

# 'I'm competitive with myself': A study of women leaders navigating neoliberal patriarchal workplaces

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## Abstract

This paper investigates how women leaders in the UK negotiate claims of being competitive by internalizing competition. Competition is a critical component in neoliberal contexts; yet its gendered implications are under research. Through analysis of 18 women leaders' narratives who directly characterize themselves as 'competitive with myself', we theorize how and why competition is directed at the self. We understand articulations of 'I'm competitive with myself' as a discursive strategy, which functions in the narratives in three interconnected ways. 'Competitive with myself' versus 'competitive with others' explains *how* women leaders internalize competition by rejecting competition with others and distancing from the conventional notion of zero-sum game competition. 'Competing with myself for perfection' and 'Competitive with myself as a protective shield' explain *why* women leaders internalize competition—to perfect the self and navigate the double standards of a gendered neoliberal workplace. We argue that 'competitive with myself' as a discursive strategy enables women leaders to openly claim competitiveness, (an undesirable performance for women) and simultaneously distance themselves from it. The study contributes understandings of competition as gendered under neoliberalism and in patriarchal men-dominated leadership roles and workplaces. Through a nuanced discussion

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of women leaders' narratives, we identify both an obligation to compete and a possible flexing of gender norms in relation to competition.

**KEYWORDS**

gendered competition, internalized competition, neoliberalism, perfect, stigma, women leaders

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The neoliberalization of feminism has become a key topic in feminist debates in recent years with scholars such as Catherine Rottenberg (2014), Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018), and Angela McRobbie (2015) arguing that neoliberal rationality has colonized contemporary feminism. Although women in top leadership positions have been critiqued as part of the problem (highly privileged, mainly white, oriented toward individual success and indifferent toward the ideals of gender justice) (Mavin & Grandy, 2019; Rottenberg, 2014), little is known about how these women inhabit and experience neoliberal subjectivities in the context of persisting gender inequalities and severe gender leadership gaps.

Within the theoretical tradition, which understands neoliberalism as a form of governmentality, competition has been described as a defining feature of the new neoliberal society (Foucault, 2008; McRobbie, 2015; Read, 2009). However, research on gender and competition has demonstrated that competition is a gendered phenomenon—a process, activity, and orientation, which has strong masculine connotations (e.g., Mavin & Yusupova, 2021; Niederle & Vesterlund, 2007; Sutter & Glätzle-Rützler, 2015). To be openly competitive for a woman means to appear as a nonfeminine and bears the risk of gender backlash (Rudman & Glick, 2001). Thus, the neoliberal ideal of a successful career, achieved through hard work, competition, and strategic investments in oneself, comes in conflict with the normative ideal of noncompetitive femininity, leading to clashing expectations that women should and should not be competitive.

This paper investigates the gendered implications of competition under neoliberalism through analysis of how women leaders in the UK negotiate claims of being competitive by directing their competition at the self. Research on gender and neoliberal subjectivities shows that under neoliberalism, competition can be directed at others and at the self (McRobbie, 2015; Petersen & O'Flynn, 2007; Scharff, 2016). This research views competition with oneself as a discursive strategy rooted in neoliberal subjectivity of the perfect citizen-worker (Baker & Brewis, 2020) and indicates that women tend to turn competition inward and claim they are competing with themselves to do better. However, it does not explain how and why women internalize competition. We address this question through consideration of how the notion of inner-directed competition functions in women leaders' narratives.

Through a close examination of how the claim 'I am competitive with myself' functions in women leaders' narratives of competition, we suggest that internalizing competition, apart from being a neoliberal perfection technique ('I should be doing better than I am') (McRobbie, 2015, p. 15), can serve a different purpose for women working in this heavily men-dominated occupation, namely enable them to navigate double standards of a gendered neoliberal workplace. Internalizing competition allows women leaders to confirm their competitiveness (and thus gain proximity to the exclusionary masculinist ideal of the perfect worker) (Baker & Brewis, 2020), and at the same time, it supports them to deflect some of the gendered stigma that comes with the label of 'competitive woman'.

The empirical data are derived from a larger qualitative study of women leaders at the top of organizational hierarchies in the UK. Following McRobbie who indicated that one of the parameters of female competition under neoliberalism is 'self-competitiveness' (understood as an incessant drive to 'perfection') (2015, p. 15), we focus on interviews with 18 women who directly characterize themselves as 'competitive with myself' and not with others. We explore what purpose claims of 'I'm competitive with myself' serve in women's narratives of competition.

This study contributes to debates on the changing contours of gender inequality under neoliberalism. Building on feminist critique of neoliberalism, which points out that neoliberal rationality is gendered in particular ways (Gill & Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2015; Scharff, 2016), we provide a more nuanced discussion of how competition is gendered under neoliberalism.

## 2 | NEOLIBERAL SUBJECTIVITIES, GENDER, AND A COMPETITIVE DRIVE TO PERFECTION

We understand neoliberalism as a form of governmentality, which extends and generalizes market and enterprise values to all social domains and relations, including human subjectivity (Brown, 2003; Foucault, 2008; Read, 2009). Under neoliberalism, any activity (e.g., taking professional development courses and having children or teeth whitening) can be understood 'economically' and considered as an investment in oneself. In this sense, neoliberalism is not just a new political ideology, but a new manner of living, 'a new regime of truth', 'a new way in which people are made subjects' (Foucault discussed by Read, 2009, p. 28).

