Torture and Blessing: The Impostor Phenomenon among Spanish Female Executives

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This research explores the impostor phenomenon (IP) within the context of gender and leadership, aiming to transform impostor feelings into catalysts for leadership empowerment and positive career outcomes.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Utilising grounded theory, this study conducts in-depth interviews with 34 female Spanish senior executives to analyse their experiences with IP.

Findings: The research reveals that top executive women are not only affected by IP but can also harness it to foster personal and professional growth. It identifies key strategies—such as self-reflection, effective communication, and cultivating positive habits—that enable women to transform IP into a lever for enhancing their careers. This approach leads to a proposed virtuous cycle model that empowers women to overcome the negative impacts of IP and advance their leadership capabilities.

Originality: This study contributes to the literature on gender and leadership by offering insights into the gendered nuances of IP. By framing IP as a potential catalyst for growth rather than a barrier, the study provides practical tools for HR departments to promote gender diversity at senior levels. It also advocates for HR practices to dismantle internal barriers to women's career progression and addresses conscious and unconscious gender biases.

Keywords: female executives; impostor phenomenon; leadership; gender; in-depth interviews

INTRODUCTION

"It's my torture and my blessing" (P22)

Despite the growing awareness of the benefits of gender diversity in leadership positions, progress has been slow in increasing female representation at the top levels of companies. According to data from BoardEx (2023), women currently occupy only 20,5% of top management positions in the largest capitalization companies across 20 countries. In the European Union, female representation on executive committees reached 21% by the end of 2022, but only 8% of these companies were women-led. However, there is reason for optimism, as the percentage of women on boards in Europe stands at 32% (EIGE, 2023). Nonetheless, the issue of increasing gender diversity on boards of directors remains important and relevant, as noted by Halliday et al. (2021).

The academic literature employs various metaphors to illustrate the challenges women face in accessing top management positions, including the "glass ceiling" (Bass & Avolio, 1994), "glass cliffs" (Ryan & Haslam, 2007), and the "labyrinth" (Eagly & Carli, 2007). The Role Congruity Theory (RCT), introduced by Eagly and Karau (2002), explains the underrepresentation of women in top management. RTC focuses on prejudices and stereotypes associated with being a leader and a woman, which may adversely affect women's career development. RTC is the anchoring theory for this research. Women face various internal and external barriers on their path to leadership positions, with the Impostor Phenomenon (IP) being a significant internal barrier (Kets de Vries, 2005; Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016; Vergauwe et al., 2015). In their seminal paper, Clance and Imes (1978) posited that this phenomenon occurs in high-achieving women who feel like frauds despite their successes.

The prevailing narrative suggests that IP disproportionately affects women due to societal expectations, a stance bolstered by subsequent studies (Badawy et al., 2018; Cokley et al., 2018; Patzak et al., 2017). However, recent empirical evidence presents a more nuanced picture, challenging the notion of IP as a gender-specific issue, particularly within the context of management roles (Kumar et al., 2021; Leonhardt et al., 2017; Rohrmann et al., 2016). While women generally may experience IP more frequently and intensely, those who ascend to traditionally male-dominated leadership positions may exhibit resilience against this phenomenon. Rohrmann et al. (2016) suggest that the reduction of IP in female executives could be attributed to either a decrease in IP during career advancement or to the fact that women in leadership positions are generally less likely to experience IP than their counterparts. This gap in understanding highlights the critical need for further exploration into the presence and implications of IP in the ascent of women to top management positions.

To fill this gap, we conducted qualitative research through in-depth interviews with senior female leaders in male-dominated industries to explore their experiences with IP throughout their careers. We employed grounded theory methods to capture the meanings behind their experiences. The following research questions guided our research: (1) What is the prevalence of IP among these women in senior leadership roles? (2) How does IP influence these women's career advancement? As our research progressed, a pivotal question emerged: (3) What strategies have senior female leaders developed to cope with IP?

Our study enriches the literature on gender and leadership by delving into two underexplored aspects. Firstly, we examine the IP and its significance in women's career progression and leadership development, which presents gender-specific challenges

(Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). We approach this from the individual perspective of their narratives as female top executives, offering a unique insight compared to previous studies (Eagly et al., 2020; Lyness & Grotto, 2018).

Secondly, while existing research predominantly focuses on the negative impacts of IP on career advancement (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016; Vergauwe et al., 2015), we draw attention to recent studies that reveal its potential positive effects in the workplace (Kark et al., 2022; Tewfik, 2022). We propose a virtuous cycle model that enables women to overcome the negative consequences of IP through communication, good habits, and self-reflection. This model is particularly relevant from a gender perspective, considering the observed differences between men and women in their susceptibility to some aspects of IP, like perfectionism, and their emotional coping strategies (Badawy et al., 2018; Hoang, 2013; Patzak et al., 2017).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Gender and Leadership

Gender gaps in leadership across social, political, and business sectors are narrowing but persist (Badura et al., 2018). Despite efforts, female representation in executive committees is only 21% in Europe (EIGE, 2023). However, the presence of gender diversity within organisational leadership is not merely symbolic but also a critical driver of innovation and enhanced company performance (Glass & Cook, 2016; Wu et al., 2022). This highlights the importance of increasing gender diversity in corporate leadership (Halliday et al., 2021).

