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Women, Masculinities, Workplace Culture in Small and Medium Size Businesses in the Leeds City Region

Abstract

Purpose

This paper explored the workplace culture in small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) in the Leeds City Region. The paper looked at perceived leadership expectations vs self-assessment of leadership characteristics and mindsets, and the workplace culture respective of hierarchy and organisational supportiveness of SMEs as workplaces.

Method

A mixed method was deployed: a survey with SMEs and 14 interviews with women working in SMEs. Since the survey yielded a low response, results were analysed summatively and using a cross-tabulation to provide insight into data and inform future research. Survey questions were then used to inform the interview questionnaire to explore findings in-depth. Thematic analysis was used to analyse interview data. The research was informed by studies conducted on women in mass communication industries, Bourdieu's habitus theory, and industry research on alpha organisational cultures.

Findings

Findings revealed that self-assessment of leadership characteristics and mindsets leans towards what is usually perceived as feminine, whereas assessment of which characteristics are needed to become a leader lean towards what is usually perceived as masculine. However, at the same time, the workplace culture is assessed positively, and women reported a lack of hierarchy and a positive and friendly atmosphere in SME workplaces.

Originality

The authors analysed the workplace culture in SMEs using Bourdieu's habitus, previous research in mass communication industries, and industry research on alpha culture and applied it to study the workplace culture and leadership in the context of SMEs, thus extending research in sociology and communication to studying SMEs. To the best of the author's knowledge, this is the first paper to do so.

Implications

Women reported more positive results respective of the workplace culture than in other studies conducted generally or on larger corporations, thus opening questions about whether things are different in SMEs and better for women. Issues with leadership characteristics and mindsets are present in SMEs, but they do not seem to affect women's career progression or satisfaction with employment. Organisations which are not SMEs should consider these findings to develop more inclusive policies to foster a positive perception of their workplace culture.

Keywords: women, workplace culture, SME, leadership characteristics, mindsets, masculinities

Introduction

Workplace culture is an important area of research encompassing numerous issues such as employee wellbeing, motivation, satisfaction, retention, workplace culture, and organisational outcomes. The term workplace culture is often used to explain “a company's prevailing values, attitudes, beliefs, artifacts and behaviors that contribute to its sense of order, continuity and commitment” (Haworth, 2006, cited from Cole et al., 2014, p. 786). Workplace culture does not happen outside of a broader cultural context, and the workplace culture often influences practices such as dress code, personalisation of the workplace as well as behaviours and ethics (Brunia and Hartjes-Gosselink, 2009, Burke, 2011, Cole et al, 2014).

Workplace culture should be inclusive, and employees should feel valued, respected, and supported. However, organisational literature has been arguing for decades that women face numerous obstacles in the organisational world. For example, there is a long-standing argument that social rules are set around masculine values (Acker, 1990, Alvesson, 1998, 2013). A behavioural aspect is particularly relevant for studying workplace culture because many organisations have informal structures, such as being able to engage in banter and social interactions in offices, which have been shown to affect career progression. In studies of women in mass communication industries, Topić (2023b) argued that it is often those who are ‘like us’ who get promoted and that women's equality is still not where it needs to be because it is often behaviour, mindset toward work and the ability to fit into informal structures that take some ahead whilst others fall behind. It is also often those women who can become ‘one of the boys’ who progress in their careers due to engaging with masculine meanings at work that they seem to understand, which forms a masculine habitus (Topić, 2023, 2023a, 2021a).

The literature also reports that women working in SMEs and women entrepreneurs face many obstacles when trying to create a successful business, including barriers to accessing finance, networks, and support from family members due to social expectations of women to act as caregivers and take care of their families (Hunt et al., 2019, Outsios and Farooqi, 2017, Landig, 2011). However, in a systematic literature review on women in SMEs, on which this study is based (Topić et al, 2021), findings have shown that research conducted on SMEs mainly focuses on women entrepreneurs, not women who work in SMEs, which have an organisational structure similar to those of corporations, albeit on a smaller scale. The analysis of the literature suggests that it is common to treat SMEs and entrepreneurship as synonyms, which is true on some level, e.g., women entrepreneurs indeed own a small business, but it is not always true for all SMEs because an SME, by definition covers organisations of different sizes. There is also no research on women, leadership, and workplace culture in the SME context. Researching these issues is relevant since SMEs are considered the backbone of the UK economy (UK Government, 2018), and thus, this paper contributes to expanding the knowledge of workplace culture in the SME context.

In addition to that, given the vast amount of organisational research on women, it is surprising that literature on SMEs is lacking even though most organisations that employ workers are SMEs in the UK (99.2% of all private businesses in the UK; National Federation of Self-Employed & Small Businesses Ltd, 2024). Since research has generally established that women suffer from discrimination and career barriers, it is relevant to distinguish whether these barriers happen on a general level (as reported in the vast literature on workplace culture) or perhaps discrimination and career barriers depend on the type and size of the organisation. We particularly focus on women and workplace culture in the context of career progression and leadership, issues explored in general scholarship but not in the SME context. The main objectives of the study were, firstly, to explore whether the workplace culture in SMEs is different than what is reported in general literature and, thus, whether workplace culture in SMEs is conducive to women's career progression. Secondly, the objective of the study was to apply findings from other research on women's career progression and leadership traits to SMEs and explore whether the same issues arise in SMEs, as they did in research on workplace culture generally, e.g., do women report masculine expectations in leadership styles and what leaderships styles – on a masculine vs feminine perceptions of leadership – do women report as desirable in their organisations. Therefore, this paper contributes towards shedding more light on the organisational treatment of women in the context of SMEs. Since we do not have

a starting point in existing SME research, we draw from sociological theories (Bourdieu) and works produced in the context of mass communication industries (advertising, public relations).

Literature Review

Women and the Workplace Culture

Workplace culture is multifaceted, with multiple attempts to define it (Deal and Kennedy, 1988, Handy, 1993) and identify constituent levels (Schein, 1988) or elements (Johnson 2014). It is usefully characterised as relating to the personality of an organisation and can be simply defined as “how things are done around here” (Mullins, 2019, p. 564). Progressing beyond cultural artefacts that remain symbolically important, the role of values, beliefs, and assumptions within an organisation (Schein, 1988) appear particularly relevant to the behaviour of individuals within it, including the behaviour of and towards women, with recognition of gender differences in behaviour varying according to the context, a key aspect of which is culture (Fine et al., 2020). Socially created and historically embedded norms, values, and beliefs are often persistent, difficult, and slow to change (Szydło and Grześ-Bukłaho, 2020), with cultural stereotypes in society being carried forward into workplace cultures.