For Foucault, the difference between liberalism and neoliberalism has to do with the different ways in which people focus on economic activity. In liberalism, *homo economicus* is driven by the logic of exchange, whereas neoliberalism 'takes as its focus not exchange but competition' (Foucault discussed by Read, 2009, p. 27). This shift from exchange to competition has a profound effect on human subjectivities (Read, 2009). Careful calculation of cost for benefit and a strategic investment in "human capital" is a competitive advantage game associated with an opportunity to increase income, achieve satisfaction, or realize one's full potential in life. Neoliberalism thus encourages people to see themselves not as "workers" but as "entrepreneurs of themselves," turning *homo economicus* into *homo entrepreneur*, whose every action is informed by "considerations of profitability" in both personal and professional life (Brown, 2003; Foucault, 2008; Read, 2009). The logic of competition, investment, interests, desires, and aspirations becomes a structuring force of people's lives and subjectivities; a form of governmentality that 'governs without governing' by granting people 'a great deal of freedom to act—to choose between competing strategies' (Read, 2009, p. 29).

In *Notes on the Perfect* (2015), Angela McRobbie makes two important observations regarding Foucault's conceptualization of neoliberalism. First, she points out that 'the idea of competition which Foucault so emphasizes in his lectures on neoliberalism remains one of the more neglected aspects of his work' (p. 7). Second, she identifies 'one of the key unasked questions within the recent debates on feminism and neoliberalism is how competition operates in gender-specific ways?' Indeed, as demonstrated by research from different academic disciplines, competition is a gendered term and a gendering process (e.g., Mavin & Yusupova, 2021; Niederle & Vesterlund, 2007; Rudman & Glick, 2001; Sutter & Glätzle-Rützler, 2015). Therefore, the question, identified by Angela McRobbie, warrants consideration. Her own tentative answer is that, under neoliberalism, women are encouraged to compete 'to be perfect' and do 'inner-directed self-competition' (McRobbie, 2015, p. 15).

Drawing on examples from contemporary lives of several western celebrities as well as women characters from the HBO's series *Sex and the City*, and *Girls*, McRobbie demonstrates that the idea of the 'perfect' has become 'a leitmotif for contemporary femininity' (2015, p. 4). The 'perfect' underscores the way in which neoliberal rationality informs and shapes women's subjectivities. When applied to different spheres of life (body image, domesticity, or career), the 'perfect' works as a neoliberal form of self-measurement and self-regulation linked to the search for the 'good life' and the aspiration of 'having it all'. According to McRobbie, the 'perfect' constitutes the new gendered 'terrain of suffering' for women:

How well did I do today? Did I manage to eat fewer calories? Did I eat more healthily? Did I get to the gym? Did I achieve what I aimed to achieve at work? Did I look after the children with the right kind of attention? Did I cook well after the days' work? Did I ensure that my family returned from school

and work to a well-appointed and well-regulated home? Did I maintain my good looks and my sexually attractive and well-groomed body?

(McRobbie, 2015, p. 9)

Within the realm of the perfect, the self is understood as a project to constantly work on and improve. McRobbie explains that the constant calculations, incessant work on themselves, and intensified self-scrutiny against elevated benchmarks works 'to create a competitive self among the ranks of young women' with constant self-beratement and self-competitiveness as the outcomes ('I should be doing better than I am') (2015, p. 15). In the sphere of work, McRobbie explains this neoliberal drive to perfection and self-competitiveness among women as an expression of their unwillingness to challenge gender hierarchies in the workplace and openly compete with men:

The competitive ethic is internalised for the reason that where gender hierarchies must more or less remain intact there cannot be open competition in work (and indeed in school) with their male counterparts. At most it will be said that a competitive woman wants to make it to the top 'in a man's world'. By these means too is male privilege actively safe-guarded.

(McRobbie, 2015, p. 15).

While this interpretation might be particularly applicable to young women, a more nuanced and empirically informed approach to how women do competition at work and why they internalize it is needed.

Self-competitiveness among women has been reported by recent studies on gender and neoliberal subjectivities. For example, Christina Scharff's (2016) research on classical music professionals reveals the pattern of self-competitiveness among young women. These women expressed dislike for competition with others and directed their competition toward the self to emphasize individuality, creativity, and uniqueness of their professional routes. Scharff (2016) explains that 'reluctance to engage in open competition with others may be indicative of power dynamics working on a "deeper" level' (p. 118). She notes that dislike for competition with others does not necessarily constitute a break with the entrepreneurial logic of constant competition, quite the opposite, internalization of competition by the entrepreneurial subject can indicate a deeper form of exploitation (Scharff, 2016). Petersen and O'Flynn's (2007) study of girls from a prestigious Australian private school taking up the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme also highlights the key role of voluntary 'competition with oneself' as a form of self-motivation. While, on the surface level, the scheme de-emphasizes competition among the participants, 'the relentless entrepreneurial neoliberal rationalities to "be more", to "be self-motivated", and to be constantly bettering the self were most certainly taken up by the young women in their talk about their participation in the scheme, and about their lives in general' (Petersen & O'Flynn, 2007, p. 207).

