of the performance, the appearance of the performer,

and the performer's actions. It also includes aspects such as one's personal front (age, sex, race, etc.). Goffman (1959) describes how, when a performer takes on a certain role in society, he often finds that the role has an established front already and he must perform in a way that maintains an existing front. To illustrate this, Goffman (1959) uses the example of the medical profession. A doctor, for example, has a predetermined front in society of wearing scrubs or a white coat, diagnosing medical issues, and working within a hospital or caregiving facility. If a doctor was presented as doing something besides these things in their role, that could be confusing for the audience. Because performers are often asked to choose from existing fronts rather than make their own, Goffman (1959) discusses how this can cause a dilemma when a front fails to suit the needs of a performer. Corporate leadership, which often leans towards masculine styles of leading, can be an example of this. If a woman enters a corporate leadership position, she may feel uncomfortable exerting masculine leadership traits, which often differ from societal expectations of how women should act. While a corporate leader role may call for someone who is commanding and decisive, this front may fail the needs of a woman leader, who has been raised to be a relational leader and generate consensus.

Back

Goffman (1959) describes back as relating to backstage, where a performer is not actively performing their role to an audience. In the backstage, "the impression fostered by the presentation is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course," indicating a more "truthful" type of performance (Goffman, 1959, pg. 112). In general, the backstage area is a place where performers can expect no audience members will intrude. Because of this, performers can be more themselves, or closer to themselves, because they are able to drop certain aspects of their performance only saved for being in front of others. When one is backstage, they are not actively seeking the impression of others, so they are worried less about expression management. For

example, a marketing director will spend a day at work “performing” tasks of their job as part of her front. This would mean running meetings, creating marketing plans, and putting on a confident, collected face as a leader. However, when that marketing director finishes her workday, she moves backstage and retreats to her private apartment. Here she is not performing a marketing director front and instead may engage in private, more personal activities. She may explore personal interests or hobbies, change into new clothes, and behave in ways inconsistent with her work persona. Her backstage actions are closer to her true self because her audience is reduced to only herself.

Idealization

An important aspect of the performance is the idea of idealization. Idealization is when a performer emphasizes certain character traits while suppressing others in relation to the audience’s values (Goffman, 1959). By doing this, a performer plays into others’ preexisting beliefs and desires. Goffman (1959) describes, “If an individual is to give expression to ideal standards during this performance, then he will have to forgo or conceal action which is inconsistent with these standards” (p. 41). Performers may choose to downplay certain aspects of their identities to establish credibility with their audiences. Similarly, performers often have an idea of how their characters should be portrayed, especially because of preexisting societal fronts, and try to act in a way that corresponds with that vision (Goffman, 1959). For example, the existing societal front for a leader suggests someone who is confident, inspiring, and decisive. A new leader may try to imitate these ideals when stepping into that role, despite any personal hesitations, because they idealize that leadership front.

Impression Management

In addition to describing the various aspects of the performance, Goffman (1959) also discusses techniques performers can employ to ensure audiences receive the intended

impressions. He calls these techniques impression management and offers three categories of them: *defensive attributes and practices*, *protective practices*, and *tact regarding tact* (Goffman, 1959). These techniques allow performers to have a hand in managing their audiences' impressions of them by actively doing things that will make the audiences more likely to buy into their performances. For the purposes of this study, I focus on *defensive attributes and practices*, and explain in detail here.

Defensive attributes and practices are things performers do to avoid embarrassment or mishap (Goffman, 1959). One practice is dramaturgical discipline. This technique aids performers in not allowing personal feelings to affect their performance (Goffman, 1959). A performer who practices dramaturgical discipline is intentional about their performances, practices presence of mind, and is actively aware of their expression. By doing so, they can cover issues that arise spur of the moment, exercise emotional control by suppressing personal emotions and respond accordingly to teammates who make mistakes. Thus, they manage their audience's impression by being dedicated to their character and ensuring they do not make mistakes that would jeopardize the desired impression (Goffman, 1959).

Another defensive practice is dramaturgical circumspection, which Goffman also refers to as prudence. This is the skill of anticipating awkward situations or conflict and successfully avoiding them (Goffman, 1959). This is often practiced through control of certain aspects of the performance. For example, one way a performer can practice dramaturgical circumspection is to control audience selection. By selecting an audience that causes minimal trouble for the performer and forgoing other audience options, the performer gains control in their performance and can have a better chance of creating a successful impression (Goffman, 1959). Another aspect of dramaturgical circumspection is choosing loyal and disciplined teammates. By doing so, the performer reduces the chances of mistakes being made in the performance or conflict

arising within the team (Goffman, 1959). In a play, an actor may feel more comfortable putting on a show with seasoned performers because he trusts their abilities to memorize lines, improvise through unexpected blips, and be familiar with the theatrical process. The same can be said for a manager who ensures their success by carefully curating their team with talented, professional members and only takes meetings with respected clients. This betters the chance the manager will perform well because they have a trusted team around them and have controlled as much as they can in the performance.

Goffman's dramaturgical theory illustrates the ways in which humans interact with one another by stepping into assumed roles associated with their various societal fronts. This theory offers a deep and unique understanding of human interaction and how people actively attempt to garner the support of others in everyday life. I believe this framework to be beneficial to my study, which I discuss further in the following section.

Method

This is a qualitative study, utilizing interviews as the main data source. My research question asked, "How do female-identifying, for-profit leaders who have experienced imposter feelings manage them to effectively lead?" I interviewed ten female-identifying leaders of the for-profit sector who had experience with imposter feelings and considered themselves leaders within their companies. This section describes the data collection process, research subjects, data analysis, and ethical considerations of the study.

Data Collection

I used interviews to collect my data. Interviews allow for in-depth discussion to truly understand one's experiences and allows the researcher to build rapport with the interview subject (O'Leary, 2017). Imposter phenomenon can be a very personal aspect of one's life with nuance, complicated emotions, and various experiences. O'Leary (2017) describes, "Interviews

allow you to develop rapport and trust; provide you with rich, in-depth qualitative data; allow for non-verbal as well as verbal data; [and] are flexible enough to allow you to explore tangents” (p. 240). This data collection strategy allowed me to go in-depth with my participants in ways other methods do not.

Data for the research study consisted of transcripts from ten semi-structured interviews, which were 60-90 minutes each. The semi-structured interview approach allowed for consistency between different participants’ interview sessions while also providing the flexibility to explore unique interviewee experiences and personal examples and probe as necessary. The interview consisted of nine questions and probes and follow-up questions as needed. The questions covered participants’ career background and leadership experiences, discussions of their experiences with imposter feelings, and information on their management of the imposter feelings (see Appendix A). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and for the sake of flexibility for all participants, I completed all interviews via Zoom. I recorded and transcribed all the interviews, which I describe in detail in the Data Analysis section.

Research Subjects

The source of data for this research was ten individuals who self-identified as female leaders within for-profit organizations and had experience with imposter feelings. I recruited participants through email invitations and two social media platforms: Facebook and LinkedIn. The email and social media recruitment messages briefly described the study and invited potential participants to complete a Google form if interested in participating (see Appendix B).

All potential participants also completed a pre-screening survey, which was part of the Google form (see Appendix C). The pre-screening survey ensured participants met the criteria for the research study and gave them the opportunity to briefly describe their experiences with imposter feelings, which gave me the opportunity to discern amongst participants. If a participant

met the criteria and had relevant experiences, I would email her to invite her to interview. I sent anyone not chosen to interview an email noting they had not been chosen (see Appendix D).

My participants consisted of ten women. All worked in the for-profit business sector, but they represented a variety of industries, job titles, and job responsibilities. All of the women were under the age of 40. Eight identified as white, one identified as Latina, and one identified as biracial (identifying as both Asian and white descent). The majority of interviewees were newer to leadership positions, with one to three years of experience. Some had direct reports and some did not. Table 1 lists the participants pseudonyms, job titles, industries, years of leadership experience, and whether they had direct reports.

Table 1: Study Participants

Pseudonym	Job Title	Industry	Years of Leadership Experience	Direct Reports
Chanel	Marketing Manager	Sporting Equipment	1-3	Yes
Veronica	Marketing Associate	Manufacturing	1-3	No
Elsa	Associate Research and Development Scientist	Consumer Foods	1-3	No
Pippa	Director of Provider Transformations	Health Insurance	1-3	Yes
Darcy	Senior Consultant	Financial Consulting	1-3	No
Felicity	Senior Supply Chain Analyst	Retail	1-3	No
Olive	Senior Product Analyst	Data and Analytics	1-3	Yes
Maggie	Managing Editor	Entertainment	1-3	Yes
Rachel	Supervisor	Entertainment	10-12	Yes

Madeline	Project Manager	Medical Devices	7-9	No
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Data Analysis

I employed Creswell's (2016) inductive process of data analysis to analyze the data in this study. This included six major steps: prepare the data for analysis, read the data, develop codes and code the data, identify themes, interrelate themes, and validate the information (Creswell, 2016). The following sections further discuss these steps.

Prepare the Data for Analysis

After recording, Zoom provided an initial transcription of each interview. I reviewed each for accuracy by listening to the recorded interview while reading the transcription, making corrections as necessary during the process. I also removed participant names, names of others mentioned in the interviews, and participant workplaces from interview transcripts to ensure confidentiality and replaced them with pseudonyms and generic organization descriptions.

Read the Data

Next, I read through each transcript at least two times. The first time was without any breaks to read for understanding only and familiarize myself with the data. Next, I read through again and took notes on possible codes and evidence or general impressions of the interviews. After each read, I created a short memo.

Develop Codes and Code the Data

I used Dedoose software to code my data. I read each interview line-by-line and assigned codes as I went through. Dedoose allowed me to create subcodes as necessary. After initial coding, I went through the interviews again to assign any codes that could have been missed or

were added later in the coding process. In total, I created 77 codes ranging from gender to lack of experience to hesitating to self-confidence.

Identify Themes

After assigning codes to all transcripts, I took a list of the codes and began analyzing them for overarching themes. I used Microsoft Excel to create a spreadsheet of all codes from Dedoose, along with their counts and the number of data sources in which they appeared. This allowed me to understand which codes were the most prevalent in the data. With this information in mind, I sorted the list of codes into overarching categories based on the type of data bits each code represented. Once I had broad thematic categories, I began narrowing the list into subcategories.

Interrelate Themes

Once I had identified my themes and subthemes, I used deductive reasoning to consider the implications of the different themes on my research question and theoretical framework. To do this, I stepped back and looked at the data as a whole, taking time to consider the stories it told. I used memos to explore my thoughts about the themes and their connections to my central phenomenon. Connecting this data within the context of my research resulted in three overarching themes, *Triggers of Imposter Stage Fright*, *Impact of Imposter Feelings on Performance*, and *Imposter Feelings and Impression Management*, each with several supporting themes. I detail these in the Findings section later in the paper.