Organisational scholars argued that there is a gendered division of labour with men monopolising higher positions whilst women remain in lower positions (Alvesson, 1998). Some scholars thus proposed to study organisational structures as gendered because advantages and disadvantages are understood as masculine and feminine (Acker, 1990). Therefore, scholars proposed that researchers start studying “how organizational structures, processes, and practices material, behavioral, relational, ideational, and discursive may be viewed as (culturally understood as) masculine and, perhaps often less salient, feminine. Gendering organisations usually means paying attention to how they are dominated by culturally masculine meanings. Masculinity is a vague concept but can be defined as values, experiences, and meanings that are culturally interpreted as masculine and typically feel "natural" for or are ascribed to men more than women in the particular cultural context” (Alvesson, 1998, p. 972, emphasis in the original).

Some authors also argued that bureaucracy and hierarchy in organisations are “male-created and male-dominated structures of control that oppress women” (Acker, 1990, p. 141) and that “there was never a question that women would be able to move up the company ladder in the way men could, since it remained unfathomable for male executives to place women alongside

them in managerial jobs (...) Men were allowed to think of themselves as middle-class so long as women, from their perspective, remained something like the office proletariat, took office jobs to help their families until they married” (Saval, 2015, p. 77-78). Ferguson (1984) criticised organisational rules and procedures as oppressive male power that only further reinforces male domination, which leads to the argument of Burris (1989) that “organizational control always has been shaped by patriarchy, understood as a relatively autonomous system of domination based on gender differentiation” (p. 448). Burris (1989) also argued that “bureaucracy vested control in organizational rules and hierarchy, but its allegations of objective evaluation, promotion upward through the ranks, and meritocracy were from the beginning rendered problematic by gender barriers for female clerical workers” (p. 448).

Masculinity in Organisations

In studies on women in advertising, journalism, and public relations in England, Topić argued that only women who embrace masculine characteristics go ahead in their careers, and those who become *one of the boys* advance and hold power (Topić et al., 2020, Topić, 2020, 2020a, Topić, 2021). If organisations function as a masculine world where only masculine meanings take one ahead, then it becomes natural that women must become tough because it is also obvious that women who embrace what is known as feminine characteristics, such as emotion and empathy, are not seen as manager material. Topić, therefore, identified characteristics one needs to succeed such as toughness, aggression, directness, giving it as good as it gets, work-first attitude, overtime, engaging with banter, networking, lack of emotion, and empathy as a recipe for success; women who embrace these characteristics go ahead but are often perceived as tougher than men whereas women who show feminine characteristics either do not progress or they are tokenised and do not always have the real power to run organisations and affect change (ibid).

In addition to that, the term alpha female is used by Ward et al. (2010), to signify leadership attributes such as motivation, self-confidence, and talent, as well as high achievement motivation. In their research, participants identified as alpha female leaders reported feeling dominant or superior over other females, having others seek their guidance, having beliefs that men and women are equal, and being driven to achieve. Ward et al. (2010) suggest that alpha female leaders are extroverted and believe in their own strengths and that they are young enough to have benefitted from the feminist movement advocating for greater gender balance in the workplace. However, despite a younger cohort of female leaders demonstrating alpha

female characteristics, and a belief that both men and women can achieve leadership success, the data shows a continuing male-centric leadership story. For example, a Fawcett Society study using 2022 data, showed that more than 95% of 382 United Kingdom councils are dominated by men; 36% of councillors are women. This compares with 35% female representation in the House of Commons. Key decisions made by organisations and also by elected representatives in a local and national government equally affect men and women, however, those making the decisions are predominately male.

Finally, what should be mentioned in the context of workplace culture research is Bourdieu's theory of habitus, which has been used in the above-mentioned workplace culture studies in mass communication industries effectively demonstrating issues that women often face when navigating their careers (Topić et al., 2020, Topić, 2020, 2020a, 2021). Bourdieu (2007) argued that social norms are embedded into society through the early socialisation process, which is gendered, and this often results in a situation in which individuals do not challenge the usual order of things because the gendered division is deeply entrenched in everyday life. This translates to many women not challenging sexism and oppression that result in injustice because masculine domination is ingrained into every day to the point it becomes natural and normal (Bourdieu, 2007, Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu (2007) calls this masculine domination "symbolic violence, a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims" (p. 1). As a result, the social order "functions as an immense symbolic machine tending to ratify the masculine domination on which it is founded: it is the sexual division of labour, a very strict distribution of the activities assigned to each sex, of their place, time and instruments; it is the structure of space, with the opposition between the place of assembly or the market, reserved for men, and the house, reserved for women" (pp. 9–11). This then also translates into a situation where women, in the organisational world, are expected to demonstrate characteristics that naturally come to men, rather than women, due to the early socialisation process where men develop characteristics such as "a physical stature, a voice, or dispositions such as aggressiveness, self-assurance, 'role distance', what is called natural authority, etc. for which men have been tacitly prepared and trained as men" (p. 62, emphasis in the original). This forms a masculine habitus which constitutes a "factor of social difference (. . .) which is also a factor of inequality. It is an important means through which 'large scale' social inequalities (such as class and gender) are made real, and are also made to inhere within the person, so that it is persons themselves who can be judged and found wanting, and persons themselves who can be made to bear the 'hidden injuries' of inequality" (Lawler, 2004, p. 113,