Both studies highlight that self-competitiveness reflects the broader neoliberal phenomenon of self-responsibilization that scholars of postfeminism have identified (Adamson, 2017; Baker & Kelan, 2019; Gill & Scharff, 2011; Lewis, 2014). Instead of acknowledging discriminatory career impediments, women are encouraged to individually liberate themselves from the old system of gender oppression through hard work and competition. Failure to overcome structural disadvantages is individualized. If individual women accept the neoliberal call to responsabilize the self, they assume personal responsibility for their successes and failures. Following this logic, less successful women have only themselves to blame for their own experiences of social and organizational inequalities (Baker & Brewis, 2020; Baker & Kelan, 2019).

An exclusionary masculine character of the 'perfect worker' ideal (Baker & Brewis, 2020) presents another explanation for why women, and particularly young women, have been positioned as entrepreneurial subjects par excellence, who are typically expected to self-manage and self-discipline themselves more than men (Adamson, 2017; Gill & Scharff, 2011; Martinussen et al., 2020). The 'perfect worker' ideal has been modeled after successful careers of white, middle-class, heterosexual men unburdened by care responsibilities and exhibiting high aspirations at work (Bendl, 2008). Within a neoliberal model, the perfect worker is envisioned as a highly efficient, ambitious, and

entrepreneurial individual that takes full responsibility for their actions, progress, and outcomes. Baker and Brewis (2020, p. 2) explain that the 'perfect worker' is 'not as an identity that can be attained but as a fantasy toward which individuals strive'. Being an unattainable fantasy, this ideal 'is nevertheless "real" in that it shapes the subject' (Baker & Brewis, 2020, p. 5). While all people fail to embody this ideal, due to its gendered nature, it is harder for women to gain proximity to it. Within patriarchal contexts, women are positioned as Other and as being further away from the perfect worker ideal, which leads to the pattern of heightened self-regulation (Baker & Brewis, 2020).

Relatedly, numerous studies show that women in men-dominated occupations tend to suppress certain attitudes and behaviors in response to double standards and double binds (Denissen, 2010; Zheng et al., 2018). Double standards theory (Foschi, 1996, 2000) suggests that people evaluate the same behaviors, attitudes, and emotions of women and men differently; what is seen as appropriate for one may not be equally so for the other. For instance, the leadership literature offers insights into the negative outcomes associated with expressing anger and being competitive for women, whereas for men these are seen as legitimate emotions and orientations (Rudman et al., 2012). Women leaders face double binds where they are held accountable to conflicting expectation 'to assume male patterns of behavior and to preserve their distinctively female characteristics' (Gherardi & Poggio, 2001, p. 257). As a gendered and gendering process, competition in a neoliberal workplace creates a powerful double bind for women striving for career success.

The literature exploring the gendered aspects of competition allows us to see more clearly how the neoliberal governmentality, with its defining focus on competition, is gendered. Drawing on the research above, this paper considers how women leaders working in hyper-competitive neoliberal contexts claim their competition.

### 3 | RESEARCH APPROACH

We follow a social constructionist paradigm, informed by feminist epistemology, where we see situated knowledge as vital; realities as multiple and constructed; researcher positionality and theoretical background as inseparable from results; and inquiry as inherently value-bound (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Following Mavin and Grandy (2019, p. 2), key assumptions guiding our research are that 'feminism is open to all women, not just those of certain class and/or ethnicity (Scott, 2006)' and that little is known about what women leaders at the top of organizational hierarchies can tell us about competition. For us, women's narratives are interpretations of lived experiences that have material aspects, and gender and competition are laden with power and inequalities.

The empirical data are from 18 semi-structured interviews in a larger qualitative study of women leaders at the top of organizational hierarchies in the UK. Details of the research protocols and women leaders are provided in Table 1. As feminist researchers committed to situated knowledge and embodied scholarship (Benschop, 2021), we are cognizant that the 18 women leaders identified as White British. They are privileged, middle class, and part of a wider study where only two women from 81 (with 3 nonresponders) identified as from black/mixed backgrounds, reflecting lack of women of color who responded and/or who are ED/NEDs in the FTSE100/250 or profiled as influential leaders in a UK region. As White, privileged academic researchers, we recognize that along with the participants we have 'incomplete and selective viewpoints' (Benschop, 2021, p. 3) and greater access to power and resources than people of color (in the same situation) do (Kendall, 2012).

Women were asked questions about competition shown in Table 2, and at times, researchers used follow-up probes. An important guideline for data generation (Mason, 2002) was not to provide any definitions to key concepts, such as competition, rather to elicit what meanings women attach to these terms. We focus on interviews with 18 women who characterized themselves in their narratives as 'competitive with myself.'