Validate the Data

To reduce validity threats, I employed several strategies to minimize researcher bias and reactivity. First, I sought to triangulate my data, which Creswell (2016) refers to as “building evidence from different sources to establish the themes in a study” (p. 91). I did this by including ten research participants in my data set. This use of multiple participants ensured a level of

validity, and I made sure all themes represented the voices of at least five participants. Second, I worked with an experienced research advisor on this study, who reviewed my analysis and required clarification and justification for each finding. Next, I built reflexivity into my research, as described in my Reflexive Statement. I used memos as a tool throughout my research process to explore my own bias and the way it could impact my reading of the data. Finally, I compared my research findings to published literature on the topic.

Ethical Considerations

Participation in this study was voluntary. Prior to interviewing, participants completed a consent form and demographics questionnaire (see Appendices E and F). At the beginning of the interview, prior to questions, we discussed the consent form again to ensure participants fully understood it and were participating willingly throughout the full interview. They were told clearly that they were allowed to stop the interview at any time and only needed to share information that they were comfortable sharing. Also, as a person who has struggled with imposter feelings myself, I was thoughtful during the interview to minimize my own bias by practicing active listening, taking notes, and using my interview questions and predetermined probes to guide my interview as much as possible, rather than simply asking whatever came to mind. This created a sort of uniformity to the interviews.

Findings

My data analysis and interpretation revealed three overarching themes regarding female-identifying leaders and their experiences managing imposter feelings. These three categories include *Triggers of Imposter Stage Fright*, *Impact of Imposter Feelings on Performance*, and *Imposter Feelings and Impression Management*. Supporting themes also emerged within these three categories. In this section, I describe each of the themes and sub- themes in detail, providing data from the ten interviews I conducted to illustrate and support my findings.

Triggers of Imposter Stage Fright

Triggers of Imposter Stage Fright refers to the situations participants identified that led them to experience greater imposter feelings, or stage fright, in their roles. Goffman (1959) uses the theater metaphor in his dramaturgical theory, and I build upon it in naming my findings. Certain situations or experiences can trigger imposter feelings, bringing leaders to feel heightened experiences of what I call “stage fright” surrounding their roles. All ten of the interviewed leaders discussed scenarios that made their imposter feelings more pronounced, thus giving them heightened stage fright in their leadership role.

Reflecting on their experiences, the leaders recalled times when imposter feelings were heightened as well as times in which they were less noticeable or not present at all. For example, Pippa discussed high impact situations, such as having to work on her department’s strategic plan, heightened her imposter feelings. Contrarily, she felt most at home when working within her comfort zones, which for her was networking and talking to others. Elsa suggested her biggest trigger was new situations, where she felt like she didn’t have the appropriate knowledge to handle, but felt less or no self-doubt when completing familiar tasks. I discuss these experiences and others in the following sections. Overall, the participants described their triggers of stage fright as falling into four main categories: *Sense of Belonging*, *Comparison with Others*, *New or Unknown Situations*, and *High Stakes Situations*. The following sections discuss these in detail.

Sense of Belonging

The term *Sense of Belonging* describes the variety of ways that various participants referred to the ways they felt connected (or not) to others and their organization. All ten participants identified ways in which they struggled to fit in with groups at their organization, which contributed to imposter feelings during their careers. While their individual experiences

with belonging ranged from everything from ethnic backgrounds (Veronica and Elsa) to being someone who did not consume alcohol in an environment that thrived on social settings for networking (Rachel), the two areas that participants discussed the most were gender and age.

Gender. Recalling that all participants in the study were female-identifying, seven out of ten discussed ways in which their gender undermined their sense of belonging in the workplace and thus impacted their imposter feelings. To some, being in a field that was male-dominated or working on a team that was made up primarily of men made it difficult for them to relate to coworkers. Darcy described:

In the finance and tech space, it's pretty male-heavy. My company tries to be very inclusive, and they do a good job of it...It's more of, how do I fit in with people who talk about golf all day? It sounds silly, but to not be able to be personal with people contributes to feeling like I'm not supposed to be there.

Similar to Darcy, Elsa noted she is the only woman on her team, which she believes plays into her imposter feelings. She noted that the rest of her team is men who are older than her and told the story of being at a happy hour with all of them, listening to their conversations, and realizing all of them were dads. At that moment, she said she, an early-career woman without children, felt like she really could not relate to them. On the other hand, another participant, Felicity noted that she works with several women, but she feels imposter feelings heighten in situations where she is the only woman in the room. In those situations, she feels like she needs "assert [her] knowledge of something to get results" because she finds she is overlooked otherwise.

Chanel struggles as a woman in her organization not because of lack of female coworkers but because of her boss's covert sexism. She said her boss, who is the CEO, often commits microaggressions against women. Their organization works a lot with schools and daycares, and

one example of this is how he always refers to teachers or caregivers as women or female pronouns, despite the number of times Chanel notes she's working with a male contact. Her company also has very few women in leadership, which makes Chanel feel uncomfortable in her role. She noted that she feels like her CEO looks down on her as a woman in a management role. She also described how there is a running joke about her company with their external suppliers about how few leaders are women. These things contribute to Chanel's imposter feelings and make her feel as though she only got her position because her previous boss left, leaving the position open. In all these situations, participants felt imposter feelings heightened while participating in groups where they were one of few women on the team and felt they could not relate to other coworkers.

Participants also discussed ways in which societal stereotypes of leadership often worked against them as women, which contributed to their imposter feelings. Darcy went on to discuss how she often felt like she was working against feminine stereotypes when leading and struggled to balance both being a woman and engaging in traditional leader behaviors. She discussed how being a young female leader made her feel like it was against stereotypes for her to be "bossy or strict." She described, "It feels like it's against what people would want me to do, against what I'm supposed to behave like. Women are supposed to be nurturing and not self-centered and not bossy." She noted her leadership style is more casual, but she doesn't believe it gets the best results with her team.

In a similar sentiment, Madeline discussed how often in her workplace and in our society, women are not thought of as leaders, which makes it harder to fit in as one. She explained, "I think when you're talking about imposter syndrome, part of it is do people believe you're the leader? Right when you walk in, are you the leader? ...And part of that is, as a woman and especially in an operational situation, they're not expecting that leader to walk in and be a

woman.” In further conversation, she discussed how she tries to downplay her femininity at work. She said once in a meeting she made a comment to her coworkers about how a product felt, and one of her male coworkers made a comment along the lines of “Only a woman would notice that” and the others laughed. Since then, she started taking steps to minimize being seen as feminine. She noted:

It’s highly unlikely I’m going to talk about the scent or color or appearance of the product. I do not bake cakes if there’s an event; I buy it. I don’t talk about my fiancé. I’m not wearing my ring right now. I don’t talk about my relationships, because I am very much concerned that the talk about marriage is babies, is a career killer.

Madeline, like Darcy, feels she cannot be her full self at work because being seen as feminine does not generate the results she wants.

Finally, representation plays a role. When organizations lack female leadership representation, leaders lack role models and have difficulty seeing themselves as leaders. This can contribute to their imposter feelings. Olive explained:

I have some great people to look up to at the manager level, but there’s not a ton of people above that level that are females...And there’s always that little part of me that’s like, “Well if other females weren’t able to become a director, or move up like that, what makes me think I’m going to be able to do that? What sets me apart?”

Without another woman leader to look up to, Olive found herself wondering if she would ever reach that point herself.

Age. Seven of the ten participants also discussed ways in which their age impacted their sense of belonging at work. All seven discussed how they felt uncomfortable about their age at times and how being a younger leader made their imposter feelings more pronounced. Maggie discussed how she tried her best to not mention her age with others in work settings or would

downplay it if it was ever brought up. Similarly, Darcy mentioned how she feels a lot of nervousness about her clients or teammates looking at her LinkedIn profile and using her college graduation year to estimate how old she is. Pippa, who supervises a team where everyone is significantly older than her, noted that she never turns on her camera in virtual meetings because she does not want her team (who all telecommute and live across the country) to see how young she is. She once had an employee tell her she hated working for millennials, and Pippa does not want to lose rapport with her.

To some, age was an indicator of experience or rank. Olive explained, “It’s instilled in my brain that, oh, the person above you is going to be older than you. I know that’s not true, but it feels like it should be.” Pippa echoed similar thoughts in her discussion, mentioning how she is much younger than the other leaders in her workplace. She explained, “I’m the same age as [my coworkers’] children, so if they look at me like they look at their children, I think they would wonder why their kid is in this role, in this position, in this level of the organization, and wonder about their capabilities.”

Comparison with Others

Comparing oneself with others or others’ expectations can also contribute to heightened imposter feelings, and the term and the term *Comparison to Others* illustrates the various ways participants felt this. When those with imposter feelings look at the others around them and feel underqualified in comparison, they may start to question if they truly deserve their positions. Many participants discussed the ways in which comparison with others, or others’ expectations, made them feel more like imposters. This included being around others they felt were more experienced or qualified for their positions or discomfort being referred to as an expert.

Feeling unqualified makes one doubt her own validity as a leader. Madeline discussed how immediately after she got her new role, a new person was brought into her team to lead the

innovation group. She recalled her first time encountering him and realizing he was very well spoken and good at presenting information. She remembers looking at him and thinking, “Whoa, you're actually really well spoken. You're organized. Okay, this is going to give me a run for my money.” This direct comparison to another person made her imposter feelings more pronounced.

Chanel spoke similarly about her relationship with a coworker. Her coworker joined their team a few months after Chanel moved into her leadership position, but Chanel learned that the coworker had originally applied for her job. Her coworker had a strong background knowledge of the industry, whereas Chanel moved into her role internally after knowing their company well and having general experience in her area. However, Chanel realized she gets nervous around her coworker and often feels inferior because of her coworker’s deep knowledge of their industry.

Darcy also found herself surrounded by people she feels are more qualified or experienced than her. Darcy explained, “I’m often around other people who I find to be more qualified. A lot of people on that product have my same role, but for the other areas...I think they are 100% qualified. They may feel the same way that I do, although I doubt it.” She continued by talking about how she feels most like an imposter when meeting with people who have a lot of experience in their roles, and described how she often finds herself looking around the room in meetings and thinking:

Why am I here? I don't have all this knowledge. I don't know what we should be doing. I have no idea what's going on. I have questions, but I don't feel like I could even ask them because I don't know what I should and shouldn't know.

Elsa and Felicity echoed similar sentiments. Elsa explained, “Even though I know I belong there, and they asked me to join the team for a reason, I still continue to feel like I'm a little bit outgunned or outclassed.” Felicity said something along these same lines: “There's

people who have been around for like 10+ years and they've done all this cool stuff, and [I think] 'You want me?'"