emphases in the original). Bourdieu (1990) thus sees the habitus as a reproduction of social practices that individuals learned in childhood and these practices and beliefs get reproduced throughout their lives through social interactions. The habitus and deeply engrained beliefs rest below consciousness because individuals do not memorise the past but enact it and bring it back to life through their actions, which makes habitus “a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions” (Bourdieu, 2007, pp. 82–83). Habitus also becomes a structuring experience that “brings about a unique integration, dominated by the earliest experiences” (ibid, pp. 86–87, Skeggs, 2004). Authors correctly argue that not all women experience masculine habitus and manage to strategically play with masculinity in a man’s world to succeed but some women do, those who embrace masculine behavioural patterns because organisations function as masculine habitus in which only masculine women, who behave like men and have a male mindset succeed (Lovell, 2000, Topić, 2021a). With this, masculinity in behaviour becomes a disposition and a doxa because some women have a disposition and a doxa to succeed in the workplace due to having a set of behaviours and mindsets that more closely match the mindset of a man (Bourdieu, 1977, Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, Davey, 2009, Spence and Carter, 2014). This is because habitus is reproduced through social encounters and experiences, with which habitus becomes “a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 83) whilst doxa presents a taken-for-granted understanding of the world, which develops in one habitus and whilst concepts of doxa and disposition are linked to fields, it works for workplaces generally because doxa is linked to “implicit and explicit rules of behaviour, and its own valuation of what confers power onto someone; that is what counts as “capital”. The *illusio* of the field makes the resulting power relations appear invisible, natural or inevitable plays a crucial role in upholding the logic of the field. It masks and obfuscates power and thereby reduces resistance” (Leander, 2009, p. 4, all emphases in the original). This means that women, who want to succeed in a workplace, must have a taken-for-granted knowledge of how to do the work and behavioural rules that take one ahead in the workplace, and for many women, this is not a natural process due to differences in upbringing and social expectations imposed on them. This leads to the question of leadership.

Women and Leadership

In relation to perceived leadership capability, perceptions of women's agency are linked to their perceived capability as leaders in masculine-dominated cultures (Mölders *et al.*, 2018) with masculine organisational cultures resulting in the dominant success of men in securing promotion to senior positions (Andrade, 2022). Whilst the impact of culture on women in organisations and the subsequent need to change organisational cultures to make them more inclusive is widely recognised (Andrade, 2022, McKinsey Group, 2021), paradoxically, the nature of the workplace culture itself and, in particular, perceived organisational support for initiatives to increase equality, will impact on the success of such initiatives aimed at doing so. This can be seen in relation to perceived organisational support for work-life balance initiatives focused on achieving career equality (Kossek and Buzzanell, 2018). Here, when perceived support for work-life balance initiatives is higher, women tend to have greater leadership aspirations, with impacts being particularly powerful where perceived support comes from men and women.

Traditional definitions of leadership identify characteristics such as decisiveness, aggression, dominance, being forceful, and risk-taking, which are generally deemed masculine (Blake-Beard *et al.*, 2020). Historically, men went out to work while women stayed at home, embedding social expectations about the roles of men and women and creating a stereotype relating to management and leadership styles, and the maleness of work cultures (Saval, 2015). These stereotypes not only impact the roles expected of men and women but also behaviours considered appropriate, with each gender facing social disapproval if they act outside of social expectation; leaders who demonstrate feminine traits are likely to be considered weak or lacking in gravitas (Blake-Beard *et al.*, 2020). The attributes generally associated with femaleness are compassion, sympathy, collaboration, and being soft-spoken (Blake-Beard *et al.*, 2020, Burkinshaw and White, 2019). Social expectations and habits trap leaders into behaving as they have always done; it takes a conscious effort to change, and as Blake-Beard *et al.* (2020 p. 613) conclude “by not investing in the moment to pull from that larger portfolio of available behaviors, we miss the opportunity to do our best work”.

Method

In this paper, we are analysing the results of a survey we sent to small and medium enterprise (SME) employees based in the Leeds City Region, as well as 14 interviews with women who work in SMEs in the same region. The survey is analysed first, and we are analysing workplace culture, leadership, and characteristics to succeed as well as a self-assessment of women as to

whether they have these characteristics, a mindset one needs to have to progress, their own mindset, and how impactful in their career.

The research was conducted as part of a large enterprise project we were involved with as a research lead (author 1) and academic leads (authors 2 and 3). The project was focused on offering leadership qualifications to women in the Leeds City Region in response to all literature demonstrating that women struggle with climbing to leadership positions, thus the project offered the empowering opportunity to gain ILM qualifications and participate in networking. However, apart from this practical reason, Leeds City Region is an interesting area of research because a study conducted on women in advertising found that women based in the north of England, including Leeds City Region have a more positive perception of their workplace and see their career progression opportunities in a more positive way than women from the south of England (Topić, 2020).

The survey was disseminated to the project participants, however, to ensure more transparency, we also disseminated the survey to the wider public using Facebook groups centred on small and medium-sized businesses in the Leeds City Region and personal contacts on LinkedIn. The latter was necessary because those who signed up to participate in the project could have already had a preconceived opinion that something was wrong with women's rights since the project was centred on women's empowerment and thus, we wanted to target the public in the Leeds City Region too. In addition to that, we wanted to record the views of other genders since the project only targeted women.

The response rate was low with only 65 responses, due to the online fatigue and the fact we could not access many Facebook groups because of admins who acted as gatekeepers and would not release the survey. We have paid for a Facebook advert to target a larger response rate; however, it attracted the attention of trolls who started to post abusive comments (e.g., gifs saying 'no annoying Facebook adverts', or preaching comments about how we should use other means of advertising our business, clearly not reading a description that this was a research survey for the University researchers, etc.) and thus, the survey had to be discounted.

Since the sample of the survey was low and could not be used for generalisation, we also conducted interviews with women to supplement the findings, thus using a mixed method. The reason for interviewing women only lies in the fact mainly women participated in the survey, and thus we decided to focus on the position of women in SMEs and look at the workplace culture in SMEs respective of women. Questions for interviews were derived from the survey,

which allowed us to explore survey findings in more depth. With a sample of 14 interviews, which is a number that qualitative studies often generally use in their research, the findings of this study can still shed light on the workplace culture in SMEs, albeit they cannot be generalised. Despite a low response rate of 65 participants, survey findings provide an interesting insight into the situation in SMEs compared to other industries. In other words, whilst the sample is small and non-representative, results confirmed findings from previous studies used to inform this study on masculinities, leadership characteristics and mindsets (Topić et al., 2020, Topić, 2020, 2020a, Topić, 2021, Portas, 2018).