Our initial curiosity came from the second author's bafflement regarding the meaning of the expression 'I'm competitive with myself'. Coming from a non-English speaking country with a long history of state socialism and a much shorter history of neoliberalization compared to the UK, she had never come across the notion of 'competitive with myself' before reading the interview transcripts. Although intuitively and in the context of rich personal

TABLE 1 Research protocols and women leader participants

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 80+ Women leaders self-selected (including seven referrals) in response to a flyer sent to 487 women with a closing date, bounding the number in the study. 18 women leaders included here.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Three research assistants completed semistructured interviews. • Interview guide: Progress to elite leader, ambition competition, friendship, cooperation, and relationships with women at work.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviews lasted on average 90 min, were audio-recorded, transcribed, anonymized.</li> </ul>
<p>The participants</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women leaders at the top of hierarchies in UK wide organizations across sectors.</li> <li>• Women identified using pseudonyms.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 13 Executive Directors/ Non-Executive Directors (NEDs) FTSE 100/250 companies.</li> <li>• 5 Women identified in annual regional newspaper supplement of top 250/500 influential leaders.</li> <li>• 11/18 Women had at least one other NED/Chair of Board/governor/ trustee role.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All 18 women identified as White British.</li> <li>• 13 Women aged 57–75 years;</li> <li>• 4 Women aged 41–56 years; 1 woman nondeclared.</li> <li>• 14/18 women worked full time.</li> <li>• Two worked part time and two nondeclared.</li> </ul>

TABLE 2 Questions to women leaders

- Would you describe yourself as competitive?
- How would you describe your attitude toward competitiveness and where do you think it came from?
- Where do you think your attitudes to competition come from?
- What has it been like as a woman, for you, moving into senior positions?
- Can I ask you where and when you're aware of competitiveness in relations between other women in the organizations that you've worked in?
- Could you tell me about a time when you've been competitive with another woman or with other women to develop your career?
- As your career has developed have you ever been in a situation where you've been competitive with a friend?

narratives this expression made sense, the second author was struck by how often the women leaders used it. In her native language/cultural context this phrase does not exist and would sound absurd. When taken literally, 'competition with oneself' is an oxymoron, because according to common definitions, competition involves others. Making sense of this bafflement alerted us to impact of neoliberal subjectivities in the data. We set out to explore why and how women leaders at the top of organizations internalize competition.

### 3.1 | Process of analysis

Initially, the first author coded and analyzed all transcripts in relation to competition. The second author then read/ reread the coded data and identified 18 women who explicitly characterized themselves as 'competitive with myself'. We reviewed the women's organizational sectors to examine how this might contribute to this analytical reading. However, their 11 organizational sectors are diverse. Thirteen women work as Directors/Non-Executive Directors (NEDs) in FTSE 100/250 companies and five women are influential leaders/Directors in diverse organizations located in a UK geographical region. Organizational sectors, roles, and geographies do not explain similarities in the data.

Both authors then completed a series of rereadings of the narratives, noting instances where: (i) 'competitive with myself' was constructed against and contrasted with 'competitive with others'; (ii) competition was understood in gendered terms (as a masculine or masculinizing activity); and (iii) the subject position 'competitive with myself' was situated within the broader discourses of neoliberalism and gendering. This involved three cycles of analysis of coming together to discuss interpretations before individually returning to the narratives.

Having completed a textual interpretive analysis, we draw upon extracts of interview data from women leaders as they retell their experiences of competition. We use the term narrative to describe a woman's account of

experiences in their work lives and are concerned with the content and social context of the narrative (Earthy & Cronin, 2008). Narrative is an appropriate interpretative lens for 'understanding processes of micro-political activity, one means by which ideas and practices are legitimated' (Currie & Brown, 2003, p. 564). Our presentation of the women's narratives about competition are coconstructed, partial, and intertwined with our own experiences of working in gendered neoliberal contexts (Mavin et al., 2014, p. 6). In taking this approach, we produce relational and socially situated understandings within particular historical and gendered social contexts (Stead & Elliott, 2013).

Drawing upon feminist literature on neoliberal subjectivities and analysis of women leaders' narratives, we explore how and why women internalize competition. The narratives we present are 'power quotes'—'compelling bits of data' (Pratt, 2009, p. 860) that illustrate key discoveries from the analysis.

#### 4 | 'I'M COMPETITIVE WITH MYSELF'

Internalizing competition is a major finding in the analysis of women leaders' narratives. From 81 women who took part in the wider research, 18 directly characterized themselves as 'competitive with myself.' To address the research question of how and why women leaders internalize competition, we explore how the discursive strategy 'competitive with myself' functions across the narratives. Throughout data, we see that 'competitive with oneself' functions in three interconnected ways. First, 'competitive with myself' is constructed as an alternative and/or a better version of 'competition with others' and therefore works to distance from conventional notions of competition (a zero-sum game, where one person's gain is the other person's loss). Second, 'competitive with myself' works as a perfection technique, which allows/confines women to hold themselves accountable to very high standards. Third, 'competitive with myself' serves as a protective shield from the stigma of 'competitive woman', enabling women leaders to openly claim their competitiveness and simultaneously distance from it, thus supporting them to navigate double standards of gendered neoliberal workplaces.

#### 5 | COMPETITIVE WITH MYSELF VS. COMPETITIVE WITH OTHERS

In the narratives of women leaders who characterize themselves as 'competitive with myself', open rivalry against others was constituted as less pleasant, moral, and constructive than 'winning' over 'oneself' in the form of reaching personal and organizational goals (Petersen & O'Flynn, 2007). The women reject the notion of competition with others (associated with a 'conflict', a 'fight' and a 'difficult row') in favor of the well-intended and voluntary 'competition with myself'.

