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Exploring the Imposter Syndrome: Perspectives from Executive Coaches

Nonhlanhla Mkhize

Supervisor: Dr Elona Ndlovu

A research report submitted to the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management, University of the Witwatersrand, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Management in Business and Executive Coaching

Wits Business School

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of executive coaching as an intervention to support and empower women leaders who experience imposter syndrome in South Africa. The imposter syndrome refers to a psychological phenomenon characterised by self-doubt and the persistent fear of being exposed as a "fraud." In South Africa's corporate landscape, where women remain underrepresented in senior roles, imposter syndrome poses a significant barrier to women's professional growth and career advancement.

The purpose of this research was to explore the perceptions of executive coaches regarding their experiences in coaching women leaders affected by imposter syndrome. A qualitative, interpretivist approach was employed, with data collected through semi-structured interviews with fifteen experienced executive coaches. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes and insights.

Key findings reveal that executive coaches perceive impostor syndrome as a widespread issue affecting women's confidence, leadership style, and career progression. Coaches identified various internal and external factors contributing to the imposter syndrome, including societal expectations and workplace dynamics. Effective coaching strategies, such as fostering self-advocacy, resilience, and reframing self-perceptions, have been found to help mitigate these effects and enable women to fully embrace their leadership potential.

This study contributes to the literature by providing insights into the practical applications of executive coaching in addressing imposter syndrome, underscoring its potential as a transformative tool in developing women leaders. Recommendations for organisations include integrating executive coaching into leadership development programmes to promote gender equality in corporate leadership.

Keywords: Imposter syndrome, executive coaching, women leaders, South Africa, corporate leadership, qualitative research

DECLARATION

I, Nonhlanhla Mkhize, declare that this research report is my own work except as indicated in the references and acknowledgements. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Management in Business and Executive Coaching at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted previously for any degree or examination at this university or any other institution.

Name: Nonhlanhla Mkhize Signature: 

Signed at Edenvale ……

On the 1st ……. day of December …… 2024

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to all my loved ones who have supported and encouraged me throughout this entire journey of learning and growth.

To my husband, Lindelani Mkhize, I am eternally grateful for your unconditional love, support and encouragement. You have consistently believed in me, more than I sometimes believe in myself, and have held me to a high standard. Thank you for keeping your promise to never let me give up. Ngiyabonga Gcwabe.

To my daughters, Owethu, Thando, and Maya, I am blessed and grateful to be your mother. I would not have been able to do this without your unconditional support and encouragement. Thank you for holding the space of my vulnerability so well during the last few years. With this work, I hope to inspire you to always strive for what you need to better yourself at any age and stage of your life.

To my parents, Dr. Albert and Mrs Manana Nhlanhla, uMa no Baba – you have both inspired me to always do better. Your keen interest and support of my progress and growth have been a source of encouragement. Thank you for your unwavering support and ongoing encouragement.

To my brother, Mlu Nhlanhla, and his wife, Pam, my sister, Xolo Mbizane and her husband, Zwe and my sister, Lungi Nhlanhla – thank you for your unending support, understanding and encouragement when I needed it the most. You have all carried and encouraged me in your own special ways. I will forever be grateful for the blessing you all are in my life.

Ngiyabonga.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ABCCCP African Board of Coaching, Consulting and Coaching Psychology

CBC Cognitive Behavioural Coaching

COMENSA Coaches and Mentors of South Africa

GROW Goal, Reality, Options, and Will

GSAEC Graduate School Alliance for Education in Coaching

ICF International Coaching Federation

JSE Johannesburg Stock Exchange

MBTI Myers-Briggs Type Indicator

NLP Neuro-Linguistic Programming

STEM Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

UNDP United Nations Development Programme

WEF World Economic Forum

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the key details of the study that was conducted. It contains the purpose and context of the study, which will be followed by the problem statement that the study sought to investigate. The core of the chapter will follow this, the research objectives and questions as well as the significance of the study. In conclusion to the chapter, the study will culminate in a delineation of its limitations, an elucidation of key terminologies, and a presentation of the underlying assumptions.