The underrepresentation of women in top management is often described through the "glass ceiling" metaphor (Bass & Avolio, 1994), but the "labyrinth" more accurately

depicts the complex challenges women face in reaching managerial positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007). RCT explains the scarcity of women in management due to gender and leader biases (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These biases stem from gender stereotypes where men are seen as "agents" with dominant competencies, while women are viewed through a "communal" lens, emphasizing traits like generosity and compassion (Wood & Eagly, 2012). Despite ongoing evidence of these stereotypes (Eagly et al., 2020), the traditional masculine view of leadership is declining. Contemporary leadership increasingly values androgynous styles, blending "communal" and "agent" traits (Kark et al., 2012; Koenig et al., 2011). Notably, during crises, leadership styles often shift to emphasize communal traits supporting the notion of "think crisis, think woman" and linking to the "glass cliff" metaphor (Ryan & Haslam, 2007), where women are more likely to assume leadership in turbulent times (Kulich et al., 2021).

The relationship between leadership and gender emphasizes different styles, with transformational leadership highly regarded in today's dynamic world (Yukl, 2012). As Eagly et al. (2003) found in their meta-analysis, women excel in this style, showing more effective transformational behaviors than men. Understanding the impact of gender stereotyping and factors hindering women's career progression is crucial (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). Lyness and Grotto (2018) developed a theory of female leader empowerment, proposing an organisational model that identifies barriers and enablers at multiple levels and within the social context. They highlight that gender biases can be both conscious and unconscious, stressing the need to expose and unlearn them. Internal obstacles include internalized perceptions and institutionalized biases.

Impostor Phenomenon

IP is an internal perception that can affect women's leadership advancement (Hutchins et al., 2018). Research on IP began forty years ago, but interest in it has grown significantly in the last five years (Clance & Imes, 1978; Kark et al., 2022). IP encapsulates feelings of fraudulence despite evident academic or professional accomplishments. Individuals grappling with this phenomenon often fail to acknowledge their successes, attributing achievements to luck or other external factors, and doubting their intellectual capabilities (Clance, 1985).

Consequences include perfectionism and a fear of exposure as a fraud (Lee, H. et al., 2022), prompting affected individuals to impose stringent standards of excellence upon themselves, thereby increasing anxiety over potential failures and diminishing credibility (Cokley et al., 2018; Pannhausen et al., 2022; Rohrmann et al., 2016). Clance & Imes (1978) discuss a cyclical pattern of imposture, where challenges lead to procrastination or overwork, followed by relief and subsequent worry over errors, perpetuating the cycle (Pannhausen et al., 2022). Its origins are traced back to early familial and social influences (Clance & Imes, 1978; Yaffe, 2022), with social stereotypes exacerbating its onset, particularly in women within male-dominated fields (Wiener, 2008). Recent studies, including those by Feenstra et al. (2020) and Tewfik (2022), advocate for a broader contextual understanding of the phenomenon, focusing on workplace dynamics and the interpersonal advantages of impostor thoughts and highlighting a gap for further development.

A recent trend in the literature has adopted the concept of humility as a comparative lens to examine the conceptual nuances of IP. Both humility and IP share overlapping core elements, including the precision of self-concept, the significance of confidence,

the relevance of social and/or personal value, and the effects of socialization processes (Michalec et al., 2023; Morgenstern & Beck Dallaghan, 2021). However, it is important to emphasize the tactically oriented conceptual derivatives — such as strategic impostorism and the humble brag — and to understand the wider social context within which these concepts are situated and employed (Michalec et al., 2023).

The impostor phenomenon in work contexts and leadership roles

The IP has been extensively studied within professional contexts, focusing on its implications for job satisfaction, leadership, commitment, motivation and its potential to both hinder or facilitate career development and interpersonal effectiveness (Haar & de Jong, 2022; Hutchins et al., 2018; Kark et al., 2022; Kumar et al., 2021; Lee, H. et al., 2022; Leonhardt et al., 2017; Manongsong & Ghosh, 2021; Vergauwe et al., 2015). Hutchins et al. (2018) and Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch (2016) highlight the negative impacts on job satisfaction and career aspirations, while Rohrmann et al. (2016) and Leonhardt et al. (2017) note its presence among leaders without gender bias.

The phenomenon creates internal barriers to career progression, limiting career planning and leading to a pessimistic outlook on career advancement (Kets de Vries, 2005; Vergauwe et al., 2015). It may deter individuals, especially women, from seeking leadership roles due to societal expectations and gender stereotypes, exacerbating self-doubt among successful female leaders (Bell, 1990; Clance & Imes, 1978).

Addressing the IP involves mentoring, fostering inclusive organisational cultures, and promoting environments supportive of continuous learning (Chakraverty, 2020; Haar & de Jong, 2022; Manongsong & Ghosh, 2021; Noskeau et al., 2021). This approach not only mitigates its negative effects but also leverages potential benefits, such as enhanced interpersonal effectiveness (Tewfik, 2022).