Rejection and/or manifestation of a dislike of competition with others was evident in all 18 women leaders' narratives who identified as 'competitive with myself'. For instance, Carole said: 'I'm a competitive person. No question about it. But I don't think of it in terms of people. I think of it in terms of accomplishment'. Beth explained: 'I'm not very good at competition. I like competition because I like to make sure we're the best at it but it's not just us, it's about everybody'. Stephanie said: 'I think I am quite competitive by nature, but mainly competitive with myself... I don't have to push others down to lift myself up as a star'. Mabel stated: 'I am not competitive. I want to be the best at doing what I am doing. Now that is competitive, but it is with myself actually'. Valerie elaborated:

I'm competitive against my own standard if that makes sense. But I'm absolutely not competitive against my colleagues and I see my partner [name] he's very competitive against other people. He wants to succeed against what he thinks is his peer group or his friends. I absolutely don't. I've never- I don't look around me in the company or in my peer group and think I want to be as good as that person or succeed against that person's benchmark. But my own standard is very high and I'm a perfectionist and I'm constantly trying to meet that but I'm not competitive with others.

Despite the differences in how women leaders explained their competitiveness, all of them draw a clear distinction between 'competitive with others' and 'competitive with myself', expressing strong preference for the latter.

Women leaders also discredited 'competition with others' as a counterproductive activity. For instance, in Lindsey's narrative, 'competitive with myself' works as a preferable alternative and a practical solution to the displeasing necessity to compete with others at work. Yet, competition by general definition involves others.

I like to get on. I think, my mother used always used to say that I compete with myself rather than other people. I've got very high standards... perhaps from partly from being a big family. Sometimes that can make you very competitive also... I'm probably more motivated by interest, ideas, getting things done. I like to lead so I like to have - I quite like to be a lead. I think I would quite like to be in the limelight appearing before committees and on the telly ... but that's more doing a good job rather than having a difficult row or competition with people. ... I'm keen to achieve that and I'm keen to be associated with that achievement. Now whether that's competition I'm not sure. I actually rather hate where I've got to have a row with somebody because we're in conflict with one another so I tend to try and use the tools of persuasion and work round it rather than have stand up fights.

Lindsey communicates two separate ways of 'being competitive'—'with others' and 'with myself'. She associates competition with others with a 'conflict', a 'fight', and a 'difficult row', whereas 'competition with myself' is seen as being about setting personal goals, 'doing a good job', and gaining recognition. She discredits the former and associates with the latter. In rejecting 'competition with others', Lindsey reflects an entrepreneurial self 'motivated by interest, ideas, getting things done' as well as perfectionist orientation to 'very high standards'. Wendy Brown (2003) explains that under neoliberalism, individuals are constituted as rational and constantly strategizing subjects who have 'the ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions' (p. 42). Lindsey positions as being capable of taking care of her ambitions. Her aspiration 'to be in the limelight appearing before committees and on the telly' clearly involves outshining others. However, stand-up fights with others appear as a waste of valuable personal resources, which can also impede business goals, and therefore should be effectively managed (Adamson, 2017). Lindsey uses 'the tools of persuasion' in professional practice as a way to manage personal and organizational resources; however, 'competitive with myself' works to manage something else—other's perception of competition. As the following sections show, the discursive strategy 'competitive with myself' helps to alleviate gendered tensions around the notion of being competitive.

In this section, we addressed the *how* part of our guiding research question—how and why women leaders internalize competition? They do so by rejecting competition with others and constructing 'competitive with myself' as a preferable alternative. The following empirical sections focus on *why* women leaders internalize competition. 'Competing with myself for perfection' supports existing research on how the notion of the perfect permeates women's subjectivities under neoliberalism (Baker & Brewis, 2020; McRobbie, 2015). 'Competitive with myself' can also serve as a protective shield against gendered stigma of competition and accounts for research data that cannot be explained through the perfect framework.

## 6 | COMPETITIVE WITH MYSELF FOR PERFECTION

In the narratives of women leaders, 'competitive with myself' works as a perfection technique reflecting a 'key neoliberal expectation that individuals - and particularly women - should never cease working on themselves to enhance their value' (Rottenberg, 2019, p. 2). After McRobbie (2015), we understand perfection as 'a heightened form of self-regulation'. McRobbie defines the perfect as 'a middle-class disease' (p. 4) and 'a new dividing practice, predicated on calculation and self-assessment against some elevated and rarely described benchmarks' (p. 9). Striving for perfection involves developing a particular kind of objectivating self-gaze; it is an understanding of the self as an endless work-in-progress, as something that has to be constantly analyzed, worked on, and improved (Petersen & O'Flynn, 2007). The narratives show that

women leaders routinely assess their strengths and weaknesses and devise plans for self-improvement. Their commitment to perfection and very high standards creates a competitive orientation, which almost invariably is directed at the self and often accompanied by self-beratement and self-responsibilization (Baker & Brewis, 2020; Baker & Kelan, 2019).

In the women's narratives, the discursive strategy of 'competitive with myself' is firmly connected with perfectionist talk ('very high standards', 'good enough isn't good enough') and declarations conveying full responsibility for their actions, progress and outcomes. For example, Peggy explained 'I am competitive against myself, because I set myself very high standards'. Margaret explained: 'I'm competitive with myself. Good enough isn't good enough and I think I'm a perfectionist at heart'. Gina said: 'I set very high standards for myself and I can be pretty harsh on myself if I feel I don't achieve them'. The neoliberal ethos of unreachable perfection and self-responsibilization is strikingly expressed by Willow, who communicates a perception of the self as fundamentally deficient, incomplete, lacking: 'for me being competitive means that you have to be better than somebody else and I want to be better than me.' This orientation to constant bettering of the self provides motivation to progress but simultaneously sets women up for failure. Wanting to be 'better than me' means that 'me' is never good enough. In line with McRobbie's argument (2015), striving for perfection may constitute a new gendered 'terrain of suffering' for women.