1.1 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this qualitative, exploratory study is to examine the perceptions of executive coaches regarding their coaching experiences with women leaders who exhibit symptoms of imposter syndrome in corporate South Africa. The study aims to uncover how executive coaches interpret and navigate the imposter phenomenon, as well as the coaching strategies they perceive as effective in empowering women leaders.

1.2 Context of the study

This study was conducted in modern-day South Africa, which has been the nation's identity since the post-apartheid era, beginning in 1994. It showcases a dynamic socio-political landscape with ongoing efforts towards reconciliation, diversity, and economic development while addressing persistent challenges such as unemployment and inequality. A particular focus is on women leaders in the corporate space, with business executive coaching serving as an intervention (Hutson, 2007; Mabandla, 2018). Apartheid South Africa presented a double-edged sword for women through the practice of both racism and sexism. Gender discrimination remained rife and deeply rooted in culture, with each culture finding its unique manner of viewing women as inferior (Hutson, 2007; Mabandla, 2018; Mudau, Mokoboki, Ravhuhali & Mkhize, 2021).

As stated by Baden, cited by Hutson (2007), prior to South Africa's colonisation, women had gained status and power as primary farmers. They lost this with

colonisation when farming became commercialised and therefore less important, thus stripping women of power and status (Anunobi, 2003; Hutson, 2007; Mabandla, 2018; Mudau, Mokoboki, Ravhuhali & Mkhize, 2021). On August 9, 1956, women gathered in an effort to bring about their emancipation. Approximately 20 000 South African women took to the streets to march to the Union Buildings which is the official headquarters of the government of South Africa in Pretoria, to protest the pass laws which were restricting their movement and therefore their ability to work (Light & Baloyi, 2006; Klotz, Maqhutyana, Qosha & Tsira, 2021).

The late former President Nelson Mandela and former President Thabo Mbeki are credited with spearheading transformation and women's empowerment as democratically elected leaders of the post-apartheid era (Calland & Sithole, 2022). The late former president is reported to have stated that freedom can only be achieved if women are liberated from all forms of oppression and treated equally in society (Hills, 2015; Calland & Sithole, 2022).

" Progressive" is the word most often used to describe the Constitution of democratic South Africa (Act 108 of 1996), which grants women comprehensive rights (Murray & O'Sullivan, 2005; Rustin, 2021). When read in conjunction with the Employment Equity Act (Act 55 of 1998), women's economic participation in both public and private sectors is broadly promoted (Nkomo, 2016). Gender equality is thus firmly on the South African legislative and corporate governance agendas. This is echoed globally, as Gender equality (Goal 5) is also an integral part of the 17 United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030 (UN Women, 2019). Despite international, national, legislative, and corporate efforts, including those in state-owned and privately owned businesses, the reality is that South Africa, and indeed the world, still have low female representation in corporate leadership positions (Nkomo, 2016).

The 2021 Global Gender Gap Index reports that women must wait 135.6 years to achieve equal footing with men, up from 99.5 years in 2020. Necessary societal measures implemented in the COVID-19 global pandemic management have set gender equality efforts back 36 years. Furthermore, according to the International

Labour Organization, 5% of all working women lost work or income compared to only 3.9% of working men (Suleymanova, 2021). The disproportionate gendered effect of the pandemic was noted by President Cyril Ramaphosa, who, during a virtual summit of G20 leaders, stated that the COVID-19 pandemic had exposed the urgent need for economic empowerment of women (Njilo, 2020).

1.3 Problem Statement

Despite progressive policies promoting gender equality in South Africa, women remain significantly underrepresented in senior leadership positions across corporate sectors. According to Statistics South Africa (2021), women comprise 51.1% of the population; however, the 2021 Businesswomen's Association of South Africa (BWASA) Leadership Census reported that only 6% of Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE)-listed companies had women as Chief Executive Officers (CEOs). In state-owned enterprises, this figure stood at 11.8%. A similar pattern is seen globally, where women account for less than 7% of Fortune 500 CEOs (UN Women, 2020b).