Rachel also finds herself comparing herself to others. Though she received a leadership position, she sometimes feels like those who did not are working harder or want it more. She explained:

There's always someone that you feel like is better than you, working harder than you are. But I did it. I had been working at it the same amount of time, you know, but I think it's easy for me to see things as like...you just compare yourself to someone else and think you're probably doing it the same, but that person is doing it better, or they love it more than I do.

She noted how often her imposter feelings occur because people tell her how lucky she is to have her dream job compared to those in her industry who have tried to get there but failed. She acknowledged she worked hard to get where she is, but sometimes when she sees the enthusiasm or passion of others, she feels like she doesn't belong.

Discomfort Being an Expert. One perception of others that many participants felt uncomfortable about was being referred to as an expert. Those with imposter feelings then worry they will not meet expertise expectations and thus be found out by others as a fraud. Elsa has specialized knowledge on her team and feels uncomfortable being called an expert in her area. She explained:

I think the word expert is tossed around at work, a lot. And it means different things to different people, and I think we may use it more lightly than I would like. Because I think...To me it's a fairly high bar, but I feel like as long as you have more information about something than somebody else, you are an expert.

Elsa does not feel she matches the level that the term “expert” means and becomes uncomfortable when others call her this term. She elaborated, “Maybe it will never feel comfortable because I am always doubting if I can ever get to the level of some of these other people that I would consider experts.”

Maggie had similar feelings to Elsa. She told a story about how a contact recently introduced her to a group of people in euphemistic terms. She couldn't remember the exact words he used to describe her, but believed it was something along the lines of “Queen of [participant's company]” because she remembered the phrase being both gendered and hyperbolic. This made her very uncomfortable. She explained:

I was like, “Oh that is not me, not at all. I am not the queen of anything, and also what a weird way to describe someone.” Just putting me on this pedestal of knowing everyone in [my company] or being very connected to innovation in [my hometown]. And sometimes it's true but sometimes I feel like it just sets me up to fail.

Maggie discussed how, though she works with a lot of people in the industry and works on many projects, she doesn't know everyone or everything, so being called an expert makes her uncomfortable. She also noted how she often turns down opportunities to be on panels because she worries she won't have enough to contribute to them and does not like the idea of unexpected questions.

Others noted that they feel like they recognize that they have expert knowledge in a certain aspect of their jobs, but struggle with imposter feelings when they feel uncertain about something. Chanel talked about how she has specialized knowledge in her job, but when others question her, her imposter feelings get worse. When asked about situations that impact her imposter feelings, she answered:

When I consistently get questioned about something that I feel like I know in and out, but someone is still questioning it. So then I do not trust that. I'm the expert, and I do not trust that I know what I'm talking about. That definitely heightens it for sure.

Though she does have specialized knowledge, she feels she cannot totally be an expert when she's still learning new things and questioning herself.

Veronica and Felicity also noted that they become insecure when presenting on a topic around others who consider them to be experts on the topic. They worry that they will not have answers to questions or will be over-analyzed. Felicity noted she feels most like an imposter "in situations where I have to be like the expert or the one really representing my team and especially when I don't know." When she feels like she is missing knowledge on something she should be an expert on, her imposter feelings heighten. Similarly, Veronica said she gets nervous presenting to big groups. She explained:

And they and I know that I'm the expert in presenting on that project, most of the time, but then I also feel like they're over analyzing and then I also have this feeling of, just a lot of insecurity around what I'm talking about and sometimes that gets in the way of being able to adequately present the information.

New or Unknown Situations

New or Unknown Situations refers to times when participants had to navigate new experiences, or times when they did not feel knowledgeable enough for a certain situation. Participants often felt more pronounced imposter feelings when faced with a new or unknown situation. As leaders, they felt exposed by lack of experience or knowledge in the new situation. When asked when she feels her imposter feelings at their peak, Veronica replied, "So I think it's definitely in situations that are very unknown and where I come into either the role or into the activity not really knowing what to expect or what the expectations are." Elsa felt similarly to

this and elaborated on why she thinks these situations are so triggering to her imposter feelings. She explains:

If it's something I had been doing for years and just nobody knew about it, then maybe I would feel more comfortable. But because this is like treading a little bit of uncharted territory for me, that makes me feel more like I've never proven to myself I can do this, and maybe I actually can't do something like that.

These situations felt exposing to participants, who worried they would disclose their feelings of fraudulence to others.

Chanel and Felicity both noted that new situations can bring about new imposter feelings, even if the feelings were previously minimized. Chanel noted that she often talks about getting a new job to escape her discomfort in her current role, but when asked if she thought that would improve her imposter feelings, she replied that she thinks they would still be there, at least for the start. When discussing her imposter feelings, Felicity noted she sometimes will feel a brief period of relief related to accomplishing something, but when “there’s either new things I’m working on, or maybe there's a new roadblock that I just don't know what to do or what I should do in that experience, I’ll start feeling those feelings again creep up.”

Finally, Pippa discussed how ambiguity of the future impacts her imposter feelings. She discussed how she can manage her day-to-day tasks, but when her role demands she be more strategic and forward-thinking about the organization, she becomes worried about everything unknown in the future. She explained, “I find that to be really challenging to be able to think strategically and long term, because there's ambiguity, and I don't feel like I do well with ambiguity. But you can't tell the future, right?” This created a tension for her in her role where she struggles with feeling like she can make decisions because of lack of information, but also feels pressured to think more strategically and futuristically because of her role responsibilities.

High Stakes Situations

The term *High Stakes Situations* designates situations where a leader's decision has a large impact on their company or community. Participants discussed the ways in which their leadership power could make them feel fraudulent. In situations where they needed to make decisions or focus on big picture organizational goals, they noticed more pronounced imposter feelings. Maggie talked about her discomfort with making decisions, explaining, "I think in terms of decision making and the decision-making part of being a leader, I feel like it's made me doubt myself at times." Pippa also discussed feelings of doubt surrounding her decision-making, saying that she did not always feel comfortable with them or trust herself to make the right decision. She described decision-making as "scary" and discussed her power within her role, explaining, "I felt like I have a really broad reach here, and if I think about that too hard, or too long, it feels debilitating."

Others felt pronounced imposter feelings when thinking about the big picture of their work or careers. Darcy, who works for a company that does financial consulting for external clients, explained, "I feel the most imposter syndrome feelings when I think of the big picture that we're trying to accomplish." She explained that she helps billion-dollar companies decide how to deploy their entire revenues, and any time she needs to suggest a best practice or recommendation to a client, she feels like she's not the right person to do so, despite the experience she has in her job.

In a similar sentiment, Pippa expressed the discomfort she fears when looking at her own career route and trajectory. She explained:

It feels like when I look backwards, time has gone so quickly and so much has happened, and I have grown so much that when I think about what that looks like facing forward, if it's an even match, there's a lot ahead of me that feels like how could it continue to get

bigger? But it could and it might, and hopefully does. But I don't know that I've ever thought about how to cope with that.

Though her career does not have a major effect on others, it still can feel overwhelming when she looks at her own big picture goals and thinks about how much is still ahead of her.

Impact of Imposter Feelings on Performance

Impact of Imposter Feelings on Performance describes the ways in which imposter feelings affected the leaders' work. As a leader, one performs through their everyday work tasks, such as leading and completing projects, participating in meetings, overseeing direct reports, finishing work-related tasks, and so on. Their stages are their offices, and their audiences are their colleagues, clients, and constituents. Once triggered, imposter feelings often negatively impact one's work or relationship with their career.

All participants described ways in which imposter feelings influenced either their work, well-being, or both. For Olive, the main impact was avoidance, which halted her productivity on projects. For Elsa, it meant she simply didn't see herself as a leader within her organization, despite handling major decisions for them. For Pippa, the impacts were physical: stress hives that appeared on her body when she felt her most insecure. These examples embody the three sub-themes that emerged in relation to the impact imposter feelings had on one's performance:

Productivity Impacts, Leadership Identity Impacts, and Affective Impacts.

Productivity Impacts

Productivity Impacts refers to the ways imposter feelings affected the leaders' work completion and effectiveness. Participants found imposter feelings can limit their productivity and make them more likely to avoid work. When someone feels like they are not the right person for a decision or a role, one way to respond to that is to simply not act or step into that role. Half of the interviewees discussed the ways imposter feelings impacted their productivity. Olive

talked about how she sometimes will respond to her imposter feelings by not working on a project that feels triggering to her. When she was sent a four-page project to complete, she avoided it. She explained this is not productive to her work, saying:

It's very unproductive for me just to sit there and look at it and worry about it rather than seek out help or write a mini to-do list and tackle one at a time. I just kind of looked at the whole four-page list and stressed about it and was not very productive because I didn't do anything for probably one or two hours. I marked it as read in my inbox for a couple of days, because I didn't want to do it.

Darcy echoed these thoughts, noting, "All day at work I'm procrastinating stuff because I don't think it's going to go well, and at some point, I'm going to turn something in or say an answer, something, and someone is going to tell me that that's wrong or I'm not qualified."

Participants also noted how procrastinating work eventually could deepen their imposter cycle. When they did not complete work, it could provide more evidence for them that they were not right for their role. Madeline also discussed times when she avoids her work. She explained, "A week from now, I am in the same boat. I haven't learned anything new...I'm not where I wanted to be because I didn't put in the work I wanted to put in." For Felicity, this means her lack of productivity was letting others down. She explained:

I feel like it definitely slows down the progress I could make and can make the timeline I was working on for the product concept longer than we expected. There is some real impact on the timeline. I felt like I was letting people down by not being able to drive this idea forward faster.

One of Maggie's roles at her job is to publish three stories to their webpage per day, but when she gets overwhelmed, she will avoid work - particularly avoiding making decisions on emails - for a period. She recounted the stress of logging back into work after procrastinating on

something, saying, “And then I get back online, and I have more emails and then I’m late on my last story for the day.” The lack of productivity can turn into a cycle where interviewees struggle to ever get back on track.

Leadership Role Impacts

Some leaders found imposter feelings had a negative impact on their identities and actions as a leader, which is represented here as *Leadership Role Impacts*. They had a more difficult time acting in leadership duties, such as speaking up in meetings or giving feedback to direct reports. In short, imposter feelings affect how people play the role of a leader. To some participants, imposter feelings simply affected how they saw themselves, and they struggled to identify as leaders. When asked how imposter feelings affect her leadership, Elsa responded, “I mean, I think I have a hard time classifying myself as a leader. It’s as simple as that.” Darcy replied to the question with a similar sentiment, saying, “It just feels like it stops me from being a full-potential leader.” They both felt as though imposter feelings held them back from seeing themselves as leaders, which then impacted their leadership within their organizations.

