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Gendered Hybridity in Leadership Identities: A Postfeminist Analysis

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Gendered Hybridity in Leadership Identities: A Postfeminist Analysis

Abstract

Purpose - This paper examines the discursive constitution of leadership identities by senior women leaders working in the City of London. We draw on postfeminism as a critical concept to explore this constitution, as it has produced the cultural conditions for the reconfiguration of masculine and feminine gender norms in leadership.

Design/Methodology/Approach – In a qualitative study, 13 women leaders in positions of power in the City of London were interviewed. Discourse analysis techniques were used to unpack the postfeminist shaping of leadership identities

Findings – At the heart of the leadership identities that senior women leaders construct is a gendered hybridity that is a multifaceted calibration of masculine and feminine attributes and behaviours. Postfeminist discourses of individualism, choice and self-improvement are entangled with discourses of authenticity, relatability, and connectivity as particular leadership assets. The gendered hybridity of leadership identities unfolds the possibility for a fundamental makeover of leadership by opening-up space for a transformative change that accommodates women leaders.

Originality/Value – This study is among very few studies that foreground the leadership identities that women leaders construct within the confines of postfeminist gender regimes. It shows how these women invoke authenticity, unfolding possibilities for the transformational change of and political challenge to traditional gendered leadership in their organizations.

Keywords – Postfeminism, masculinity, femininity, leadership identities, authentic individualism, relatability

Paper type - Research paper

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Introduction

This paper examines the discursive constitution of leadership identities by senior women leaders working in the City of London. Leadership has conventionally been characterized as masculine with attributes, characteristics and behaviours of leaders culturally associated with men and masculinity (Ford, 2006). Gender critiques of this dominant masculine norm have contributed to the emergence of alternative ways of leading characterised as relational in orientation and aligned with the feminised characteristics of nurture and care conventionally associated with women (Fletcher, 2004). As such, masculinised and feminised forms of leading now co-exist. Studies report how men and women leaders enact masculine and feminine leadership identities (Byrne et al, 2021), and while masculinity still suffuses understandings and expectations of what to envisage when leading or being led, feminised forms of leadership are growing in importance. Increasingly, 'good' leadership now requires a type of 'gender balancing' – collaborative, caring, empathetic behaviours are expected alongside masculine-marked practices. Indeed, accounts of leadership highlight how leaders engage in both individualistic and relational practices when leading (Byrne et al, 2021; Khan et al, 2022; Powell et al, 2021). Nevertheless, significant issues persist in terms of who can enact 'gender-balanced' leadership in a way which is valued and recognised. The common-sense association of women leaders with feminised leadership or that a 'gender-balanced' form of leadership can be performed by both men and women and assigned equal value requires ongoing scrutiny. Indeed, Khan et al, (2022, p. 321-322) demonstrate how media representations in Australia suggest that '…only men (are) able to perform both masculinized and feminized attributes, despite the theoretical assertion that post-heroic leadership can be performed by both men and women'.

Against this background, we draw on postfeminism as an analytic device (Lewis et al, 2017) to examine how senior women leaders discursively constitute a leadership identity. Our

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study is underpinned by poststructuralist principles whereby genders, persons and identities are seen as neither natural nor stable. Rather, they are understood to be fluid, fragmented, contradictory and 'performatively constituted within norms and through interaction' (Tassabehji et al, 2021, p. 1301). From this theoretical location we approach leadership identity as inscribed and regulated from cultural raw material (Lees-Marshment and Smolovic Jones, 2018) that is articulated through the constitutive force of postfeminist discourses (Benschop and Lewis, 2022). Postfeminism has produced the cultural conditions which have facilitated the reframing of leadership as contradictorily gendered. Within a postfeminist gender regime, women are interpellated to enact postfeminist identities, understood in the literature as femininities (McRobbie, 2009; Lewis, 2014), that are discursively constituted around the dialectic co-existence of masculine and feminine norms. Here, gender norms are interdependent forces and through their intermingling, adjustments occur between them, with changes in masculine norms directly impacting feminine norms and vice versa (Lewis et al, 2022). Given this, there is a need for an increased focus on the way in which postfeminist incitements such as the need to calibrate masculine and feminine behaviours are lived and negotiated at the level of subjectivity within a gendered leadership terrain which is increasingly complicated. Nevertheless, while there is a significant literature on the emergence of feminised leadership and women's experiences of leading (Eagly and Carli, 2003, Powell et al, 2008), few studies closely examine the kind of leadership identities women construct in postfeminist gender regimes. Of those studies that have drawn on postfeminism, less attention is directed at issues of identity per se, with the focus more likely to be on experiences of being a leader and the enactment of feminine behaviours within the realms of leadership. Our study contributes to this small body of work with its research question centring on how women in senior leadership positions discursively constitute a leadership identity within the confines of postfeminism. Drawing on interviews with 13

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senior women leaders in the City of London and using postfeminism as a critical concept, we reveal how women leaders constitute a hybrid leadership identity, drawing on a combination of masculine and feminine behaviours and attributes. We argue that this discursive constitution aligns with some elements of a traditionally gendered form of leadership but ultimately acts as a challenge to it.