A variety of factors have been identified as barriers to women's leadership progression, including gender bias, systemic obstacles, and entrenched societal expectations (Leite, 2019; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016). While much of the existing literature has focused on structural or organisational factors, increasing attention is being paid to internal psychological barriers such as imposter syndrome, which may further undermine women's career advancement (Vergauwe et al., 2015).

Imposter syndrome, initially identified by Clance and Imes (1978), is characterised by high-achieving individuals doubting their abilities and attributing their success to external factors, such as luck or diligence, rather than their own competence. Research shows that individuals experiencing imposter syndrome often undervalue their accomplishments, struggle to internalise success, and fear being exposed as intellectual frauds (Tigranyan et al., 2021). This internal conflict can contribute to reduced confidence, diminished assertiveness, and reluctance to pursue leadership opportunities.

Socialisation also plays a key role. Some women and other marginalised individuals may internalise societal cues that suggest they are less likely to succeed, which can foster persistent self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy (Leite, 2019). This aligns with the view that equality legislation alone cannot correct historical disadvantage without addressing the psychological impact of inequality. Fitzsimmons and Callan (2016) further argue that the progression of women into leadership roles is influenced by factors beyond capability, including access to social capital, visibility, sponsorship, and exposure to challenging assignments. These elements are often undermined when imposter syndrome is present. Notably, Zanchetta et al. (2020) found that coaching interventions were effective in reducing symptoms of imposter syndrome among young professionals, suggesting the potential value of coaching in supporting career development. However, there is limited research in the South African context specifically examining executive coaches' perceptions of imposter syndrome in women leaders and how they approach this phenomenon in their practice.

This study, therefore, seeks to explore the perspectives of executive coaches who work with women leaders experiencing imposter syndrome in corporate South Africa in order to better understand the perceived impact of this phenomenon and whether coaching is viewed as a viable intervention to support women's leadership development.

1.4 Research Objectives

The overarching aim of this study is to explore imposter syndrome as experienced by women leaders in corporate South Africa, specifically through the lens of executive coaches who have worked with these women. This study does not directly investigate the experiences of the women leaders themselves but rather focuses on how executive coaches perceive, understand, and navigate the phenomenon in their coaching practice.

In alignment with the study's qualitative and exploratory design, the specific objectives are:

i. To explore how executive coaches perceive and experience the coaching process for women leaders who exhibit symptoms of imposter syndrome.

ii. To examine executive coaches' perceptions of how imposter syndrome influences the leadership development and career progression of women in corporate South Africa.

These objectives aim to generate deeper insights into the intersection of coaching and psychological barriers that may hinder women's advancement into leadership roles. The findings may contribute to more targeted coaching strategies and inform organisational leadership development programmes.

1.5 Research Questions

Based on the objectives of the study and the interpretivist research design, the following research questions guided the inquiry:

i. What are the perceptions of executive coaches regarding the process of coaching women leaders who experience imposter syndrome?

ii. How do executive coaches perceive the influence of imposter syndrome on the leadership development and career progression of women in corporate South Africa?

1.6 Significance of the study

Despite progressive gender equity targets in South Africa, women remain under-represented at the senior management levels. There is a need to increase the number of women leaders in the corporate space and not lose the women already occupying leadership positions (Martinez & Forrey, 2019; Owens, 2021). Imposter syndrome has the potential to negate broad-based societal and organisational interventions, contributing to a drain of talent through individuals who exit or opt out of their careers due to self-doubt (Nakazwe-Masiya et al., 2017; Bowen & Botha, 2023). By understanding the prevalence of imposter syndrome, organisations can design their interventions accordingly.

Corporate firms, such as Deloitte and Ernst & Young, have progressive policies on paper regarding gender equality and women's empowerment (Prügl & True, 2014; Walters, 2022). In a 2020 press release, Deloitte committed to increasing its female ownership and representation across its African firms. Ernst & Young has the “Women Fast Forward Initiative” that seeks to fast-track the development of women. There is an indication that women's empowerment is key (Varghese,2011; Norton, 2021). Therefore, women are expected to be in their best form to be high-performing and productive individuals, especially as leaders, as studies suggest that their performance may be marred by imposter syndrome at the senior level (Ling, Zhang, & Tay, 2020).