Madeline brought up the idea of hesitating to speak up, saying, “I just think in general I hesitate to speak up when I really should be, and I shouldn’t be hesitating.” Elsa, Olive, Maggie, and Rachel all echoed these ideas, saying they often did things like deferred to others in meetings to present or ask questions or waited to be told what to do, even if they knew they should be the ones speaking up or taking charge. Chanel talked about how she is not assertive enough to bring up new ideas because she worries about her judgment and feels exposed to criticism when trying new things. She said, “I’m very hesitant to go out and try something else or do something different. I feel like it’s going to get shot down or it’s not going to, you know, fit the mold of what they’re trying to do.” Even though she is managing her own department and has authority over that section, she struggles to feel confident in that area.

Participants also discussed how their imposter feelings affect how they interact with their constituents. Some discussed how they felt uncomfortable asserting authority or giving feedback to others. When discussing her team, Pippa mentioned, “I don't feel like their boss. I still don't feel like I always have the authority to tell them what to do when it is expected of me to tell them what to do.” Olive had similar stories, saying that she often felt uncomfortable giving feedback or direction to her intern even though she knew he was relying on it to do his job better. She talked about feeling like she didn't have enough knowledge to give him good guidance. Darcy recounted times when she had to give hard feedback to others on her team and felt uncomfortable doing so. Since her leadership style is more relational, she explained, “It's hard for me to be blunt, and hard conversations are really, really important.” She then talked about how she feels like this hurts both her and her team.

Affective Impacts

In addition to facing difficulties in their jobs, leaders found imposter feelings had *Affective Impacts*. This refers to impacts on their moods, emotions, or attitudes. Most interviewees discussed some level of psychological distress surrounding their imposter feelings and their job. They described feeling anxious or overwhelmed in their everyday work experiences, sometimes to the point of feeling like a failure, worry about their job security, or questioning themselves.

For many, imposter feelings created feelings of anxiety or stress around their work. One of the most dramatic examples of this was from Pippa, who discussed how she gets hives from stress. She told a story about taking a long weekend vacation from work at a cabin where she did not have good cell phone reception and could not check her work email. She noted that her imposter feelings make her feel like she always needs to be “on” when it comes to work, so taking extended breaks, even a long weekend vacation, makes her very nervous about what she's

missing in the office. While on vacation, she noticed her hives cleared up because she was distracted, not thinking about her job, and relaxed. As she drove back home and started thinking about the week ahead of her on Sunday, she began breaking out in hives again due to the stress she was feeling. She explained, “[I was] covered in hives Sunday, just knowing that there was this impending feeling of having to get caught up, get back on track, feel like I need to make up for the two days that I was gone. I had a very physical reaction.”

Others echoed the stress Pippa mentioned. When Darcy was asked to describe the thoughts or emotions she had when experiencing imposter feelings, she responded, “I don't have a better word than just constant anxiety. Anxiety going to sleep on Sunday night because I know Monday I'll have all this stuff to do.” Veronica had similar thoughts, talking about how when she has a new experience, she feels excited but then also finds herself questioning if she can do it. She explained, “There's a lot of excitement associated with starting out that activity, but then there's also these feelings that come and go, of can I really do this?”

Participants also noted how these feelings of stress and anxiety could become overwhelming. Felicity discussed the thoughts as “paralyzing”, saying she becomes overwhelmed with not knowing what to do and begins questioning herself. She described this cycle as:

I just sit and stew in my thoughts. I cannot stop thinking about it. I just repeat and repeat the conversation or whatever happened, over and over. And I just..I sit there and I spin with my own thoughts. I can't move forward, I can't..I just sit there and think, and I think, and I overthink it, when really I just need to move on ultimately and come back and deal with that.

Others found they felt like failures or worried about losing their jobs. In an example of realizing she missed an opportunity for her organization, Pippa described, “I feel like such a

failure. Sometimes I'm just sad and sometimes I'm irate." Chanel went one step further, worrying that any mistake she makes could result in her losing her job. She said that her imposter feelings feel like "constant fear of potentially losing my job or getting reassigned." Even though she knows she is doing good work, and later discussed how she actually feels like she deserves more recognition for the work she does, she still sometimes feels as though her job is in jeopardy. Madeline felt similarly to Chanel, mentioning she worries about how others will view her work. She described her imposter thoughts as a string of questions she's always asking herself, wondering "Are they going to be underwhelmed by this presentation, right? Are they going to think, yeah if we had time we would do it that way right? Are they going to think this isn't what we hired you for?"

Imposter Feelings and Impression Management

Imposter Feelings and Impression Management refers to the coping mechanisms leaders discussed to mitigate their imposter feelings. These actions worked as a type of impression management, where they employed various strategies to attempt to reduce feelings of imposterism and successfully navigate their leadership roles, thus managing others' impressions of them.

While many participants were still coping with imposter feelings in their everyday work experiences, they all had employed various coping mechanisms in order to lessen the impacts of imposter feelings on their work or move towards resolution. The leaders described coping strategies such as over-preparation, seeking mentorship, reflecting, and taking breaks to manage their imposter feelings. These management strategies fall into five categories: *Controlling the Performance*, *Working with Others*, *Reflective Practices*, *Moving Backstage*, and *Moving Beyond Imposter Feelings*.

Controlling the Performance

Controlling the Performance designates the actions leaders took to exercise control around their work and surroundings. The idea of control was a recurring theme throughout the interviews. Participants described that they felt fewer imposter feelings when they felt more in control of their situations. While each day has elements of uncertainty to it, commitment strategies, preparedness, and generating wins were strategies interviewees employed to lessen imposter feelings throughout their workday by pushing themselves to get work done.

Madeline talked about how imposter feelings cause her to hesitate and not be very productive, so the best way she manages them is to practice what she refers to as “commitment strategies”. These force her to get work done because she does not want to let down others’ expectations, which she sets by creating a commitment. She explained this routine:

I will put a milestone on the calendar to present, even if I don't really know exactly how we're going to get there. Because that is part of my job as leadership is to figure it out.

Figure it out and move the team.

She noted that she uses this strategy in many different aspects of her work and even personal life. For example, she recently told her fiancé and friend that she is going to ask for a promotion, noting that saying things out loud really helps her get them done. She noted that when people then follow up with her, her answer to them cannot be that she never tried because “that's a sure fail.”

For Darcy, the best way to cope with her imposter feelings is to prepare, sometimes even over-preparing because she feels like this is something she can control. When asked when her imposter feelings are least pronounced, she responded:

The more times I've done something and whenever I'm really prepared. It's not even situational - that's on me. I can minimize them for sure by over-preparing. I'm definitely doing above what the other people I'm talking about would do. They can show up to

every call not knowing what it's about, [saying to me] “You're always organized”. And I'm like yeah, because I have to be, because it would be really embarrassing to have people find out I don't know what I'm doing.

Her preparedness stems from a need to not be found out as a fraud. Veronica echoed similar sentiments, saying that when she came to meetings prepared, she felt like she came into the space with her “right foot forward instead of trying to back out of it and trying to assess.” She found being prepared made her more present in meetings and less worried about how she was appearing to others or what she was missing.

Others found that focusing on tasks they knew they could complete was most effective. Completing tasks within their comfort zones created evidence of success for them or could create a feeling of accomplishment that would boost their confidence. Felicity explained when she's feeling overwhelmed with imposter feelings, she likes to take a step back from whatever is bothering her and work on something else she feels confident in. When asked for the things she does to minimize imposter feelings, she explained:

The most immediate one is definitely to take a step back from whatever piece of work or meeting and forget about it and try to do something that will create that win. Or at least will let me check something off my to-do list and feel good. And kind of get that boost of confidence back to move forward or at least keep going.

Olive discussed how she likes to create checklists for herself to generate those wins. She explained, “Big tasks are overwhelming and how I personally tackle things is to make it into those smaller milestones.” In order to do this, she creates a checklist. She described:

I'm a checklist person. I'll block my calendar for an hour, and I make a checklist, and I get as much done as I can. Because working through the stress in these situations just makes me feel better. Physically checking something off just makes me feel better.

Darcy also talked about how she is often overwhelmed by large projects and breaking big tasks into smaller tasks was effective in easing that anxiety that came along with it. Her recommendation to others struggling with imposter feelings around big tasks was to:

Take it a little bit at a time. I don't know if other people find that the smaller the task is, the less they feel that way, but I feel like that would make sense. That's how I think about it because, even when you're scared about the big thing - that is like the big, I'm-not-ready-for-this, I'm-not-prepared-for-this, I'm-the-wrong-person-for-this kind of thing - that is literally only a sum of the small things. So knowing that... Just take it day by day.

Working with Other Performers

Through techniques I call *Working with Other Performers*, leaders described how discussing their imposter feelings with others or seeking performance feedback allowed them to lessen imposter feelings. By leaning on others in similar or supporting roles around them, women found validation in their roles and felt comfortable moving forward. They described leaning on mentors, talking to others, or seeking validation or feedback as beneficial.

Mentors. A few participants described the importance of mentors, meaning trusted advisors or role models, to be helpful in lessening imposter feelings. Elsa spoke about how beneficial mentors had been for her in coping with her imposter feelings. She said she usually looks for people such as past supervisors who she got along with well as mentors because they best know her work style and goals, and they often were the ones to recommend her to higher leadership positions, so she knows they see potential in her. She explained:

I'm not sure that I necessarily discussed the idea of imposter feelings with them directly, but just this idea of "Am I ready for this? Am I qualified?" Those kinds of questions that are related to it. I think having an external perspective and somebody potentially with

more experience, also who knows you and can guide you in a way that feels authentic to you.

She described a mentor as someone who was trusted and someone who “is a little more senior or has some differential experience to you - but somebody who's maybe been through a similar situation and that knows you well enough to guide you.” She also noted that she takes part in a peer mentoring program at work too for other Asian employees, which offers yet another perspective and offers support to those who have had similar experiences to her.

Madeline also discussed the importance of mentorship. She found being in a women’s mentor group was beneficial because it provided a space to talk about work and careers and gain support from each other. She recommended that women, or anyone who felt they were missing a community at work, find or make that community they needed. She said:

I recently joined as the mentoring co-chair at our women's council at work. And it is actually really exciting just to hear other women talk about doing things. I feel like sometimes we especially as women, but also I would bet people who are like first-time college grads or in a different career path than their families, we just don't know who to discuss our work with and so there's no one for us to bounce ideas off. So find a tribe. Make a tribe.

For her, finding a network of people has been very valuable, even if those mentors are peers.

Support from others. Support from others, usually through conversation, also proved to be helpful in lessening imposter feelings. Chanel, Pippa, Maggie, and Rachel all discussed the idea of talking about their feelings with others as a coping mechanism. Chanel talked about the importance of finding community at work through their Latino resource network. As a Latina woman, she felt isolated when she first started at her company because she was working with a team of primarily white men. She explained:

Now that I've had the experience of being with the Latino resource network, and I feel like I identify with people, I feel like that's made me feel a lot more open and a lot just more honest in terms of myself and honest with how I show up.