When 'competitive with myself' functions as a perfection technique, it reinforces the neoliberal ideal of a perfect worker. Mabel's commitment to continual improvement reflects this ideal. She is not competing with others, only with herself. By declaring that her competition is 'with myself actually', Mabel signals personal responsibility for assessing and monitoring self-improvement and declares herself as being on high alert to the danger of 'plateau':

I am not competitive. I wasn't competitive at school...I want to be the best at doing what I'm doing, now that is competitive, but it is with myself actually. I want whatever I am doing to be the best that it is possible to be, because I believe that you have to just keep reaching for something... so you have to keep getting better and quality must continually improve. You must continually try to spot the point when it is time to go off in a new curve because you will start to plateau. So all of that, but it is self-driven in that sense.

Similarly, Florence's narrative communicates the relentless self-scrutiny, self-management, and 'the busy anxious work of perfecting and self-regulating' (Martinussen et al., 2020, p. 15).

I think if I'm competitive it's with myself mostly because if I don't do it better each time then I'll get bored, wherein if I don't find a new angle or I've done something that isn't quite the way I would have wanted it done or I've seen that there might have been some shortcomings with the way I did it or I can see ways of improving, improving, improving then that's always the competitive element that I have. I might get a little irritated with my staff if they're slow or less energetic but most of the staff tend to respond to it, enjoy it too because they know they get carried along with it as well and they benefit from it too because otherwise it becomes very boring not to develop.

For Florence, being competitive is about finding 'a new angle', doing 'it better each time' and 'improving, improving, improving'. Her leadership position allows her to expand this perfection drive to her team. Florence aims to live up to the perfect worker ideal—an autonomous, empowered, flexible, responsible, self-regulating subject, willing to align her interest with business goals and economic production without coercion, striving for continuous self-improvement and taking full responsibility for any outcomes (Adamson, 2017; Brown, 2003; Petersen & O'Flynn, 2007).

## 7 | COMPETITIVE WITH MYSELF AS A PROTECTIVE SHIELD

Next, we explore narratives that cannot be explained through the perfect framework. In their narratives, women leaders use the discursive strategy 'competitive with myself' to protect themselves from the stigma of 'competitive

woman' and navigate double standards of a gendered neoliberal workplace. Martha's narrative explicitly shows how she navigates gendered double standards associated with workplace competition:

I am very competitive. Where does it come from? I don't know, I have always been like this since I was a kid really, just always wanted to be the best at everything [laughs]. Sounds awful, doesn't it?

[Interviewer] No

Oh gosh. But yeah it is just –

[Interviewer] It is interesting that you feel you have to almost apologise for it?

Sounds like I am - I don't know in a way, because it is not a very feminine trait, is it, to be that competitive? I don't like to think that I am the sort of person that walks over other people to get where I get to. I want to get there on my own merit. I want to be good because I am good, not because I have pushed other people out of the way in the process of getting where I got to. So I suppose there are two different types of competitors - there is an aggressive competitiveness and I don't consider myself that sort of person at all, but I want to be good. I want to be the best at what I do and I want to - I don't know I suppose constantly be better. Maybe it is about competing with myself as much as it is about competing with other people.

[Interviewer] Yeah

But you have got to be competitive to get on otherwise I think there is - one thing I see among senior women is that we are more vulnerable to criticism. Probably not just senior women, but women across the piece really. So you have got to keep that edge of competitiveness otherwise you - and set that benchmark in the sense that 'I actually am quite good at what I do,' this constant belief in yourself, otherwise I don't think you would do it without a competitive edge really.

Along with other women leaders, Martha explains how competition is a structural requirement, one simply cannot reach top organizational positions without it. Yet, open 'aggressive' competitiveness is perceived as incompatible with femininity. As with previous narratives, Martha rejects competition with others and engages in perfectionist talk ('I want to be the best at what I do'). She continues about how, even in personal lives, 'being competitive' for a woman risks coming across 'as a bit of an aggressive, career-oriented person':

I have friends outside work and being a mother of young children I meet a lot of women who are much more traditional women in the way they live their lives and I think to them I come across as a bit of an aggressive, career-oriented person and they don't get me, and that is quite a strange and I am not quite sure where I should be sitting and all that, what is the right way to be? But I know to get on with your job, to get on with your career, you do have to be a bit more pushy and competitive and sure of yourself. Perhaps you just need to be two different people in different contexts.

Martha describes the conflict between the requirement of being an agentic, self-managed worker and being a woman. Being competitive, while an expectation for leaders, remains risky for women. Martha explains this when talking of how senior women, who 'have got to be competitive to get on', are 'more vulnerable' to criticism, while conveying a tension in how important it is to 'keep that edge of competitiveness', 'set that benchmark', and have 'constant belief in yourself'. To advance her career, Martha not only has to manage her own actions ('you do have to be a bit more pushy and competitive and sure of yourself'), but also perceptions of others.

Rebecca describes 'a world where people are having to compete for things' as hard, and like other women in this study, directs her competitiveness inward:

My competitiveness is very much with myself and making me better and getting better myself and doing more and fulfilling things more. Not about I've got to do this against [name] or [name]. I don't do

that at all. In fact, I struggle with that. I'd rather walk away sometimes which I think is, in a world where people are having to compete for things, I find that really hard.