Recent research by Kark et al. (2022) introduces the concept of leader impostorism, suggesting that the phenomenon can exist in organisational contexts and may lead to a virtuous cycle in terms of positive outcomes, including improved performance and decision-making capabilities. Thus, while IP is often seen as a hindrance, it can also contribute to exceptional drive and perseverance among leaders, highlighting the complexity and multifaceted nature of its impact within professional settings. However, it focuses on how supportive organisations can mitigate leadership impostorism, excluding the individual perspective and personal traits that can interact with this dynamic.

Despite recent interest in the literature addressing the relationship between IP and leadership development, progress has primarily been at a conceptual or propositional level (Downing et al., 2020; Kark et al., 2012; KH & Menon, 2020). This underscores the necessity for empirical work like the one presented here.

METHOD

Analytical Approach and Participants

Our research employs a qualitative, grounded theory methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to delve into the intricacies of the IP experienced by women leaders. Qualitative studies in management, renowned for their detailed and exploratory nature in understanding challenges faced by individuals (Lee, T. W., 1999; Locke, 2003; Silverman, 2001), often leverage semi-structured interviews with CEOs and top managers to gain valuable insights (Kelan & Wratil, 2021; Khemakhem et al., 2022; Saifuddin et al., 2019). This study conducted in-depth interviews to explore IP among women leaders comprehensively.

Participants are Spanish female senior executives serving on boards or or possessing demonstrated potential to become board members. Access to this elite minority group was gained through the research team's network of contacts. Subsequently, snowball sampling (Noy, 2008) was employed to ensure a representative number of cases. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached. We discuss the limitations related to potential sampling bias at the end of the article.

This is a heterogeneous sample from a wide variety of industry sectors. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the interviewees, including their year of birth, university education, number of children, C-suite function, the number of countries of residence, and board membership status. They belong to two generations: Baby Boomers and Generation X, born between 1958 and 1981. One-third lived only in Spain, while another-third resided in three or more countries. Nine participants serve on boards.

TABLE 1. Demographic and professional profiles of interviewees (*n=34*)

Code	University education	Year of birth	# Countries of residence	# Children	Industry sector	C-suite function	Board member
P1	Chemistry	65-68	3	2	FMCG	Operations	No
P2	Law & business	65-68	1	2	Investment banking	General management	Yes
P3	Maths	73-76	2	3	Consulting	General management	No
P4	Chemistry	65-68	2	3	FMCG	Operations	No
P5	Engineering	58-64	2	0	Retail	General management	No
P6	Business administration	58-64	2	2	Investment banking	General management	No
P7	Business administration	65-68	2	3	FMCG	Human resources	No
P8	Law & business	69-72	2	1	Retail Banking	Human resources	No
P9	Business administration	69-72	2	2	Retail Banking	General management	No
P10	Law	65-68	3	2	Third Sector	General management	No
P11	Engineering	58-64	3	2	Technology	General management	Yes
P12	Business administration	65-68	3	3	Retail Banking	General management	Yes
P13	Law	65-68	4	2	Public Administration	Legal	No
P14	Business administration	73-76	1	3	Real Estate	Finance	No
P15	Marketing	69-72	4	2	FMCG	General management	No
P16	Business administration	78-81	1	0	Real Estate	Finance	No
P17	Law	73-76	1	2	Public Administration	Finance	No

P18	Business administration	78-81	1	3	FMCG	General Management	No
P19	Business administration	58-64	3	1	Retail Banking	Finance	No
P20	Business administration	69-72	2	5	Education	General management	Yes
P21	Business administration	65-68	1	1	Retail	General management	No
P22	Business administration	73-76	3	2	FMCG	General management	No
P23	Psychology	65-68	1	2	Retail	Human resources	No
P24	Engineering	69-72	1	0	Technology	General management	Yes
P25	Marketing	69-72	1	2	Retail	General management	No
P26	Marketing	65-68	3	0	FMCG	General management	No
P27	Business administration	73-76	2	2	Public Administration	General management	No
P28	Business administration	69-72	3	2	FMCG	Marketing	No
P29	Law & business	58-64	3	0	Investment banking	General management	Yes
P30	Business administration	69-72	1	3	FMCG	Finance	No
P31	Law & Business	69-72	1	3	Energy	Human resources	Yes
P32	Business administration	65-68	1	2	Investment banking	General management	No
P33	Engineering	65-68	1	3	Construction	General management	Yes
P34	Engineering	78-81	6	4	Technology	General management	Yes

Source: Table by authors

Data Collection Procedures

This study is part of a larger research project examining how top Spanish female executives develop their leadership styles. We conducted in-depth interviews with 34 women, both in-person and virtually during COVID-19, drawing on established qualitative research guidelines for rigor (Gioia et al., 2013; Wengraf, 2001). The narrative approach provided rich insights into their leadership journeys and the occasional emergence of the IP, as the way stories are told is also a source of information (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

We began the interviews with an open question: "How have you developed your leadership style through your career?". The imposter phenomenon surfaced organically from participants' narratives rather than through direct questioning. The interview protocol evolved to deepen our understanding. We introduced a neutral query towards the interview's end: "Are you familiar with the imposter phenomenon?" followed by

optional, non-leading probes for further clarification, such as "Have you experienced it?", "Can you share details?" and "What helped you overcome it?"