Our contribution is twofold: first we make visible the gendered hybridity which is central to the leadership identities constituted by women leaders. Second, as the normative constraints around leadership are evolving, propelled by the presence of women and the valorisation of feminine characteristics and behaviours, we make visible the transformative potential which underpins senior women leaders' discursive constitution of their leadership identities. We argue that this transformative potential can challenge gendered power relations in the leadership field. The article is structured as follows: we begin by examining the concept of postfeminism. Next, we outline the study's methodology and following that we present the empirical sections. We conclude by discussing the implications of our study.

Postfeminism

Postfeminism is a highly contested, malleable, polysemic concept which is interpreted in multiple ways. Within the social sciences, postfeminism is mainly used as a critical concept or analytic device to explore the reconfiguration of gender norms alongside the persistence of inequality. Within the gender and organisation studies field, the dominant interpretation of postfeminism is one which treats it as a discursive formation made up of interrelated themes attached to a complex set of discourses around gender, feminism and femininity that emphasise the end of gender discrimination and treat the principle of equality as part of our contemporary common sense (Lewis et al, 2017). The cultural ideas and beliefs

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associated with postfeminism that give rise to a taken-for-granted sense of equality, call women away from a traditional femininity characterised by a sole focus on serving men and caring for children, towards a reconfigured feminine subjecthood with educational and economic capacity (McRobbie, 2009). Notwithstanding the claimed 'end' of discrimination, this does not mean the obliteration of traditional femininity, rather what emerges is a co-existence of gender equality norms with conventional gender norms which manifests in reconfigured modes of femininity. This configuration is revealed as the fusion of masculine and feminine behaviours such that together they form the central core of postfeminist subjectivities connected to discourses of individualism, choice and the optimisation of self; the pursuit of transformation and the manifestation of our 'best self'; the emphasis placed on 'natural' sexual difference; the prominence ascribed to femininity as a bodily and psychological property; the emphasis placed on subjectification; and returning home to care for children as a positive choice as opposed to a traditional duty (Gill, 2007). The interpellation to invest in a postfeminist subjectivity is conventionally understood in terms of an array of techniques which call individuals into subject positions characterised by the calibration of masculine and feminine norms. There is no centrally located source for these techniques. Instead, they emerge through the actions and influence of a range of semi-autonomous institutions and individuals who deliver a similar message across public discourse without organized co-operation (Riley et al, 2016). More recently, the affective and psychic dimensions of postfeminism are increasingly recognised, calling attention to postfeminism as a phenomenon which seeks to shape what women think and feel and how their emotional states are displayed (Gill, 2017).

As postfeminism is centrally involved in the constitution of the contemporary individualised subjectivity women are interpellated to take up, we draw on it as an analytic device to investigate the ways in which women and a reconfigured femininity are now

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included in the call to leadership. Constituting a leadership subjectivity within postfeminism is not achieved solely through the disciplined take-up of a set of techniques. It is also dependent on affective attachments which shape the way individuals orient to, articulate, and manage the demands and contradictions of a leadership subject position within a postfeminist context. Currently, there are a small number of studies which draw on postfeminism to interrogate and understand women's leadership. This work includes a reanalysis of existing studies of women's leadership through a postfeminist lens that highlight the importance of individual choice and being the 'right' type of woman (Mavin and Grandy, 2018); a consideration of how women leaders engage in feminine body-work to avoid alienating men and other women in leadership positions (Mavin and Grandy, 2019a, 2019b); a review of the autobiographies of celebrity businesswomen who offer themselves as postfeminist role models and advocate individualist solutions based on confidence, control and courage to address experiences of inequality (Adamson and Kelan, 2019); an interview study of English football which draws out the postfeminist ideological dilemma faced by women leaders who account for their success through recourse to choice and merit while also being fully aware of persistent gender inequalities (Bryan, 2022); and finally, an interview study of women leaders in STEMM who address a persistently unequal context through a focus on their own psychology, adopting a postfeminist frame of internalization where working on self is understood as the means to address inequality (Nash and Moore, 2019).

Viewed through the lens of postfeminism, we can complicate our understanding of the 'feminine leader' not as a leadership figure that is created solely around traditional feminine norms and relational practice (Fletcher, 2001) but rather as a hybrid configuration discursively constituted with respect to the dialectic coexistence of feminine *and* masculine norms. Understanding the 'feminine leader' as a hybrid subjectivity means that masculine and feminine leadership are treated as a unity of opposites that reciprocally demarcate each

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other rather than as two approaches which develop and evolve separately (Lewis et al, 2022). Accordingly, we move away from the hierarchization of an 'either-or' understanding of gendered leadership to a 'both-and' orientation where the masculine and feminine are together constitutive elements of leadership. Nevertheless, this interdependence of gender norms is not without its challenges as deep-seated asymmetrical power relations between the masculine and feminine can produce conflict and tension creating contradictory outcomes and ongoing challenges (Collinson, 2020).