Rebecca does not want to compete with others ('I'd rather walk away'). Her competitiveness is directed inward and works as a perfection technique ('making me better and getting better myself'). Later in the interview Rebecca provides an important elaboration:

I just think that it's more acceptable for a man to look competitive... I think it's a challenge for women because there's not as many senior women and therefore if a woman looks competitive the blokes will sort of go "oh God look that's terrifying, she's terrifying" and they will say things like that so they will say to me oh you're terrifying in a friendly way but they don't say it about each other so [name/man] who's one of the [name of senior role] who's a friend, will say "oh my God, you know, I'm getting nagged by you again" and "oh you're frightening" and all of this. He wouldn't say that [name/man] nagged him. He just wouldn't say that. It's a different word; so they use different words for women than they do for men.

Rebecca has experienced a gendered double standard in relation to competition. It is 'more acceptable for a man' and less acceptable for a woman 'to look competitive'. Competitiveness is a core component of the neoliberal perfect worker ideal, however, gender double standards hold women at further distance from it.

Willow communicates similar, and in her narrative 'competitive with myself' works as a strategy of approximation to the perfect worker ideal. She explains: 'I see myself as competing against me to be as good as I can be', and shortly after adds that it is an insult for a woman to be called 'too ambitious' and competitive:

I certainly think that women are less likely to want to appear to be competitive and that comment that was made to me when I was in my early thirties about being too ambitious was definitely an insult. It was a 'stop competing it's not attractive, stop being so ambitious, stop being so eager to do well and get on' so that was a definite message that was given to me.

Both Rebecca and Willow are on high alert to being marked as competitive. In their experiences, a competitive woman is constructed as unattractive, 'terrifying', and 'nagging'. They know that if people perceive them as competitive it may have a negative impact on their reputations.

Kim conveys a strikingly similar narrative of self-competitiveness in work and sport. When prompted to reflect on the origin of her attitudes to competitiveness, she immediately acknowledges that 'being competitive is a bad thing':

I'm very competitive at work. It comes out as being competitive against myself, so I do triathlons and I have to be able to beat my last time. I don't care that I came in 12,000th. Versus other people that's irrelevant as far as I'm concerned. It's about beating my own targets and that's how my competitiveness comes through, so in that context I think I am quite competitive. In a work context I don't have this need to see...I don't need to be seen to be better than somebody else. I need to be seen to be improving and then as I say I benchmark myself. What does getting better look like. I benchmark myself against people who I would say are better than me in most areas at the current time.

*Why do you think those attitudes to competitiveness that you hold, where do you think they come from?*

I think I believe that there's this inbuilt stigma that being competitive is a bad thing and I know I'm conscious and I query this in myself sometimes but yeah I think that this is from somewhere, and I can't put my finger on where, but there is this stigma that it's bad to compete.

*[Interviewer] Sorry-do you think that's a particularly female thing that it's bad?*

It could be. I'm not sure whether it is or not but it's certainly something that I feel. It's like the thoughts I remember when we were doing the Strength Finder profile, I really was pleased to see that competitive did not come up in my top five strengths.

Kim is 'pleased' that competitive did not come up in her 'top five strengths' and relieved she is not marked as competitive because this has 'inbuilt stigma' for a woman. 'Exposure to chronically threatening environments can lead to an enhanced vigilance to cues that signal threat' (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016, p. 389). The narratives communicate how the women recognize themselves 'within the structures of neoliberal patriarchy' (Baker & Brewis, 2020, p. 7), which holds them accountable to conflicting expectations. As minority senior leaders, the women are already under the spotlight and competitive women leaders are hyper-visible, placing them at odds with normative expectations. In their narratives, women leaders are acutely aware of the gender double standards surrounding their social group and that 'others may threaten them according to those beliefs' (Hoyt & Chemers, 2008, p. 165).

Carole said: 'I'm a competitive person, but... my competitive focus has not been directed at people'. Like others, Carole identified as focused on accomplishments and achievements and communicates a drive for perfection. However, at one point during the interview, Carole shares a personal story that sheds a different light on her experience of claiming competitiveness:

I think about one of my great life faux pas, when you list stupid things you've done in your life... It was in a class of about 35 MBA colleagues... your division of 35 or so did everything, took all their courses together so you actually knew these people unfortunately well and at some point, I don't even know why a professor asked a question about characteristics... but I acknowledged in this class of 35 mostly guys that I was competitive. I said yes, well I'm competitive. Well I never, to this day I'm sure some of those people would quote that to you that [name] said she was competitive. And I am, I like to win. I like to win but it's about the game, it's not about the people. It's not about the other people being less.

Carole's narrative illustrates how 'competitive woman' carries a stigma that stays with one for life. She deems her public acknowledgment of competitiveness as a 'stupid' thing and one of her 'great life faux pas'. To distance herself from the stigma of a 'competitive woman', she clarifies that she 'likes to win' but not at the cost of other 'people being less'. The same idea/self-representation appears multiple times within the narratives. Using different words, the women leaders in this study acknowledge their competitiveness and specify that 'it's not against other people'.