Data Analysis

We used grounded theory techniques for data collection and analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The first researcher conducted interviews, transcriptions, and annotations then shared these with the other researchers. Every six interviews, they met to discuss common findings, refine the interview protocol, and consult the existing literature. We iteratively moved back and forth between data collection and analysis. After four meetings, it became clear that the concepts identified were saturated. However, five additional interviews that had already been scheduled were conducted to confirm saturation (Locke, 2003). After coding 34 interviews, we stopped data collection.

The present study followed the steps for content analysis recommended by Charmaz (2006). The first phase of the coding (initial coding) involved in-depth readings by the three researchers and discussions to identify the main categories. This was followed by the second phase (focused coding) using Nvivo 1.5 software to organize information thematically. In the inductive coding stage, we coded a large amount of data, examining interviews and identifying themes and sub-themes as Nvivo parent and child nodes. We ended up with many nodes needing revision for consistency and simplification. Coding is a living process subject to many changes as more interviews are analysed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

In the third phase, axial coding, we reviewed data category by category for coherence. Adjustments included redefining child nodes and reevaluating top nodes. Triangulation ensured trustworthiness, with the second and third authors independently analysing

two parent codes from randomly selected interviews. Finally, in the last phase (theoretical coding), we draw our analysis into the data structure presented in Table 2. We also developed a theoretical model of women's responses to overcome the IP, which will be explained later.

RESULTS

Three higher-order themes emerged from the analysis of the 34 interviewees' narratives. The first theme encompasses the confirmation of IP in female senior executives, the second theme identifies the consequences of IP, and the third theme deals with how to overcome this phenomenon. The themes and codes generated are presented in Table 2.

TABLE II. Themes and codes generated (*n*=34)

Theme 1: Framing the impostor phenomenon in female senior executives

Codes	References (participants)	Representative quote
Impostor feelings confirmation	14 (9)	*"Of course I do. Yes, yes, (…) One day they'll find out that I don't know anything and that I'm pulling their leg." (P27)*
Luck factor	38 (14)	*"And I was very lucky to be offered a board, to join a board of directors, from people who believed in me when I had no experience as a board member." (P12)*
Fake factor	36 (17)	*"When I arrived at the board of that great company, (…) I said to the chairman: Listen, thanks for the interview, but I don't know if I'm ready to be part of this board with this group of people (…) The president said to me: Excuse me, you're going to let us be the ones to say yes or no." (P11)*
Comments of no impostor feelings	24 (14)	*"Not at all, in no position have I ever felt like that (impostor feelings). … I said why me and not her, and I said because you have a capacity for analysis, you have these results" (P18)*

Theme 2: The impostor phenomenon consequences in female senior executives

Codes	References (Participants)	Representative Quote
Perfectionism	20 (11)	*"We must be the best professionals, the best bosses, the best collaborators, the best mothers, the best wives, and the best daughters. And you generate quite a tremendous tension in yourself" (P31)*

| Self-limitation | 20 (11) | *"Hey, Salvador (her husband), I don't think I know if I'm capable of doing this job, right?' And then he said, ' Can you imagine a single guy thinking about whether he's going to be able to do this?" (P11)* |

Theme 3: Overcome the impostor phenomenon

Codes	References (Participants)	Representative Quote
Communication	13 (9)	*"'Oh, but why am I being offered this? But I don't know if I will be able to do it. But well, that's a lot, isn't it?' You have these doubts, and then I worked on it with my coaches." (P25)*
Self-reflection	19 (11)	*"I've always been doubting myself and saying, "No, you're capable, you're intelligent, you're hard-working, and why aren't you going to make it? Now, yes, I've had a hard time with myself and with that doubt." (P13)*
Good habits	8 (7)	*"Every Monday, I wake up saying, 'I'm going to resign because I'd better resign, and no one has to come and tell me.' Well, how do I manage these thoughts? When you say, 'I take care of business,' and you start doing it, those thoughts disappear (…). So, when I'm worried, I get busy. I do my best to get it out of my head." (P22)*

Source: Table by authors

Theme 1: Framing the impostor phenomenon in top executive women

Among the 34 interviewees, 59% (20 participants) reported experiencing IP. However, regardless of whether or not they have experienced it firsthand, the research into the interviewees' feelings has allowed us to offer an expanded, rich and detailed characterization of this phenomenon. Sub-themes clustered under this theme were: (1) impostor feelings confirmation, (2) luck factor, (3) fake factor, and (4) instances devoid of IP experiences.

Impostor feeling confirmation

Some interviewees answered very assertively when questioned about their experiences with IP. For instance, Participant 12 expressed, "I feel like an impostor; I am totally an impostor." Similarly, Participant 22 described it as fluctuating, stating, "It

comes and goes, it comes and goes. I experience IP as described in books (...) And I don't think it's insecurity, I think it's self-demand".

