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## **Navigating gender biases**

How female leaders confront external and internalised  
stereotypes in a male world

*A qualitative case study*

Master's thesis

by

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**.Abstract**

<b>Title</b>	Navigating Gender Biases: How female leaders confront external and internalised stereotypes in a male world
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<b>Purpose</b>	The purpose of this study is to contribute to the understanding of external and internalised stereotypes female leaders in male-dominated environments face, as well as to shed light on opportunities of countering stereotypes in order to give voice to new perspectives and experiences, allowing for improvements for future female leaders.
<b>Theoretical perspective</b>	Our theory is grounded in literature on male-dominated environments, stereotypes and prejudices, (female) leadership, barriers caused by stereotypes, and addressing stereotypes. These main themes allow an initial understanding of the stereotypes female leaders in male-dominated environments face and what is known about the manners of addressing these stereotypes.
<b>Methodology</b>	This qualitative study draws on interpretive research traditions and follows an abductive research approach. The empirical data has been collected in 6 organisations and consists of 12 semi-structured interviews and 5 observations, allowing for more in-depth insights.
<b>Contributions</b>	The research contributes to literature on stereotypes around female leaders in male-dominated environments and possible coping-mechanisms. We discovered multiple ways in which women contribute to upholding gender stereotypes within a professional setting, mainly due to internalised stereotypes. Our study presents new coping-mechanisms that have not been mentioned by literature before, some of short-term nature and others constructively countering stereotypes.
<b>Keywords</b>	Female leaders; leadership; male-dominated; stereotypes; masculine-typed; coping; internalised stereotypes

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Enjoy reading!

Roos van Lunsen & Ines Hofmann

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## 1 Introduction

*“I wanted to be heard. I wanted to be seen. Not to be the silent person in the room.”*

– Sofia

### 1.1 Background

Gender inequality in the workplace has been a topic of discussion for decades, highlighting the great interest in, as well as the high importance of this topic. While there has been progress in recent years towards promoting gender diversity and inclusion in the workplace, there is still a significant gap between the number of men and women in leadership positions (Powell, 2019). Present day, women are still considered as being “less competent, less influential and less likely to have played a leadership role”, whether conscious or unconscious (Chang & Milkman, 2020, p3). These present just a few examples of the unique challenges and obstacles women encounter in leadership roles. To give background to the origin of gender-related stereotypes, social role theory (Eagly, 1997) needs to be introduced. This theory traces back to the historic labour division which created distinct social roles. Men were supposed to take on agentic tasks such as hunting while women’s responsibilities evolved around communal tasks such as child-care. From this basic division, distinct traditional images of how women and men are supposed to behave and which traits they are supposed to have originated and still influence our modern-day perceptions and expectations of the female and the male role.

In male-dominated fields, many of these gender-based biases can become even more salient due to a lack of representation (Chen & Moons, 2015). Furthermore, the presence of these biases that hold up gender-related stereotypes can expose women to the stereotype threat, meaning they feel at risk of confirming negative stereotypes. This causes women to be vulnerable, feel pressured and anxious (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Furthermore, the stereotype threat can affect evaluations and often leads to underperformance. However, Johns, Schmader and Martens (2005) argue that a simple way of reducing the stereotype threat in the workplace is to talk about it. The stereotype threat has been of great interest to researchers when it comes to women in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) related occupations (Starr, Anderson & Green, 2019; Collins, Price, Hanson & Neaves, 2020).

According to Jandeska and Kraimer (2005), male-dominated organisations and

industries are “reflecting the more traditional workplace—one created, maintained, and controlled by males since its inception” (p.465). Therefore, these environments exhibit stereotypically masculine perceived traits such as competitiveness, risk-taking, aggressiveness and decisiveness (Bligh & Kohles, 2008; Fisher, 2015). Male-dominated occupations include for example scientists, surgeons, CEOs, police officers, and air traffic controllers (Chang & Milkman, 2020; Miller & Hayward, 2006). Occupations predominately held by men are often also referred to as ‘masculine-typed’, whereas those that are dominated by women are referred to as ‘feminine-typed’. However, despite the various challenges, women have proven to be successful leaders in many industries, including male-dominated ones (Eagly & Carli, 2007). As typically male-dominated work areas tend to be based on more traditional structures and homogenous cultures, female leaders can be viewed as a force of movement, bringing new ideas and change to these industries (Campuzano, 2019).

Today’s fast-paced, ever-changing environment is often referred to as the VUCA world, describing the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous nature of our daily life. Volatility refers to the speed and magnitude of change, uncertainty to the lack of predictability and information, complexity to the interconnectedness of issues and systems, and ambiguity describes the multiple and conflicting interpretations of events and situations (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). These factors create an environment in which traditional ways of thinking and problem-solving may not be effective and require new approaches to leadership and decision-making (Ruesga Rath, Grosskopf & Barmeyer, 2021). As organisations and individuals continue to navigate in this world, it is important to consider diversity as an opportunity to stay adaptive and innovative in this constantly changing environment. Especially certain industries and occupations traditionally lack this diversity, as their workforce tends to be predominately male. As studies have shown that diverse teams can exceed homogenous groups and accomplish greater results, this is an important factor that should be considered more (Jackson & Ruderman, 1995; Offermann & Foley, 2020). This reflects the meaning behind our study, showing the need for more research and improvements in terms of gender-related stereotypes in the workplace.

## **1.2 Research and Objectives**

Although there is plentiful research that explores the gender gap in the workplace,

gaining information about women's experience with stereotypes in traditionally male-dominated industries or positions can offer new insights. In these industries, women are often considered to be brought in on diversity initiatives (Heilman & Welle, 2006). This issue can even intensify for women that take on leadership positions in these male-dominated industries. By examining the experiences of women in leadership in those specific environments, we aim to broaden the understanding of the stereotypes female leaders face within their daily work. Moreover, even though diversity is an emerging topic of interest with many studies within the past years, a lot of the influential literature surrounding this issue dates many years back. Considering the fast changes and constant adaptations in organisations, especially after the recent COVID-19 pandemic, it is worth revisiting the topic to possibly uncover new developments in recent times.

At the same time, however, our goal is to also shed light on the unique assets and opportunities female leaders bring into these environments and that they use to counter the stereotypes they face. While contributing to this research direction, we aim to uncover these positive aspects of the female leadership experience which could ultimately serve as a motivator or encouragement for other women to pursue a career in a male-dominated area. The broad literature surrounding women's leadership especially in more male-dominated industries tends to emphasize the hindrances and negative stereotypes women face, often neglecting the possible insights concerning ways of addressing and overcoming them. The few studies examining this topic provide conflicting results regarding the success factors for women in male-dominated industries. While some studies advocate for a gender-blindness, downplaying differences between male and female leaders and employees (Martin & Phillips, 2017), others see the heightened visibility of women in traditionally male environments as an advantage (Annis & Merron, 2014; Campuzano, 2019; Gerzema & D'Antonio, 2013). Therefore, gaining insight from different female leaders in different occupations can help us understand this matter from their point of view and add to the existing research and the conflicting approaches mentioned by literature.

As another basis for our study, we identified a gap in research surrounding internalised stereotypes by female leaders in male-dominated environments. Previous research was able to show that society overall has adopted certain subconscious or



unconscious biases and stereotypes around women and their role in a more domestic setting (e.g., Ünlü, 2018), however, it fails to elaborate on the unique way this influences female leaders in the workplace. Moreover, earlier research presents that the internalised stereotypes women have towards other women mainly concern benevolent sexism, therefore not actually subjecting them to hostile stereotypes (Glick et al., 2000; Glick & Fiske, 2001). It needs to be explored how these phenomena influence the work of female leaders in male-dominated environments, which are known for heightening the gender-related challenges for women. Furthermore, there is a need for more recent literature exploring this issue.

Moreover, past research mainly covers the topic of perceptions of leadership from the followers' or colleagues' perspectives, showing how they view women in leadership and how they evaluate their roles. More research is needed to understand how women in leadership experience critical situations including stereotypes and how they counter them in order to succeed in male-dominated industries, thus giving voice to how they want to be seen and treated by their environment. Consequently, studying how their own interpretations of situations play out in daily work situations can offer interesting insights into possible unconscious dynamics, behaviours, and biases in this field.

Thus, this study provides insights into how female leaders experience stereotypes and what methods they use to counter these while giving a voice to their own perceptions and experiences. Research has shown that women in leadership positions can bring unique advantages to organizations, such as increased innovation, better communication, and stronger interpersonal skills (Offermann & Foley, 2020). Therefore, it is important to understand how to deal with stereotypes, to contribute to countering the stereotype threat and encourage women to work in male-dominated industries. There is still more to discover in countering the stereotype threat and relieving women from the anxious and pressured feeling that might be especially high in these more male environments. This is why we propose the following research question:

RQ: What stereotypes do female leaders in male-dominated environments face and how do they address them?

We consider it important to include barriers caused by stereotypes for our research, as it forms the base of how female leaders can address these. Furthermore, we recognise the importance of applying a critical lens and not disregarding more adverse approaches of our participants, despite wanting to shed a more positive light on how female leaders deal with difficult situations. These factors led to the creation of the research question as mentioned above.

### **1.3 Outline**

In the following, we present the outline of this thesis. After this initial introduction, chapter two provides a literature review, summarising previous research and giving insight into the theoretical background of the investigated constructs in this thesis. After giving insights on gender differences in the workplace that may be heightened or caused by stereotypes, we present research on how women in leadership positions experience these stereotypes and what methods they use to counter them. This serves as a basis for the gap our research aims to fill. In the subsequent chapter, the methods used will be explained, giving deeper information on the philosophical grounding of the study, and on how the data collection as well as analysis was conducted. Moreover, we engage in reflexivity and elaborate on limitations considering our methods. This is followed by the analysis which presents the key themes and empirical findings within our research, supported by different illustrative quotes derived from our data. We immediately link and contrast these findings with literature in order to highlight patterns and relationships within our data as well as important additions to existing research. Chapter five consists of a short discussion of our main findings by connecting the most important insights. Finally, a conclusion summarises the main findings of our study, suggesting practical as well as theoretical implications. Moreover, possible limitations of the study are discussed, while also giving an outlook on future research potential.

## **2 Literature Review**

In the following chapter, the theoretical background of the constructs this thesis aims to examine will be described. For this purpose, we present and discuss important findings on gender differences in the workplace and the stereotypes connected to that before we go in on the topic of leadership overall, as well as specific indications for women in leadership.

## ***2.1 Gender differences in the workplace***

Streams of organisational studies have recently been focusing on the influence of gender in regard to different outcomes in the workplace. The following subchapters highlight the uneven representation of women in certain industries and the underlying reasons for this issue. These also serve as one explanation for the existence of common stereotypes and prejudices around women in the workplace, which will be examined in a second subchapter.

### *2.1.1 Representation of women in the workplace*

Occupational gender segregation can be found across Europe, the USA and Australia (Miller & Hayward, 2006; Thewlis, Miller & Neathey, 2004). This is partly caused by an occupational preference, already started by gender-stereotyping among children, which continues to influence career choices later in life (Miller & Hayward, 2006). A study by Reuben, Sapienza and Zingales (2014) in the United States showed that female and male high school students show a roughly equal interest in mathematics and science courses. This indicates that girls are just as equipped as boys to pursue science and engineering majors in college. However, women are far less likely than men to choose a major in STEM-related fields in their first year of college, resulting in men outnumbering women in almost every science and engineering field upon graduation. Furthermore, Casad et al. (2020) state that, while there has been an increase in women receiving postgraduate degrees, the number of women in STEM faculty positions has remained largely unchanged. Casad et al. (2020) argue that women in STEM have lower social capital and thus lack support networks, which limits their opportunities. Especially the women in faculty of STEM academic settings may find the climate unwelcoming and threatening, making it important to offer social capital, such as support networks and mentorship, to women. Research by Francis (2002), notes that gender, rather than ability, remains a prime determinant in career choice, and that there is a need for the creation of awareness in job availability and skill shortage. Moreover, women continue to face gender-based payment differences in various industries and are significantly underrepresented in higher-level positions such as supervisory, executive and managerial roles (Eurostat, 2019). In addition to cultural factors, gender norms and market imperfections, workplace factors such as work-life balance and diversity practices in firms have an impact on the segregation of

women in lower occupational positions (Bertrand, Goldin & Katz, 2010; Goldin, 2014). Research shows that for example in the science and engineering fields, only 36% of the employees are female whereas 64% are male, highlighting the underrepresentation of the female workforce in those occupations (NCSES, 2023). It is important to note that the participants of our study come from different backgrounds, working in Sweden, Germany, and the Netherlands. Workplace diversity differs between these countries as well as in the sub-industries within each country. Regarding diversity among gender representation in higher-level functions, France has the highest proportion of female board members in the largest publicly listed companies, accounting for 45% of board members. Sweden comes in second with 38%, followed by Belgium, Germany, and Italy, all with 36%, as well as the Netherlands and Finland, both with 34% (Eurostat, 2019).

This imbalance in certain industries can lead to stereotypes or prejudices around women at work, which will be examined in the following.

### *2.1.2 Stereotypes and prejudices*

The most commonly used definition of stereotypes stems from the early highly influential research of Allport (1954) on the matter of prejudices, who defines stereotypes as generalizations about personal attributes or characteristics of a group of people. The persistence of these stereotypes is supported by mass media communications. The repetition of these messages causes the stereotypes to be considered the general truth.

In order to further explore gender stereotypes and their origin, we can draw on social role theory (Eagly, 1987; Eagly, 1997). As previously introduced, social role theory (Eagly, 1997) is grounded in historic labour division and the social roles that were traditionally assigned to men and women. Based on this, divergent stereotypes about the character of men and women evolved, associating men “with agency (e.g., assertive, competitive) and women with communality (e.g., warm, kind).” (Martin & Phillips, 2017, p.29). Even though these roles have no practical relevance in today’s society, the assumptions still frame our social life and create resistant stereotypes. Women are often seen as more dependent on support, whereas men are seen as “more likely get the message” (Tinsley & Ely, 2018, para.6). This stems from the assumed idea that women are more caring, cooperative and that they lack confidence,

negotiate poorly, are risk-averse, or do not put in enough hours at work in order to spend more time with family (Tinsley & Ely, 2018).

As previously explained, the stereotype of women being the caregiver or nurturer stems from the historical role women played in staying home, taking care of their husband and children, and doing domestic chores (Eagly & Wood, 2016). This has led to the occupational segregation of women in nurturer roles, which Eagly, Nater, Miller, Kaufmann and Sczesny (2020) define as occupations that require social skills. This is compared to stereotypical masculine-typed occupations, which Eagly et al. (2020) connect to a 'provider role' and which is characterized by using competition and physical strength. Christov-Moore, Simpson, Coudé, Grigaityte, Iacoboni and Ferrari (2014) argue that the idea that women are more caring is grounded in the empathetic behaviour and emotional response they give. However, this is related to social, contextual, and cultural influences that have led to women being allowed to express their empathy and emotions, whereas men are expected to have more emotional control. Therefore, the stereotype of women being more caring is directly connected to the stereotype that women should be more empathetic and emotional than men.