Madeline also relies on support from others at work, but in a different way. She described how she has learned it's beneficial for her to ask other leaders to identify her as the leader of certain meetings, projects, or groups. She finds this has been particularly helpful when she's stepping in to lead a meeting when her boss is out and reduces the amount of confusion amongst other teammates of who is in charge. It also has helped her gain credibility. She routinely asks others around her to introduce her to teams of people as the person leading certain projects and making it clear to them what is and is not her role.

Pippa and Maggie relied on their personal relationships for support. Pippa found that she relied mostly on her friends and sister. She talked about how she has a friend who has a similar position to her at another organization, and they will check with each other about how things are going and how they feel about themselves and their work. She also talks a lot to her sister, who is a doctor, about experiences they have in common, such as not being taken seriously because of their genders or ages. Maggie talked about sending texts or Snapchat messages to friends to get support from them, noting that sometimes having someone to listen to her makes her feel better in the moment.

Rachel also benefited from her personal networks - saying that her husband was her best support system and a constant reminder to her of the hard work she put in to get to her job - but she also found it beneficial to work with others on her team. She said it was eye opening to her when she realized she could learn from others on her team without giving up some of the power that came with leadership. She explained:

I think once I opened my eyes and realized, I can still learn from these people, even though I'm in a leadership role, we can have like a back and forth, that really helped me to like not only get more information and gain more knowledge in my career from these people who've been doing it forever, but also have that moment of like learning from them.

While some women experiencing imposter feelings may find admitting to not knowing something to be scary, moments like this helped Rachel realize that she could actually gain more skills and credibility with her coworkers by opening up to others rather than feeling like she needed to do everything herself.

Feedback and validation. Finally, participants talked about the importance of getting feedback or validation from others. Positive feedback proved that participants were doing a good job, and kind, corrective feedback helped them find solutions for things with which they were uncomfortable. Felicity talked about working with her very first client in her role and feeling very nervous about the interaction. She described:

When I had my first client I was like, "I don't really know what I should be doing." But she seemed fine with what I was doing and very happy and excited, so I'm just kept going with it. I think that validation again helped me not have some of those feelings.

When Felicity got validation from the client, she felt like she belonged in her role and could succeed. She said that bit of validation propelled her forward as she took on more clients.

Elsa also described the importance of getting feedback. She said that this was the most valuable thing to her when it came to managing imposter feelings. She explained:

I think [the most beneficial thing for me is] when I get positive feedback that "Oh no, actually you're going in the right direction, you contributed something important to this conversation, you put together a nice clear slide that articulated something that was

otherwise unclear, etc, etc.” All those positive reinforcements are helping me think, “No, actually I think I do have a role to play here, and I belong here,” And I didn't just pull the wool over their eyes in the interview. I actually have things to offer.

For her, feedback was the validation she needs to see herself as providing value to the team and keep moving forward.

Reflective Practices

Reflective Practices refers to the range of reflection activities, either formal or informal, that leaders used to minimize imposter feelings. These activities tended to be personal forms of self-reflection, such as questioning thought patterns or envisioning themselves in new ways. Six of the participants talked about mantras they had for themselves or mental reminders or thought processes they returned to on a regular basis to combat imposter feelings. For some, this included reminding themselves of the people who believed in them and put them in their roles.

Olive explained her mantra is to repeat “You can do hard things” to herself and remind herself she has her role for a reason. She described:

It's very easy to overthink. It's very easy to compare yourself to others. But ultimately, you're where you're at for a reason. No one else got you there, you got yourself there.

These are the choices you made. And if people didn't have that faith in you, you wouldn't be where you're at, so you're clearly doing something right. And also everyone is there to learn. No one's perfect. I always have to remind myself of that.

Similarly, Felicity would give herself a reminder of things she did well, often writing down a win she had during a rough day. This acted as a reminder to her of the things she did accomplish, despite any difficulties she encountered.

Darcy likes to remind herself of the people who put her in position and reflect on how they would not have done that if they did not believe in her. She explained:

They're the ones asking me to do this role, asking me to sit at the table, asking me to try. And I remember that, if I think they know what they're doing, then they knew what they were doing by placing me here. Just hammering into my head the reasons other people say that I'm ready...Definitely trying to remember that does help a bit.

Pippa also thinks about how others see her when engaging in reflection about her imposter feelings. Pippa told the story of talking to a friend one day and telling her friend that she wished she saw herself the way Pippa did. She recalled this conversation, saying:

It's easier said than done, I guess, but the advice I would give is to think about yourself the way that your friends think about you. Think about the people who you love and the people who surround you and feel like good influences on you. They think really great things about you, and you trust them, so why wouldn't you trust that you're good, and enough, and adequate, and smart, and all of those things?

This reflection activity of picturing herself through another's eyes made her question her imposter feelings and try to see herself more clearly.

Felicity talked about how mental reminders acted as almost a personal fact-check of her imposter feelings. When she sees problems within herself or feels like a fraud, she reminds herself, "They offered me the job, so my data was clearly flawed because they didn't see this problem in me." She also reminds herself that imposter feelings are relatively common and naming her imposter syndrome acted as a first step in conquering it.

Veronica talked at length about reflection practices she takes part in. She believes that questioning her imposter feelings has been very beneficial in resolving them. She talked about "digesting" the feelings by taking the time to think about why they occur and whether they're actually true. She noted that she finds that we as a society are often resistant to do this type of

practice because it can be uncomfortable and because we're used to imposter feelings being talked about as negative, so our reaction is to avoid them. She explained:

I feel like oftentimes when we have these imposter feelings, we view them as something negative and because we view them as something that is negative, we try to refuse them, or we try to attack them or resist those feelings. And we don't necessarily take the time to digest them and we don't necessarily take the time or see them as an opportunity to better understand. Changing the perception of it, changing the perspective of, you know, this is something negative to let me better understand this little, let me come neutral to the situation and try to better understand what it is that I'm feeling, why it is that I'm feeling it, and whether that feeling is true. Whether that feeling is actually true in a situation, and if it is true, then, what can I do about it, but at least you go through that process of digesting instead of being harsh with it and opposing the feelings associated with it. (...) It's made a lot of big changes in a very quick amount of time. And I think it has been incredibly valuable to me so far.

For Veronica, the most valuable steps she took were to stop burying her imposter thoughts and instead bring them forward, taking the time to really question them and change her thought patterns. She also practiced reflection techniques such as visualization in her everyday work.

Moving Backstage

Finally, some participants recognized that imposter feelings lessened when they reduced stage presence by *moving backstage*. To some, this meant taking breaks from work and for others this meant taking time to complete work in a less visible setting. By spending time backstage and creating regular separation from their audiences (coworkers, clients, etc.), participants felt less pressure to perform their leadership roles perfectly.

Maggie talked about the importance of taking breaks from work. When she is struggling with imposter feelings, she noted she needs to “take a step away from work and do something. Like do a happy hour or book an exercise class over lunch and have that distance and a reason to get distracted and my mind off of it.” Chanel also saw breaks as valuable to reset her focus. She explained what works best for her is “walking away from the computer, unplugging from anything work related. Or if I’m trying to shut everything else out, closing email and focusing on the one task that has to get done.”

Pippa agreed that breaks were important and added the need for boundaries when taking them. She talked about how her struggles with control often make her worry about being away from the office. Even while on vacation, she would list her cell phone number on her out of office message. When she complained to her sister about all the messages she was getting while away, her sister suggested she set up boundaries. She removed her cell phone number from her email and instead set up one of her employees to act as a triage while she’s out, deciding which few incoming tasks could not wait for Pippa’s return and then passing them to those who could do them in her absence. While Pippa noted that she is working on setting up work-life balance in other areas (such as not answering email late into the evening), developing boundaries in situations like this have been a good step forward.

A couple of participants also commented on how reduced visibility at work was beneficial to them because they spent less time worrying what coworkers thought. Both realized this during the COVID-19 pandemic when they began working from home. Maggie noted that attending fewer large events made her have less experiences with people who could make her feel like an imposter. Veronica noted that she no longer thinks to worry so much about all the side conversations happening around her because she’s no longer witnessing them. She explained that working from home, the interactions are selective, noting, “You know you don’t

get the whole experience you don't get the watercooler experience. You don't overhear conversations.” She explained that this makes her feel more comfortable being herself because she’s spending less time around others. She described:

Being in person, you are very much aware of the perception and the feelings and emotions that you get from everything, but in being a virtual setting I get less of that. I feel like I'm more comfortable about it...I'm not afraid of owning up to a leadership position or taking a stand on things in meetings, because they don't get that.

Being in a less visible position, thus limiting her interactions with others, made her less worried about what others thought and she felt she could be herself.

Moving Beyond Imposter Feelings

Moving Beyond Imposter Feelings alludes to the ways participants overcame imposter feelings. Given the discomfort and negative effects of imposter feelings on their work and roles, the interviewees noted desires to eventually conquer them. Though the majority of participants noted they still feel imposter feelings in their everyday work, it is important to note that two participants felt resolution to their imposter feelings. Both Rachel and Veronica described experiences where their imposter feelings felt fully overcome.

For Rachel, the experience of overcoming imposter feelings took both time and support from others. She described the process of overcoming imposter feelings as a matter of “trial and error”, noting she often found herself “remembering what it feels like to go back to that place [of imposter feelings] and not wanting that feeling of you're not good enough to do this.” She also noted that maturing in general helped her with this process, noting that as she became more confident in other arenas of her life, her self-confidence at work also increased. Eventually, she found herself continually building on the success of past projects each time she took on a new one, feeling more confident at the start of each.

Rachel also discussed her relationships with others to both be a support system for overcoming imposter feelings and a marker for how she had improved. She noted her husband and coworkers were her biggest supporters, often helping remind her of her talents and hard work to achieve her role. She now uses the improved confidence she must recognize and reach out to others who may also experience imposter feelings. She tries to encourage her staff to trust their own instincts and not let insecurities get in their way, noting she is open about her own experiences to them.

On the other hand, Veronica found that self-reflection was the most powerful tool for her. Though she was not fully over imposter feelings in all areas, she noted that self-reflection had helped her significantly. As noted in the *Reflective Practices* section, her self-questioning and visualization techniques helped her navigate uncomfortable emotions and uncover why she had self-doubts. This ultimately helped her release imposter thoughts altogether.

Discussion

Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory proves useful to further explore the experiences of female-identifying leaders with imposter feelings. As discussed earlier, this theory uses the theater metaphor to look at all human interactions as performances in which one is taking on a role, therefore creating both an expression of their roles and an impression on their audiences (Goffman, 1959). This section applies this theory to my findings, first looking at Goffman's notion of performances and then his description of impression management.