Participants also offered brief definitions of IP within their narratives, such as "self-doubt" (P13) or "the feeling that you are overrated. That others think you can do things when you don't" (P30). Additionally, Participant 21 expressed doubts about meriting higher positions and mentioned, "You never believe that you deserve the position." Interestingly, one participant introduced a positive perspective by admitting to experiencing IP somewhat joyfully:

"I will tell you that I do, and I have experienced it. But when you endure that impostor phenomenon, I think it leads you to humility and approaching things with a certain humility and active listening." (P11)

In summary, a majority of the women leaders interviewed acknowledged experiencing the IP, which intensified their self-doubt and insecurity. However, as illustrated by the final quote provided, the impact of this phenomenon is not solely detrimental. It can also positively influence the development of relationships with others, potentially leading to enhanced leadership capabilities. This aspect will be further analyzed in the sections that follow.

Luck factor

Results suggest that interviewees who reported experiences with IP frequently attributed their career progression to luck "I was extremely lucky to grow up" (P12). An analysis of the transcripts reveals that the term "luck" appears most frequently (between six and eighteen times) in ten of the eleven transcriptions from women who have experienced IP. Participant 6, who mentioned the word "luck" many times, is the

exception, as she assured that luck exists, but an enormous effort must accompany it, " and it's not just luck, you can have a good team around you because (…) you build it."

Luck is shown to be a decisive factor in defining IP. Many interviews revealed that individuals with impostor feelings often downplayed their contributions to success and attributed disproportionate significance to luck. They emphasized luck rather than their ability, effort, and commitment. Participant 2 referred to luck in situations where external observers would not consider luck to be a factor:

> "I tried to adapt. The truth is that I was lucky, or I worked hard, or I would have proved it, that the team that was in Japan was put in place to report to me instead of the other way around." (P2)

Analysing the interviewees' references to luck, the results show that luck emerged as a key external leverage in their success "I forgot to tell you 'you will never meet a luckier woman in your life than me' (...) in the end what I can conclude is that I am very lucky" (P33). Similarly, providence is often mentioned alongside luck as another external attribution for success, as Participant 14 notes, "I consider that I have always had a lot of luck, luck or providence" (P14). Some interviewees reiterated that they were privileged to recognise the disparity between their contributions and their achievements. "I also see people who work with me, who are worth much more than I (…) I am in a totally privileged position because I have been able to get this far" (P21).

Fake factor

In addition to luck, another dimension that describes the IP is the feelings of fraud. Individuals experiencing IP often undervalue their achievements "I have seen others do my same jobs, and I think they have all done better than me" (P9). Another began

her interview with notable self-doubt: "Perhaps I am probably not at the same level as many of the people you have interviewed so far. Also, to put it in context, my level is different" (P30).

Such individuals frequently fear disappointing others. Participant 8 expressed a significant concern about failing senior leaders: "I would hate to disappoint the chairman and the CEO, that is, to fail them, the concept of letting them down rather than making errors" (P8). Similarly, they often deny their expertise: "What am I doing here if I don't know anything about this?" (P27). Moreover, they perceive their colleagues as far more competent, as Participant 12 illustrates: "I am surrounded by more intelligent people on the top and the bottom, on the sides" (P12).

This perceived "fake factor" is notably evident when women are promoted and experience a sense of vertigo: "What am I doing now leading this team? And then I felt a little bit of vertigo" (P10). Participant 25 echoed this uncertainty, questioning her capabilities for a new role: "Why am I being offered this? But I don't know if I'm going to be able to do this" (P25).

Instances devoid of IP experience

The three previous sub-themes manifest in our research as the confirmation of women leaders who have experienced IP. To broaden the characterization of this phenomenon, we explore perspectives from those who emphatically deny experiencing IP, with one respondent stating a "radical no" (P23). Another participant asserted that her success was purely a result of her own efforts, explicitly rejecting the role of luck or external factors "I have worked hard, and how did I" (P19).

Furthermore, those who denied experiencing IP did not impose perfectionist standards upon themselves "I have done well in life without seeking perfection" (P32), noted the generally low standards in her field "the average is very low" (P32), and recognised the occasional role of serendipity "being at the right time, in the right place" (P6).

These interviewees also remarked that feeling overwhelmed by challenges does not imply experiencing IP "It is inevitable in times of transitions, a problem of self-confidence, not so much feeling like an impostor" (P15). Moreover, some described experiencing high adrenaline during significant changes, which did not lead them to doubt their capabilities or feel underqualified. Thus, it is crucial not to conflate IP with occasional reliance on luck or experiencing temporary vertigo:

> "Not as such (I have not felt like an impostor), but it is true (...) the higher you go up the mountain, the more vertigo you feel when you look down! And, also, the more others expect from you" (P34)

Theme 2: The impostor phenomenon consequences in female senior executives

Perfectionism

The term "perfectionism" was mentioned 19 times throughout the interviews. This pursuit often stems from a desire to avoid any accusations of fraudulence. "This can be related to IP, where you want everything to be perfect and everything to be right" (P2).

Interviewees often described maladaptive perfectionism as being marked by a noticeable gap between their high standards and performance: "I always doubt whether I am doing as well as I can"(P13). Similarly, Participant 16 expressed setting expectations

beyond the achievable, stating, "Maybe we are so self-demanding that you think that although you have given 100%, you could have given 110%" (P16). Participant 22 emphasized this by admitting, "I feel that I don't compete with anyone. I compete with myself".