Imposter syndrome is a real phenomenon that has already drained businesses of significant top talent, as individuals have exited or opted not to advance their careers due to self-doubt. The significance of the study lies in making progress toward finding more information on alleviating imposter syndrome. To this end, this study explored executive coaching (Winter, 2020), which is defined below. The significance of the study also lies in considering executive coaching intervention for women who experience the imposter syndrome (Winter, 2020). Coaching is regarded as one of the programmatic interventions that can support career progression in marginalised individuals (Abbot, 2006).

The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge in leadership, management, and coaching studies. It may assist Talent Management practitioners, Human Resources departments, relevant associations, and policymakers who aspire to overcome barriers to women's advancement to senior management positions.

1.7 Delimitations of the study

This study focuses specifically on the imposter syndrome as experienced by women leaders in corporate South Africa, as perceived through the lens of executive coaches. It deliberately excludes the experiences of male leaders or other gender identities, not because they do not experience imposter syndrome

but because the historical and socio-cultural disadvantages faced by women warrant focused investigation. The study further delimits its scope to individual-level psychological barriers, primarily explored within the context of the coaching relationship. Broader systemic barriers such as unequal policies, pay gaps, or organisational cultures were not directly investigated, although they may have emerged indirectly through participants' reflections. Additionally, while the foundational study by Clance and Imes (1978) identified four behavioural patterns that maintain imposter syndrome — (1) diligence and overwork, (2) feelings of phoniness, (3) use of charm and perceptiveness, and (4) fear of negative consequences such as being seen as hostile or unfeminine — this study primarily focused on the first three patterns, as these emerged most prominently in the coaching narratives. The fourth behaviour, which concerns how societal perceptions penalise women who act confidently or assertively, was not explored in depth. This delimitation resulted from both the study's interpretivist design and the nature of the coaching conversations shared by participants. Future research could benefit from a more targeted investigation into how gendered perceptions of assertiveness intersect with imposter syndrome in leadership contexts. Finally, the study focused only on one-on-one executive coaching as an intervention and did not explore other developmental tools such as mentorship, therapy, or group coaching models.

1.8 Definitions of the study

***Imposter syndrome*:** This phenomenon was first coined in the 1970s by Dr. Pauline Clance and Dr. Suzanne Imes, who likened the syndrome to a feeling of academic or professional fraud (Clance & Imes, 1978). Imposter syndrome is characterized by extreme feelings of being a fraud, experienced by high-performing individuals despite their legitimate and outstanding academic and professional achievements (Edwards, 2019).

***Coaching*:** Coaching is a process between a coach and a client, working together on the client's agenda in order to convert potential to actual performance (Wales, 2002; Starr, 2021; Martens & Vealey, 2023). It is an equal

responsibility partnership aimed at achieving efficient, sustainable effectiveness by applying focused learning across all aspects of the client's life. Through coaching, the client achieves self-awareness and is empowered to generate his own choices and solutions choices (Rodgers, 2012, p. 7). It is the unleashing of people's abilities in order for their performance to be empowered, thus supporting them to learn as opposed to teaching them (Whitmore, Kauffman & David, 2016).

Executive Coaching: A relationship between a client with managerial authority and responsibility in an organisation and a consultant using various behavioural techniques and methods to support the client to achieve set goals, improve professional performance and personal satisfaction in order to improve the effectiveness of client's organisation within the context of the coaching agreement (Kilburg, 2000; Boysen-Rotelli, 2021; Knowles & Knowles, 2021). Executive Coaching focuses on applying coaching principles to achieve aligned organisational and personal goals (Roberts & Jarrett, 2018).

1.9 Assumptions

i. This study assumed that the participants were honest and unbiased in sharing their views on the subject, given the anonymity associated with their participation.

ii. This study assumed that the participants had adequate knowledge and understanding of the subject matter based on their academic qualifications and experience.

iii. This study assumed that the participants would be able to recall the experiences of women leaders they coached in accurate detail.

iv. This study assumed that the participants would share input from their experiences with women leaders in South Africa, as well as with other coachees they work with, and their own possible experiences.