Interview questions were developed using survey questions, which were developed from research into women in advertising, journalism, and public relations (Topić et al, 2020, Topić, 2020, 2020a, Topić, 2021) as well as a book by Mary Portas, British businesswoman, broadcaster and an author (Portas, 2018). In this book, Portas narrates her experience of climbing the ladder in a retail industry dominated by men and she particularly focuses on the so-called alpha culture of the organisation. In that, she talks about common issues women face such as misogyny and sexism, which are well explored in research, however, she also tackled unexplored issues such as office setup, hierarchies, meeting culture, and the general feeling and sentiment of the office culture and the way it works. Therefore, we developed an interview guide asking women questions such as about the mindset one needs to have to progress in the organisation, what personalities go ahead in their career as well as a self-assessment of their own personalities of women who participated in this study, and whether their particular mindset and personality helped or hindered their careers. We were also guided by Bourdieu's (2007) work on masculine habitus and thus analysed our findings in the context of behaviour and views on what constitutes good leaders that one needs to have to succeed, and this was juxtaposed with asking participants to self-assess their own leadership styles. The questions on leadership styles were developed from already mentioned literature on women in mass communication industries and thus we developed a scale of feminine and masculine characteristics asking participants to self-assess themselves and then assess generally what is needed to succeed. The scales started with feminine leadership characteristics (empathetic, fair, emotional, supportive, understanding, people's person, open) moving toward masculine (directive, aggressive, straightforward, tough, loud, self-promoting). We also asked questions about the office and the workplace culture generally to explore whether workplace culture in SMEs could be seen as an alpha culture with a strict hierarchy and masculinities in the way the organisation operates.

Survey Sample and Analysis

The 65 survey participants were predominantly female, with no non-binary responses received. 51 participants who partook in the survey were female with 14 participants identifying as male. None of the participants identified as transgender. In addition to that, the survey participants were made up of various ages between 18 and 70. The sample was ethnically diverse, and we recruited participants of diverse origins (white British, Black, Indian, European, etc.). There is also a diversity of industries represented including manufacturing, marketing, commercial property, construction, legal, arts, waste management, work support and training, design, IT, retail, services, accounting, financial services, events, social enterprise, communication, law enforcement, education, housing, research and development. This diversity of industries is relevant because some industries are feminised and traditionally attract large numbers of women (e.g., communication, marketing, retail), whilst others are more traditionally masculine and attract more men (e.g., finance, manufacturing, construction). The findings offered an interesting insight into leadership and organisational experiences and perceptions, which were further explored in interviews.

The survey is first discussed in a summative form since the findings cannot be generalised. We summarised responses by grouping 4 and 5 as the highest values that show where the main agreement with the statement would be and in which direction the participant's views were going. After that, we conducted a cross-tabulation analysis of findings based on the size of the SME organisation and the views on own characteristics and work mindset vs the desired characteristics and mindset to progress in a career, as well as an analysis of personal vs desired characteristics vs the size of the organisation and with weighing years of experience. This analysis provided an insight into data and whilst the sample is small and cannot be generalised, findings should be considered an opportunity for further research.

Interview Sample and Analysis

Interviews were conducted with 14 women based in the Leeds City Region. Of 14 women, 13 hold managerial roles and are between 26 and 60 years of age whilst one is an employee. Of 14 interviewed women, six are participants of the project and eight are not, thus providing a good balance in responses to tackle a pre-conceived bias. Women also come from a range of industries (table 1).

Table 1. Interviewee demographics

INTERVIEWEE NO	INDUSTRY	LOCATION	POSITION	AGE	Project participant?
1	Demography industry	Leeds	Director	32	Yes
2	Publishing	Barnsley	Editor	35	No
3	Real estate	Leeds	Owner	60	No
4	PR and Marketing	Leeds	Head of department	26	Yes
5	Manufacturing	Leeds	HR director	52	Yes
6	IT Consulting	Leeds	Senior business analyst	40	Yes
7	Business consultant	Leeds	Managing director	42	Yes
8	Learning and development	Pontefract	Director	55	No
9	Not-for-profit	Leeds	Managing director	50	No
10	Executive coaching	Leeds	Managing director	38	Yes
11	Consultancy and events	Leeds	CEO	41	No
12	Manufacturing	Leeds	Sales administrator	56	No
13	Manufacturing	Leeds	Managing director	56	No
14	Manufacturing	Leeds	Work Manager	35	No

Interviews were transcribed into a Word document and triple-coded. Firstly, we conducted an open coding that helped in identifying critical themes that emerged from the data and this helped us compare, contextualise, and categorize the data. After that, we conducted axial coding that interrogated the context and interaction of data derived from the interviewee's responses. Finally, we conducted selective coding that helped in identifying the most important themes and relating them across data to identify general themes that derive from data.

Thematic analysis was carried out next and codes were grouped and converted to themes. Thematic analysis is "a systematic approach to the analysis of qualitative data that involves identifying themes or patterns of cultural meaning; coding and classifying data, usually textual, according to themes; and interpreting the resulting thematic structures by seeking