Another stereotype around women concerns them being more cooperative than men, which can be linked to the caregiving or nurturer stereotype. Taylor, Cousino Klein, Lewis, Gruenewald, Gurung and Updegraff (2000) describe the 'Tend-and-befriend' strategy, which is considered the opposite of the 'Fight-or-flight' strategy. The fight-or-flight response was first described by Cannon (1932) and is characterised by a response of either fighting or fleeing in a stressful situation. The tend-and-befriend strategy is proposed by Taylor et al. (2000) as the female response to a stressful situation. Tending is considered a nurturing response, which, as established above, is stereotypically considered a feminine trait. Befriending is considered a cooperative response, which is about creating and maintaining social networks. They further argue that the idea behind creating and maintaining these social networks is about reducing vulnerability, contributing to the development of social groupings, and exchanging recourses and responsibilities. The tend-and-befriend strategy is relevant, as it is used in recent studies, such as an article by Fox, Scelza, Silk and Kramer (2023), who state that the idea of women being more cooperative stems from the initial response of

women to work together with others. This response likely has to do with the behavioural strategy women adopt, after which they bring in the tend-and-befriend strategy. Nonetheless, research by Balliet, Li, Macfarlan and van Vugt (2011) suggests that there are no real differences in the overall amount of cooperation based on gender. They argue that the idea of cooperation has more to do with the association between sex and cooperation, and social context.

The stereotype of women being more risk-averse is a widely researched topic to this day. Charness and Gneezy (2012) state that the idea that women are more risk-avoidant comes from the fact that women make smaller investments in risky assets than men do. However, they specify this does not mean women are always less risk-tolerant than men. Research by Villanueva-Moya and Expósito (2021) shows that women are more disadvantageous in risk decisions due to their fear of negative evaluation. Furthermore, Shropshire, Peterson, Bartels, Amanatullah and Lee (2021) argue that rather than women being risk-averse, there is a difference in risk-taking strategy. Their research shows that women in CEO positions are less likely to choose risky strategies. They further suggest that this has to do with a difference in orientation that leads to the decision-making process.

One of the most important stereotypes is the assumed lack of confidence, as it is an important reason women get promoted and listened to less than men. This stems from the belief that confidence is needed to succeed (Tinsley & Ely., 2018). However, one can argue that 'lack of confidence' is a man-made concept rather than a fixed attribute. The interpretation of confidence is dependent on the participants of the interaction and is influenced by gender, age and ethnicity. According to Wahyuningsih (2018), men are often more directive and use simpler words, whereas women are more expressive and use polite language. This affects the way and effectiveness of how men and women communicate. Due to these differences in interactions between men and women, it is no surprise that the perceived lack of confidence can also be gender-related. Overall, gender differences in confidence are predominantly discussed and reported to occur within masculine environments, where 'masculine' abilities or qualities such as dominance, directness or assertiveness are preferred over 'feminine' qualities, often described as being emotional, warm and sensitive (Cejka & Eagly, 1999). This indicates how the notion of confidence can easily become a

stereotype or assumption, especially in these environments. The appearance of confidence influences communication and interaction and can increase or decrease the chances of being hired. According to Reuben et al. (2014), men have more tendency to boast about performance, whereas women generally underreport it. This phenomenon increases the likelihood of men being considered a better fit for the job. Furthermore, men overestimate future performances, causing them to be considered better candidates in job interviews.

## **2.2 Leadership**

As this thesis evolves around female leadership, a definition of the concept is needed before the unique factors influencing women in leadership are discussed. Furthermore, research findings surrounding barriers caused by stereotypes as well as different strategies to address these or cope with them are presented.

With leadership being a topic of high popularity with extensive amounts of literature published, there are various views on leadership conceptualized within diverse models and frameworks (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). Luedi (2022) indicates how diverse leadership can be defined: It can refer to a dedicated position or processes, to oneself or other people, and to individuals or societies. Moreover, leadership includes demanding, serving, trusting, and following but also conflicts. Thus, the indication of leadership may mean something different to different people and is context-dependent. Leadership can be based on the organization or industry it is found in. Winston and Patterson (2006) integrate several definitions and describe a leader as a person “who selects, equips, trains, and influences one or more follower(s)” (p.7) in an effort to engage followers towards the organization’s goals and mission. Within the literature, leadership is often distinguished from management, describing management as more of a role or title which entails formal responsibilities and more structural aspects. Leadership on the other hand is often used to describe inspiring actions that give value and purpose to the followers (Nienaber, 2010). According to Nayar (2013), the most important separating fact between management and leadership is not power and control, but influence and inspiration. Therefore, a manager can be a leader, but not all leaders are managers. Alvesson et al. (2017) however criticise this strict separation and the idealized view of leadership it tends to imply. Although they believe that leadership can make a difference in giving meaning

to work tasks or boost morale, ethos and emotional well-being within an organization and that it contributes to learning and development, leadership is “complex and calls for reflexivity and thoughtfulness” (p.1). After this introduction to leadership as a concept, the following section will examine the unique aspects related to female leadership.

### **2.3 Women in leadership**

Despite more women obtaining advanced degrees than men, women remain underrepresented in upper-level positions (Johnson, 2016). This causes a lack of diversity at the highest leadership levels, creating obstacles for the success of organisations. In order to remain competitive, new leadership approaches and greater diversity among leaders have to be considered (Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak & White, 2017). The barrier for women to reach leadership positions has also been referred to as ‘Glass Ceiling’. This glass ceiling consists of transparent barriers that prevent women from moving up the hierarchical ladder. Although it may sound like one barrier, the glass ceiling is known to have various layers that come with varied and pervasive forms of gender biases (Oakley, 2000). However, according to Eagly and Carli (2007), the metaphor of the glass ceiling is outdated and too simplistic. They argue that the explanation of fixed barriers is incorrect and that women encounter more indirect and branched-out barriers at various stages throughout their careers. Eagly and Carli (2007) suggest that a better metaphor would be ‘The Labyrinth’, as this gives a better visual of the complex and challenging journey that women face when striving for their goals. This metaphor fits with the various challenges female leaders face on a more horizontal level, once they are already in leadership positions, highlighting the complex routes a woman needs to take. Although the concepts of the glass ceiling and the labyrinth are quite dated, they both remain relevant to this day. Rabelo Duarte Vaz, Gallon and Mendonça Fraga (2023) make use of the labyrinth metaphor created by Eagly and Carli to express the stereotypes, prejudices, discrimination, and the use of oppressive resources women experience. This includes mansplaining, maninterrupting, bropropriating, gaslighting, and harassment. They suggest the labyrinth includes barriers that are based on socio-cultural relationships, organizational relationships, and family relationships and arrangements. The socio-cultural relationships relate to macho-behaviour, sexism, prejudice, discrimination,



etc., while the organizational relationships relate to the pay difference between men and women, the glass ceiling, practices that favour men or overvalue masculinities, lack of representation, etc. The family relationships and arrangements relate to marriage, motherhood, and unpaid housework and care activities. Rabelo Duarte Vaz et al. (2023) thus suggest that rather than two separate metaphors, the glass ceiling is part of the barriers that are faced by women within the labyrinth. These barriers that are grounded in various stereotypes concerning female leaders will be examined further in the following.

### *2.3.1 Barriers caused by stereotypes*

In order to elaborate on the barriers caused by stereotypes that female leaders face, it is important to understand the underlying reasons for the existence of these stereotypes. The lack of fit theory (Heilman & Eagly, 2008) offers important insights, as it presents explanations as to why the female social role is typically not connected to leadership abilities as much as the male social role. Agency, a trait presented previously as stereotypically male, aligns with the characteristics that are appreciated and expected from leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002). As agency is associated less with the female social role, men are assumed more likely to have the necessary abilities for success (Eagly & Karau, 2002), causing a 'lack of fit' (Heilman, 1983; Heilman & Eagly, 2008) for women in several workplace settings that require agency. This is supported by the previously presented findings on stereotypes, indicating that society expects men to display traits like assertiveness, dominance, competence, and authority, while women are expected to be warm, supportive, kind, and helpful (Carli & Eagly, 2011). Schein (2007) further researched this stereotype of women being considered less of a leader figure than men, referring to it as the 'Think Manager-Think Male' attitude. Braun, Stegmann, Hernandez Bark, Junker and van Dick (2017) made use of the think manager-think male theory in their research. Findings indicate that the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions partly relates to the association that women are more ideal followers. Eagly and Karau (2002) propose a role congruity theory of prejudice, elaborating on this phenomenon of female gender roles being perceived as incongruent with leadership roles. Therefore, women are viewed less positively when evaluating their potential to become a leader. Moreover, female leaders fulfilling the requirements of leadership roles and behaving accordingly get

evaluated less favourably than men exercising the same behaviour. It can be argued that this issue is likely to present in an even more salient way within a male-dominated occupation or industry, making it more difficult for female leaders to be respected. Martin and Phillips (2017) elaborate on this issue while giving a perspective that differs from other researchers. The authors argue that high awareness of gender and the abilities ascribed to it further strengthens this incongruence between how women are stereotypically perceived and which characteristics are expected of a leader. Therefore, Martin and Phillips (2017) suggest that within male-dominated environments, a different approach might be beneficial, namely 'gender-blindness'. This strategy is different from the gender-awareness practiced in many organisations. Within more masculine-typed occupations, the authors argue that gender-blindness may be effective in "reducing perceived gender-differences in agency, increasing women's identification with agentic traits, and subsequently increasing women's confidence and agentic behavior." (p.29).

The previously presented stereotypical expectations of women lead to differences in the way they lead and how they are evaluated for their leadership. Helgesen (1990) states women lead with more cooperativeness and problem-solving focussed on intuition and empathy compared to men, who, according to Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt (2008), are more passive. Moreover, findings of a meta-analysis by Eagly and Johnson (1990) indicate that women tend to be more interpersonally oriented and lead in a more democratic manner than men. Alvesson et al. (2017) support these findings by suggesting that women tend to lead through transformational behaviour while men tend to use controlling or transactional styles. Highlighting once again the existing prejudices around female leaders, women still get preselected for leadership positions less often, and male leaders are often evaluated in a more positive way than a female leader exercising the same leadership behaviour (Kolb, 1997). An example of this shows in a study about men and women using transformational leadership. Hentschel, Braun, Peus and Frey (2018) highlight that male leaders who engage in transformational leadership were evaluated more positively and considered more promotable than female leaders showing the same leadership style. Conversely, when women engaged in a stereotypically more male-

associated leadership style namely autocratic leadership, there was no difference in being considered promotable.

A highly relevant barrier to female leaders is part of what literature refers to as the 'authority gap' (Sieghart, 2021). This term stands for the overall phenomenon that women are considered less competent than men, which is created by an unconscious bias (Cassidy & Krendl, 2019). These assumptions cause behaviours such as talking over women more frequently or interrupting them (Heath, Flynn & Holt, 2014). Research links this phenomenon back to linguistic norms, causing women to learn and engage in different styles of speaking than men. This includes pausing, volume, pacing, directness, word choice, jokes, figures of speech, questions, and apologising. Men fail to realise the difference in conversational style, leading to women being interrupted more, or women waiting their turn, which causes their voices to be heard less (Tannen, 1995). Moreover, the authority gap causes women to be evaluated as less competent in employment or career advancement settings, even if identical qualifications are presented (Moss-Racusin, Dovidio, Brescoll, Graham & Handelsman, 2012). Interviewees in the qualitative study by Sieghart (2021) reported that the incidents related to the authority gap occurred less often or openly after they advanced into higher managerial positions, as this made it harder for people to disrespect them.

Another consequence of the previously described prejudices and stereotypes concerns female leaders experiencing social sanctions in connection with their visibility in their position. The visibility of women in male-dominated industries may feel like a threat to men in powerful positions, leading to these men excluding women from more powerful roles by use of their own power (Cohn, 2000). Men may feel women are invading male territory and are attempting to make a move on the 'male monopoly' in these masculine-typed occupations (Watts, 2010). This fits with empirical findings by Fielding-Singh, Magliozzi and Ballakrishnen (2018), who argue that women are invisible due to being systematically overlooked, and that attempts to become visible are often met with backlash due to the expectations of how women should behave. Many women who participated in the research "had experienced or witnessed situations where women who acted assertively or authoritatively were penalized" (Fielding-Singh et al., 2018, *Avoiding Backlash in the Workplace*). Thus, many women

turned to being risk-averse and conflict-avoidant to become “intentionally invisible” (Fielding-Singh et al., 2018, para. 5), even though this led to them feeling underappreciated (Fielding-Singh et al., 2018). Nonetheless, Fielding-Singh et al. (2018) argue that most organizations value leaders who stand in front of the room to take credit. Despite this, women who do so are penalized and seen as bitchy, pushy or rude. The authors further state that it can be helpful not to push women to adapt their behaviour to masculine norms and to align behaviour, systems, and processes with gender-equal values. A study by Liu (2019) on women in politics, which can also be considered a male-dominated environment, elaborates on this paradoxical challenge. On one hand, women are expected to display leadership qualities that are traditionally associated with masculinity in order to be taken seriously. However, Liu (2019) argues that adopting these masculine traits leads to them being perceived as aggressive or cold. On the other hand, women without these masculine traits are often viewed as being ‘too feminine’ which once again leads to others questioning their competence and leadership abilities.

A highly relevant aspect of our thesis concerns internalised stereotypes. This refers to the effect of accepting and incorporating societal prejudices about one’s own social group and therefore making them part of a person’s self-concept (Dweck, 2017; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Past research has mainly approached this issue from a more global perspective, describing how society holds internalised biases around women and their role and therefore puts gender-related biases on them (e.g., Evans, 2015; Heng, 1997; Porrone & Poto, 2023). A study by Ünlü (2018) shows how internalised stereotypes can affect women in their behaviour, however, this research focuses on women in an everyday context who adopt domestic stereotypes around their role at home. Moreover, Glick et al. (2000) have shown that in an employment setting, female leaders show more internalised biases towards other women by subjecting them to benevolent sexism. However, these findings indicate that women do not necessarily project hostile stereotypes onto other women. Therefore, there is a distinct lack of recent research on how female leaders adopt and internalise stereotypes in the workplace, or even more so in male-dominated areas. A way these internalised stereotypes can present in organisations relates to the ‘queen bee’ phenomenon or syndrome, a barrier female leaders more or less create or uphold themselves due to

the stereotypes and prejudices society puts on them (Derks, van Laar & Ellemers, 2016). The term has first been brought up and defined in research by Staines, Tavis and Jayaratne (1974) and refers to female leaders who managed to earn success in traditionally male-dominated industries. However, it is mostly used in a negatively connotated way as it usually refers to female leaders engaging in negative behaviours towards their female subordinates or colleagues, therefore presenting a contrast to the previously mentioned research by Glick et al. (2000). Within male-dominated organisations, female leaders may feel the need to assimilate by distancing themselves from other women in the organisation (Derks et al., 2016). Examples of how this can present include having a lower bar for error for their female subordinates, neglecting their contributions, subjecting them to gossip or underestimating and frequently criticizing them (Achhanni & Gupta, 2022). However, it can also show in a more subtle way by presenting oneself as 'tough' and denying the existence of gender discrimination in the organisation (Derks et al., 2016). Consequently, the female leaders in the queen bee role contribute to the legitimisation of gender inequality within the organisation, feeding into the stereotype of female leaders being unsupportive of other women. Research presents different reasons for this phenomenon such as pressure to conform to masculine norms within the organisation, a desire to maintain power and status in one's position or experiencing a threat to one's social identity (Uyar et al., 2022). Summarising these findings, a female leader taking on the queen bee role can be seen "both as a culprit as well as a victim of sexism in the workplace" (Achhanni & Gupta, 2022, p.68). However, contrary to the previously presented stereotype that women are more competitive with each other, research indicates that women in senior leadership positions may actually display queen bee behaviours towards junior women, rather than towards their fellow senior women who are their direct competitors (Faniko, Ellemers & Derks, 2016).