Performances

Recall, Goffman uses the metaphor of performance to represent the experience of interactions in everyday life. In interviews, participants spent a great deal of time describing their interactions with others and the ways in which imposter feelings occur in those spaces.

Goffman discusses several different aspects of performances. In this section, I explore the ideas of fronts, idealization, and the theater itself.

Fronts

Goffman (1959) describes the front as the part of the performance that an audience observes. Those managing imposter feelings have a sort of stage fright surrounding their fronts, believing that they are incapable of performing in their roles. Each of my participants experienced imposter feelings and believed it impacted their performances. First, participants felt wrongly cast in their roles; second, participants felt they did not meet the expectations of their roles; and third, participants experienced negative impacts on their performance because of their discomfort with their fronts.

One reason for this stage fright could be that participants do not feel properly cast in their roles and instead have been wrongly assigned. Take for example Chanel or Madeline, who felt incredibly intimidated by coworkers. Chanel described feeling greater imposter feelings when she realized her coworker, who had more industry knowledge, had first applied for Chanel's job before landing a different role in the organization. Madeline felt her imposter feelings were heightened when a new member joined her team and outshined her in an area she saw as valuable for her position. Similarly, Elsa, Felicity, Rachel, and Darcy often see those around them as more knowledgeable or experienced than them. These direct comparisons to others serve as evidence to leaders that they do not deserve the roles they have because they regularly interact with other people who they perceive to be better suited for that same part.

Another reason women with imposter feelings may struggle with their fronts is a sense of belonging. Goffman (1959) discusses how society often has predetermined fronts, so an actress is choosing from a selection of existing fronts rather than creating a new front each time she steps into a role. This can create conflict when an actress does not feel suited for a certain front

or picks up on cues that she is not right for the role she is playing. Many of the participants described how they felt out of place in their organizations at times, which also contributed to them experiencing imposter feelings. One example of this is Darcy, who felt like she needed to be bossier and stricter in her role in order to manage her team, but she struggled with adapting her more relational leadership style to suit this need. These examples connect to literature on the topic of women, imposter feelings, and roles. Just as Ladge et. al (2019) comments on women entrepreneurs feeling like imposters because of lack of role models in their fields, the leaders I interviewed may feel insecure because they do not see other leaders in their companies who look and act like them.

Those with imposter feelings may also struggle with their front because they pick up cues that they are not creating the idealized impression on their audience. Goffman (1959) notes that actors who do not feel suited for their fronts may pick up on audience cues that something about their performance is amiss. Those experiencing imposter feelings, who already see themselves as frauds, may be hyper-sensitive to these cues and even misread them. Veronica described how she gets nervous about giving presentations, even though she is presenting as an expert in her area, because she feels as though she is being over-analyzed by others around her. Similarly, Chanel felt her imposter feelings heighten when she could not answer specific questions about her department area. While these questions or reactions from coworkers may have been cues to something else (such as genuine curiosity) those with imposter feelings, who already are uncomfortable in a role, may see them as their audience not believing their performance.

Imposter feelings also impact the performer's front in a variety of ways, as illustrated by the findings on *Impacts of Imposter Feelings on Performance*. These findings were consistent with research on the topic, showing how imposter feelings often negatively impacted both one's job and well-being. Those with imposter feelings found their roles impacted by their

productivity challenges, struggle with leadership roles, and affective reactions. For example, Hirschfeld (1985) also discusses the negative productivity impacts from the imposter phenomenon, as do Hutchins and Rainbolt (2017). The participants also noted this. Darcy, Felicity, Olive, Maggie, and Madeline saw impacts on their productivity, such as failing to get work done. This resulted in them not fully performing their roles, and not being able to always do all that was expected of them. Chanel, Elsa, Pippa, Darcy, Olive, and Madeline struggled with aspects of their leadership roles because of their imposter feelings. Elsa and Darcy even noted they struggle to even identify as leaders. Goffman (1959) notes that, in some cases, one's audience can even be her own self. When women with imposter syndrome struggle with their leadership identity, they are not just struggling to create an impression on an audience of others, but also on the audience of themselves.

Many of the participants also noted the ways imposter feelings impact their mental, physical, and emotional wellbeing, giving examples ranging from increased stress levels to anxiety to being overwhelmed to hives. Many studies note that those with imposter feelings report higher rates of stress and anxiety (Cozzarelli & Major, 1990; Topping & Kimmel, 1985; Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006; Lane, 2015; Guillaume et al., 2019). This is consistent with the adverse psychological effects described by the leaders, such as Darcy who simply described imposter feelings as “constant anxiety”. This suggests that imposter feelings can greatly impact one's role and also well-being in that role, and one cannot play her part to its full potential when feeling like an imposter.

Idealization

Idealization is when an actress emphasizes certain traits while downplaying or concealing others (Goffman, 1959). Since those imposter feelings often fear they will be found out as a fraud, they often use idealization in their roles to act in ways they believe will “fool” their

audience into believing they actually belong there. While those with imposter feelings actually have earned their roles by their own merit, they often do not see it this way.

One of the main ways participants practiced idealization was in concealment. They would downplay things that they felt exposed them as imposters or drew attention to the fact they did not fit in (at least in their eyes) to act in an idealized version of their roles. For example, Madeline discussed how she actively conceals her feminine traits at work to de-emphasize she is a woman working alongside many men. In this way, she is participating in idealization by concealing one of her traits to better fit her role. Another example of this is Pippa, who noted she never turns her camera on in meetings because she does not want her team to realize she is younger than they think she is. For both Madeline and Pippa, they believe they are gaining credibility with their coworkers by concealing parts of their identity.

Participants also noted ways in which they emphasize certain traits as an act of idealization. One example of this is Darcy, who noted she always prepares heavily, sometimes over-preparing, for her meetings. When she comes to a meeting and can appear knowledgeable and on top of things, she emphasizes those traits, which she believes represent the ideal leader in her organization.

The Theater

We must also discuss the theater itself. If the role is leadership, and the performers are the women, then the theaters where they perform are their companies. Situated within corporate America, the women I interviewed operated in theaters such as healthcare companies, manufacturing operations, and the entertainment industry. These theaters were built by and for men. The women I interviewed often worked in male-dominated environments or in settings where they regularly interacted with men. Literature notes organizations gravitate towards leadership styles that tend to be more masculine (Cabajal, 2018). While Goffman (1959) did not

comment directly on gender expectations, we can follow his idea of pre-established fronts to understand why women often feel imposter feelings when stepping into a leadership role. When women try to act in fronts that were created traditionally for men, they often feel like imposters because they do not feel comfortable or suited for those roles. Chanel, Elsa, Felicity, Darcy, Olive, and Madeline all commented on the idea of gender and imposter feelings.

Felicity commented on this idea when she noted that she never sees women in higher leadership positions in her organization, and while she still strives for that, she often finds herself questioning why she could be the one to break barriers when so many before her have failed. This is something that Ladge et al. (2019) comments on in their article where they discuss the importance of female representation, noting that lacking representation can contribute to feelings of imposter syndrome in women at work.

Chanel echoed these same sentiments, noting she feels more like her job was by chance (her previous boss leaving and her stepping to his role) because her CEO does not put many women in leadership positions and, she feels, looks down on her as a woman in management. In this way, Chanel is getting several audience cues that she is not suited for her role simply because of her gender, even though she notes she does her job well and often feels she is not getting as much as she deserves. Similarly, Darcy felt her relational leadership style didn't fit leadership stereotypes in her company, but being "strict" or "bossy" went against stereotypes of how to act as a woman. No matter what Darcy did, she picked up cues that something was wrong, and she failed in two different fronts.

Regarding gender, Madeline simply said, "They're not expecting that leader to walk in and be a woman." Just as Mullangi and Jagsi (2019) suggest, when societal and organization expectations of leadership do not include women, women will never feel fully comfortable in their leadership fronts, and imposter feelings will always continue to manifest.

Impression Management

Goffman (1959) uses the idea of impression management to explain how performers can actively manage the impression of their audiences by employing a variety of strategies. Similarly, my participants discussed a variety of coping mechanisms they use to address their imposter feelings. Two of the management strategies Goffman (1959) discusses are dramaturgical discipline (where a performer is intentional about her performances, practices presence of mind, and is actively aware of her expression) and dramaturgical circumspection (which is the skill of anticipating awkward situations or conflict and successfully avoiding them). The various techniques participants discussed to manage imposter feelings fall into both of these categories.

Dramaturgical Discipline

Goffman (1959) emphasizes the importance of presence of mind when discussing dramaturgical discipline, noting that performers must be able to set aside personal issues and emotions to fully play their parts. The best example of dramaturgical discipline participants used to manage imposter feelings is reflective practices. These practices allowed women with imposter feelings to reset their frame of mind or actively work to overcome imposter feelings, which reduced their feelings of stress and anxiety and allowed them to work at a higher potential.

Olive, Felicity, Pippa, and Darcy all engaged in discipline by creating mantras or reminders for themselves. These mantras were things like “you can do hard things” and the reminders either of times they had done things well or the ways in which others had believed in them when putting them in their positions. In Pippa’s case, she challenged herself to see herself through a trusted friend’s eyes and connect to the good qualities others saw in her. For these leaders, the reminders helped calm them and assure them. In this way, they were practicing

discipline by actively choosing to engage strategies that would help them put aside their imposter feelings to feel more confident moving forward in their roles.

Rachel took reflective practices a step further. She practices reflective techniques as a way of actively engaging with her imposter feelings to question their validity and eventually release them. She has found this practice incredibly helpful in minimizing her imposter feelings. Similarly to the others, this technique allows her to focus on her performance and be more intentional and present in her role.

In these ways, the participants manage the impressions of others by minimizing imposter feelings that could negatively affect their performances. Without this personal distraction, they were able to bring more of themselves into their roles and feel more confident in their parts. This allowed them to gain credibility with their audience and gain more favorable impressions because they deliver better, more effective performances when imposter feelings do not stand in their way.

Dramaturgical Circumspection

Performers can also manage audiences' impressions through the technique of dramaturgical circumspection, which Goffman (1959) describes as anticipating awkwardness and successfully avoiding it. Participants also used coping strategies for their imposter feelings that were employed to avoid potential conflict or stress. These strategies included ways in which participants exercise control wherever possible, work with others, and move backstage as needed.

Some participants noted ways in which they prepare for things like meetings or milestones. Darcy discusses how she prepares heavily for meetings, thus avoiding what she would perceive as embarrassment or awkwardness if she were to not have an answer for something. Similarly, Madeline uses commitment strategies to create deadlines or external

pressure for herself to get things done, motivated to complete by the sure-fail of not meeting others' expectations. In these ways, they are practicing circumspection by anticipating potential awkward situations that would come when work was not completed properly as a result of their imposter feelings and changing their actions in order to avoid that.