Across the narratives 'competitive with myself' appears as the way to claim and normalize competition. However, openly claiming competition may only be tentatively normal for women leaders, as stigma associated with gendered double standards is deeply entrenched. In order to claim competitiveness, women leaders have to describe it as 'with themselves' and not with others to attend to a neoliberal ideal of a perfect worker and the gender norm of noncompetitive femininity. 'Competitive with myself' is effective for these women as they are able to confirm their competitiveness as well as deflect negative gendered associations.

## 8 | 'I'M COMPETITIVE WITH MYSELF': WOMEN LEADERS NAVIGATING NEOLIBERAL PATRIARCHAL WORKPLACES

This study explores women leaders' narratives of competition and addresses the question of how and why they direct competition at the self. We contribute a discursive strategy of 'competitive with myself', which is well-embedded across the narratives as part of women leaders' culture, language, and ways of being and knowing. 'Competitive with myself' provides empirical resonance to research into gendered neoliberal subjectivities and perfection (Baker & Brewis, 2020; McRobbie, 2015; Scharff, 2016) and demonstrates evidence of perfectionist talk and self-gaze

(Petersen & O'Flynn, 2007) and women working on themselves, increasing their value (Rottenberg, 2019). However, some of our findings cannot be explained through the neoliberal perfection framework. Our study shows that women leaders use 'competitive with myself' as protection against stigma of competitive woman and to navigate double standards of a gendered neoliberal workplace. This adds an important consideration to the discussion on the gendered implications of competition under neoliberalism.

In exploring further nuances, it could appear that neoliberalism offers women leaders 'license to compete'. However, competition is a gendered term and a gendering process (Mavin & Yusupova, 2021). This study contributes understandings of competition as gendered under neoliberalism and in patriarchal men-dominated leadership roles and workplaces. The narratives convey how some women continue to experience harsh double standards related to being competitive at work and that distancing from conventional notions of competition is important for them. In the neoliberal patriarchal workplace, competition is acceptable for and allowed to men—yet only tentatively allowed for women. Women leaders' elite status and senior leader position are not yet able to override gendered stigma associated with competition and overcome gendered double standards, which are deeply entrenched. Subsequently, while competitiveness is a core component of the neoliberal perfect worker ideal (Baker & Brewis, 2020), women are held even further away from it.

Women leaders do not ignore this gendering. Their narratives convey how they navigate with levels of awareness of the double standards and inequalities they face. Both women and men 'contribute to the construction of norms in the daily doing of gender' (Billing, 2011, p. 311) and 'norms change as we respond to them' (p. 314). The women leaders internalize competition because their organizational contexts are simultaneously neoliberal and patriarchal. In order to claim competition and comply with neoliberal and patriarchal imperatives, women have to be 'competitive with themselves'. However, in actually articulating their competitiveness at all, the women leaders indicate some flexing of norms in relation to competition.

'Competitive with myself' rearticulates competition for women in interesting ways. In relation to the feminist project, we observe some paradoxical effects. 'Competitive with myself' as a discursive strategy rearticulates the gendering of competition, yet enables women to claim competition and manage associated double standards and stigma. In practical terms internalizing competition may be effective for women to progress into senior roles. The study does not allow for exploration of the consequences of internalizing competition for women leaders. Although existing research provides signals of what can happen to women when they accept the neoliberal call to responsabilise the self, for example, assuming personal responsibility for overcoming structural disadvantages and self-blame for experiences of inequalities, precarity and failure (e.g., Adamson, 2017; Gill & Scharff, 2011; Lewis, 2014). We do see a 'compulsion to compete for perfection' (McRobbie, 2015, p. 16) in the women leaders' narratives. Under neoliberalism, turning the self into a means to an end may become normalized, so that 'competitive with myself' becomes indicative of 'a deeper form of exploitation' (Scharff, 2016, p. 118) and constitute a gendered 'terrain of suffering' for women' (McRobbie, 2015, p. 4).

It is important to learn more about the gendered implications of competition under neoliberalism and how competition operates in gender-specific ways. As more women compete for jobs, promotion and recognition at work and enter men-dominated occupations, future research to explore the impact of 'competitive with myself' is important and valuable as well as further research that investigates how gender-specific norms of competition may be flexing.

## 9 | CONCLUSION

This study has explored how and why women leaders internalize competition. We address this research question through consideration of how a discursive strategy of 'competitive with myself' functions in women leaders' narratives. 'Competitive with myself versus competitive with others' explains *how* women leaders internalize competition by constructing self-competitiveness as a preferable version to competition with others. 'Competing with myself for perfection' and 'competitive with myself as a protective shield' explain *why* women leaders internalize competition;

women hold themselves accountable to very high standards and protect from negative gendered misconceptions of their competition. The women leaders in this study internalize competition because their organizational contexts are simultaneously neoliberal and patriarchal; to claim competition and comply with the neoliberal and patriarchal imperatives, women have to be 'competitive with themselves'. We argue that 'competitive with myself' as a discursive strategy enables women leaders to navigate neoliberal patriarchal workplaces by openly claiming competitiveness (an undesirable performance for women) and simultaneously distancing themselves from it. Our empirical analysis of competition under neoliberalism identifies both a compulsion to compete for perfection (McRobbie, 2015) and a possible flexing of gender norms. Future research is recommended to explore the impact of self-directed competition on women and possible shifts in gender-specific norms of competition.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No, there is no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings are not publicly available.

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