Given the challenges and barriers women face, especially those in leadership positions, confronting those who make use of stereotypical or even sexist behaviour is said to be very difficult. Alani, Clark-Taylor, Rogeshefsky and Cerulli (2016) state that speaking out against stereotypes can cause tension and leads to women being perceived negatively for speaking their mind. Before we go into this further, it is important to understand the link between sexism and stereotyping. Sexism is defined

as the belief, or actions based on this belief, that one sex is less competent, intelligent, or skilled than members of the other sex (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023a). This usually evolves around the belief of women being less capable than men. The Cambridge definition of stereotyping (2023b) refers to fixed ideas people hold about characteristics of individuals or things, even though these ideas are often wrong. Therefore, one can argue that sexism is a form of stereotyping. According to Woodzicka, Mallett, Hendricks & Pruitt (2015), sexist jokes are considered less offensive than sexist statements. Although those involved are allowed to express that they do not consider the joke funny, labelling the joke as sexist would not be considered appropriate. This likely has to do with the negative association of critical or negative feedback that does not fit with one's self-image and can therefore be considered a threat to one's person (Sedikides & Hepper, 2009). Furthermore, Burns and Granz (2020) argue that fighting or confronting sexism is a difficult task, due to the general acceptance of benevolent sexism in comparison to hostile sexism. Benevolent sexism often relates to more positive stereotypical associations, such as 'women are attentive', which is more socially acceptable than its negative counterpart that could be found in hostile sexism, namely 'women are fragile' or 'women are indecisive'. However, although benevolent sexism may focus on more positive stereotypes, research emphasises that it can still be harmful to women to legitimize gender inequality (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Barsamian Kahn, van Breen, Barreto & Kaiser, 2021).

After having outlined the most commonly occurring barriers that the stereotypes around women cause for female leaders, the following chapter will examine possible ways to address or cope with stereotypes.

### *2.3.2 Addressing stereotypes*

While there is a vast body of research considering challenges and barriers due to stereotypes around women in leadership, studies about opportunities of dealing with them are rather rare. While a few researchers identify success factors of women in leadership positions in general, even fewer researchers focus on this topic within male-dominated industries or environments.

As discussed in the previous chapter, calling out stereotypical or sexist behaviour is a crucial yet difficult step in addressing stereotypes. When it comes to

women in specific, authors have the tendency to refer to sexism rather than stereotyping when discussing these problems related to women. There is some literature covering how women can speak out against sexism. Joyce, Humă, Ristimäki, Ferraz de Almeida and Doehring (2021) mainly focus on how to speak up and call out mansplaining, which is an action taken based on sexism. They suggest exposing men by making the use of mansplaining more visible, as it helps to expose imbalance, motives, and patterns. Research by Mavin, Elliott, Stead and Grandy (2023) in the UK shows female leaders countering sexism by calling for collective action, forcing people into feminism, and challenging masculine leadership. Their study mainly focusses on the power of publicly calling out sexism and gathering support from other women. Washington (2022) highlights factors to consider when addressing stereotypes. Her research surrounds marginalised groups encountering 'microaggressions', a more subtle way of stereotyping. Firstly, the study suggests considering the safety within the current environment and assessing whether the conversation can best be held in the moment or one on one. Having the conversation in the moment may mean there are other people present and can lead to tension or confrontation. Secondly, Washington (2022) advises considering the relationship, as it is easier to call out someone close than an unfamiliar person that is less approachable. Lastly, the author suggests creating personal awareness of the subject, therefore shining light on the background of a microaggression. Someone may not have the intent to be offensive, but this does not mean the statements do not have a negative impact. Being able to point out the gap between intent and impact allows for clearer communication.

In general, factors that have been considered critical success factors for female leaders include drive, commitment, and perseverance, as well as important interpersonal skills such as communication skills (Kass, Souba & Thorndyke, 2006; Offermann & Foley, 2020). These can also be considered helpful in dealing with stereotypes in the workplace. As women are traditionally or stereotypically associated with being more social and having a more interactive and stronger interpersonal communication, they tend to be perceived in this way in their leadership as well (Bligh & Kohles, 2008, Fisher, 2015, Gill & Jones, 2013). With these factors, women have the opportunity to become valuable and successful leaders within their organisations, while also earning acceptance when confirming this stereotypical image. Especially in

rather male-dominated industries, where more patriarchal cultures determine the work climate and employees are expected to prioritize effectivity over emotions, female leaders can offer valuable contributions (Campuzano, 2019). Some scholars suggest a certain switch within society regarding which characteristics are valued and perceived as bringing success to an organisation. Gerzema and D'Antonio (2013) argue that there is a growing recognition of the value of traditionally feminine attributes in the workplace, such as collaboration, empathy, and inclusiveness. With these factors being valued more in the modern workplace, female leaders who are traditionally perceived as bringing in these qualities have more opportunities to succeed.

Moreover, research presents the use of networking as well as mentoring or coaching as an opportunity for dealing with the challenges and barriers. Having access to a mentor heightens women's chances of reaching leadership positions but can also be a success factor for those already leading (Searby, Ballenger & Tripses, 2017). Networks can contribute to this positive effect and further strengthen opportunities for female leaders. Apart from formal networks mainly focusing on work-related exchange, many large organisations have multiple informal networks where employees get together, collaborate, and share ideas, driven by their own self-interest (Bryan, Matson & Weiss, 2007). Especially in male-dominated environments, supporting each other becomes even more important (Gaines, 2017). Gaines' study suggests that the self-value of women included in networks increases, showing how these ties to other women can offer support and encouragement. At the same time, women within the network can function as role models and share valuable insights crucial for success as well as possibly needed technical knowledge, especially when working in more male-typed functions or environments (Magrane et al., 2012).

The aspect of being visible has been mentioned as a possible challenge in 2.3 Women in leadership, however, other scholars highlight it as an opportunity to counter negative effects caused by stereotypes. Being part of the minority and therefore experiencing heightened visibility can become an advantage in terms of being listened to more or just standing out more in general (Kass et al., 2006). Moreover, heightening one's own visibility can contribute to overall awareness and acknowledgment of the existence of certain gender biases, making it easier to recognise and address



problems right when they occur. A systematic review of female leadership in male-dominated industries by Campuzano (2019) supports the view of visibility as an opportunity, by identifying 'strategic femininity' as a way of dealing with challenges caused by stereotypes. The author describes this concept as the active use of feminine styles, behaviours, or traits as specific tactics within leadership. As this review focuses on studies conducted in the United States and summarises research that dates back many years, it is important to revisit these findings and try to replicate them. However, as mentioned before, other authors advocate for a gender-blindness strategy to highlight similarities between men and women rather than focusing on the differences in order to reduce stereotypes (Koenig & Richeson, 2010; Martin & Phillips, 2019). Overall, however, studies suggest that heightened visibility and increased representation of women in leadership positions is associated with a potential reduction of the gender wage gap and can furthermore increase the opportunities for promotions for other women (Albrecht, Bjorklund & Vroman, 2003; Becker, 1957). This has also been indicated by Penhall (2018) who argues that the heightened visibility of women in STEM fields contributes to the confidence and belief of other women of being able to excel in a male-dominated field.

An interesting way of coping with the stereotypes caused by social role theory is presented by van Veelen, Veldman, van Laar and Derks (2020) who identified the act of distancing the self from a stigmatised social role as a coping-mechanism for different minority groups. This is referred to as 'self-group distancing' and can also be seen as relevant in the context of this thesis, as female leaders in male-dominated environments are a minority and are, as previously presented, confronted with prejudices and stereotypes that originate in the traditional social role of a woman. In cases of subtle discrimination in the workplace, individuals often doubt whether their bad experience is related to them as individuals or to being part of a certain social group, in this case being a woman (van Veelen et al., 2020). This uncertainty can make it challenging for them to engage in collective coping-mechanisms such as protesting to improve their group's position (Tajfel & Turner, 2001). Instead, they may be more likely to use individual coping responses, such as trying to improve their status within the organization or thus self-group distancing (Ellemers & van Laar, 2010; van Laar, Meeussen, Veldman, van Grootel, Sterk & Jacobs, 2019). By creating a distance

from the social role that is confronted with stereotypes and stigma, individuals can protect their self-efficacy and self-esteem (Steele, Spencer & Aronson, 2002; van Veelen et al., 2020).

### **3 Methodology**

To provide an overview of the methodology of the study, the following section outlines the philosophical grounding behind our research and presents the research approach in terms of data collection and analysis. We also challenge our own research with a reflexivity approach, discussing possible limitations.

#### ***3.1 Philosophical grounding***

Our goal is to understand how different female leaders experience the stereotypes and consequential challenges they face in male-dominated industries, as well as how they can overcome them or even turn them into positive aspects in these environments. In order to do that, our study draws on the interpretative research traditions defined by Prasad (2018), which are based on the assumption that reality is constructed by individuals and their social contexts. Applying this to our study, different people's perceptions of reality might differ depending on context and hidden structures. Within our given research context, we acknowledge that experiences and views expressed by our interviewees are highly subjective and connected to their individual context, past experiences, and sense-making. Those individual experiences and self-images can be made visible by applying a variant of the interpretivist tradition, namely symbolic interactionism (Prasad, 2018). By trying to make visible certain power structures or dynamics influencing possible prejudices and stereotypes around female leaders as well as among themselves, we furthermore apply a critical lens to our research. Critical traditions are fit for questioning the "innocence of social and institutional practices" (Prasad, 2018, p.172) and are therefore also an important grounding for our study.

#### ***3.2 Research Approach***

In order to gather insight into our research topic, the social context of different leaders' perceptions and experiences needs to be put into consideration. Thus, we have chosen a qualitative approach to conduct our study. This allows us to understand social interactions and their meaning while we simultaneously observe the context in which they occur (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). There are two main approaches to

research questions. Induction refers to observing cases and drawing plausible conclusions from what can be perceived, while deduction makes premises based on existing data and tests them afterwards in an empirical context (Bara & Bucciarelli, 2000). Our research is based on a third additional approach, namely abduction. It includes and combines aspects of both induction and deduction but on the other hand entails distinct aspects that exceed the simple combination of the properties of the other approaches. With its focus on patterns, abduction enables deeper understanding than the two approaches mentioned prior. That way, switching between theoretical and empirical material, the course of the research is constantly objected to adaptations and reinterpretations in an ongoing process (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018).

After outlining the research approach followed in our study, the next section will focus on the context within which we collected the data.

### **3.3 Research Context**

Before we proceed with describing the data collection process in more detail, it is necessary to briefly introduce the different case companies or organisations which our sample consists of. However, within some of the interviews, the leaders referred back to their experiences in previous positions, outside of the organisation we looked into. We consider these additions to be valuable insights as well because the interviewees used this to compare their current experiences with former roles in other male-dominated organisations, or with opposite experiences in less male-dominated environments. In order to fully anonymise the organisations as well as our participants, all the names have been changed.

Out of our 12 interviewees, 6 work within the same organisation, which will be referred to as organisation A in the following. Organisation A is a research laboratory in Sweden. Out of this organisation, the following six women were open to doing an interview with us: Giselle works as the head of communications, therefore holding a rather feminine-typed occupation within this male-dominated environment. She also agreed to us joining her in a team meeting in the facilities of organisation A to observe her. Ingrid and Valentina are both project leaders for different research divisions, a position traditionally rather held by men. Clara leads the security department. Sofia and Bianca are both directors of different departments. The functions of project leader, head of security, and department director are all traditionally masculine-typed

occupations. Out of the six leaders interviewed within organisation A, all the interviews were conducted in person.

The second organisation we included in our sample will be called organisation B in the following. It is a hospital based in the Netherlands, therefore presenting a rather gender-mixed environment. However, the two interviewees both lead in very masculine-typed occupations, which is why we considered their point of view insightful for our study. Aurora is the head of the IT department, while Chiara works in the same department as a team coordinator. Due to the geographical distance, both of these interviews, as well as all the remaining interviews described in the following, were conducted online. Moreover, both Aurora and Chiara agreed to two separate observations of different team meetings, which we also joined online.

Organisation C is an internationally operating Dutch bank, with the leader interviewed by us working in a subsidiary. Isadora is the lead for sustainability and financing. With the sustainability sector often being more gender-mixed or dominated by women, the financing part of her job is a position usually filled by men. Therefore, Isadora works in a mixed-typed occupation within a generally male-dominated organisation.

Organisation D is a multinational tyre manufacturing company. The person we interviewed, referred to as Lucia, works in one of the German sites as the head of communications, therefore holding a more feminine-typed occupation within a very male-dominated industry.

The next organisation approached by us is a German IT consultancy, in the following referred to as organisation E. Beatrice works in enterprise resource planning and will in the future become a board member of the company. Therefore, she holds a typically male-typed position within a male-dominated industry. We were also allowed to observe Beatrice interact with her team in an online meeting.

Lastly, organisation F is an energy technology company. We reached out to Frederica who is the global head of finance, technology and innovation which can be considered a masculine-typed occupation in an overall male-dominated industry. Frederica also agreed on being observed online while having a meeting with her team.

### **3.4 Data Collection**

Our study has two distinct sources of data. The main data for the analysis is provided

by 12 in-depth interviews with different female leaders, coming from various male-dominated industries or occupations that have been described in the previous section. This is complemented by 5 observations of team meetings led by different interviewees to examine dynamics and indications of leadership techniques or the notion of stereotypes and coping-mechanisms in real life, offering additional insights to the interviews. The following sections cover the sampling process previous to our actual data collection as well as the two data collection approaches in more detail.