Goffman (1959) discusses how another aspect of dramaturgical circumspection is building a strong team and working well with other performers. Several participants talked about the importance of support networks, whether it was mentors or simply talking to others about their imposter feelings. While this action could feel exposing to those with imposter syndrome, who often experience imposter feelings as private due to their fear of being found out as a fraud and thus facing repercussions, many participants talked about the ways in which leaning on others was valuable in minimizing imposter feelings. Just as a good performer needs a good supporting cast to effectively deliver a show, a leader needs a support network to help them work through imposter feelings to effectively lead. Further, the feedback and validation leaders received from peers, who in a sense are also their audiences, provided positive reinforcement that they did belong in their roles and were doing a good job there. By getting feedback that they were creating a positive impression, they were able to continue exercising those same qualities to maintain it.

Finally, participants noted the importance of moving backstage as necessary. Part of impression management is knowing how and when to limit an audience, and those with imposter feelings needed to recognize when they felt it best to take breaks from their leadership role or limit their audiences to lessen their stage fright (Goffman 1959). Those with imposter feelings then manage impressions by having selective audience interactions, where they are more likely to gain favorable impressions.

The techniques mentioned as both dramaturgical discipline and dramaturgical circumspection are also the mechanism leaders can employ to overcome imposter feelings. Veronica found reflection activities, a form of discipline, to be most beneficial in moving beyond her imposterism, whereas Rachel relied on a combination of both. While none of my participants noted seeking professional help for their imposter feelings, such as therapy or personalized coaching, literature suggests this may be beneficial as well (Clance & Imes, 1978; Clance & O'Toole, 1988; Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016). In this way, imposters are not just managing the impressions of their audience for a short period of time; they also fully get beyond their stage fright and are able to produce more convincing, fearless performances.

Implications and Recommendations

The ten women I interviewed in my study were aware of their imposter feelings and the ways these feelings affected their leadership. Additionally, they all employed a variety of strategies to manage imposter feelings in their everyday work lives. The leaders recognized a variety of triggers for their imposterism, including lacking a sense of belonging, comparison to others, new or unknown situations, and high impact situations. When imposter feelings took hold, the leaders saw impacts on their productivity, leadership roles, and well-being. However, leaders recognized the impacts these feelings have and actively work to improve them through a variety of strategies. These strategies included controlling the performance, working with others, reflective practices, and moving backstage. Goffman's dramaturgical theory was vital in understanding these findings in relation to how female-identifying imposter struggle with their performances and ultimately attempt to repair them through impression management techniques. In the following paragraphs, I discuss the implications of this study on two groups: current and aspiring female-identifying leaders experiencing imposter feelings and the organizations who employ them. In addition, I offer recommendations to both.

Current and Aspiring Female-Identifying Leaders

This research identified triggers of imposter feelings, impacts of those feelings on one's performance, and possible coping strategies for these feelings. The identification of both triggers and impacts on leadership illustrate to current and future leaders experiencing imposter feelings how these can show up in their work and thus impact it. The coping strategies suggested in this research provide real, tangible advice to those experiencing imposter feelings as ways to effectively manage them, resulting in four recommendations for these leaders.

The first recommendation to current and aspiring female-identifying leaders is to create a network of support. While literature discusses the ways in which people with imposter feelings fear being found out as a fraud, the research participants of this study spoke at length about the importance of support networks when dealing with imposter feelings. The formation of an understanding, open, and honest community can help combat imposter feelings. Having mentors to offer guidance, peers to offer support, and strong personal relationships to offer comfort allows those managing imposter feelings to see themselves at their fullest potential, explore problems from and create solutions for effects of imposter feelings, and distress. Further, these communities can help leaders formulate their leadership identities, especially if their communities include other women leaders. These women can then act as role models and offer alternatives to the fronts those with imposter feelings may not feel comfortable stepping into otherwise.

The second recommendation is to establish new fronts as needed. One of the reasons participants of my study struggled with imposter feelings was because the roles they were stepping into were not traditionally created for women, and participants felt out of place because they did not fully belong. Similarly, some participants felt uncomfortable with their fronts because of their age, one noted her ethnicity playing a part in her lacking sense of belonging, and

another noting she often felt like an outsider because she did not engage in alcohol consumption. Leaders should feel empowered to establish their own fronts, emphasizing the unique traits and skills they bring to their roles. While creating a new front or alternating an existing one is challenging, especially when working and living in a society that can favor the status quo, leaders could develop their fronts over time after establishing initial credibility with their audiences or practicing their new fronts in small and/or supportive groups. Creating new fronts, and reimagining existing ones, will allow leaders to feel more at home in their roles and expand possibilities for the leaders coming up behind them.

Finally, I recommend leaders engage in reflective practices. Participants noted these practices were particularly useful in diminishing imposter feelings, especially Veronica who saw significant improvements in confronting her imposter feelings head-on to question them and eventually release them. Imposter feelings create a lot of discomfort, so it is easy for those experiencing them to want to avoid them as much as possible. However, when one takes the time to bring them forward, question them, and look for alternative evidence that instead supports one's validity as a leader, one can begin to relieve themselves of imposter feelings and create new thought patterns. For many, this may be the way to move beyond them.

Organizations

While my research looked specifically at how those with imposter feelings experience and cope with them, I must also mention the implications of this study on organizations who employ women with imposter feelings. Given the serious impacts imposter feelings have on both employees and employers, organizations should feel motivated to support those who experience them. Without addressing imposter feelings, organizations can face a loss of productivity, a lack of diversity in leadership, and employee turnover. Given this, I offer three recommendations for organizations.

First, organizations must offer support to those managing imposter feelings. This could be a variety of things. It could be forming mentorship programs or peer mentoring groups that allow employees to create trusted relationships with others where feelings such as these can be addressed. Given the number of participants who mentioned the positive impact of having support from others, this idea allows for people to find networks and make connections in their workplaces, which is especially important for those who feel they do not belong there. It is important to find a balance of allowing for authentic dialogue of these groups or mentorships while also ensuring they are productive and inclusive for all members. Mentors, or anyone in management positions, should be trained to talk about imposter feelings with mentees or employees in ways that do not isolate those with imposter feelings and do not threaten their employment. By creating safe places for people to discuss imposter feelings and the things that cause them, organizations can lessen the impacts of imposter feelings.

Additionally, organizations can support employees with imposter feelings is to provide resources that specifically address them. This could include training or professional development sessions surrounding imposter syndrome and ways to manage it. For example, organizations could offer a program on imposter feelings during the onboarding process for all employees that defined imposter feelings and disclosed the available resources for anyone experiencing them. This could help people feel more comfortable raising concerns about imposter feelings because they would know how to identify the feelings and where they could safely discuss them in the workplace. In addition to a one-time training, discussions on imposter feelings should appear formally in regular professional development, whether in check-ins or programming, so that the issue stays front-of-mind. Organizations should also offer employees services such as Employee Assistance Programs where employees experiencing imposter feelings can connect with people like licensed therapists to discuss their imposter feelings in a safe, confidential environment. This

would be especially important for anyone managing more severe affective impacts, such as heightened stress. By supporting employees with existing imposter feelings, organizations can help diminish their prevalence in the workplace.

Finally, organizations must seriously consider the ways in which they've created leadership roles, questioning things like who is leading, what types of leadership skills are favored, and who has been left out of these conversations. If an organization is only built for one type of leader, anyone who varies slightly from that ideal will likely struggle with imposter feelings at some point. Many of the participants felt like they did not fit into their leadership roles because of their gender. This is not a problem they can resolve; it is a problem of their organization and society as a whole. Organizations should encourage their employees to develop their own fronts and reimagine the fronts already established for them and celebrate front diversity in significant ways. The creativity of exploring and creating new leadership fronts could make more people feel secure in their leadership; thus, removing imposter feelings altogether. Organizations should question who is leading, what types of leadership skills are favored, who is being left out of leadership conversations, and why that is. For example, when women lead, they often face this juxtaposition of being negatively perceived when they're being too assertive or receiving negative feedback when they aren't being assertive enough. Organizations need to encourage leaders to develop their own fronts and celebrate leadership diversity in a significant way that isn't just tokenism. By allowing leaders freedom to express and practice their leadership in a variety of ways and through a multitude of fronts, organizations can help everyone feel more at home in their leadership while also creating more role models for the leaders who will follow.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This study had at least two significant limitations. First, the number of research subjects (ten) was too small to allow for generalized and transferable findings to larger populations. Next, the group was fairly homogeneous, with eight out of ten identifying as white and all participants being under the age of 40. Additionally, most participants only had one to three years of leadership experience. Not being able to further explore various intersections of identity, leadership, and imposter feelings limited my understanding of the experiences of those with imposter feelings and their coping strategies for them. This warrants further research.

The findings of my study raise opportunities for further research surrounding leaders who have experienced imposter feelings. First is the finding of the impact imposter feelings have on one's leadership role. The findings of this study discussed ways in which female-identifying leaders experiencing imposter feelings struggled to see themselves as leaders, give critical feedback, or make decisions. It would be interesting to explore how these things impact followers. One could study followers working under leaders with imposter feelings and the ways in which they believe their work experiences are affected. Second is the idea of reflective practices and imposter feelings. One could further investigate the ways in which reflective practices impact imposter feelings, including which techniques are most effective and if impacts are long- or short-term.

Finally, as mentioned above, my participants lacked significant diversity in age, amount of leadership experience, race and ethnicity, and sexual identity, so one should further explore these intersections with imposter syndrome and leadership. For example, a woman of color may experience even more triggers of imposter feelings as a leader because of the significant barriers to them accessing the leadership front. A leader who is a woman of color is not just juggling the dual fronts of "woman" and "leader" but is also facing stereotypes about their existing front as a person of color, which may add complexity to their imposter feelings. This paper does not

address the experiences of women who face additional marginalization related to their identities, and further research should explore how the intersection of various identities impacts leaders experiencing imposter feelings, including what triggers the feelings, how it impacts their leadership, and how they and their organizations address it.

Conclusion

Imposter feelings in female-identifying leaders can significantly limit leadership effectiveness; however, they can be managed through a variety of coping strategies. The stories participants told about their experiences with imposter feelings were impactful and informative, describing how these feelings are triggered, how they impact their leadership performance, and how they manage them in their everyday lives. The struggles they described showed a need for change in how we as a society view leadership and points us to reconsider the traditional leadership roles to which many do not feel fully comfortable obtaining. While there is still much research to be done around this topic, it is my hope that this study can guide future investigations and provide valuable insight to both leaders and organizations surrounding imposter feelings. If the world is indeed a stage, I hope this study shows that there is a need for new roles, creative casting, and, in cases where it's necessary, a rebuilding of the theater from the ground up.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Tell me about your career path and how you got to your current role.