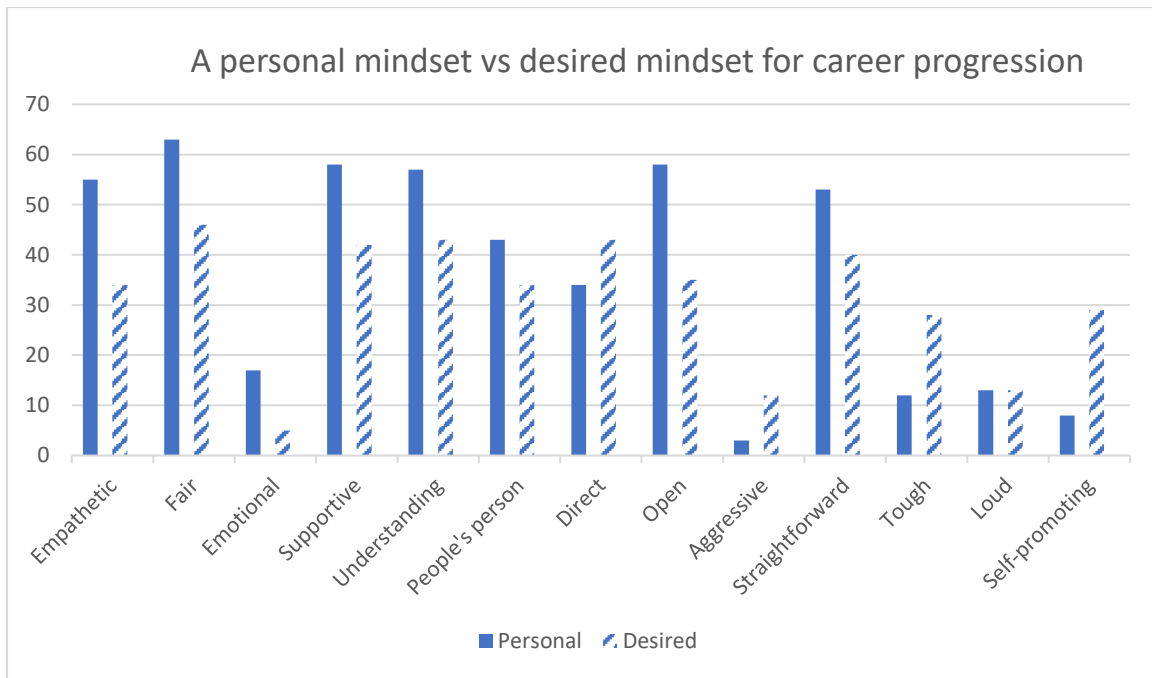
commonalities, relationships, overarching patterns, theoretical constructs, or explanatory principles (Lapadat, 2010, p. 926). Thematic analysis is mainly used as a sensemaking approach, which helps in reducing large datasets as well as helps in identifying recurrent themes, which then also identifies trends in data that can be explored in further research. Thus, this form of the analysis is more centred on identifying trends rather than building a theory, which was convenient for this study since not much research has been done on women in SMEs, and this exploratory approach helped in identifying trends and themes, which can be taken forward in further studies. In addition to that, thematic analysis is the closest one can get to quantitative and post-positivist analysis because of its focus on systematically analysing data and looking at trends, rather than critically engaging with data and focusing on analysing meanings, which is a subjective process of data analysis. This approach was suitable for a mixed method study that first conducted a survey and a highly structured way of approaching interviews by first developing the interview questionnaire from a survey and also asking all participants the same questions to compare and contrast data to identify trends and patterns. In the presentation of findings, we follow an approach by Braun and Clarke (2006), visualise data, and then analyse it according to themes and sub-themes, also supported by direct statements from participants.

Findings

The Survey

In summary of survey findings, it appeared that participants assessed characteristics they have as more leaning towards the feminine side, such as empathy, emotion, fairness, supportiveness, understanding, and people's person. However, when it comes to assessing what mindset is necessary to progress, participants tend to give more emphasis to what is usually perceived as masculine characteristics such as self-promotion, aggressiveness, toughness, and directiveness. For example, the highest value in personal characteristics based on a self-assessment of participants was assigned to fairness, openness, being straightforward, understanding, supportive and then empathetic, whilst characteristics needed to succeed show the lower value assigned to empathy, for example, and characteristics such as toughness, aggression and self-promotion increased in values (figure 1).

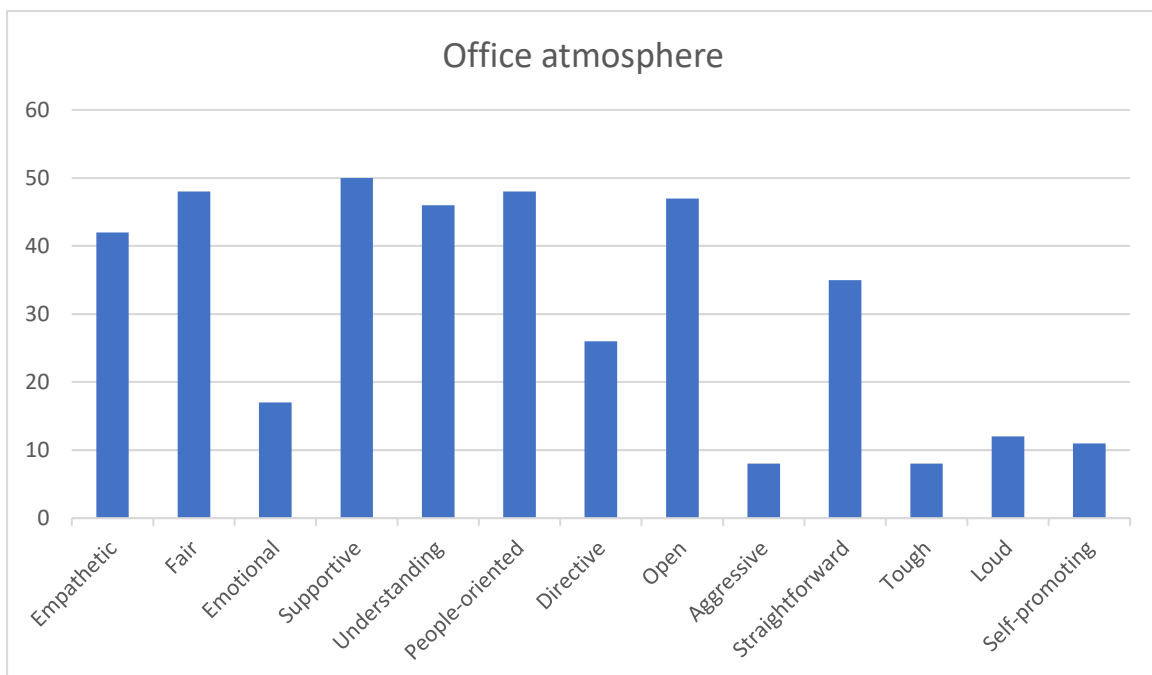
Figure 1. Characteristics possessed and desired



Source: author's work

Participants labelled their office atmosphere as a mix of characteristics but leaned towards the feminine and emphasised empathy, fairness, supportiveness, and people orientation, thus signalling some positive developments in workplaces (figure 2), at least when SMEs and this survey sample are concerned, which was further explored in interviews.

Figure 2. Office Atmosphere



Source: author's work

Following the summative trends analysis, we also conducted a cross-tabular analysis by calculating the mean value of participants' assessment of each mindset trait (self-assessment of personal and desired characteristics) vs the size of the organisation. Organisations were divided into four categories based on their size: 1-9 employees, 11-49 employees, 50-99 employees, 100-249 employees and 250+ employees. The difference between personal and desired characteristics for each mindset trait was calculated (table 2). A positive difference value indicates a mean personal value that is higher than the mean desired value, whereas a negative difference value indicates a mean personal value that is lower than the mean desired value.