### *3.4.1 Sampling*

Initially, we aimed to research one or two case-organisations that serve as examples of male-dominated environments in detail. In order to achieve that, we reached out to two different game development studios. However, by narrowing down our desired research direction, we adapted our goals, leading to us broadening the focus. We realised we could benefit from including various individuals from different organisations and even countries to diversify our findings, rather than just approaching female leaders from the same one or two organisations.

As a first contact, we decided to approach the previously presented organisation A due to their strong research focus, with the majority of the workforce being physicists or engineers and therefore presenting a male-dominated environment. A contact person within the HR-department referred us to all the female leaders in the organisation, which we then individually approached by e-mail to schedule appointments on-site with them. For this, we set up a short descriptive text of our research which we also used for reaching out to the female leaders of other organisations. Partly, we also made use of our personal contacts in the private environment to get connections to female leaders in different industries. This technique of purposefully reaching out to certain individuals with distinct functions or attributes is also referred to as purposive sampling by Bell, Bryman, and Harley (2019). This approach allows researchers to conduct a sample that is fit for the specific research. In our case, the criteria we looked for were working in a middle or high management or leading function while also working in either a masculine-typed occupation or a generally male-dominated environment. To get detailed insights, we purposefully tried to gain some variety in terms of the organisations or functions we included. Moreover, we made use of snowballing (Bell et al., 2019): After we had

established a connection with one female leader within an organisation, we made use of this contact and asked the female leaders to refer us to other female leaders within their organisation who could add an interesting view to this research. This way of reaching out made it easier to get in contact with higher-level managers within organisation A who initially did not reply to our first e-mail with the description of research.

Bell et al. (2019) acknowledge the complexity of finding the correct sample size for a qualitative study regarding the number of interviews and observations. After having conducted eight interviews, we felt like we were getting close to what literature refers to as theoretical saturation, meaning we continued to get overlapping answers and topics in each interview. In order to make our sample as representative as possible, we scheduled four more interviews, leaving us with a final sample size of 12 interviewees, 6 being part of the same organisation. To complement these findings, we observed five of them.

### *3.4.2 Semi-structured Interviews*

Choosing interviews to collect our empirical data gave us a detailed insight into the thoughts and perceptions of the leaders. The details given by them within the interviews specifically portray their individual view and truth around different events within their overall work experience and daily life as leaders (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Moreover, conducting the interviews in a semi-structured way gave us the opportunity of adapting questions or going more into detail about specific topics mentioned by the interviewees (Kvale, 1983). During the interviews, we followed a main guide for the sake of covering important key topics, however, we remained flexible in terms of adding or removing questions if seen fit to the situation. This way, the interview guide gradually throughout our interviews, as we focused our research more and more towards a detailed research question. The first interviews included more questions regarding their overall leadership and what challenges they encounter. When we narrowed down our specific gap in research we wanted to fill, we started going into more detail in regard to experiences with stereotypes and how they counter them. We made sure to establish an environment that feels as natural and relaxed as possible, which allowed us to receive honest and open answers from our interviewees. To help achieve this, all our interviews started with some open small talk to break the ice as

well as a repetition of the important information regarding the interview, such as the full confidentiality and anonymity of their data. Moreover, we repeated that the interview doesn't serve as an interrogation but rather informs us about their experiences and opinions in order for us to learn something and gain insights. Including the initial remarks as well as closing questions and comments in the end, our interviews took an hour on average. Due to geographical distance, 6 out of the 12 interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams. Chapter 3.6 Reflexivity and limitations will further elaborate on the possible downsides of this approach, however, we still saw this as a valuable opportunity to gain access to experiences of leaders outside of Sweden.

To give context to the topics discussed within the interviews, we followed some of the female leaders to meetings where we observed them. This process will be explained further in the following.

### *3.4.3 Observations*

The process of observing has been a fundamental part of qualitative research for a long time with the goal of "collecting data using one's senses, especially looking and listening in a systematic and meaningful way" (McKechnie, 2008, p.573). More precisely, we made use of direct non-participant observations, which are considered a popular tool within organisational studies. Through the use of direct non-participatory observations, researchers can gain a better understanding of the research field while maintaining an outsider or guest role (Kostera, 2007). Thus, this approach allows the researcher to observe without intervening with the field or participating directly. Even though this approach to observing is not part of a full ethnography but rather covering and assessing a short moment in their complex reality, it still offered us valuable insights for our data analysis by informing us further and making the interviews more reliable. Therefore, we consider this approach fit for our data collection as it enabled us to become part of the social setting and pick up certain dynamics between leaders and their followers that they might not be aware of themselves. Moreover, observing meetings gave us the opportunity to observe leadership techniques or non-verbal clues like tensions between different actors. However, we are aware of the fact that our presence in the room can always influence the participants of the meetings, even if we don't actively engage in any of the conversations (Ciesielska, Boström &

Öhlander, 2017). To counter this, we made it a priority to ensure a trusting relationship with the people observed, highlighting the intent of our research and how we are interested in their daily routines and behaviours without judging anything. Similar to the interviews, four out of our five observations were conducted online as well. However, the female leaders were still sitting in one conference room with their subordinates, allowing us to see their interactions the same way as in an in-person setting. After the initial welcoming talk as well as an explanation of our purpose, we turned off the camera to be as little of a distraction as possible, just listening in on the meeting happening in the room. The virtual aspect of our observations and possible challenges due to this will be discussed in chapter 3.6 Reflexivity and limitations in more detail.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

Having outlined the data collection procedures, the following section looks at the methods that were used to analyse the data.

In order to be able to extract all the necessary information from the interviews, we made use of audio recordings. Those served as a basis for the following transcription, which enabled an in-depth analysis and interpretation of all the answers while making sure no details get lost in the process (Bell et al., 2019). Different software can be of help in this process, digitalizing the transcription. We used the software Otter.ai, which provided us with a real-time transcription of the interviews. However, this did not replace a careful re-evaluation of the interviews to ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions. Moreover, one of our interviews was held in Dutch, requiring us to first translate the interview transcript into English before continuing the analysis. By codifying the data related to different labels and categories, we managed to reach a deeper understanding and identify key concepts within the interviews (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). This was done by open coding, a method allowing us to start combining different quotes and sections from the interviews under key terms (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Highlighting different parts and statements within the transcripts in different colours related to themes helped us get an overview and find connected statements easier. After this first-order analysis which took place immediately when we transcribed the interviews, we discussed our findings, trying to agree on and identify the most important key terms and formulate them into actual



labels (Bell et al., 2019). This meant we had to reduce our empirical material, as we identified more common themes within our interviews than we could include in the final analysis (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). An Excel sheet for summarising quotes by topic, participant and timestamp helped us during this analysis step and allowed us to leave comments next to the quotes, making the shared work easier. Similarly, we analysed the excerpts from our empirical notes taken during the observed meetings and labelled our observations. To guarantee a deep-level understanding of the happenings within the meetings, we categorised the observation notes into *what* and *how*. This way, we did not only objectively report what was said or done but reflected more in detail on how it was acted out. This helped us to identify underlying meanings or more hidden cues (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018) The final step of analysis consisted of what Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) describe as entering the “dialogue with our data” (p.189), where we discussed different statements made in interviews and related them to theories and findings in previous literature, therefore connecting empirical data with theoretical concepts. This already helped us prepare for the analysis of the empirical findings and the discussion part of the thesis and furthermore shaped the focus we want to take on in our analysis even more. To unfold our arguments in the empirical analysis, we were inspired by the method of excerpt-commentary-units (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). This method structures the presentation of empirical material into four sections: the analytical point, the orientation, the empirical excerpt, and the analytical comment. Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) emphasise that this method is suitable for linking empirical data directly to interpretations while being guided by theoretical background information. For our thesis, we considered it the most fitting to integrate existing literature into the presentation of our empirical findings, as it gives more theoretical background while already showing the reader where our findings add to or even contrast these sources, allowing a deeper level of analysis. Moreover, we argue that a strict separation of the presentation of the findings and their interpretations in light of the literature would complexify the understanding of the reader, as it would require moving between the different sections of the thesis. Having this in mind, we still follow the advice of Styhre (2013) to leave room for the reader to interpret the findings to a degree, therefore not entirely shaping but rather guiding the reader’s opinion of how certain events should

be understood.

### **3.6 Reflexivity and limitations**

The following section serves as a critical reflection on our study, highlighting possible limitations as well as reasoning behind certain decisions within our research and thus adding reflexivity to it. Incorporating reflexivity into qualitative research can add depth and nuance to a researcher's work by acknowledging the researcher's own role in shaping the research process (Berger, 2015; Symon & Cassell, 2012). This entails not only reflecting but also actively questioning and re-evaluating one's assumptions, heuristics, and actions (Symon & Cassell, 2012). Although Alvesson & Sköldberg (2018) recognize reflection as a part of reflexivity in qualitative research, they argue that reflexivity goes beyond simple reflections but rather forms through the interplay of reflection and interpretation. By adding reflexivity, researchers can thus offer a more complete understanding of their research and how it was shaped by their own experiences, biases, and assumptions. We argue that by constantly discussing our interpretations between the two of us and therefore questioning our individual understandings of events, we already add a certain reflexivity to our research. However, we are still aware of possible biases or methodological limitations that impact our study, which we will present in the following.

First of all, it has to be highlighted that our study, being a qualitative study, includes a high degree of subjectiveness, both from the researchers' and interviewees' part (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). All the findings are strongly connected to our individual setting, making it not replicable in different contexts which can be seen as one of the limitations of a case study or qualitative studies in general. However, we argue that this aspect of not being able to generalise does not necessarily compromise the quality of the study. Flyvbjerg (2006) elaborates on this common misunderstanding in literature surrounding qualitative case studies and highlights that case studies can offer a valuable and in-depth understanding and may therefore suffice for researching certain constructs within social sciences. Flyvbjerg (2006) suggests that while case studies may not provide generalisable findings, they can still serve as a source of pioneering knowledge for certain fields of research. Furthermore, Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that context-dependent knowledge obtained through case studies is as

valuable as context-independent knowledge obtained through quantitative research, as it allows for a deeper comprehension of complex situations.

One could question the validity of this study because of the highly subjective nature of the interviews and observations as well as the tendency of people to portray themselves and events concerning their person in a positive or socially acceptable way. This phenomenon is also referred to as social desirability (Bispo Júnior, 2022). Especially in our setting, talking about potentially sensitive topics such as negative experiences with prejudices, this is a factor we must reflect on. However, we tried to minimise these influences by ensuring total confidentiality and anonymity to our interviewees, which increases the validity of the research (Bell et al., 2019). During the interviews, we noticed the participants being very open with sharing personal, confidential, or overall critical situations, giving us the feeling that they trusted us. We can imagine that us being women ourselves helped them sympathise with us and share their experiences with gender-related stereotypes more openly.

Moreover, the audio recordings as well as complete transcriptions of the interviews contribute to a higher reliability of the study. This was further strengthened by both of us bringing in our perspectives and discussing how we viewed certain events. We see this as an advantage over studies conducted by just one researcher. Nonetheless, Bell et al. (2019) highlight that qualitative research does not necessarily need to adhere to traditional research criteria such as reliability or validity. Rather, they advocate for prioritizing authenticity as a guiding principle for qualitative research in the business context.

As mentioned before, half of the interviews and most of our observations were held within an online format, therefore lacking personal closeness and influencing our ability to interpret mimic and gestures (Carter, Shih, Williams, Degeling & Mooney-Somers, 2021). However, we argue that the online setting still provided us with valuable insights, given the fact that the use of the camera allowed us to pick up on non-verbal cues. Moreover, we expect an overall heightened openness to digital meetings, as the recent developments due to the COVID-19 crisis have normalised meeting in an online context (Karl, Peluchette & Aghakhani, 2022). Furthermore, by turning on our camera for the interviews and taking some extra time in the beginning to create a friendly and trusting environment, we ensured that the disadvantages of

online interviewing were kept to a minimum. Studies comparing face-to-face interviews with online video conferencing interviews even suggest that the quality of the interviews does not vary based on the mode of communication (Cabaroglu, Basaran, & Roberts, 2010; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Additionally, other researchers indicate that online participants are more open and expressive in their responses (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Mabragaña, Carballo-Diéguez & Giguere, 2013). In the case of our observations, we decided to only have the camera turned on during the first minutes and shut it off for the rest of the meeting, therefore really 'blending in' with the natural meeting setting and making it easier for the people in the room to forget that someone is observing the meeting. Therefore, possible effects due to feeling insecure or uneasy in this digital setting can be seen as minimal.

## **4 Analysis**

In the following section, we present our empirical findings derived from the interviews and observations within our research. The findings can be separated into two main sections, one focusing on presenting the stereotypes that our female leaders encounter and the second one highlighting the distinct techniques and coping-mechanisms they make use of to address these.

### **4.1 Stereotypes**

Stereotypes play an important role in how individuals perceive others and themselves, how they behave and what expectations they have, and it affects the groups people identify themselves with. Based on our interviews and observations, the following chapters explore both the external and internalised stereotypes female leaders in male-dominated environments encounter.

#### *4.1.1 External stereotypes*

The external stereotypes are stereotypes that come from the direct environment of the female leaders we interviewed. This mainly focusses on colleagues and subordinates, but can also include a third party, such as partner companies they work with.

##### *4.1.1.1 Women are unfit to lead*

The first key topic we identified during our interviews was almost all of our interviewees highlighting that they see themselves confronted with a lack of respect and not being taken seriously, mainly by male colleagues, which can be traced back to the assumption that women are not fit for leadership roles. The judgements our female

leaders reported experiencing depended on the industry they work in, as well as the department. When working in a more mixed-to-female industry such as a hospital, there are two stereotypes female leaders may encounter. Aurora explains that men who start working with her often have the following response:

*“Probably you’re a nurse who switched jobs, probably you don’t know much about IT. And you got into this function because they needed anyone.”*

This shows that men have a certain image of women in IT and how they got into their position. Men start questioning their knowledge and abilities and seem to have the prejudice that women in these masculine-typed occupations are put into management positions purely for their social skills, rather than knowledge in the field. This could relate to the underrepresentation of women in STEM-related workplaces (NCSES, 2023) and to the fact that gender is a prime determinant in career choice (Francis, 2002), resulting in the stereotype that women likely have some sort of nurturing background when it comes to departments in industries such as hospitals. Chiara believes this has to do with the fact that “working with people” is typically more something women do, as it is “closer to their hearts than it is for the men.” Aligning with the stereotype of women being more fit for nurturer roles in which social skills, empathy and emotions play an important role (Christov-Moore et al., 2014). Aurora continues to explain:

*“You are a woman on this job. I don’t know how you got there, but you probably don’t know what you’re talking about’. So, the people try to, I think the term for it now is mansplaining.”*

With this quote, she further explains that men feel the need to start explaining her job to her, purely because they believe she does not have the knowledge to understand what they mean when talking about factual knowledge related to the work field. This once again undermines her authority and disrespects her in her function. Chiara agrees with this, explaining these responses mainly come from men that work in companies their department hires or works with, such as software companies. These companies are more often even more male-dominated and the men working there have the tendency of questioning women in leadership positions, and of explaining basic work-related knowledge, even though it has been proven women are just as

equipped to pursue masculine-typed occupations (Reuben et al., 2014). This further extends the previously presented findings by Casad et al. (2020) that women face an unwelcoming climate, however not only in STEM-related academic settings but in the work environment as well. However, it is specified by the interviewees that these assumptions are mainly made by men who have not yet worked with these female leaders. Clara and Bianca specify that this may be related to the idea that as a woman, you represent all women. Due to this, there is a higher feeling of pressure. Clara stated:

*“I could feel that any mistake I'm going to make, they're going to point and say that's because you're a woman. So it was very high pressure for me to be able to deliver that, and that's why I said the first person who's going to break the glass ceiling, that's the person who's going to face the biggest issue.”*

This quote shows women in leadership positions still feel there is a glass ceiling that needs to be broken. There is a pressure of doing well, in order to gain respect for all women and to not feed into the stereotype that women do not belong in leadership. Nonetheless, not all interviewees felt they had to earn the respect of the men in their work environment. Isadora specified she believed she has the respect of her colleagues no matter her gender.