When did you first notice you were feeling like an imposter?

- Can you describe the emotions you felt or thoughts you had?
- How did these feelings manifest in your career?
- How have things changed since then?
- What is the current status?

(Note to interviewee: For the purpose of my study, I define imposter feelings as experiences in which one doubts their abilities, successes, or talents and has a persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud, despite any external evidence suggesting otherwise. The interviewee may name them differently.)

In which situations do you or did you feel most like an imposter?

- Why do you think those situations impacted those feelings?
- When are the feelings minimized?

How do you think different aspects of your identity (for example your gender, race, sexual identity, or age) contribute to your imposter feelings?

- Can you provide an example?

Have these feelings impacted your leadership? Why or why not?

- If they have impacted your leadership, can you provide any examples?

What coping strategies have you used to manage your imposter feelings?

- Which strategies have been most effective for you?
- Can you provide an example?

When have you managed these feelings in a way that felt unproductive?

- What did that look like?
- How did you know it was unproductive?
- How did it impact your leadership/organization?

If you could give one piece of advice to someone struggling with feelings similar to yours, what would you tell them?

Is there anything I haven't asked that you feel would be useful to know for my study?

Appendix B: Recruiting Materials

Text for email recruitment:

Hello _____,

As you may know, I am a graduate student at St. Catherine University in the Master of Organizational Leadership program. I am conducting a research project about women leaders who have experiences with imposter syndrome. I am looking for women to interview who consider themselves leaders within their teams or organizations in the for-profit sector and have experienced imposter feelings at any point in their careers. For the purpose of the study, “imposter feelings” refers to experiences in which one doubts their abilities, successes, or talents and has a persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud, despite any external evidence suggesting otherwise. Those managing imposter feelings may also attribute their successes to luck or chance rather than hard work or qualifications.

If you may fit these criteria and are interested in being considered for an interview, please complete the following form: [insert Google form link]

If you have any questions, please contact me at kknorton@stkate.edu. Any participation is voluntary and confidential. Interviewees will receive a \$15 Target gift card for their time. Interviews will take place via Zoom.

Thank you!

Text for Facebook/LinkedIn recruitment:

Ever felt like an imposter?

If you are a woman leader in the for-profit sector and have experienced “imposter feelings”, please consider participating in this study:

Keeley Norton, a graduate student at St. Catherine University in the Master of Organizational Leadership program, is conducting a research project about female, for-profit business leaders who have experiences with imposter feelings. For the purpose of the study, “imposter feelings” refers to experiences in which one doubts their abilities, successes, or talents and has a persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud, despite any external evidence suggesting otherwise. Those managing imposter feelings may also attribute their successes to luck or chance rather than hard work or qualifications.

If you believe you meet these criteria and are interested in interviewing, please complete this form: [insert Google form link]

Anyone selected to interview will receive a \$15 Target gift card. Any participation is voluntary and confidential, and interviews will take place via Zoom.

Appendix C: Pre-Screening Survey

Thank you for your interest in this study. This pre-screening survey is used to help me discern among participants. The pre-screening survey will ensure the research includes a variety of perspectives and experiences with imposter feelings in the for-profit work environment. I am looking for a range of experiences in my interviewees. For example, variance may appear in types of leadership experience, times in which imposter feelings emerged, or whether someone is presently facing imposter feelings.

Any data provided in the pre-screening survey will only be used if a participant is chosen to participate in an interview and gives consent to their data being used at that time. The information you provide will be kept confidential. Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not participate in an interview, any information given in this pre-screening survey will be destroyed no later than August 30, 2021.

By completing this survey, you agree to provide this information for the purposes of consideration for this study.

If you have any questions about this pre-screening survey, please contact me at kknorton@stkate.edu. If are interested in participating in the study and prefer to contact me directly, you can email me at kknorton@stkate.edu.

Pre-Screening Survey Questions

Full name:

Email address:

Phone number:

Do you identify as a woman? Yes/No

Do you currently work in the for-profit business sector and consider yourself a leader within your team or organization? Yes/No

What is your job title? _____

Do you supervise a team? Yes/No

If yes, how many do you supervise:

At any point in your career, have you experienced imposter feelings? Yes/No

“Imposter feelings” refers to experiences in which one doubts their abilities, successes, or talents and has a persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud, despite any external evidence suggesting

otherwise. Those managing imposter feelings may also attribute their successes to luck or chance rather than hard work or qualifications.

In 100 words or less, please describe your experience with imposter feelings in your career:

Appendix D: Email to Participants Not Chosen to Interview

Dear _____,

Thank you for your interest in my study. I have received more responses than I can accommodate at this time, so you have not been chosen to participate in an interview. Any data you provided in the pre-screening survey will not be included in the study and has been destroyed.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,
Keeley Norton
kknorton@stkate.edu

Appendix E: Demographic Information

If you agree to participate in the study, please complete the following demographics questions. Please note for any question you do not wish to answer, please mark “Prefer not to respond”. Choosing not to respond to any or all questions below will not negatively impact your participation in the study.

1. What is your current age? _____
Prefer not to respond

2. How would you describe your race? (Please check all that apply.)
Native American or Alaskan Native
Asian
Black or African American
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
White or Caucasian
Other/Prefer to self-describe: _____
Prefer not to respond

3. How would you describe your ethnicity?

Prefer to not respond

4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
Less than a high school diploma or GED
High school diploma/GED
Some college
Associates degree
Bachelor’s degree
Master’s degree
Doctoral degree
Prefer to not answer

5. How many years of leadership experience do you have?
Less than one year
1-3 years
4-6 years
7-9 years
10-12 years
13-15 years
16 or more years
Prefer to not answer

6. What is the name of your place of employment?

Prefer to not respond

7. What is your job title?

Prefer to not respond

8. Do you supervise any direct reports?

Yes (if yes, how many _____)

No

Prefer to not respond

Appendix F: Informed Consent Form

DATE

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your willingness to participate in my research study titled Leading as a Fraud: Female-Identifying Leaders Navigating Imposter Feelings in the For-Profit Sector.

I am a graduate student at St. Catherine University under the supervision of Sharon Radd, Ed.D, program director of the Department of Organizational Leadership. I am completing this study as a part of my Master's degree in Organizational Leadership.

In order to make sure that this research is both ethical and credible, it is important that each participant be fully informed of the risks and benefits of the study, as well as of their rights as a participant. Please read the attached Informed Consent Form for this important information. We will review this information at the beginning of your interview, and I will ask you to sign it and return it. If you have any difficulty signing this consent form in the virtual environment, please contact me for an alternative.

If you have any questions about the form or the study, please do not hesitate to discuss them with me.

Thank you for your support of my study,

Keeley Norton
kknorton@stkate.edu
218.260.7178

ST CATHERINE UNIVERSITY

Informed Consent for a Research Study

Study Title: Leading as a Fraud: Female-Identifying Leaders Navigating Imposter Feelings in the For-Profit Sector

You are invited to participate in a research study. This study is called Leading as a Fraud: Female-Identifying Leaders Navigating Imposter Feelings in the For-Profit Sector. The study is being done by Keeley Norton, a Masters' candidate at St. Catherine University in St. Paul, MN. The faculty advisor for this study is Dr. Sharon Radd, Program Director in the Master of Organizational Leadership program at St. Catherine University. Below, you will find answers to the most commonly asked questions about participating in a research study. Please read this entire document and ask questions you have before you agree to be in the study.

Why are the researchers doing this study?

The purpose of this study is to identify how women leading in the for-profit sector navigate imposter feelings to effectively lead. This study is important because it will provide information about imposter feelings within the context of leadership and how to successfully manage these feelings. This could benefit both future and current leaders with similar experiences. Approximately 6-10 people are expected to participate in this research.

Why have I been asked to be in this study?

You were selected for this study because you responded to an ad for this study (flyer, email, or online post) and a female-identifying leader in the for-profit business sector with experience with imposter feelings.

If I decide to participate, what will I be asked to do?

If you meet the criteria and agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do these things:

- Complete a demographics questionnaire
- Complete a semi-structured 60-90 minute interview

In total, this study will take approximately 60 to 90minutes over one session.

What if I decide I don't want to be in this study?

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide you do not want to participate in this study, please feel free to say so, and do not sign this form. If you decide to participate in this study, but later change your mind and want to withdraw, simply notify me and you will be removed immediately. You may withdraw until July 30, 2021, after which time withdrawal will no longer be possible. If you choose to withdraw after July 30, 2021, your data cannot be withdrawn from the analysis. Your decision of whether or not to participate will have no negative or positive impact on your relationship with St. Catherine University, nor with any of the students or faculty involved in the research.

What are the risks (dangers or harms) to me if I am in this study?

Some participants may experience discomfort when recounting past experiences given the personal nature of imposter feelings.

What are the benefits (good things) that may happen if I am in this study?

Some participants may appreciate the ability to reflect on and talk through their experiences in order to gain additional clarity. Through this study, I hope to add to the public knowledge of on how those experiencing imposter feelings can manage them to effectively lead.

Will I receive any compensation for participating in this study?

Interviewees will receive a \$15 Target gift card via email after the interview is completed.

What will you do with the information you get from me and how will you protect my privacy?

The information that you provide in this study will be video and audio-recorded and transcribed. To ensure confidentiality, all data will be de-identified and participants assigned a pseudonym. I will keep consent forms, transcripts, recordings, and my notes in a secure location and only I and my research advisor will have access to the records while I work on this project. I will finish analyzing the data in December 2021 and will then destroy all original reports and identifying information that can be linked back to you by December 2022.

Any information that you provide will be kept confidential, which means that you will not be identified or identifiable in the any written reports or publications. If it becomes useful to disclose any of your information, the researcher will seek your permission and tell you the persons or agencies to whom the information will be furnished, the nature of the information to be furnished, and the purpose of the disclosure; you will have the right to grant or deny permission for this to happen. If you do not grant permission, the information will remain confidential and will not be released.

Could my information be used for future research?

No, your data will not be used or distributed for future research even if de-identified without gaining further consent from you.

Are there possible changes to the study once it gets started?

If during the course of this research study the researcher team learns about new findings that might influence your willingness to continue participating in the study, they will inform you of these findings

How can I get more information?

If you have any questions, you can ask them before you sign this form. You can also feel free to contact me at kknorton@stkate.edu. If you have any additional questions later and would like to talk to the faculty advisor, please contact Sharon Radd at siradd@stkate.edu. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you may also contact Dr. John Schmitt, Chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board, at (651) 690-7739 or jsschmitt@stkate.edu.

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I consent to participate in the study and agree to be videotaped/audiotaped.

My signature indicates that I have read this information, my questions have been answered and I am at least 18 years of age.

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Researcher

Date