The emergence of hybrid forms of femininity based around the interlinking of feminine and masculine behaviours, signals that women's engagement in masculine marked behaviours and practices has become culturally normative. Accordingly, femininity can no longer be understood in singular terms but rather as multiplicitous, with normative femininities compulsorily interlocking with norms as well as social realms marked by masculinity (Carlson, 2011, Lewis, 2014). As leadership discourses capture and constrain women in terms of what can be said about leadership and reading this through the lens of postfeminism, we draw out women's take-up and engagement with masculine leadership norms alongside feminine relationality when constituting their leader identity.

Methodology

This paper derives from an interview study of leaders working in the City of London that sought to investigate how postfeminism calls men and women to calibrate masculine and feminine norms in the constitution of leader subjectivities. From the broader study, we focus in this paper on how women in senior leadership positions discursively constitute a leadership identity within the confines of postfeminism. For the overall research project, 48 interviews – 22 men and 26 women - were completed by the first author and ethical approval for the

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study was granted by her university. Study participants were sourced using a purposive, snowballing sampling strategy with use being made of a mixture of personal and professional contacts to identify appropriate respondents across a range of organisations. For the purposes of this paper, the focus is on interviews with 13 senior women leaders to address the question of how a leadership identity is constituted by women in positions of power who engage with the identity category of leader. As this paper focuses on senior women leaders, details of this sub-section of the sample are presented in Table I below. Pseudonyms are used throughout the data analysis and the specific roles of the interviewees are not identified to ensure that confidentiality is not compromised either directly or indirectly.

Insert Table I here

Of the 13 interviews, 11 took place in the organizations of the respondents with one interview taking place in a member's club in London and another being held in the home of an interviewee. All respondents agreed to the interviews being digitally recorded and these were transcribed by a professional transcription service which specialises in servicing research projects. Topics covered during the interviews included the path to leadership, their motivation for taking up a leadership position, the work they did on themselves as they moved into leadership, their own account of how they lead and how this developed, their view on what counts as 'good'/'poor' leadership and the challenges they have faced. While the respondents were aware that men and women in leadership positions were being interviewed, the questions were not couched in gender terms. Rather, questions posed related to leadership in general in terms of their understanding, motivation, and experiences. The aim in doing this was to provide as open a space as possible for individuals to speak about leadership. Nevertheless, within this context, it was not unusual for the conversation to turn to the issue of gender in relation to leadership.

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The data analysis (summarised in Table II below) was informed by a Foucauldian discursive approach with discourse analysis techniques being deployed to address the interest of the study which is to explore how leadership identities are discursively constituted by senior women leaders. In doing this we draw on Weedon's (1987, p. 12) conceptualization of discourse as systems of text, concepts, beliefs, and signs that exist in written and oral form and in the social practices of everyday life. Discourses are understood to offer subject positions that individuals assume, the take-up of which is a discursive practice. While discursive practices are activated by individual agency, people are 'subjected to the power and regulation of discourse' (Weedon, 1987, p. 119). As such gender and leadership identity are not understood as fixed properties of the individual but as discursive effects.

Our first step in the data analysis related to the identification of our object of study as the postfeminist shaping of leadership subjectivities within the City of London and problematised the common-sense association of men leaders with masculine behaviours and women leaders with caring behaviours as a feminised way of leading. From here, we completed the analysis by concentrating on what was said in the interviews with the emphasis placed on *what* people say, *how* they say it and what they do *not say*. Thus, we concentrated on the 'things said' as they have normative implications, functioning to invoke certain norms and subject positions, '…establishing ways for people to be…' (Bacchi & Bonham, 2016, p. 115). As our theoretical location of poststructuralism understands interview talk as located within discourses, the second step of our data analysis focused on locating traces of postfeminist discourses connected to gender, feminism and femininity, so that the 'things said' were read through the analytical lens of postfeminism. Thus, our data analysis focused on identifying postfeminist constitutive discourses as delineated by Gill (2007) in her explication of the cultural phenomenon of postfeminism. Through identification and analysis of the words and phrases articulated by our interviewees, we traced the postfeminist

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discourses that their utterances related to, were located in and which made them sayable (Tassabehji et al, 2021). While many other discourses could be identified in the interview data, our use of postfeminism as an analytic device influenced the discourses we focused on. Accordingly, four postfeminist discourses were identified including individualism, choice and empowerment, make-over and self-transformation, authenticity, and relatability (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Gill, 2007). Such discourses make it possible for certain things to be said, forming the limits and forms of the sayable, enabling the interviewees to speak of themselves as particular kinds of subjects. Following Lewis (2014), we understand discourses of individualism, choice and empowerment and make-over and self-transformation as connected to masculinised attainment in the sphere of work, while discourses of authenticity and relatability are associated with the feminised tradition of creating connection, focusing on the needs of others, and providing support. We argue that these imbricated discourses call women into a hybrid subject position, inviting them to interlink masculinised and feminised behaviours, conventionally associated with work and the supportive environment of home respectively (Lewis et al, 2022). As such we argue that the contemporary 'feminine leader' is socially constituted within these discourses and their associated discursive practices.