Although this lack of respecting a woman's leadership position can be related to gender and can come from men questioning the knowledge and skills of female leaders in masculine-typed occupations, those in the more mixed to female-dominated industry are encountering a second stereotype from their female colleagues. According to Aurora other women in leadership positions of more female-dominated departments often had a specific image of her abilities as well. They believed:

*“You're super technical. You probably don't know about management skills because you're from the IT department.”*

Therefore, women in masculine-typed occupations in a more female-dominated setting are likely to encounter stereotypes from two sides. On one side, by men who believe the leader must come from a stereotypical feminine-occupation and likely does not have the required skills for her position, while on the other hand by women who believe the female leader to have the factual knowledge, but not the soft skills.

Therefore, the female leaders in the IT department are associated with stereotypical female characteristics by the men they work with, such as social skills, empathy, and emotional response (Christov-Moore et al., 2014). Whereas the women they work with on a managerial level associate the interviewees with stereotypical male characteristics, believing them to 'lack' this more caring nature women stereotypically are believed to have and being unable to use the social skills they believe to be required for a more feminine-typed setting (Eagly et al., 2020). We consider this conflict between the two roles that both question a woman's leadership abilities in a different manner a very interesting finding, as it shows how difficult it can be for female leaders to meet the expectations of their environment. In chapter 4.2. Coping-mechanisms we will further discuss both how our interviewees indicated that they handle the stereotypes regarding their expert knowledge, as well as how they use their soft skills in their communication and leadership.

#### *4.1.1.2 Women are less competent*

Another barrier we found concerns the issue of female leaders being heard and listened to less due to an assumed lack of competence. Based on the stories interviewees told this could be related to the stereotype that a man's word is considered to be worth more than that of a woman in a masculine-typed occupation or male-dominated field. This relates back to chapter 4.1.1.1. Women are unfit to lead, in which we discussed the fact that men *and* women feel women lack certain skills that would be required for their leading position in a masculine-typed occupation. This prejudice may cause subordinates or colleagues to look at a man, who they believe to have the skill or knowledge, for answers instead. Lucia explains:

*"...be aware that they don't expect you to be competent."*

The expectations of competence likely lead to men not listening to a woman the same way they would to a man (Cassidy & Krendl., 2019). The lack of listening can then lead to women being talked over, or ideas being repeated by their male colleagues (Heath et al., 2014). 4 out of 12 interviewees specifically mentioned a situation where their word was considered 'less' than that of a man. Ingrid described:

*“If you're saying something like: ‘Oh okay in this situation, I think we should do it like this or like that’. And at the same time, or like half a second afterwards, a man starts talking, everybody looks at the man. Without fail.”*

Similar situations such as these are repeated by these four interviewees, who state that the attention goes to a man, even if he speaks over another person. Ingrid specifies that this does not only happen in meetings in which she is the only woman, but in mixed meetings as well. We were able to examine this phenomenon of the attention going to male participants more in detail during an observation of a meeting led by Frederica. At times this was when a man interrupted a woman, but we also noticed the participants of the meeting looking at the man talking when there was a dialogue ongoing. There was little to no attention moving back and forth between the male speaker and the female speaker and the main focus remained on the male speaker. Sofia even takes it a step further, stating:

*“I have seen cases where women aren't heard as much. A woman says something and then the man repeats it and says exactly the same thing. And the man is listened to. I've seen that. [...] Even have experienced that myself.”*

In this case, instead of a man just interrupting a woman, he even repeats what she said and receives credit for it, taking away from her opportunity of showing her competence in the meeting and contributing a valid point. Taking credit is something men are praised for (Fielding-Singh et al., 2018). In the case described in the quote, the incident may be caused by the man in question not having listened to what the woman has said, but registering it nonetheless, giving him the feeling that the idea was his to begin with.

The notion that men do not consider a woman's competence the same as a man's in a male-dominated environment can also be seen in hiring processes. Valentina gave a specific example in which her male colleague does not consider the technical skills of two applicants for a job equal, despite the fact that it was pointed out that they were:

*“I usually try to make them do like a ranking, to actually do it properly, to say ‘okay, these are the things that we ask for.’ [...] This guy he consistently scores the women as only a zero or half on technical skills. Then I say ‘Yes, but she has a master's in*



*that, and he has a master's in that, so why does his experience mean that he has the technical skills, and she doesn't?' And he always does this but once you finally get him to look at it, he maybe realizes what he does, but he still does it every single time."*

This shows that even with the same background, the male colleague will score a male applicant higher than a woman, most likely related to the stereotype that men are more technical than women. However, being evaluated as less than men is seen with women in leadership positions as well (Eagly, 2002), which could suggest a pattern of women being under-evaluated in general. The general attitude of looking down on women and female leaders in particular is also reflected in some of the male colleagues' use of words, as indicated by Valentina: When describing a team, her male colleague called the male participants 'men' and the female participants 'girls'.

#### *4.1.2 Internalised stereotypes*

Almost all the interviewees seemed to have some form of internalised stereotype, whether big or small. Even though we recognise that many of the participants specified that certain statements were generalizations, certain stereotypes seemed more or less self-imposed or internalised within interviewees.

One common topic among the interviewees was the mention that there seems to be a lower bar for error for female leaders in this environment than for their male counterparts. The feeling of a lower bar for error likely leads women to act more risk-averse to avoid a negative evaluation (Villanueva-Moya & Expósito, 2021). However, this can also be related to women feeling more pressure to perform with a goal of being seen as competent. Consequently, women seemed to feel the need to be good organizers or planners, as this was expected of them. Giselle even stated:

*"I tend to be more ashamed of my disorganization as a woman, because I think you are expected... You are supposed to, as a woman, be a little bit more, the one that takes notes and the one that knows stuff and the one to have all the documents ready."*

This shows that Giselle has internalised the expectation that women are organized and that the fact that she is not organized affects her self-image. Her specification "I'm supposed to be the organized one" shows how she tries to fulfil this self-imposed stereotype while this lack of a skill that is stereotypically considered female comes

across as something shameful. This can be seen in the responses of Clara and Aurora as well. Both of them specified that they feel their soft skills are lacking, resulting in them not having much small talk with their subordinates. Clara said:

*"I'm not a great networker which I'm trying to work on. [...] And then also not being this networking-based person, I don't fika that often. Because I find that I need those times to catch up on everything and stuff like that. So now I'm also trying to do that part, I need to talk about non-work-related things to my team as well..."*

The use of "I'm trying" shows that she considers it a necessary skill she is required to have. Thus, she does everything she can to work on obtaining this skill. This same comes forth in the interview with Aurora. Both show a clear intent or desire of having that skill and are quick to state that they are trying to make that connection with their subordinates through small talk, because they feel they should have this skill that is stereotypically linked to women (Eagly et al., 2020).

One could argue that some of the interviewees were keeping up gender-related stereotypes purely due to their way of speaking. Out of the 12 interviewees, 3 specifically used the pronouns 'he' or 'him' in relation to leaders or leadership, 8 used 'their' or do not relate leadership to any gender, and only one specified 'his or her'. Although this does show that most women do not uphold the standard of men being leaders, if a specific gender-related pronoun *is* used, it is more often male than female. This shows their way of thinking about leadership and leaders, due to internalised stereotypes, fits with the think manager-think male attitude (Schein, 2007). These deeply internalised societal stereotypes can also be seen when Ingrid specified that, due to her experiences with women and their conversation topics, female-dominated environments remind her of nail polish. However, she specified that they now and then need nail polish for their research for marking samples:

*"And guess who has to buy it whenever it runs out because my male colleagues are like: 'Oh no, I cannot'. So, that's my job."*

Therefore, by taking it out of the hands of her male subordinates, Ingrid might be keeping this stereotype of nail polish being something feminine intact. In this case, this stereotype does not seem to apply to herself, as she makes it a clear point to describe herself as somewhat of a tomboy. By doing so, she distances herself from the

stereotypical feminine associations. This is likely a form of self-group distancing (van Veelen et al., 2020), in order to avoid the stereotypes projected onto women and cope with the stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson., 1995). However, in the end, she still gives in and takes on this 'female' task, as her male colleagues refuse to do so, therefore showing that it still seems to be part of her perceived responsibilities as a woman.

Likely, the interviewees are not aware of these self-imposed stereotypes as they get influenced by them in their daily work. Therefore, they may not notice that they have adopted some of the stereotypical behaviours themselves. Giselle stated:

*"I'm a little bit like this fish that doesn't notice the water, because I've been in a male-dominated industry all my work-life."*

The idea of a fish not noticing they are in the water refers to women being so adjusted to the situation around them, that they have become indoctrinated to it. They likely no longer notice certain behaviour towards them, as they are used to it. In the same way, they might not be aware of how they impose certain standards created by stereotypes onto themselves. As a consequence, they may moreover not recognise certain issues happening to themselves but do recognise something happening to someone else. One interviewee may point at another interviewee, stating they have seen men disrespecting them, but the other interviewee may not recognise that this is happening to them. The tendency of projecting stereotypes and related behaviour onto other women will be examined as one of the coping-mechanisms in chapter 4.2.1.

## **4.2 Coping-Mechanisms**

In the previous chapter, we discussed the stereotypes female leaders in male-dominated environments encounter. However, it is important to also understand how these women handle these stereotypes. Therefore, within this chapter, we will be discussing coping-mechanisms we have found based on the interviews and observations.

### **4.2.1 Projecting stereotypes onto others**

While conducting the interviews we noticed a repetition within answers, both on questions with regards to gender-related differences, as well as when asking interviewees what advice they would give to women who aim for a leadership function

in male-dominated environments. Consistently, the female leaders seemed to point out stereotypical behaviour that they relate to other women. Out of the 12 interviewees, 10 interviewees mentioned something related to stereotypical female behaviour. Often this behaviour was internalised, which we discussed in chapter 4.1.2. Internalised stereotypes. However, at times the stereotypes were not focussed towards themselves but were directly projected onto other women. Sometimes this was done in a direct way, such as Bianca stating “Not really so much myself. But more- I have seen some other, let’s say colleagues...” with which she clarified that certain stereotypes did not apply to her, but she did see it being put on her female colleague. In other cases, the projecting was done more between the lines. One of the main issues being projected onto other women was a lack of confidence or the notion of heightened insecurities. Although many of the interviewees described themselves as confident, they reported recognising insecurities in their female colleagues. Ingrid specified:

*“...a small Taiwanese lady that, my God, I mean, she does not stand a chance. Really. Because she has so much more to fight against. Then what I am is a 1.83 tall, low-voiced, Dutch person.”*

This quote relates to an earlier comment by Ingrid, where she spoke about the same Taiwanese colleague having a “very light voice, almost childlike” and “always looking up at people” as she is “1.57”. According to Ingrid, this makes the colleague “very easy to talk over”. She partly relates this to cultural differences, specifying this likely made the colleague more “respectful and deferential to people”. Ingrid recognised the challenge within another woman but not within herself, due to specific characteristic differences. The height, the voice, but also the ethnicity seem to be characteristics that play an important role in the perception of an individual’s confidence. However, gender is included in this as well. Most of the female leaders did not report seeing themselves as unconfident and are therefore distancing themselves from the group to which the stereotype relates (van Veelen et al., 2020). Ingrid specifies that she is not afraid to stand up for herself, Sofia felt she could be quite confident and assertive, and said that it was no big deal to speak to a group of 300 people, Valentina states that she is more assertive now, whereas she used to lack confidence and Beatrice speaks about how

she learned to stand up for herself and her opinion. Therefore, there is some recognition from certain interviewees that confidence did not come to them naturally. However, six of the interviewees specifically advised women to be more confident. Aurora specified:

*“I think there are too many women who let themselves be restricted because they don't have the confidence.”*

This quote is one of many in which the interviewees connect women with insecurity or lack of confidence. The observation of Aurora was able to add to our understanding of this phenomenon, as Aurora showed that she was not a woman who ‘lacked confidence’ by making sure to be heard. She refused to allow a male subordinate to talk over her, simply by continuing to talk loudly until the male subordinate stopped speaking. This fits with a situation described by Ingrid, in which she explained she would get into a “competition” with a male colleague who would always attempt to speak over her. This display may be an attempt to present oneself as ‘tough’ to counter the stereotype of lacking confidence (Derks et al., 2016). She would continue speaking, while slightly raising her voice. If the male colleague were to do the same thing, she would slowly increase her own volume, to ensure that she was heard and in the hopes that her male colleague would stop speaking over her. Even though most of these female leaders do not describe themselves as being unconfident, when asked what advice they would give towards women who wish to be in a similar function as they are, most interviewees brought in this exact stereotype of women lacking confidence. Clara advised to:

*“Take your space. As in: you don't have to request to be part of this male-dominated world. You deserve to be there and doing exactly what you do. And never doubt it for a second that you are less because you're a woman.”*

Similar advice was given in many different manners of phrasing by other interviewees, with Bianca stating “Just go for it. Don't be too afraid“. This relates to the idea that women should be more assertive and confident and that women should not let themselves be made smaller in this male-dominated environment. However, with this assertive approach, they take the risk of being seen as pushy, rude or bitchy (Fielding-Singh et al., 2018), or being perceived as cold or aggressive (Liu, 2019). Overall, there

seems to be a clear division between what the female leaders believe to be true for other women versus what they believe applies for themselves.