Table 2. Cross-tabular analysis (size of the organisation vs traits)

		Average Score				
Mindset Traits		1 to 9 employees (N=25)	10 to 49 employees (N=23)	50 to 99 employees (N=8)	100 to 249 employees (N=5)	250 or more employees (N=4)
Empathetic	Personal (mean)	4.16	4.43	4.63	4.40	4.00
	Desired (mean)	3.72	3.48	3.25	3.00	2.50
	Difference	0.44	0.95	1.38	1.40	1.50
Fair	Personal (mean)	4.72	4.70	4.88	4.80	4.75
	Desired (mean)	4.24	4.26	3.13	3.60	3.25
	Difference	0.48	0.44	1.75	1.20	1.50
Emotional	Personal (mean)	3.12	2.78	3.00	2.80	2.50
	Desired (mean)	2.40	2.26	2.25	2.00	1.50
	Difference	0.72	0.52	0.75	0.80	1.00
Supportive	Personal (mean)	4.28	4.52	4.50	4.20	4.25
	Desired (mean)	4.08	4.04	3.38	3.60	2.50
	Difference	0.20	0.48	1.12	0.60	1.75
Understanding	Personal (mean)	4.12	4.39	4.38	4.40	3.75
	Desired (mean)	3.96	3.96	3.13	3.60	2.75
	Difference	0.16	0.43	1.25	0.80	1.00
People Person	Personal (mean)	4.20	3.83	4.00	4.40	3.25
	Desired (mean)	3.64	3.48	3.63	3.20	2.50
	Difference	0.56	0.35	0.37	1.20	0.75
Direct	Personal (mean)	3.52	3.30	3.25	3.80	4.25
	Desired (mean)	4.00	3.30	4.50	4.00	3.75
	Difference	-0.48	0.00	-1.25	-0.20	-0.50
Open	Personal (mean)	4.56	4.13	4.25	4.60	4.00
	Desired (mean)	3.76	3.78	3.00	2.60	1.75
	Difference	0.80	0.35	1.25	2.00	2.25
Aggressive	Personal (mean)	1.76	1.39	1.25	1.60	2.25
	Desired (mean)	2.16	1.57	2.63	2.60	4.00
	Difference	-0.40	-0.18	-1.38	-1.00	-1.75
Straight-forward	Personal (mean)	4.12	4.09	4.00	4.80	4.00
	Desired (mean)	4.20	3.74	3.00	3.40	2.25
	Difference	-0.08	0.35	1.00	1.40	1.75
Tough	Personal (mean)	2.92	2.48	2.63	2.60	3.50
	Desired (mean)	3.72	2.91	3.50	2.80	3.50
	Difference	-0.80	-0.43	-0.87	-0.20	0.00
Loud	Personal (mean)	2.24	2.22	2.25	3.00	2.50
	Desired (mean)	2.48	2.00	3.13	2.40	3.75
	Difference	-0.24	0.22	-0.88	0.60	-1.25
Self-promoting	Personal (mean)	1.96	2.00	1.63	2.20	2.75
	Desired (mean)	3.40	2.43	3.50	3.40	4.75
	Difference	-1.44	-0.43	-1.87	-1.20	-2.00

Source: author's work

The analysis has shown that the two biggest differences in self-assessment of personal vs desired characteristics are, in descending order, self-promotion and (equally tied) toughness and openness (1-9 employees), empathy and emotional (10-49 employees), self-promoting and fairness (50-99 employees), openness and empathy (100-249 employees), and self-promoting and openness (250+ employees). Therefore, people in smaller organisations tend to think that the organisation itself values self-promotion and toughness.

The analysis has shown differences based on the size of the organisation, which seems to affect perceptions of the desirability of feminine characteristics and the self-assessment of these characteristics by participants. For example, in organisations with 1-9 employees, participants self-assessed themselves as possessing feminine characteristics such as empathy, fairness, emotion, supportiveness, understanding, people's person and openness. However, these characteristics were not assessed as desired for career progression, which were what is commonly perceived as masculine characteristics: directness, aggressiveness, straight-forwardness, toughness, loudness and self-promotion. However, for organisations sized 11-49, 50-99, 100-249 and 250+, somewhat different findings appear, for example, straightforwardness is assessed as higher on a personal level than the desired one, and loudness appears as relevant and assessed higher on a personal than a desired level for organisations size 11-49, 50-99, 100-249 and 250+. In organisations size 250+, almost exclusively masculine characteristics appear as higher on a personal level (directness, loudness, straight-forwardness), potentially indicating that the larger the organisation, the more masculine characteristics employees show on a personal level and these characteristics are desirable ones. However, differences among organisations with 50-99 employees, 100-249 employees and 250+ employees are derived from N values of 8, 5, and 4, respectively and thus, since the sample is so low it is very difficult to discuss these findings beyond trends. Equally, the survey as a whole cannot be generalised due to a total sample being 65 participants, however, findings show interesting trends, that go in line with previous research (desirability of masculine characteristics for organisations) but also new trends such as the relevance of the size of the organisation.

We also calculated the weighted mean taking into consideration years at the organisation, applying the following weights to each result: 1 for less than a year, 2 points for 1-5 years, 4 for 6-10 years, 7 for 11-20 and 10 for 21-30 (table 3).

Table 3. Cross-tabular analysis (size of the organisation vs traits vs years of experience)