Accordingly, the third step of the data analysis focused on identifying the discursive practices present in the accounts of the respondents. As a poststructuralist term, discursive practice refers to the way in which a discourse is practiced and circulated within a culture. Through discursive practices individuals can reproduce or challenge taken-for-granted social norms. Discursive practices can have transformative potential whereby subject formation can open-up possibilities for change in a subject position such as 'leader'. While this subject position is produced within multiple discursive practices, we (as the analysts) determined what discursive practices are relevant to the 'things said' as they encapsulate how (postfeminist) discourses 'practice' and the set of relations that characterise them (Bacchi and

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Bonham, 2016). The next section is organised around the identified discursive practices: choosing work, changing and enhancing self, being true to self and building connection. In presenting the findings, we include excerpts from individual interviews which clearly articulate and are illustrative of the discursive practices, resonating across the wider data set. Referred to by Pratt (2008) as 'power quotes', these extracts of data effectively and persuasively illuminate our argument. Overall, we treated the interview data as providing us with an opportunity to examine the contours of postfeminist discourses in women leaders' discursive accounts and not as a precise outline of the experience of leadership within the City of London. Given this, it is important to note that the identified discursive practices make visible what can be said but not exhaustively about leading at this postfeminist historical juncture (Lewis et al, 2022).

Insert Table II here

Findings

Choosing work

A significant consequence of the emergence of postfeminism, is the way in which it calls women '…to assume the position of an individual (as opposed to being) a member of a disadvantaged group' (Budgeon, 2014, p. 323). In being interpellated in this way, women assimilate masculine attributes and 'do' masculinity as the latter is conflated with individuality. One way in which this manifested was the emphasis placed by all respondents on their willingness to go the 'extra mile' for their organization. Long working hours which are a well-known characteristic and requirement of the masculine world of work were treated as normal and necessary. Choosing work by putting it before other aspects of life is one of the main ways by which individualised masculine attributes and behaviours were assimilated by the respondents. In a postfeminist discourse of individualism, choice and empowerment,

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respondents were constituted as having a strong sense of loyalty to their organization and choosing work as follows:

> '…at the time I just didn't really think about it, I just thought this is what you did, you just worked hard. I suppose I could see that I was always the person that sort of worked late, I was always somebody that did more than others, but I didn't think actually, it took a lot more effort for people to sort of see that you were making an effort if you know what I mean? I didn't…I suppose I am competitive, but I didn't think about it as being, you know, I've got…I'm going to do more because that's in my nature, I just, I'm just somebody that, I just kind of take things on and I'm the person that takes responsibility…
>
> (Linda, Senior Woman Leader)

In articulating this view, Linda expresses a masculinised attachment to work which she understood as just 'what you did'. Across the interviews, the emphasis placed on making an effort and the minimisation of 'the effort' taken to do this was common among the respondents. Being available and ready for (extra) work was seen as normal and treated as a straightforward way to get noticed, a means to differentiate yourself as an individual from others. Similarly, within the same discourses, individual behaviours in relation to work are understood as choices, where working longer is perceived as something anyone can easily do, if they choose this path. Additionally, such choices in relation to work were seen as empowering as the following illustrates:

> But also, I was prepared to work really hard, you know, I sacrificed a lot for my work …work was my number one priority…it was work, work, work. But I wasn't in a bad mental state over it because I was really enjoying it…But the reality is that it becomes a huge part of how you see yourself, particularly if you're leading or are successful

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> because you start to describe yourself "I'm a leader, I'm successful" and then if you're not successful or a leader anymore what are you? And if you haven't got a big friendship circle because you've been working the whole time and you know you don't know people in your area because you commute, you don't know your children that well because you hardly see them, it is who you are you know, reality is your job is who you are
>
> (Simone, Senior Woman Leader)

Drawing on postfeminist discourses around individualism, choice and empowerment, Simone is constituted as having a masculinised attachment to work in the way that she put it before all other elements of her life. While she has experienced this positively, she is also aware that her identity is centred on work and that there are consequences to the constitution of self as a committed, work-centred employee. Further to this, in drawing on the discourses of individualism and choice and considering what it takes to be positioned as a conventional 'successful leader', she acknowledges but also distances herself from the negative elements of her dedication through her use of the pronoun 'you', expressed as 'you've been working all the time; you don't know your children'. As such, while doing masculinity and acknowledging that work is at the centre of her identity, she is also conscious of the femininity she has foregone or even sacrificed – connection to home, children, and friendships outside of work.

Changing and enhancing self

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The interviewees point to the self-work they do to be in their leadership roles. They reflect on the changes they make, which resonates with a postfeminist discourse of make-over and self-enhancement. We observe how women senior leaders engage with a discourse of change and self-transformation:

> So, I've had two different coaches in the last five years. So, I've done a number of things, I have done things like, it's all about increasing self-awareness. I think a big key to it is having self-awareness, because if you kind of know who you are, what motivates you, what drives you, how you react to things, why you react to things, it's you know, if you know yourself you have a better chance of kind of harnessing the good, for want of a better word, restricting the bits that you're not as keen on or maybe the bits that might not work in all situations. So, mine has been about understanding myself, so I've done things like Myers Briggs, I've done things like Disc, you know, read the reports with interest, you know, kind of trying to see if they correlate. I've done maybe four of those over the past seven, eight years. And I don't hold, right, that's the truth and nothing but the truth. But it's useful…some things get pulled out
>
> (Victoria, Senior Woman Leader)