Another projection made by multiple interviewees is the assumption that women have the tendency of hiding messages or meanings in their communication. They feel women are not open about what they truly mean while stating that men are communicating openly and straight to the point. This plays in on the stereotypical image of men being more direct (Cejka, & Eagly, 1999). However, this showcases a different approach than suggested by literature about women stereotypically engaging in tend-and-befriend behaviour (Taylor et al., 2000), as the underlying messages may not be the friendliest and may include indirect criticism (Achhnani & Gupta., 2022). In some cases, they believe hormones or emotions play a role in the messages other women are conveying. However, even though they are not denying that they can be emotional, they do not seem to feel like they are part of the group of women who they describe. Isadora specifies:

*“...with women they might say A and actually mean B. And again, this is very generalizing and I don't mean to but, I just feel more comfortable working in an environment where I know immediately what I can expect or work with people who don't beat around the bush.”*

Although Isadora recognises the fact that she is generalizing, she indicates that women might have hidden intentions or meanings behind their communication. This matches responses by other interviewees, showing how they project negative stereotypes onto other women. Moreover, the participants connected other women with negative terms such as gossip or unhealthy competition. Although some of this behaviour can be connected to the queen bee phenomenon (Achhnani & Gupta, 2022), competitiveness is not completely confirmed to be related, as it is mainly shown towards women in lower positions rather than direct concurrence (Faniko et al., 2016). Furthermore, competitiveness is more often seen as a stereotypical male trait (Eagly et al., 2020). Overall, our findings indicate that there is a feeling that women hide the message, bring in social matters, and are not direct about what they want or mean. This is a clear contrast with how the interviewees describe themselves. The aspect of their personal directness and straightforwardness will be discussed in the following.

#### 4.2.2 Communication strategies

A big part of coping with stereotypes within their functions was based on the communication strategies and leadership techniques of the female leaders. We noticed two distinct techniques in terms of how they reported communicating with and leading their team. While one strategy focuses on very honest, straightforward, and direct communication, some leaders also reported deliberately making use of soft skills stereotypically associated with women and more emotional aspects to succeed. The following two chapters examine these two techniques in more detail.

##### 4.2.2.1 Straightforward and direct

When talking about how to succeed in a male-dominated environment, a common theme among 9 of the interviewees was making use of honesty, straightforwardness, and directness. Chiara for example explained:

*“You should always be honest. Sometimes there are things that aren't fun to tell them. Then, I just tell them, like: 'Well, it is what it is. That's the way we'll have to go. It's the way it is.' Not everything is fun. You cannot keep eight people happy on every front...”*

This indicates how she as a leader often has to make decisions, even if not everyone agrees with her. By standing her ground and still pursuing her decision, she makes sure she is respected. This is also supported by Aurora who highlighted the importance of “setting clear lines”, Clara who states “being decisive” is an important part of her communication and Isadora who describes herself as tending “to be proactive and to step up”. In light of the previously presented literature, we consider this an interesting finding, as engaging in more stereotypically male behaviour is reported to possibly lead to a negative evaluation by the surrounding people (Liu, 2019; Fielding-Singh et al., 2018). Moreover, having shown within role congruity theory of prejudice that women confirming their social role are being valued as leaders by society (Eagly & Karau, 2002), these contrasting findings can be considered especially surprising. The overlap in responses could also be traced back to the queen bee syndrome which states that women might feel the need to present themselves as tough in male-dominated environments to gain respect and remain in power (Derks et al., 2016). However, Chiara continues to add to her previous statement:

*“Sometimes you might not like it yourself, because of course you want to meet everyone in the middle.”*

By admitting that this goes against her own liking sometimes, it can be concluded that she has a feeling she has to make use of this more decisive and directive style of communicating and leading, even though she would prefer meeting everyone's expectations. This diversifies the previously presented findings on the queen bee syndrome, showing that choosing this technique or way of presenting oneself might be a successful coping strategy, even though the person applying it might not be aware of or in favour of it. Given the fact that women are stereotypically seen as leading and communicating with more 'soft' attributes, the female leaders deliberately making use of a more directive and straightforward communication can be considered a way of coping with the stereotypes. One could also argue that this is a way of applying the gender-blindness approach presented by Martin and Phillips (2017), which is reported to reduce the perceived difference between men and women in the workplace and make women more comfortable when leading with agentic traits. Moreover, their described behaviour once again indicates that self-group distancing is being applied (van Veelen et al., 2020). By using purposefully directive communication and incorporating more stereotypically masculine attributes into their leadership style, they automatically distance themselves from society's image of the typical female leader and may thereby also liberate themselves from the stereotypes associated with this social group. However, three of the interviewees specifically stated that they struggle with being assertive or direct; Valentina for example states:

*“Probably my worst characteristic [...] is not being absolutely decisive that 'you must do this', which then leads to a lot of... they don't always exactly know what they should be doing.”*

Her way of phrasing this almost indicates some kind of shame or regret about not having this characteristic of being decisive towards her team and therefore not being able to counter the stereotype of the more 'soft' female leader. This is also supported by Frederica who reported that she sometimes struggles with saying no whenever other high-function managers want her to take on certain tasks and pass them to her team:



*“Sometimes I - and this may be a female thing, say yes to too many tasks. So I'm not good at saying 'no, our team will not do this task!'.”*

Frederica referring to this lack of assertiveness and being able to say no as a “female thing” once again shows that she has adopted this prominent view within society of how women are supposed to be, relating back to the issues presented in chapter 4.1.2 Internalised stereotypes. Therefore, the women actively making use of this assertive and direct way of communicating and leading that is usually more associated with men seem to actively try to cope with this and break free from the stereotypical judgement as an active way to gain respect and be heard.

#### *4.2.2.2 Stereotypical soft skills*

In a way countering the previous finding of being more direct and straight in leading, many of the interviewees also highlighted a strong emotionality within their daily work as a distinct asset. We were surprised to find such a strong contrast between the group of employees highlighting this approach, while others relied on the previously presented direct and straightforward communication. Within this group of interviewees, we identified a strong emphasis on their communication abilities as well as other soft skills such as being compassionate as key themes they make use of. For example, Beatrice states that:

*“A leader must be a person who can convince people, who has empathy, who has social skills, who can communicate [...] I think I am more of a relationship person. [...] we work closely together and yeah, I think I'm very empathetic”*

This shows her idea of a good leader, which she also sees in her own characteristics and way of leading. By making use of these stereotypically female characteristics or skills in communication and bringing in empathy, she ensures a good relationship with her subordinates. Contrasting the previous findings on the leaders that engaged in more agentic communication styles, the interviewees employed more stereotypically feminine traits, therefore complying with social role theory (Eagly, 1997). Giselle moreover adds:

*“I'm a fairly good communicator. I'm very self-aware, I think after having thought about these things a lot... I think I can also a little bit meta think around my communication.”*

This once again highlights her high awareness of her communication style and the importance she puts on being perceived this way. As previously stated, women who exhibit a more direct or assertive way of communicating or leading can easily be judged as being aggressive or too dominant, portraying the stereotype of ‘the hysterical woman’ (Liu, 2019; Fielding-Singh et al., 2018). Therefore, direct and straightforward communication or leadership styles as described in the previous chapter have been reported to backfire by some of the interviewees: Valentina comments on this issue:

*“Unfortunately, if you're a woman and you're very assertive, you get often told you're aggressive. [...] It's this balance, isn't it, between trying to be assertive on the correct side of assertive so it doesn't come across as aggressive. And that's really tough.”*

This quote shows the possible negative outcomes of female leaders making use of communication or leadership styles that are not stereotypically associated with the female role. This experience is also shared by Giselle who reports one team not being used to her straightforward way of leading and therefore taking her for being angry. Therefore, the intentional use of more stereotypically female attributes in communication and leading can be seen as a way of coping with this negative backlash and stereotype of ‘the aggressive woman’. In a way, the female leaders avoid the negative judgment by their environment by conforming to the expectations. Arguably, this could also be seen as a way of intentionally preventing the previously mentioned negatively connotated image of the queen bee leader (Achhnani & Gupta, 2022). Moreover, they feel like this is giving them advantages considering the way their team perceives them. Valentina states for example:

*“It was really nice having people tell me at the end that they really like me being their manager, about the fact that I listen to them, that I try and solve problems [...], but then I'm not stepping in all the time and telling them to do this or that either.”*

This overall notion was also supported by our observation of Giselle, where she clearly used her soft skills, cared deeply about how the team felt and included them in decisions. During our observation, there was no use of any autocratic techniques or leadership, leading to a relaxed atmosphere where everyone communicated at eye level.

### 4.2.3 *Highlighting knowledge and competence*

The importance of having factual knowledge in order to gain respect in a male-dominated environment has been brought up by six interviewees. This was an interesting factor, considering we did not ask any specific questions about this in the beginning, yet many of the interviewees brought up this topic on their own. Lucia told us:

*“I have the competence, I have the knowledge about it and to get the respect over time, that is a method.”*

This quote indicates that Lucia believes that with competence and knowledge, respect comes over time. Thus, she believes it is not immediately there, but that she can ‘earn’ it by showing that she is competent and has the required knowledge. Chiara specified that she considers it important to at least be on the same competence level as her subordinates, as she stated:

*“Yes, I think so. If you know less than the others - and you don't have to know everything in detail, but it is nice to be able to 'spar' with people and that you can join in on a conversation. So I think that it is definitely important that you have knowledge, yes.”*

Therefore, Chiara believes being able to present her knowledge in front of her subordinates helps in gaining respect, as it allows for a more equal or useful conversation with the team in which the subordinates can get inspiration from their leader. Moreover, it is likely that her feeling the need to emphasise her factual knowledge can be traced back to the authority gap (Sieghart, 2021). As women are often considered less knowledgeable than men (Cassidy & Krendl, 2019), the interviewees of this study seem to be trying to find a unique way to eliminate this bias by showcasing that they do in fact have the knowledge. Aurora adds how having factual knowledge of what her subordinates are working with helps her connect with them and have open conversations. Due to this, they show more respect by being more ‘open and upfront’. Aurora continues explaining by stating:

*“...if you're a woman and you have some technical abilities and you have an easier way to connect with the people who actually do the work. It's like a hot air balloon*

*that you can easily punch. And after that, you have a much better working relationship. And I think that's something you can do more easily if you're a woman."*

By use of the "hot air balloon" metaphor, she illustrates that a person with knowledge and technical abilities can act like a balloon filled with hot air: You can punch the balloon, but it will lift back up because the knowledge elevates the person. Therefore, if a subordinate needs help and needs to 'bounce ideas off' of someone, they can profit from a leader who has the knowledge and abilities. This allows a deeper understanding and connection with the subordinates. The reason Aurora feels like this is something a woman can do more easily is due to the manner of communicating. Earlier on, she specified that women tend to have better communication skills.

However, six out of twelve interviewees believe it is not about having more knowledge than your subordinates, or in-depth, factual knowledge. They believe it is about knowing your team, knowing their knowledge and trusting their competence. For example, Frederica felt that, although knowledge is important:

*"It's not the most important topic for me actually. If you have a team you can trust... - because you have to lead the team, right, not to be the best "clerk" for each and every topic. You have to give some guidance."*

Therefore, Frederica specifies that it is about trusting in your team and guiding them accordingly, rather than having knowledge about every topic in detail and being some sort of physical representation of a knowledge-based database. Furthermore, multiple of these interviewees specified that it is about having the knowledge to accommodate your team and to understand what your team needs. Clara states:

*"For me, as a leader, the qualities that are very important is that you don't necessarily need the knowledge to it, but actually have the ability to grasp what the team needs out of you."*

There is a focus with these six interviewees that they are not the experts in factual knowledge, but that they are there to support their team and that they should have the knowledge to support them by understanding what they need and guiding them, rather than by offering them the factual knowledge. One can argue that this finding is also related to how high of a managerial position the interviewees hold. The women stating it is more important to know the competencies of one's team and delegating tasks

accordingly held higher managerial or leadership functions than the women highlighting the importance of having detailed knowledge themselves. However, one can suggest that the fact that only the female leaders in lower positions put a high emphasis on their own knowledge is related to the previously presented findings by Sieghart (2021). As she suggests that women in advanced managerial positions face less stereotypes around their knowledge and therefore experience less of an authority gap and disrespectful behaviour connected to it, it is possible that this also influences the behaviour of our interviewees.

Therefore, all of the interviewees believe some sort of knowledge or skill is needed in order to highlight one's competence. Due to this, the interviewees highlight their knowledge to show they deserve respect. In a way, they use this method of highlighting their competence to counter some of the mentioned stereotypes in chapter 4.1.1. External stereotypes. Moreover, especially in male-dominated industries, women are often considered to be brought in solely for the cause of diversity initiatives (Heilman & Welle, 2006). Therefore, we suggest that our interviewees highlighting their knowledge can almost be seen as a justification, offering evidence on why they deserve to be in their position. Ingrid highlights:

*"I had to, in a way, earn his respect... But I think every now and then I put it in a way that I say, like: 'See, I'm not so useless.'"*

This once again emphasises how by highlighting their knowledge and competence, the interviewees work on earning respect and showing their usefulness. This way of coping with the prejudices and stereotypes around women being less knowledgeable or deserving of a leadership function adds a unique perspective on the previous literature on how women address stereotypes in male-dominated environments.

#### *4.2.4 Turning stereotypes into advantages*

Some of the interviewees seemed to have even stronger techniques and mechanisms to counter the challenges they face. Among 6 out of the 12 interviewees, we noticed targeted techniques or behaviours aimed at reversing stereotypes in a way of making them their own or even using them to their own advantage.

The less obvious use of this coping-mechanism was something we noticed more between the lines. Some of the leaders mentioned techniques or behaviours in

their daily leadership that can be traced back to stereotypes about women that they somehow adopted in their way of acting in order to profit from it. This is for example shown by Aurora:

*“Maybe as a woman, you are less of a threat. So you're more easily accepted as a mediator [...] that will help smooth things over usually”*

Even though women being perceived as less of a threat can be traced back to the stereotypical view of not taking them seriously or seeing women as more emotional and soft rather than assertive figures (Martin & Phillips, 2017), Aurora mentions how she accepted this role and makes use of it. That way, she can profit from being able to mediate and resolve conflicts more easily than a male colleague possibly would. Similar patterns could be identified when observing Beatrice: In the meeting, there was a small disagreement between three team members on how to solve a problem. Beatrice took a mediator role and got involved to make sure everybody shares their point of view and ideas and is heard. That way, she quickly de-escalated the situation.

Another example of claiming something that is often stereotypically associated with women and using it in a positive sense could be seen in an experience by Valentina:

*“If you're going to work in such a male-dominated area, you do try and find people. So sometimes we'll have lunch together or whatever. And I have been told 'ohh, your little girls club', and it's like 'uhm no! That's about supporting each other.’”*

When she told us about a male colleague making this belittling remark towards her and her network, she made clear how she doesn't care about how he or other colleagues in the organisation view it. They formed this informal network in order to support each other. This can be connected to previous findings that suggested that especially in male-dominated environments, women tend to have a lower social capital, caused by them lacking support networks (Casad et al., 2020). As studies by other scholars suggest, making use of networking or mentoring is a highly effective way of addressing or coping with challenges or barriers caused by stereotypes (Gaines, 2017; Searby et al., 2017). Adding to the previous literature, what we find interesting is the fact that in a way, Valentina is actively ignoring the stereotype of women sticking together and forming close groups where they gossip, or even uses it

to her advantage, therefore reclaiming the narrative.