		Average Score				
Mindset Traits		1 to 9 employees (N=25)	10 to 49 employees (N=23)	50 to 99 employees (N=8)	100 to 249 employees (N=5)	250 or more employees (N=4)
Empathetic	Personal (mean)	4.26	4.43	4.64	4.25	4.33
	Desired (mean)	3.70	3.72	3.79	2.67	2.47
	Difference	0.56	0.71	0.85	1.58	1.86
Fair	Personal (mean)	4.77	4.70	4.86	4.92	4.87
	Desired (mean)	4.23	4.46	3.54	3.59	3.20
	Difference	0.54	0.24	1.32	1.33	1.67
Emotional	Personal (mean)	3.26	2.67	3.18	2.75	2.47
	Desired (mean)	2.21	2.22	2.61	1.67	1.60
	Difference	1.05	0.45	0.57	1.08	0.87
Supportive	Personal (mean)	4.31	4.59	4.50	4.17	4.13
	Desired (mean)	4.15	4.26	3.86	3.17	2.47
	Difference	0.16	0.33	0.64	1.00	1.66
Understanding	Personal (mean)	4.16	4.42	4.36	4.58	3.87
	Desired (mean)	3.89	4.08	3.46	3.42	2.93
	Difference	0.27	0.34	0.90	1.16	0.94
People Person	Personal (mean)	4.17	3.92	4.18	4.50	3.67
	Desired (mean)	3.57	3.55	3.68	2.83	2.47
	Difference	0.60	0.37	0.50	1.67	1.20
Direct	Personal (mean)	3.47	3.38	3.25	3.92	4.13
	Desired (mean)	3.99	3.38	4.46	4.25	3.80
	Difference	-0.52	0.00	-1.21	-0.33	0.33
Open	Personal (mean)	4.63	4.23	4.21	4.42	4.33
	Desired (mean)	3.67	4.08	3.29	2.17	1.40
	Difference	0.96	0.15	0.92	2.25	2.93
Aggressive	Personal (mean)	1.85	1.51	1.39	1.50	1.80
	Desired (mean)	2.15	1.49	2.57	2.92	4.00
	Difference	-0.30	0.02	-1.18	-1.42	-2.20
Straight-forward	Personal (mean)	4.19	4.11	3.82	4.92	3.67
	Desired (mean)	4.17	3.87	3.21	3.08	2.00
	Difference	0.02	0.24	0.61	1.84	1.67
Tough	Personal (mean)	2.96	2.63	2.25	2.50	3.07
	Desired (mean)	3.73	2.99	3.29	3.08	3.73
	Difference	-0.77	-0.36	-1.04	-0.58	-0.66
Loud	Personal (mean)	2.38	2.17	2.36	3.17	2.47
	Desired (mean)	2.23	1.79	3.00	2.75	3.93
	Difference	0.15	0.38	-0.64	0.42	-1.46
Self-promoting	Personal (mean)	1.74	2.07	1.96	2.08	2.93
	Desired (mean)	3.04	2.24	3.21	3.75	4.87
	Difference	-1.30	-0.17	-1.25	-1.67	-1.94

Source: author's work

The results show that findings did not change substantially when years of experience were weighted. However, some minor differences and trends were observed, for example, the masculine characteristics, toughness and aggressiveness slightly increased when weighing for experience, in organisations below 100 employees. On the other side, people's person went slightly up when weighing for years of experience; people tended to rate themselves slightly higher on people's person characteristics.

Interviews

After analysing data from all 14 interviews, it appears that workplace positivity is visible in answers from interviewed women, which goes in line with survey participants who also

expressed views that lean more towards the positive. In interviews, the majority reported feeling comfortable in their organisations and not worrying too much about their appearance or talking about children, thus being perceived as too focused on their role as mothers. Women also did not report a very strict hierarchy when it comes to office setups or meetings and generally, for example,

“It's quite a flat structure really. If I wanted to speak to my director and just pick up the phone and give them a call if I need to speak to them for whatever reason, it's it's a very flat organization. They're trying to put some structure in place, but that is mainly for reporting lines 'cause otherwise it just gets too overwhelming for managers to be managing people and resources all the time. But yeah, I mean, it's everything else is very flat” (interviewee 6).

“Yeah. Oh, yeah, we all talk. We do all talk about everything. We are quite open really. As even in the office, you know like, I've worked with everybody in the office, obviously for years, so that we all know everybody's circumstances and what's going on and yeah, in that respect, we're really open” (interviewee 13).

Findings show some progress from the reported experiences of Portas (2018) who argued that a strict meeting and office hierarchy linked to the office setup also perpetuates an alpha culture in the organisation and impedes women's progress. In addition to that, women did not report an expectation to attend weekend leisure activities, which has historically impeded women's progress due to women's lack of availability on weekends linked to family commitments (Saval, 2015). Some women said, for example, that they have some activities outside of work, but not a lot, emphasising also that people often do not come, thus demonstrating there is no pressure to have a work-first attitude and give up private time for work,

“We do it at Christmas. Sometimes in the summer we might say, oh, we're going to go to the pub, anyone's welcome, and it's only the same people that turn up the same few. Even with like the Christmas parties. We had a good turn out this year, but normally a lot of people don't come (...) Once every couple of months, an afternoon where you go out and do something and it's in work time. Or even just get sandwiches and sit in the canteen and just park it. Don't have to be about work, but just socialise” (interviewee 14).

What is more, there are no signs of any behavioural expectations in the workplace culture, which would go against Bourdieu's (2007) writing that was proved to be correct in mass communication studies that informed this study (Topić, 2023a), thus opening a question whether SME workplaces are better for women?

Most women do not seek power or domination in their organisations, which fits within existing research that largely argues that men historically had power, and that power is a contradiction

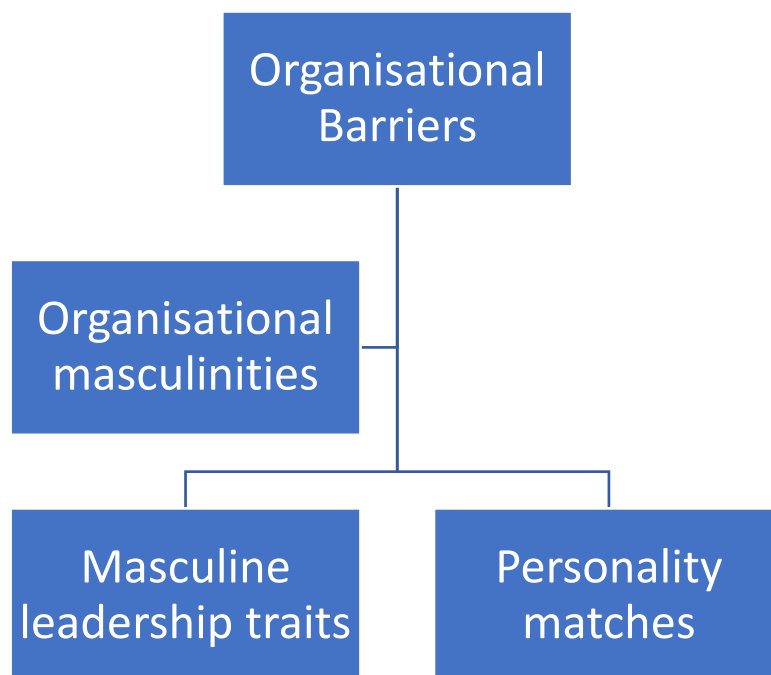
in terms when applied to women (French, 1985, MacKinnon, 1989, Pateman, 1988). In this case, it appears that women do not aim to have power and are committed to teamwork with many women demonstrating supportive leadership traits such as wanting to work as a team, and support staff in their daily work as well as when struggling. For example,

“...like that cohesion is there that we all feel part of one and the same team (...) ethics kind of thing, we all work together (...) the same core values, I think, for us are really important (...) You can’t say that I’m not coping with something and it’s not going to be taken against you that we’ve got this very sort of supportive environment” (interviewee 1).