Victoria discusses how she invests in coaching and training to come to a better understanding of herself, of how she can bring out the best in herself and remedy those parts that are not useful. Self-awareness is seen as very valuable, as key even, and she accepts that self-awareness takes work and needs to be maintained repeatedly. This constant work on knowing and changing the self is a well-known trope for women, contributing to the emergence of vast industries – women's magazines, self-help books, coaching websites – that are built on making women work on themselves in line with postfeminist femininities (Swan, 2017). As

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Elaine Swan notes, women are seen as the perfect malleable subjects in postfeminist gender regimes, and for these women senior leaders the feminine make-over work and the leader self-awareness work go together seamlessly.

> I guess I've changed quite a bit even in my leadership role…I have become more feminine in my dress in the last five years…I've moved away from your very traditional you know, navy trouser suit or navy skirt suit or black…the more I've moved up the ladder the more I've realised that I have to actually be quite outspoken in my opinion because I think sometimes as a woman you're not heard unless you're willing to be just very direct and not beat around the bush on a topic and I think if I look at my boardroom experiences I think women are a lot better at actually really getting to the root of the issue rather than skirting around an issue and maybe that's because traditionally this old boy's network thing, you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours, that's diluting, that's diluting
>
> (Diana, Senior Woman Leader)

Diana's reflections illustrate how much work goes into constructing a leader identity as a woman and how this construction entails a careful combination of masculinity and femininity. She notes how she explicitly worked on her appearance (dress more feminine) and on being outspoken to be seen and heard as a woman leader. She emphasizes femininity as she connects women to a superior boardroom performance, reiterating the female advantage in leadership thesis. At the same time, this illustrates how it is not self-evident that women are seen and heard in leadership positions that have been male dominated traditionally, even for senior women leaders themselves. We note how Diana can move away from masculine navy suits, but not from masculine connotated leader behaviour in her emphasis of having to 'be outspoken and just very direct and not beat around the bush' to be

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heard as a woman leader. The construction of leadership identities by senior women entails continuous work and changes of the self to get the right gender mix, to master a 'balance' of both masculine and feminine behaviours.

Being true to self

As we have seen above, postfeminist themes of masculine individualism are strongly present in interviewees' accounts of how they 'choose' long working hours alongside a willingness to take responsibility for transforming themselves by engaging in continuous processes of self-improvement. Nevertheless, while positively engaging with discourses of individualism, choice and self-transformation, there was also an awareness that there are constraints around doing masculinity in terms of engaging in certain behaviours as the following illustrates:

> But yeah, I think there's still in certain environments, you get labelled with being a particular type of women if you're ambitious. The amount, of times people have said to me things like…you know "you're so ambitious or you're not aggressive but sort of a similar very assertive or something where it's been said to me in a way as if to say "bit too pushy" you know that kind of way. Whereas a man doing the same would be "oh he's a bit too hot-headed, don't worry about him" and I'm being pushy, yet they're being what we would call disgracefully rude…If I behaved like that no one would tolerate me. I've got less ability to behave badly
>
> (Simone, Senior Woman Leader)

The power effects of gendered discourses in relation to leadership emerge strongly in the way Simone assesses how she has been perceived and the limits that are put on her engagement in behaviours which are socially marked as masculine. Ambition and being assertive through

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strong articulation of her opinions are all perceived as displays of masculinity and women's latitude in engaging in such behaviours is much narrower than the leeway given to men. As their room for (masculine) manoeuvre is restricted within a postfeminist gender regime, women leaders, no matter what their characteristics, are called into femininity as the following illustrates:

> I always make sure that I am well turned out, so I'm well groomed…So in terms of you know what experience has told me is that, if you don't look as you're expected to look, they don't even care what you say after that. So, it's a sad fact, but then you are kind of climbing a hill to get your, it's almost like they look at you, and go, yeah, tick. Like she's well presented, she's got the right amount of jewellery on, you know kind of lipstick on, you know, there's an image that they expect you to have. If you turn up, and you know, I know some females who are brilliant technically, but they're almost they're ignored because they kind of, I mean, I know one, she wears male suits because that's what she likes to do. She never has any make-up on, you know, she and that, unfortunately, is, she's judged on it. And people comment more about that than they do about her technical brilliance.
>
> (Victoria, Senior Woman Leader)

What Victoria demonstrates here is that feminine attributes and behaviours cannot be refused as being perceived as a credible leader is dependent on successful engagement with feminine gender norms (Khan et al, 2022). Clothing plays an important role in calibrating masculine behaviours with displays of femininity. The physical embodiment of feminine norms is necessary for credibility and women who reject the material accoutrements of femininity in their dress are 'ignored'.