A similar coping-mechanism is applied in a different setting by Lucia who states:  
*“I learned that I need some adjustments in my appearance, to get respect. [...] If I know there's a big meeting coming, for example, I put lip gloss or lipstick on my lips, I wear high heels or something like that. Not because I say all the women have to do that. But I think I made good experiences. [...] I hope that you don't have to be like that at one point, but at the moment, I try to make the best out of the situation.”*

The quote indicates that Lucia is facing the stereotype of women caring about their appearance and always having to look good. However, she also manages to use it to her advantage, stating that she has made good experiences by strategically making use of her physical appearance and thus being respected more. At the same time, she does acknowledge that she would hope that this does not continue to be necessary in the future. Her making use of her feminine attributes relates to what Campuzano (2019) describes as strategic femininity, highlighting how this can be used by female leaders as a success factor. As this study was conducted in a very different research context and on a different continent, we argue that our findings add to this source by showing a European perspective of leaders in a male-dominated environment. However, this behaviour also creates a conflict with other scholars' findings who suggest the previously mentioned gender-blindness strategy for reducing stereotypes. Lucia highlighting her female attributes that make her stand out in her environment is therefore a coping strategy on one hand, while it might also make her stand out even more, possibly leading to certain expectations about women being upheld. Similar issues have been previously discussed in chapter 4.1.2 Internalised stereotypes.

Aurora gave an even more explicit example of this technique of taking advantage of certain assumptions that can be traced back to stereotypes about women:

*“When there's a new situation, you meet new people, it will help that you're a woman because like I said, sometimes they underestimate you and they will say more than they should say.”*

Although Aurora is not always taken seriously and her knowledge is questioned as a woman, showcasing once again the stereotype that women are less knowledgeable

or skilled (Cassidy & Krendl, 2019, Moss-Racusin et al., 2012), she turns this into her advantage: When men believe her to be less knowledgeable, they speak more freely and let information slip that she can use to her advantage. This is specifically useful when meeting new people, as they are not yet aware of her background and knowledge. Once she has used her position to her advantage and shows that she does, in fact, have the knowledge they expect her not to have, this advantage 'card' can likely not be used again. Nonetheless, this is an interesting finding, showing that what some stereotypically consider a weakness of a woman can be used to the advantage of a female leader. Among the commonly described techniques of how female leaders can address or deal with stereotypes in the workplace within the literature, we did not find any mention of this specific approach. Therefore, this is a finding that both surprised us and also adds to the existing knowledge about how female leaders in male-dominated environments can cope with their daily challenges. A similar use of this technique was indicated during our interview with Chiara, who explained:

*"If you're only sitting with men, for you, they sometimes make a bigger effort than they would for the men. And that I use as well. I say: 'Oh, but for me you would do that, right?' And then they say: 'Yeah'. Sometimes you also need to make use of that."*

Chiara openly admits to sometimes making use of stereotypical behaviour like seductiveness or appearance in order to accomplish her goals. When going further into explaining, she states that she feels like the treatment of men and women is fundamentally different in her environment. However, when asked whether she finds that problematic, she answered "No, I make use of it." Even though literature partly covers this phenomenon within the strategic femininity approach that has been previously mentioned (Campuzano, 2019), the behaviour described by Chiara goes further than just making use of stereotypically female behaviours. Therefore, these findings add a more detailed perspective to the existing knowledge. Elaborating further on how she acts to get the wanted behaviour from her male subordinates, she states:

*"You need to know where your strengths and weaknesses lie. And, winding the men around your finger a little, yeah, that can't hurt much."*



Her open way of addressing this topic shows she does not feel any shame around it and considers it a valid strategy of making use of this existing stereotypical image of women. In this case, our observation of Chiara within a team meeting was once again able to add to the findings of the interview by making visible some of this described behaviour. Two of the men in the meeting seemed to respond well to the 'wrapping around the finger' which was also shown in their body language indicating a positive response. They smiled at her, moved their bodies in her direction and offered to do her favours. However, one of the other men in the meeting seemed very uncomfortable with her applying this technique in one case. His body language indicated he wanted to remove himself from the situation: He moved his body backwards, looked away and started to fidget or look at his phone. In the end, he still agreed to do what she wanted him to do, showing how her technique seems to be successful overall. However, considering that one camp of researchers advocates for downplaying one's own stereotypical traits (Koenig & Richeson, 2010; Martin & Phillips, 2019) instead of applying this heightened visibility approach that makes use of strategic femininity (Campuzano, 2019; Penhall, 2018), we can argue that it depends on the individual subordinate whether they respond well to these techniques or not.

#### 4.2.5 *Calling it out*

Lastly, we will be discussing one of the possibly most difficult manners of addressing stereotypes, which is calling others out. Less than half of the interviewees indicated speaking up against situations caused by stereotypes. This includes situations in which women were spoken over, their knowledge was questioned, or any other form of disrespect was shown with regards to gender. In one example given, Ingrid was spoken over multiple times in a meeting. Whenever the man spoke over her, all other participants turned and listened to him, rather than allow her to finish. In response, she said the following:

*"So then usually I do make a remark. Saying something like: 'What am I, chopped liver? I mean, he's like- My opinion doesn't count. What?!' And then they're like: 'Oh, sorry'."*

With the use of the words "chopped liver", Ingrid metaphorically illustrates how the interruption makes her feel. We consider this choice of words interesting, as women often feel like 'a piece of meat' when it comes to men just seeing them for their body,

rather than as a person. One could argue that the chopped liver metaphor illustrates women feeling even less than a piece of meat. A piece of meat is often eaten, whereas chopped liver is often fed to animals if not pushed aside and disregarded completely. Therefore, Ingrid made use of the chopped liver metaphor to describe how she felt disregarded and unworthy. Only after calling out the situation and making it clear that this made her feel like she and her opinion are not valued, he apologised. She seems to use “they apologise” in this situation as it happens more often and thus moves from a specific situation to a general one, in which men apologise after being called out.

An example of someone speaking out in a situation of being questioned about her knowledge came from Aurora, who explained that men who meet her for the first time often have the wrong impression of her and assume she lacks knowledge in the field. This relates back to women in hospitals being linked to a nurturing background. In her example, she told us:

*“They’re gonna sit across me and say: Yeah, you’re probably not gonna understand this. We have to upgrade the database.’ ‘Yeah. Well, you know what, I used to be a database manager. I do understand what you’re talking about.’ ‘Ohh, oh!’ - you get that kind of reaction.”*

In this example, Aurora simply called out the man for his assumptions by giving him a short introduction into her career background. Thus, she called him out by bringing in her past and, in a way, by highlighting her knowledge. Therefore, speaking out against men links back to the other coping-mechanisms, such as highlighting knowledge, or making use of a more direct and straightforward communicational strategy. Nonetheless, we found it important to mention calling out men as a separate coping-mechanism, as calling people out is a way of making the stereotypes visible and stimulating conversation about the problem. This is what these five women do. However, the fact that less than half of the participants reported engaging in this behaviour might have to do with the fact that fighting or confronting sexism or stereotypes is difficult, even for women in leadership positions (Burns & Granz, 2020).

The difficulty of calling out can be seen in at least two interviews. In some cases, our interviewees were too shocked to speak out, because what was being said seemed so ridiculous or did not ‘land’ straight away. These interviewees wished they had said something. Valentina highlighted how she learned from this and developed

the ability to speak up the next time. With this, she seemed to suggest that it became easier for her with time and age, as she felt she had “less to lose” and could thus speak up more easily. However, she gave many examples of times she wished she spoke out, one of which was the following:

*“...so he was describing the people working in a team, and he called the guys the men and the women girls. And I was just really shocked and didn't say anything because this was someone managing the team. And I didn't say anything at the time and afterwards, I was like, I should have done it - I mean, it's a minor thing but still, it's dismissing women.”*

This situation has been mentioned by us earlier in chapter 4.1.1.2 Women are less competent. The quote shows that there was intent to speak up, but not action. There are likely more women who eventually do not speak up, even though they would like to. Reasons can be that they are too shocked, as in the example above, or that they do not feel comfortable speaking up in the situation, or they simply feel they are too late with speaking up. Many women may not speak up immediately and feel that the moment has passed for them to speak up after that. However, it could even be useful to bring situations up after the fact. One may not feel comfortable speaking up when they are surrounded by a group of people, but it may be easier to talk to someone in private about their behaviour or words. On the other hand, some may feel more comfortable speaking up in public rather than in private. This quote represents at least two of the interviewees, who regretted not calling someone out on their biases. Valentina did indicate that this was one of the moments she learned from and that helped her to speak up in future instances. Nonetheless, it shows that calling someone out is not an easy task and that one may fear damaging a good work relationship or receiving a negative evaluation. Furthermore, Valentina indicated that “there’s only so many times you can stand up and go: ‘That’s not right’.” By this, she shows that she feels speaking up can be tiring or difficult.

## **5 Discussion**

Throughout our empirical findings we have analysed the interviews and observations and made some indications on how these findings link to the literature review. In this chapter, we will elaborate on the key results of this study by discussing the key findings

of the two main chapters, namely stereotypes and coping-mechanisms. By doing so we aim to make further associations both within the findings, as well as between the findings and literature review.

### **5.1 Stereotypes**

We have discussed both external and internalised stereotypes that affect the work-life of women in leadership. In terms of external stereotypes, we found that women working in a masculine-typed occupation in a mixed environment are questioned from two sides. Our participants from organisation B, the hospital, reported men questioning the women's positions while linking them to a nurturer role in their mixed environment. This phenomenon can be linked to the underrepresentation of women in certain occupations (NCSES, 2023), and the occupational segregation of women in more nurturing fields (Eagly et al., 2020). This may specifically be the case as the interviewees pointed out that these situations particularly occur with men who are unfamiliar with them. These men then believe that women lack the competence needed for the more masculine-typed occupation, therefore undermining their authority and questioning their leadership position. One can argue that this also may have to do with the overall idea that women are less competent and that the characteristic of competence is linked to men (Chang & Milkman, 2020; Carli et al., 2011). We find it interesting that competence is linked as a characteristic with men, rather than with abilities or skill. In addition to this issue, interviewees indicated that at the same time, other women in their organisation assumed that the interviewees lacked the necessary soft skills needed for their function. This could be linked to women stereotypically having social or soft skills that are needed in stereotypically more feminine occupations (Eagly et al., 2020). However, these colleagues likely associate the interviewees with more masculine traits, perhaps seeing them as more aggressive or cold, while the men the interviewees spoke about likely consider them too feminine. The findings of our study expand the results presented by Liu (2019) on perceptions of women in politics. Her findings elaborate on the issue of being seen as too soft and feminine to lead on one hand but as too aggressive and cold when engaging in more masculine behaviours. However, Liu (2019) focusses on how voters view women in politics, in which the dynamics are different than for female leaders with people on the same hierarchical level or with subordinates. In our study, the

environment of the female leaders is in a direct exchange with them, causing a stronger interpersonal dependence, whereas voters do not know politicians more intimately than their public image. Furthermore, a politician is more dependent on the voter to gain a more powerful position. Although our interviewees have a level of dependence with their managerial co-workers and subordinates, this mainly comes in the form of the need for a good relationship in order to work together well. Therefore, we extend the previous findings by Liu (2019) by discovering that the same issue is present despite the difference in study settings.

Our study provides distinct new findings on internalised stereotypes of female leaders. Most of the literature with regards to the internalisation of stereotypes is related to more domestic stereotypes or stereotypes on a societal level rather than purely within women in the workplace (Evans, 2015; Heng, 1997; Porrone & Poto, 2023; Ünlü, 2018). Our research therefore shows internalised stereotypes from a new perspective, exploring them in an organisational context, specifically in male-dominated areas. Our findings suggest that women might actively hinder overcoming stereotypes within male-dominated environments by putting these stereotypes onto themselves. The internalised belief of women needing to be organised or having specific characteristics enables the idea that women are supposed to have certain qualities to be good leaders. The interviewees viewing these stereotypical female traits as a 'must' can lead to them requiring the same from other women, which is similar to the queen bee phenomenon, in which women uphold the bar for other women (Achhnani & Gupta, 2022). However, rather than putting such a bar on other women, our participants put it onto themselves. Furthermore, some of the interviewees seem to have adopted the think manager-think male attitude (Schein, 2007), as they refer to leaders with male pronouns. All these aspects show an overall tendency to uphold gender-related stereotypes due to internalised assumptions about women, even though this seemed to be an unconscious process in most cases.

## **5.2 Coping-mechanisms**

A direct coping-mechanism resulting from internalising stereotypes is projecting stereotypes onto others rather than allowing them to be related to their own person. We noticed many of the participants of this study making use of strategies that resemble the self-group distancing technique (van Veelen et al., 2020). We believe

this allows them to cope better with men putting stereotypes on the overall social group of women, leading to the projection of stereotypes onto other women and the adoption of more masculine characteristics. We noticed the main self-distancing is focussed on the lack of confidence stereotype. This likely has to do with the idea that confidence is needed to get into a leadership position (Tinsley & Ely., 2018). The argument that confidence is a man-made concept becomes evident in our interviewees: Despite one interviewee accusing another participant of our study of lacking confidence, this person still portrayed herself as a confident person during her own interview. Most interviewees described themselves as direct, straightforward, and honest, which are characteristics that are often stereotypically linked to men (Cejka & Eagly, 1999). Opposing previous literature (e.g. Eagly & Karau, 2002; Fielding-Singh et al., 2018; Liu, 2019), our research indicates that female leaders in male-dominated environments may actually experience positive responses to adopting more masculine traits, rather than negative ones. Our participants reported that directness, straightforwardness and honesty contributed to a more open environment and could help them gain respect. However, it became evident that many of the participants did not allow the stereotypes to be related to themselves but rather projected them onto other women. This is an interesting finding, as female leaders are reported to project rather benevolent stereotypes onto other women (Glick et al., 2000; Glick & Fiske, 2001). Our findings contrast this study as our participants projected more negative stereotypes that are related to hostile sexism. Examples of this are the projection of negative assumptions about women such as being overly competitive or gossipy. While Eagly et al. (2020) link competitiveness to men, Faniko et al. (2016) argue that competitiveness may be present in the queen bee phenomenon. However, they specify competitive behaviour mainly shows against women in lower positions (Faniko et al., 2016). Therefore, our study contributes an interesting perspective, showing that the participants of our study connected unhealthy competitiveness with women in general. Nonetheless, they do not recognise these stereotypes within themselves, therefore protecting and distancing themselves by projecting the stereotypes onto others. When it comes to positive stereotypes, these seem to be internalised mainly towards themselves, as some interviewees specified making use of stereotypical feminine characteristics and made sure to emphasise emotionality and compassion in

their communicational strategies (Christov-Moore et al., 2014). We could argue that these interviewees may want to prevent possible sanctions. However, it could arguably also be a manner to 'own' the stereotype and make use of the positive effects it has, both for their own evaluation, as well as in showing other women more representation in the company.