“I’d say I’m very compassionate and very empathetic towards people. And I like to help people. Not solve the problems. If I can help them, then great, but to guide them through and just be supportive of them. But that comes in all life, not just my working life, my home life” (interviewee 14).

However, many women in this study also reported organisational barriers respective to masculinities in the organisation or what culturally and in terms of socialisation comes more naturally to men than women (Bourdieu, 2007, Alvesson, 1998, 2013). Therefore, the main themes from these interviews appear to be organisational barriers as the main theme, which are described with organisational masculinities as its main descriptor, and the main sub-themes that appear from the data are masculine leadership traits and personality matches (figure 3).

Figure 3. Thematic map



Source: author’s work

Therefore, whilst women reported progress, as outlined above, they also reported issues. The main one and this is consistent with the literature and available research on workplace culture, is that what is perceived as a masculine trait is still needed to progress in their career, and nevertheless, many women name these characteristics as that one needs to have to succeed, thus showing that masculine habitus is engrained into women's subconsciousness to the point they no longer recognise it (Bourdieu, 2007). For example, some women named regular characteristics and personality traits such as "no cutting corners and delivering high-quality work" (interviewee 1). Other interviewees outlined determination and putting yourself forward (interviewee 4, 14), competence, knowledge, ability, drive and speed (interviewee 5), hard work, ambition, can-do attitude, resourcefulness, ability to cope with change and fast-paced work (interviewee 8), intrapreneurial, loving the challenge and a willingness to learn (interviewee 11, 14), being able to do the work without needing too much guidance (13), etc. These findings show that women themselves often outline masculine characteristics as ones needed to succeed (Topić et al, 2020, Topić, 2020, 2020a, Topić, 2021, Bourdieu, 2007). Previous studies (ibid) identified characteristics one needs to succeed such as toughness, aggression, directness, lack of emotion and empathy, giving it as good as it gets, work-first attitude, etc. as a recipe for success, and women who embrace these characteristics go ahead but are often perceived as tougher than men whereas women who show feminine characteristics either do not progress or they are tokenised and do not always have the real power to run organisations and affect change (ibid). The findings from this study also showed that interviewees outline masculine characteristics as necessary to succeed in one's career, and this leads back to the argument that the division in organisations on masculine and feminine, including allowed behaviours, power, and institutionalised means of maintaining and perpetuating divisions have led to a situation where a successful manager is almost a synonym with a man whereas women are left behind (Acker, 1990).

In addition to that, personality matches seem to hinder the career, and some participants reported issues with not having the right personality to go ahead in their careers. For example, interviewee 2 said her organisation has a very corporate mindset marked also by groupthink and particular behavioural styles, e.g., promoting the organisation even when not agreeing with their policies and having to be a type of person that fits into the team and the groupthink, calling also her organisation cliquey. As a result of not being seen as a good fit, this interviewee suffered career barriers and was not promoted despite being highly qualified and having joined her current organisation from a more senior position where she took a step down and then faced

barriers, based on her personality, in progressing in her career. Following internal career progression failures, she changed her behaviour and tried to be more upbeat about the organisation, but issues remained due to the cliquey nature of the organisation,

“I needed a job, so I took basically an entry-level role when I’ve been above that for years. That was quite hard for me. Like psychologically, quite hard to do that, so I was obviously as soon as any opening came up, I was very keen to go for it. I had four internal interviews over three years, all of which I was rejected from. I always felt that it was because it’s sort of already made a decision on who was going to fill those roles. And there was one time when I was told that the role was basically a promotion within my team. The same team that I’ve been working with: it was a little bit of a step up. It’s gonna be a little bit more to do and I was told that they didn’t think I was a good fit for the team. It was nothing to do with all like the extra stuff were done because that is what I did. I went and did lots of extra stuff and I made a big point about it. But I was told that so after that I sort of put a bit of a façade on and became a bit of a cheerleader” (interviewee 2).

It, therefore, appears that whilst workplace culture has changed positively since women no longer report traditional hierarchies and power struggles, commonly associated with organisations of the past, some old habits and behavioural expectations still exist, and SMEs are not immune to these issues. However, compared to other studies, conducted generally on organisations and in the corporate world, these findings reveal more positivity at least when workplace culture is at stake, opening avenues for further research to explore whether things are changing and if so, why is this the case and what are SMEs potentially doing better than larger organisations.

Conclusion

What appears from this study is that SMEs as organisations seem to be friendlier and lack the strict hierarchy and masculinities that are often found in research. SME workplaces are reported to be friendlier and more inclusive, which goes against research that usually reports sexism and barriers for women, however, these findings also go in line with a study on women in advertising where women from the north of England have reported similar findings (Topić, 2020), thus opening two questions, are SMEs better for women or is the north of England somehow a more inclusive workplace? Is there a local workplace culture in the north that enables more inclusion or is there a lack of recognition of discrimination mentioned in Bourdieu’s work (2007) that goes beyond not recognising masculine practices but organisational barriers in general?

However, regardless of workplace culture findings and their ambiguous nature, what remains as an issue is that women still recognise male characteristics and mindsets as the ones leaders need to demonstrate to succeed as leaders and progress in their careers. This is a failure both for women who fail to recognise this practice as discriminatory because no woman in interviews mentioned expected characteristics as problematic, thus accepting things as they are, but also for organisations who still work under masculine meanings and expect behaviours that commonly come more naturally to men than women due to differences in upbringing and social expectations (Bourdieu, 2007). Organisations, therefore, are still gendered and function under masculine meanings (Acker, 1990, Alvesson, 1998, 2013), and there seems to still be a division between male and female characteristics in leadership that determine who goes ahead (Topić, 2023, 2023a, 2023b).

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