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This awareness of the limits of being an autonomous individual in terms of engagement in masculinised behaviours was evident across all the interviews. Yet despite this, senior women leaders did not forego the call to individualism or personal transformation, rather they interpreted it in terms of a feminised authenticity of being 'true to self'. This meant the focus of their individualism and work-on-self shifted towards engagement in behaviour that felt 'right' for them. Drawing on the notion of authentic individualism was a key means by which women's identities as leaders took shape and their attachment to leadership was articulated through a discourse of authenticity. Here, it is important to note that in alignment with the poststructuralist principles which underpin this study, we do not understand our respondents as unitary individuals who present a 'true' self, manifest in possessing and displaying 'authentic' traits. Rather, we understand them as individuals who 'do' authenticity as part of the constitution of their leadership identities. As such this discourse of authenticity is not to be confused with the notion of authentic leadership which is dominated by an understanding 'that assume(s) a disembodied genderless individual who exhibits a 'true' fixed self', securely delimited from the external world (Liu et al, 2015, p. 240).

As we see below, doing authenticity in terms of authentic individualism facilitated the calibration of masculinity and femininity as they discursively constituted their leadership identities. It is also notable that being authentic was expressed as being important by women interviewees but was not given similar attention by the men interviewed in the wider study. Authentic individualism tended to be articulated in terms of refusing to separate who they are at home in their private life and who they are at work with efforts made to integrate them. Building connection between the feminised space of home and the masculinised space of work was seen as key to being 'true to self' as the following illustrates:

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> One of the things that I try to be is open and honest and not have a work persona and a home persona. There's a business (name) and a home (name) but they're not completely different…I try to humanise everything that I do so that people can be comfortable and I'm not, you know, I'm not one of the team per se, I am part of the team and my job is to lead the team, so what I try to do is I try to be caring, approachable, understanding and understandable, but not one of the girls or boys… I'll tell a stupid joke as part of my presentations, which I will do at home…it's really hard to create two versions of yourself…you know, my true character is not different at home as it is at work. I talk about my children, about my husband…the trials and tribulations, at the right level
>
> (Kelly, Senior Woman Leader)

Kelly's claim that there is no significant difference between who she is at home and who she is at work, demonstrates that the discursive constitution of her leadership identity entails a capacity to dwell within and between masculine and feminine norms (Lewis et al, 2022). Being a leader starts with who she 'really is' – a wife, a mother, a woman. Nevertheless, she knows that engaging in feminine behaviours associated with home without calibrating them with masculinity by controlling their expression will be problematic. While she places an emphasis on relational behaviours - being caring, humanising work, making people feel comfortable – she also places a limit on the connection she builds with those she works with by leading the team but not being 'one of the girls or boys.' In other words, she knows that performing authenticity must be done 'at the right level', requiring a negotiation between the masculine norms associated with work and the feminine norms she draws on from her life outside her organization. Drawing on a discourse of authenticity and engaging in authentic individualism was how the interviewees address the challenges that go with leadership

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Building connection

The emphasis placed on performing authenticity as an individual, provided women leaders with a framework to discursively mobilise behaviours that are conventionally marked as feminine when leading. From this vantage point, an important part of the leadership identities of the senior women leaders derives from the emphasis they place on building connections and relationships with the people they lead. From Lorraine's comments below, we can see how she displays feminised leadership attributes by engaging in feminine behaviours that felt authentic to her. She articulates a willingness '…to listen and to share…' her own experiences, bringing together her private life and work life as follows:

> I was making a huge effort to build relationships with all the teams, just going out with them and showing them, I was a human being and wasn't some…walking around with a clipboard and stopwatch which some had previously done. I think that made me a better leader because people responded to that a lot more clearly and saw me as more authentic and more willing to listen and to share my own experiences of what had happened to me and as a result I ended up getting an awful lot more loyalty and people wanting to work for me… those experiences genuinely changed me and entirely changed my approach to my leadership style and calmed me the hell down. But you're not authentic if you can't visibly live it. So that's what it means, from my perspective, is visibly living it
>
> (Lorraine, Senior Woman Leader)

Drawing on a discourse of authenticity, Lorraine rejects the traditional masculine displays of authority, described as '…walking around with a clipboard and stopwatch….'. She found that engaging in a more relational form of leadership and building connections with her team, changed her understanding of who she is as a leader. She became calmer and this enhanced

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how she led people, with the result that in return she received loyalty and people wanting to work for her.

A similar important discourse in this respect is the discourse of relatability. We observe how women leaders use discursive resources which emphasise warmth and care for others, signalling traditional communal femininities and working these qualities into their accounts of leadership identity as the following illustrates:

> You want to carry on being friendly with people, you want them to sort of see who you are…And my thing was always that I never wanted to have to say to people, come on, you know we've got to work, I wanted them just to read me, so that it just happened…over the years, without realising it I have a face, and so they'd go "she's got that face on, right we better get on then" and so it would just all happen, and that was always much more suitable for me because I never wanted to have confrontation with people…It was just about trying to be the kind of leader that people wanted to work with
>
> (Linda, Senior Woman Leader)