This perfectionism is expressed in the case of some participants as an internal demand " to be the best professionals, the best bosses, the best collaborators, the best mothers, wives, and daughters" (P31). Such perfectionism often escalates into anxiety: "I can assure you that I constantly feel that I can do things a million times better than I am doing them. I am a perennial non-conformist." (P30)

Self-limitation

Furthermore, 11 women reported feelings of self-limitation associated with IP, particularly when confronting new challenges. Doubts about their own competence dominated these internal constraints: "A key example of my IP is when I start "I won't be able to, I won't be able to, No, I don't know, I don't know" (P22). These doubts make you feel "very humble, and I also felt very small" (P11). One participant noted:

> "It's healthy to realize your limitations because every little jump you take on the vertical or every leap makes you feel dizzy, and you start to find yourself tiny." (P31)

In addition to feeling diminished, some interviewees experiencing IP questioned their ability to meet new challenges: "Will I be up to it? (…) This is like crossing a minefield" (P13). They doubted their capabilities and did not value the past successes that might motivate them "Maybe you don't feel enough qualified. (…) That limits a lot" (P16).

In these instances, despite taking on the challenges, women leaders expressed doubts about their capabilities, although external observers clearly perceived them as competent to handle the tasks.

Theme 3: Overcome the impostor phenomenon

This study illustrates that some female executives have experienced IP despite their professional achievements. The strategies these leaders employed to mitigate the effects of IP were categorized into three primary support mechanisms: (1) Communication, (2) Self-reflection, and (3) Good habits.

Communication

Among the strategies, nine interviewees highlighted the importance of acknowledging and articulating the problem as crucial for overcoming IP. One participant emphasized the significance of labeling one's experiences to make them more manageable:

> "This is what happens to me, it's normal, and nothing happens. That yes, I'm good, that this is paranoia, I'm putting in my head. In other words, once you identify it, it leaves you calm (…). When I didn't know, I used to say, 'They're going to realize that I don't know anything (laughs). But look, hey, I'm over it." (P27)

The research identifies that certain profiles are particularly effective in assisting in addressing IP. These executives often shared their impostor feelings with trusted individuals when challenges arose. For instance, Participant 11 confided in her husband about her self-doubts in new roles, while Participant 17 found support among colleagues and friends who reassured her of her capabilities. Participant 16 identified her boss as a

key ally in managing her concerns. Participants 22, 31, and 33 sought counsel within their professional circles during times of doubt.

Furthermore, three other participants (P11, P20, and P25) engaged coaches to bolster their confidence and combat feelings of inadequacy. Participant 20 remarked on the significant positive impact of coaching: "The coach was very good for me to gain confidence and not to feel too insecure." Engagement in women's networks also played a role in normalizing IP, as sharing experiences with peers helped to demystify the phenomenon:

> "And that's when I suddenly felt I became aware of this (IP). And that's when I realized and said, "Ah, well, we indeed need help; we need a network so that if at any given moment we need it, people will say that this is happening to me." (P31)

Self-reflection

For these women executives, the act of communicating their vulnerabilities related to IP served as a catalyst for self-reflection. When they shared their feelings, others offered different perspectives that prompted reflection on their professional journey. Through such interactions, participants began to recognise their own agency and contributions beyond mere luck. For instance, Participant 14 remarked, "You say, oh, how lucky to have been able to... Lucky? Yes, lucky, but you have to make that decision."

As they assumed complex roles, participants like P11, P2, and P27 realized the impossibility of mastering every detail, with P11 stating, "When you are given a General Management position, it is impossible to master." Participant 12 reflected on the cultural biases, such as risk aversion, that shaped their professional attitudes. This self-

reflection helped them understand that mistakes are an inevitable part of growth and should not lead to self-punishment.

Participants 13, 22, and 27 also articulated how they managed the distress of impostor feelings by focusing on their strengths. P27 advised, "You have to be humble but also very aware of what your strengths are and what you can offer." Participant 22 emphasized the importance of self-awareness:

> "That's another thing that I point out to you, which I think is key, which is knowing what you are good at, which I don't even think I'm completely clear on yet, but I'm spending more and more time on understanding what I do well." (P22)

Good habits

In addition to discussing their impostor feelings and engaging in self-reflection, the female executives developed effective habits to manage IP. For instance, Participant 22 adopted a proactive approach, emphasizing the importance of "taking action instead of dwelling on thoughts" to combat the perceived illusion of incompetence associated with her impostor feelings:

> "The impostor syndrome is an example of when I start 'I can't, I can't, I don't know, I don't know.' That's when I say to myself, 'Get on, get on. If you're worried, what are you doing with that?" (P22)

These women leaders discovered that shifting their focus towards tasks or individuals helped them realize the futility of dwelling on impostor feelings, as articulated by Participant 9: "We have to focus on what is today." Additionally, they learned the importance of relinquishing perfectionism. Participant 12 emphasized the need to avoid

overextending oneself, "not trying to be superwoman, asking for help." Participant 20 further reflected on how perfectionism can become a significant trap.