One of the main coping-mechanisms to gain respect identified in our study is highlighting knowledge and competence. This coping-mechanism links back most to the earlier discussed stereotypes in chapter 5.1. With women being perceived as less knowledgeable and competent, it should not be a surprise that many of the interviewees felt the need to specifically prove this stereotype to be wrong. We found it troublesome that women are seen as less competent (Chang & Milkman., 2020), but even more so that female leaders in high-level leadership positions of knowledge-intensive domains still have to prove their expertise, rather than it being a given. Our findings show that the interviewees highlight their knowledge, which may indicate an underlying fear of being judged as being brought in only for diversity reasons (Powell, 2019). Nonetheless, a second group of interviewees provided a different view, as they put more emphasis on knowing their team and delegating accordingly, rather than having to be the expert themselves. We believe this may be a difference in management position. Most of the interviewees who valued factual knowledge seemed to be 'lower' in the hierarchy than those who valued knowledge related to their team and available resources. Therefore, we offer additional evidence for the findings of Sieghart (2021) who stated that moving up the hierarchical ladder reduces the questioning of a leader's knowledge. Our findings suggest that this can be related to the type of responsibilities the leaders hold, rather than uniquely their position on the hierarchical ladder. We consider the highlighting of knowledge and competence to be a unique addition to the existing research on coping-mechanisms.

We noted that the coping-mechanism of turning around stereotypes was used on many different levels, such as on the communicational level. Some interviewees use more subtle approaches, whereas others seemed to apply almost manipulative techniques by exploiting the stereotypical attributes connected to women, to profit from them. An example of this is the 'winding men around the finger' in order to get them to do what is desired of them. Although this use of feminine traits has been described in

recent literature as 'strategic femininity' (Campuzano, 2019), we had not expected to come across such a clear and drastic use of stereotypical traits. On further examination, we found it noteworthy that literature highlighted possible negative reactions or sanctions related to this type of behaviour, as it makes the differences between men and women more distinct and increases stereotypes rather than reducing them (Koenig & Richeson, 2010). Therefore, our study contributes to existing knowledge by showing potential risks of this unhealthy, unsustainable technique for the long term, showcasing a rather 'short fix' for current problems. We believe this might not be the most ideal way for women to gain respect in male-dominated industries.

Although multiple sources are stating the importance and difficulty of calling out stereotypes (e.g., Alani et al., 2016; Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Burns & Ganz, 2020; Woodzicka et al., 2015), few sources explain how one can call out stereotypes (e.g., Joyce et al., 2021; Mavin et al., 2023; Washington, 2022). Joyce et al. (2021) only explain one can point out mansplaining to create more awareness and Mavin et al. (2023) merely state the importance of speaking out publicly and as a group. Washington (2022) suggests more in-depth information on what women can take into consideration when calling out stereotypes, namely the time and place, the relationship, and background knowledge on the stereotype that will allow for insight into intent and impact. Therefore, our findings add more depth to the existing research by contributing specific techniques on how one can call out stereotypes. Our participants called out stereotypes both by highlighting their own factual knowledge and by using a more direct and straightforward communication strategy. Although Johns et al. (2005) make it seem like talking is the easiest way of reducing the stereotype threat, the participants of this study showed that it could be a struggle to do so. Speaking about the fear of confirming stereotypes can lead to more awareness about those prejudices and their effect on women, whereas a lack of open conversation leads to stereotypes being upheld. Regardless of the risk of being perceived as rude or aggressive (Fielding-Singh et al., 2018), some participants of our study spoke out against unjust behaviours related to stereotyping. Highlighting their expertise and the use of assertive communication strategies in calling out stereotypes has proven to be useful to our interviewees. Therefore, this finding contributes to



possible coping-mechanisms for women in male-dominated industries. Women calling out stereotypes now may very well help future generations in male-dominated industries to find a more welcoming environment.

## **6 Conclusion**

This qualitative research had the goal to uncover the unique stereotypes female leaders in male-dominated environments are confronted with and how they cope with or address these. Both the interviews and the observations helped us gain deep insights by truly listening to the experiences of the individual leaders and seeing how these play out in real life. This led us to the previously described key findings which we also discussed in light of existing literature.

This concluding chapter once again shortly mentions our key findings and additions to existing theoretical knowledge on the topic, while also suggesting practical implications. Furthermore, we once again highlight possible limitations of the study and how future research could address and advance this research topic further.

### **6.1 Key findings**

As the discussion already summarised our findings while highlighting how they contribute to the previous literature in detail, we only mention the most important factors that we conclude from our study.

The first part of our research question aimed at uncovering the stereotypes female leaders face in their male-dominated environments. Our initial expectations regarding the most common stereotype-related issues occurring at their workplaces mainly included the external stereotypes. We found that within their industry and by the people around them, female leaders are confronted with the stereotype of being less fit for leadership roles, leading to an overall lack of respect. Moreover, people continue to consider a woman's word less worthy or important than that of a man due to an assumed lack of competence. However, what exceeded our initial expectations was the existence of another source of stereotypes, rooted in the interviewees themselves. These internalised stereotypes were things they were not even aware of but are still likely to influence their daily life and contribute to the continuous existence of stereotypes in the workplace. As presented in the discussion above, this adds a new perspective on previous literature by showing internalised stereotypes in a leadership context in male-dominated environments rather than on a domestic or societal level.

Examples of this are the internalised belief that women are supposed to be organised or good communicators, or playing into the stereotype that women are less fit to lead by unconsciously using male pronouns when referring to a good leader.

In accordance with these existing stereotypes, our study examined the unique ways the female leaders address or deal with the challenges and barriers they encounter due to the stereotypes. Some of these findings also exceeded our initial expectations. During the interviews, we asked the leaders for specific advice on how women could overcome those stereotype-related challenges and how they address certain issues themselves. Some of the key findings such as the intentional use of certain communication styles or leadership techniques and openly calling out stereotypical or offensive behaviour in the workplace were more on the obvious side of overcoming gender-related challenges and therefore matched our expectations while still adding to existing knowledge. However, we were surprised to find more between the lines that part of dealing with existing stereotypes also leads to some of the female leaders reflecting these onto other women in their organisation in order to distance themselves from these stereotypes. This can once again be seen as a consequence of the previously described phenomenon that the women adopt stereotypical thinking and therefore reflect it on other women in the workplace too. Similarly, we were also surprised by multiple leaders actively adopting stereotypical views about them and making them their own with a goal of profiting from them. These last two coping-mechanisms can be considered less healthy and possibly more short-term solutions helping the leaders in their current situation but contributing to the overall persistence of stereotypes in their organisations in the long run.

## **6.2 Theoretical implications**

This qualitative case study adds to the existing literature on gender-specific challenges concerning stereotypes of and around female leaders. On one hand, we expand the findings on coping-mechanisms while on the other, we specifically shed light on how these issues and strategies play out in male-dominated industries. The broad literature on stereotypes around women in leadership addresses these issues on a more global scale, including all types of occupations. While a lot of the previous research focuses on active strategies for female leaders to address certain challenges caused by stereotypes, we add to this by showing more between the lines, sub- or even

unconscious strategies that help the women at least in the short term.

Our research adds insights to the existing literature on the authority gap (Sieghart, 2021) and the stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995). We were able to replicate the existing findings that women tend to be disrespected or considered less fit for leadership positions due to an assumed lack of knowledge. Although our interviewees shared this experience as well, we add a consequence to this that literature has not mentioned before: The awareness of this assumed lack of competence led to half of our interviewees strongly emphasising their expert knowledge on their subjects, almost in a justifying way, showing how much pressure this authority gap can put onto female leaders, especially in male-dominated environments. This combines the authority gap with the perception of a stereotype threat, showing how the female leaders fear possibly confirming the stereotype of 'the incompetent woman'. However, this effect did seem to get less drastic for the leaders in high managerial positions, indicating that higher status and the respect due to that can possibly lift the pressure and therefore the need of proving one's own competence.

We provide another valuable addition to the existing research around the issue of calling out stereotypical or sexist behaviour in organisations while shining light on the specific context of male-dominated industries. As previously highlighted, our study confirms the high importance of speaking up against unjust behaviour or practices (e.g., Alani et al., 2016; Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Burns & Granz, 2020; Woodzicka et al., 2015), however, we add to the suggestions made by previous literature on *how* women can achieve this in the workplace. The participants of our study indicated that bluntly calling out the incident by use of direct and assertive language is a successful technique, alongside highlighting their own expertise and knowledge on the subject and therefore reclaiming the respect in their position. We consider this aspect to be of even higher importance in male-dominated environments in which a woman's competence and position are often questioned and the work has a strong focus on expertise.

The main contribution of our study lies in the renewing insights on internalised stereotypes that are held by the female leaders and as a consequence are put onto themselves but also on other women in the workplace. There is an overall lack of empirical studies exploring this issue, even more so in male-dominated environments

where this phenomenon is likely to present in an even more drastic way. As previous literature mainly focuses on how society as a whole has internalised views on how women should act and the consequences this provokes (e.g. Ünlü, 2018), we provide a unique new angle. By showing explicit examples of how this phenomenon occurs in the organisational context, we can broaden the understanding of the challenges female leaders still have to overcome in male-dominated environments. As a worrying consequence of these internalised stereotypes, our findings show a hostile way of projecting stereotypical beliefs onto other women, confronting them with the prejudice of being too competitive, too gossipy, or not confident enough. Another way these internalised biases show is the active use of stereotypical behaviour and therefore confirming the image society has of women, which the participants of our study used to their advantage. Therefore, this study was also able to add to the existing research on strategic femininity (Campuzano, 2019) which can be used to achieve positive reactions or outcomes. As previously presented, our findings exceeded the notion of women making use of stereotypically female behaviours or traits in order to stand out in a positive way. At the same time, these findings contrast previous literature that suggests the use of a gender-blindness strategy (Martin & Phillips, 2017) with the goal of downplaying gender differences. Our study indicated a very calculated, in some cases even manipulative use of this, which might be connected to the male-dominated environments our interviewees lead in. Due to this, they might feel like they need to make use of these strategies to reach their goals. This finding can therefore be seen as a theoretical contribution, showing how difficult environments might require female leaders to make use of more drastic measures to still get their voices heard.

### **6.3 Practical Implications**

First of all, by expanding the research on stereotypes and how to address or even overcome them in male-dominated areas, we share valuable insights from successful women in this field. This can be an inspiration to other women who aspire to take on leadership roles in traditionally more male-dominated areas. As previous research has shown the importance of having role models and successful examples in order for other female leaders to successfully advance in their careers, we consider this a valuable message to show to other women (Gaines, 2017; Magrane et al., 2012). This study contributed to existing research on how even though stereotypes do still exist

and influence female leaders' lives, especially in these industries, there are multiple ways to cope with or to even turn around certain challenges to one's advantage.

Moreover, our findings also indicate a need for self-reflection for the female leaders themselves, as reflexivity is an important aspect of self-development and is especially reported to benefit leadership (Alvesson et al., 2017). Even though some of the interviewees already seemed very self-aware and reflective around their own biases and trying not to generalise certain gender-related aspects, we still encountered a surprisingly high amount of more or less obvious stereotypes or biases they carry within themselves. Subconsciously adopting the way traditional society thinks or speaks about what a woman is supposed to act or be like will likely not have positive effects or eliminate these issues in the long term, therefore demanding critical reflection from these leaders. Similar conclusions can be made about the way some leaders project stereotypes or biases onto other women in their organisation, possibly hindering their career advancement and preventing the successful use of support networks.

Connected to the previously described practical implication, we furthermore suggest a stronger focus on networking. As previous literature and this present study have shown how crucial the existence of support networks can be for women, especially in male-dominated environments (Gaines, 2017; Magrane et al., 2012; Searby et al., 2017), we were surprised to find that less than half of the participants of our study actually engaged in such networks. The participants that were part of such networks highly recommended doing so, as it offers the support that often seems to be lacking in a male-dominated environment. This is an aspect that women regardless of their position in the organisation should consider.

Even though things seem to be improving already, we strongly advocate for calling out stereotypical, offensive, or inappropriate behaviours happening at work as this will make the work-life easier for generations to come. As previously shown, not many of the female leaders in this present study recalled situations where they openly called out the unfair situations and inappropriate behaviours that they encounter in their daily life. As this is reported to be a very difficult task (Alani et al., 2016; Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Burns & Granz, 2020; Woodzicka et al., 2015), this behaviour must get more and more normalised, possibly inspiring other organisational members by

the good example of the female leaders. This way, other people can take the role of allies and support the overall development of organisations into a more diverse, inclusive environment.

#### **6.4 Limitations and future research**

The following chapter shortly mentions the limitations of our study while connecting them to possible implications or opportunities for future research. The main limitations concerning the methodology of this study have already been presented in chapter 3.6.

First of all, we do acknowledge that in a highly complex and broad study field that gender-related challenges and coping-mechanisms are, research could benefit from a longitudinal study design. The setting we were bound to due to a limited time frame did allow us to conduct in-depth interviews with the leaders, however, we argue that turning this into a long-term study that follows individual leaders around and thus examines their unique challenges as well as coping-mechanisms in more detail could be highly beneficial. Especially in terms of observing the leaders, multiple and longer observations of meetings but also more natural, daily work situations could add a lot to the already uncovered stereotype-caused barriers as well as coping-mechanisms. As our way of conducting observations only covered short moments in the participants' leadership, we recognise the limited opportunities of this approach as opposed to a full ethnographic work. This is one research opportunity that could be explored in future studies.

A second aspect we reflected on is the fact that all the observations and interviews of our study portray the situation of female leaders in developed countries. While this doesn't limit the value or significance of our study, we still want to highlight that the labour market participation within countries with emerging economies differs to a way higher degree, possibly presenting a vast variety of different experiences for women in these contexts. As our research only included interviewees from organisations within Europe that were overall rather advanced in terms of diversity, future studies could help develop a more global understanding of these issues as well as possible opportunities and therefore add to the existing knowledge.

In connection to our unique findings on how the female leaders highlighted their expert knowledge in a nearly justifying way, and considering that all of our interviewees work in knowledge-intensive occupations, it would be interesting to conduct a

comparing study both in more knowledge-intensive organisations as well as in those where expert knowledge is less important to see if our findings are connected to the type of organisation, or if female leaders generally have to counter the stereotype of not being competent enough.

Ultimately, another aspect we would encourage future studies to examine further concerns our findings on internalised stereotypes or implicit biases. The manner in which female leaders put these onto themselves as well as the way they seem to project these on other women, and the effects this has on their career advancement could be expanded by future studies by making it the sole research purpose instead of just one aspect, therefore allowing a more nuanced and in detail understanding. This would benefit both entire organisations as well as individual women in the workforce and women in leadership, as the ultimate goal should be working towards a safe and inclusive environment that is free of judgements and stereotypes.

## 7 References

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