In this excerpt, we see how Linda carefully steers away from a form of leadership that requires her to tell people what to do. Her emphasis is on wanting to be the kind of leader who is friendly with people and who people want to work with. We can see the emphasis she places on a form of relational leadership, culturally associated with femininity, whereby the connection between her and those she leads, is such that followers 'read the leader' and the work 'just happens'. She juxtaposes this relational leadership to a masculine, authoritative or 'confrontational' leadership. Women leaders drawing on a discourse of relatability and incorporating connectivity into their leadership identities signal the value that they attach to this feminised, non-normative leadership behaviour. It serves as a way to make gender

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matter, invoking classic femininities as a form of gender capital and leadership asset. This emphasis on connectivity and relatability was emphasized by all women leaders as follows:

> I mean I think people are always happy to meet a normal person…I mean maybe people come out of meetings and think 'oh my God how did she get that job?' or something but I do think it's you know, I think people want to work with a person that they can have a normal conversation with and who cares about the same stuff that they do and that's what I've said to everyone about the merger…These people aren't nutjobs, I mean maybe some of them are, there'll be people who care about exactly the same stuff we do. You know, we just have to figure it out and then the hard part of it is, it's all about the humans. You know there's nothing else to say, it would be great to go sit in a cupboard and move assets around but unfortunately, it's all about the humans
>
> (Bethany, Senior Woman Leader)

The challenge for women leaders is that they must be credible in conventional (masculine) leadership terms without transgressing gendered expectations. However, in emphasizing the importance of connecting to people ('humans') and taking their concerns seriously, Bethany tempers the masculine emphasis on keeping a distance as one means to maintain authority. Instead, she identifies herself as a normal person, ready to make 'normal conversation'. She does not position herself in the hierarchy above people but seeks to make a connection on the same level, saying she 'cares about the same stuff'. The traditional feminine qualities of care and building connections are normalized in her account and integrated in a leadership that is 'all about the humans'. As such, she places an emphasis on the superior value of these feminine leadership behaviours through the implicit contrast with masculine leadership that emphasises the human *resources* over the *human* resources.

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Discussion

This article investigates the discursive constitution of leadership identities by senior women leaders within the postfeminist context of the City of London. In doing this, we contribute to the small but developing corpus of research which mobilises postfeminism as an analytic device, to draw out the complexity of women's work experiences – here leadership – within contemporary organizations. Our contribution is twofold: first we make visible the *gendered hybridity* – a dialectic calibration of feminine and masculine behaviours - which lies at the heart of the leadership identities constituted by women in senior positions and the multifaceted form this takes. We acknowledge that there is existing research which highlights how women draw on a range of gendered discursive resources driven by their contextual needs when constituting identity. This includes studies which conceptualise the display of and engagement in normatively masculine and feminine attributes and behaviours when leading, in terms of 'androgyny' and 'gender' neutral prototypes', opening-up leadership to women (Powell, 2021). Contrastingly, a study by Muhr (2011) suggests that simultaneously drawing on masculine and feminine norms in an excessive way to achieve success can reinforce gender inequality. Other studies in different empirical settings – exotic dancers (Mavin and Grandy, 2013) and women business owners (Lewis, 2013) – demonstrate how masculine norms are drawn on strategically in tandem with femininity to maintain social status in those contexts, and to counteract any negativity that attaches to constituting a feminised identity. However, we argue that our use of postfeminism as a critical concept does something different as we diverge from the indeterminate consensual stance of 'androgyny' while also demonstrating how the calibration of masculinity and femininity is not just done as a 'strategic choice' but rather as a normative requirement. Drawing on postfeminism as a critical concept, enables an analysis that draws out the complexity and challenges women

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leaders face when called to engage in contradictory gender-marked behaviours as normative conduct.

In drawing on postfeminist discourses of individualism, choice, and self-transformation, we note how the senior women in this study construct a classic masculine leader identity in their adherence to the priorities of work over other things in life, yet they do not take this prioritization for granted, as they remark on the sacrifice to their relationships outside of work. Using postfeminism as an analytic device, we highlight the pressures women face to engage in feminine displays not only for general social acceptance but to ensure that they are listened to when operating in conventionally masculine ways, in conventionally masculine spaces such as the board room. Thus, doing masculinity when leading necessarily and unavoidably requires the doing of femininity, resulting in a gendered hybridity that needs constant work. For the senior women in this study who work in a masculinised environment, authenticity is fundamental to their understanding of who they are as leaders. We argue that drawing on a discourse of authenticity allowed them to strategically present their own calibration of required masculinized behaviours – authority, competitiveness, exercising control – while also invoking feminised behaviours – care, empathy, connection. In postfeminist gender regimes, traditional feminine qualities such as being relatable and building connections remain important normative markers for women leaders, allowing them to build identities in a way which feels 'right' and 'true to themselves'. Nevertheless, as we see throughout the analysis above, these women leaders are aware of the need to calibrate with masculine marked practices of authority. While engagement in masculine behaviours is not possible without conforming to attributes and behaviours coded as feminine, compliance with femininity is framed as a form of authentic individualism, bringing masculine and feminine gender norms together as interdependent forces.