"Indeed, if perfectionism seeks you out and finds you, it makes you its slave (...) The point of non-perfectionism, I am quite proud of that because it has been a learning point and has set me free." (P20)

They learned to be more lenient towards themselves and realized that situations were often less dire than they initially seemed, "Oh no, I'm not going to measure up, and it seems like I'm here on borrowed time. But then, when I feel that way, I always say: Well, I don't know, but I will learn." (P21).

DISCUSSION

This qualitative study highlights IP among female senior executives, with 20 out of 34 participants feeling like "frauds" in their careers. This contrasts with Cárdenas et al. (2014), where women leaders generally attributed success to their own merits. Our findings suggest a more complex scenario of self-doubt among high-achieving women, careful not to confuse IP with sometimes believing in luck.

This result aligns with research conducted by Rohrmann et al. (2016) and Leonhardt et al. (2017), confirming the presence of impostor feelings in leaders. Our study goes a step further by providing evidence to support one of the two explanations Rohrmann et al. (2016) offered regarding why women leaders showed lower levels of impostorism than expected in their study of 242 leaders. Our results suggest that IP diminishes after career progression and not so much that women who have become leaders are less prone to this phenomenon. In light of Glass and Cook's (2016) findings, it is possible that

women executives, initially facing heightened scrutiny, learn to navigate and mitigate impostor feelings by overcoming career challenges.

The experiences of IP among female senior executives, as confirmed through self-assessments and interviews, reveal a dual perception of fraud and luck as primary factors, aligning with the simplification of Clance's (1985) three factors into these two (Domínguez-Soto et al., 2023). Participants expressed doubt in their abilities and a fear of being exposed as frauds, while attributing professional successes to external factors such as luck, thus minimising their own contributions.

The study uncovers key consequences of IP, including perfectionism, highlighted by several researchers (Cokley et al., 2018; Pannhausen et al., 2022; Rohrmann et al., 2016), and self-imposed limitations from a lack of confidence, leading to increased efforts to avoid perceptions of fraudulence (Lee, H. et al., 2022; Leonhardt et al., 2017). Notably, the selected participants, despite their successful careers, did not report other negative effects commonly associated with IP, such as decreased job satisfaction, increased stress, or reduced career aspirations (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017; Vergauwe et al., 2015), suggesting a potential bias due to their career success.
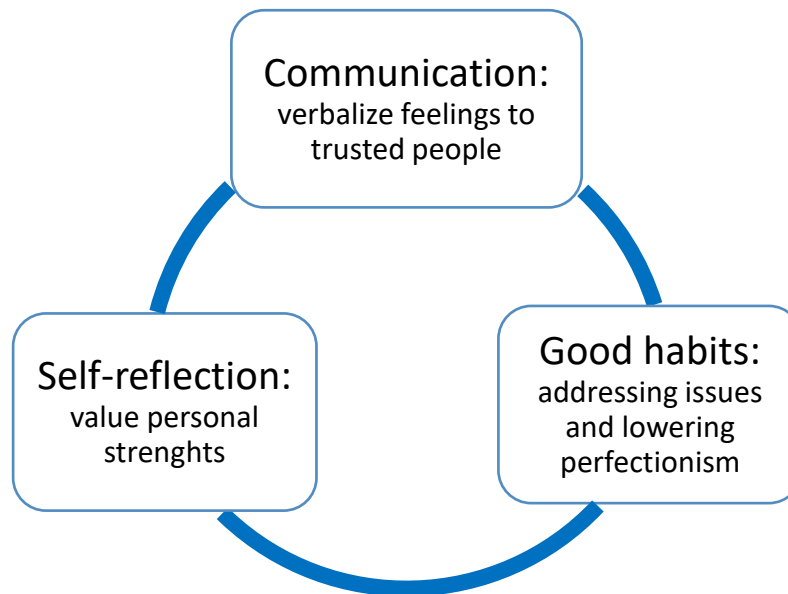
The IP has been identified as a psychological barrier to career development, sapping motivation to lead (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016). However, this study also highlights a positive aspect or a "functional" dimension of IP. This aspect includes excessive self-demand driving executives towards excellence, facilitated by their ability to manage IP effectively. Interestingly, the discourse reveals a positive perception of IP, seen as both a "torture and a blessing" (P22), driving individuals to compete with themselves and strive for their best, supported by recent research highlighting IP's positive workplace impacts (Kark et al., 2022; Tewfik, 2022).

Our results also highlight the vulnerability of women who experience IP, emphasising their need for social support (Chakraverty, 2020; Manongsong & Ghosh, 2021). Communicating with their partners or trusted individuals about their fears and stresses related to IP helps them to overcome it. Interviewees sometimes question their capability to handle challenges despite others recognising their skills. They find support aligning with Haar and de Jong's (2022) on organisational support buffering against impostor feelings. These trustful interviews have also shown how this phenomenon fosters humility and effective interactions, as Tewfik (2022) stated. The sympathy of these leaders enhances their approachability (Blake et al., 2022).

Another critical point identified in our study concerns the elements or practices that can help women overcome IP, which is described in the results section as theme 3. A recursive approach to process theorizing (Cloutier & Langley, 2020) can be employed to present this coping process. In our interviews, participants shared how they dealt with IP by taking specific actions that led to virtuous cycles of self-reinforcement and personal resilience. Based on our findings, we have proposed a model of a virtuous cycle that can help reduce IP. Figure 1 illustrates the model, including three levers of support: communication, good habits, and self-reflection.