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Our second contribution concerns the implications of the bringing together of postfeminist authenticity work (not just be yourself but be your *best* self) with leadership, by senior women leaders. An emphasis placed on authenticity and being the 'real me' is often associated with a disavowal of structural change in favour of a focus on the individual. However, when senior women leaders draw on a discourse of authenticity, are they only concerned with their own unique inner compass and leading authentically in accordance with it (Calder-Dawe and Gavey, 2017)? Considering the emphasis placed on authenticity, we can see that the same individualising logic informs masculinised and feminised leadership behaviours as both concentrate on personal transformation. Nevertheless, we argue that this does not mean that there is no challenge to conventional leadership with its deep embeddedness in traditional masculinised images and behaviours. In drawing on the discourse of relatability and seeking to build connection with those they lead, these senior women leaders change leadership: they reduce hierarchy, open-up channels of communication with their followers and emphasise common purpose.

Further, from our analysis, we suggest that in discursively constituting their leadership identities, these senior women leaders are doing more than just 'be themselves'. Embedded in these senior women's 'authenticity talk', is an engagement with power relations and a desire to change leadership within their organizations. As such there is an ethical sensibility attached to their account of who they are as leaders focused on changing 'how leaders do things'. The discourse of authenticity provided them with '…a more intelligible and liveable framing…' for their leadership identities. For these women leaders, being authentic was not just '…an inwards looking project of the self…' (Calder-Dawe and Gavey, 2017, p. 792). Rather, it provided them with a space to be non-conformist within a traditional masculine environment, unlocking an opportunity to challenge this masculinity through calibration with leadership behaviours which fall within the realm of femininity.

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Accordingly, we suggest that the emphasis they place on being authentic when leading is as much a political as an individualised project of 'building your best self'. It provides these senior women leaders with transformative potential (Bonham and Bacchi, 2016), opening-up possibilities for a fundamental makeover of leadership and a challenging of the prevailing wisdom within their organizations. It provokes cultural change and through the value placed on relatability, builds connection and engagement on the same level with those they lead.

Conclusion

Drawing on postfeminism as an analytic device, this paper makes visible the way in which the entanglement of discourses of individualism, choice, and self-transformation with discourses of authenticity and relatability provides the senior women leaders in this study with an intelligible and liveable framing of their leadership identities. Through recourse to the notion of the 'authentic self' they can conform to the demands of leading in a long-standing masculine business environment. At the same time, they create an opportunity of stepping outside the masculine orthodoxy of command and control, advocating change through a feminised relational form of leadership. Being a postfeminist authentic leader, provides these senior women leaders with '…a politicized framework to make sense of the difference and distance between their experiences of self on the one hand, and the cultural conditions of recognition (as a leader) on the other' (Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2017, p. 792). As we have shown, being called to engage in a calibration of masculine and feminine behaviours when leading, is not just about achieving a correct balance between a set of contradictory gender norms. Rather developing the capacity to manage and challenge the gender constraints they are subject to is more than a 'project of the self', it also opens-up space to transform how leadership is practiced within their organizations. While other studies have emphasised how

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postfeminist subjectivities ultimately reinforce the masculine status quo, this study demonstrates that transformative agendas have not been prevented. Rather, postfeminism as a discursive formation and the authentic individualism it promotes, can serve as a gateway for more radical change (Benschop and Lewis, 2022).

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Table I – Senior Women Leader Interviewees

Pseudonym	Interview Details	Type of Organization
Linda	1 hour 10 minutes, Interview 3	Insurance Market Expert
Bethany	46 minutes, Interview 6	Broker
Lorraine	1 hour, Interview 10	Insurance Organization
Katherine	55 minutes, Interview 11	Insurance Organization
Kelly	1 hour 2 minutes, Interview 15	Company associated with insurance market
Charlotte	59 minutes, Interview 16	Underwriter
Simone	1 hour 8 minutes, Interview 22	Company associated with insurance market
Christine	58 minutes, Interview 31	Underwriter
Diana	40 minutes, Interview 38	Underwriter
Rebecca	42 minutes, Interview 40	Underwriter
Phoebe	58 minutes, Interview 45	Underwriter
Victoria	1 hour 50 minutes, Interview 46	Underwriter
Vanessa	58 minutes, Interview 48	Underwriter

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Table II – Summary of the Data Analysis

***What* women leaders say – the things said**	**Postfeminist Discourses**	**Postfeminist Discursive Practices**
I was always someone who did more than others I suppose I am competitive I was prepared to work really, really, hard I sacrificed a lot for my work The reality is your job is who you are I had strong ambition, a hunger to be different My observation is that most people do change You have to be a Rubik's Cube, not just one colour I did a lot of self-exploring You learn to harness the best bits You have to take the blows and be able to still get up Being authentic and just being yourself You want them to see who you are I was doing authentic before it was a word It's really hard to create two versions of yourself Let people see enough to appreciate who you are I find it quite hard to be something I'm not It's a constant struggle to stay true to who you are I never wanted to have confrontation with people I am naturally empathetic What I've done is always be nice, try to be helpful You want to carry on being friendly with people I think people are happy to meet a normal person Show them I was a human being I care about the same stuff that they do Show them your vulnerabilities	Individualism, choice, and empowerment Make-over and self-transformation Authenticity Relatability	Choosing work Changing & enhancing self Being true to self Building connection

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