FIGURE 1. Personal empowerment model: a virtuous cycle to overcome IP

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            ┌──────────────────────┐
            │   Communication:     │
            │ verbalize feelings to│
            │   trusted people     │
            └──────────────────────┘

┌──────────────────┐        ┌──────────────────┐
│ Self-reflection: │        │   Good habits:   │
│  value personal  │        │ addressing issues│
│     strenghts    │        │   and lowering   │
│                  │        │  perfectionism   │
└──────────────────┘        └──────────────────┘
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In contrast to Clance and Imes' (1978) cycle of imposture, a virtuous cycle of the IP is proposed, aligning with the concept of the virtuous cycle in organisations presented by Kark et al. (2022). When faced with a new challenge, individuals may doubt their abilities and fear not meeting others' expectations. To combat this phenomenon, it is crucial to recognise and verbalise these feelings, communicating them to trusted individuals such as a partner, boss, mentor, or support network. Once these feelings are expressed, and support is received, it is vital to reinforce positive habits. This involves refraining from excessive worry about the future, which can be mentally draining, and confronting specific small challenges directly. Moreover, it is essential to avoid the trap of perfectionism and downplay the seriousness of mistakes. After successfully navigating the challenge, reflecting on and celebrating achievements can enhance self-awareness and value strengths. This cycle equips individuals to face future challenges and counter doubts effectively.

Practical implications

HR departments should promote gender diversity at senior levels (Wu et al., 2022) and eliminate conscious and unconscious gender biases (Lyness & Grotto, 2018). We advocate HR practices that address internal barriers to women's career progression (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023).

Firstly, activating the virtuous circle of IP helps develop a pipeline of women leaders (Spencer et al., 2019). We recommend creating a mentoring program, as proposed in other studies (Chakraverty, 2020; Haar & de Jong, 2022; Manongsong & Ghosh, 2021; Noskeau et al., 2021), based on the experiences and learnings of these female executives for junior to mid-career women. These programs should include all women aspiring to or currently in management roles, enhancing open communication, self-reflection, and a complete understanding of one's competencies.

Secondly, the virtuous circle of IP can cultivate a healthy leadership identity in women (Byrne & Chadwick, 2024), counteracting the effects of the Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002). There's a gap between the leader who is competent but still not ready to put her hand up. A curated top-down sponsoring system designed to activate the virtuous circle of IP should help women struggling with self-promotion maintain agency, effectiveness, and authenticity despite identity tensions, enhancing their leadership skills. IP encourages humility, improves interactions, and increases accessibility, shaping transformational leaders (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Eagly et al., 2003). Integrating strategies to mitigate IP with initiatives promoting transformational leadership can help women delegate more effectively, reduce perfectionism, and foster trusting team relationships (Domínguez-Soto et al., 2023; Yukl, 2012).

Limitations and future research

The current study has several limitations that can open up new avenues of research. First, our exploratory study focused on 34 female Spanish senior leaders selected through the snowballing technique (Noy, 2008). Future work could include larger samples drawn from diverse cultures and nationalities.

Second, this study sheds light on leadership development and experiences with IP of female executives but acknowledges the limitation of not exploring these within broader organisational contexts. The impact of being in a numerical minority, as highlighted by Hoang (2013), deserves further investigation to understand the potential intensification of IP in women. Moreover, a comparative analysis with male counterparts could reveal how men in top positions manage the IP. A more comprehensive gender perspective would require analysing differences in the collective of men and women and "should also consider the extent to which individuals identify with typical characteristics of masculinity and femininity, i.e., their gender-role orientation," as Patzak et al. (2017) argued.

Third, our sample targeted women who reached the top positions through the labyrinth. Future research could study women as middle managers to validate the strategies proposed in the virtuous cycle to overcome IP.

Finally, there is a chance that biases may have influenced the interpretations, leading other researchers to arrive at different conclusions, themes, and categories. However, we made every effort to maintain objectivity in conducting and analysing this research, adhering to established qualitative principles of transparency and consistency (Patton, 2015). Therefore, we are confident that our approach has provided a more profound understanding of IP.

CONCLUSION

This research shows two sides of IP, encapsulated by this quote: "It's my torture and my blessing" (P22). The negative consequences, such as perfectionism and the fear of being exposed as a fraud, are confirmed among female senior executives experiencing IP. On the other hand, our findings suggest that effective IP management can also positively affect organizational performance and foster improved interpersonal relationships among top management. Furthermore, this study offers a theoretical contribution by proposing the virtuous cycle of IP that reduces the perception of impostorism through three elements: communication, good habits, and self-reflection, complementing the cycle presented by Kark et al. (2022). By highlighting an internal barrier such as the IP (Vergauwe et al., 2015), which is exacerbated by gender stereotypes in career development for senior management (Eagly et al., 2020; Kulich et al., 2021), we propose activating virtuous cycles of IP to assist women in navigating the labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2007) and reducing the gender gap at the top level.

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