1.10 Structure of the report

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the study, delineating its fundamental components and addressing contextual factors that necessitated the research. Chapter 1 articulates research objectives, questions, and anticipated contributions, presenting a coherent argument for the study's significance and potential impact within the identified field of inquiry, thus establishing a robust foundation for the subsequent research exploration.

Chapter 2 reviews the available literature to gain a deeper understanding of the impostor syndrome and its origins. This chapter also explores the theoretical foundations of executive coaching as the study assesses its effectiveness as an intervention to treat and support women leaders in corporate South Africa who experience feelings of imposter syndrome.

Chapter 3 outlines the research approach and design adopted for conducting this qualitative study.

Chapter 4 outlines the themes and sub-themes that have emerged from the analysis process.

Chapter 5 discusses the findings for each of the two research questions.

Chapter 6 is the final chapter of the study. It consolidates and concludes the study's findings, providing recommendations for practical application based on the study's learnings.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This study focuses on an executive coaching intervention for corporate women leaders in South Africa who experience imposter syndrome. Women have a unique contribution to make and hold unique perspectives; therefore, there is an imperative, both morally and legally, to assist women leaders in overcoming this real and limiting barrier (McGill, Clarke, & Sheffield, 2019; Kilpatrick, 2022; Terblanche, 2022). The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation provides credible data on the positive effects of women's economic empowerment. There is a positive impact on the economy when women are empowered to make a significant contribution to the economy (Hendricks, 2019).

This chapter begins with an examination of definitions before exploring two theoretical foundations for executive coaching. Then, the imposter syndrome is defined and discussed in terms of its possible causes and behaviours found to make it difficult to overcome. Executive coaching as an intervention for the imposter syndrome is also discussed.

2.2 Contextual overview

2.2.1 *Defining imposter syndrome*

In the 1970s, the term "Imposter Syndrome" was established through the observations and work of two female psychologists, Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes (1978). These psychologists identified a recurring phenomenon among highly intelligent and high-performing women whom they encountered in their professional practice. These women consistently grappled with an unsettling fear of being exposed as fraudulent despite their evident intelligence and achievements in academia or their careers (Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021). This pervasive sentiment led them to downplay their accomplishments, attributing their outstanding work and results to factors such as coincidence, luck, the kindness of others, fluke, mistakes, or even just sheer hard work – but notably never acknowledging their own innate abilities. This initial exploration laid the

groundwork for understanding and recognizing Imposter Syndrome, a concept that has since evolved and gained recognition in the broader discourse on psychological well-being and self-perception (Breeze, 2018).

The phenomenon has been regularly referred to as imposter syndrome; however, Mak, Kleitman, and Abbott (2019) state that it is a widely experienced psychological phenomenon and a clinical condition that has been observed and diagnosed. Furthermore, Mak et al. (2019) cite Harvey (1981) to highlight that imposter syndrome does not only occur in high-achieving individuals however any individual who may be faced with a task may experience feelings of fraudulence.

More recently, Orbé-Austin and Orbé-Austin (2020) have offered a definition of Imposter syndrome as a set of “thoughts, feelings, and behaviors” that may be experienced by an individual, thus affecting their emotional well-being. They also refer to Imposter syndrome as feelings experienced by individuals perceived as successful. These individuals experience feelings of being inauthentic and live in constant fear of being exposed as such; they minimise their achievements and feel incompetent. The result of this is that these individuals are unable to fully enjoy their achievements, as they are always again fearing that all will be taken away. They overwork and sabotage themselves. They also state that as much as 70% of people are said to experience imposter syndrome.

Several factors have been identified as contributing to feelings of imposter syndrome. Clance and Imes (1978) had identified family dynamics as one such cause. An assertion supported by Orbé-Austin and Orbé-Austin (2020), in the sense that on one hand, a certain individual in the family may receive an unwelcome label linked to their emotional or sensitive nature. They are boxed and are unable to escape the mould, regardless of their intelligence and/or achievements. This may persist into adulthood, resulting in feelings of self-doubt and, ultimately, imposter syndrome (Council, 2020).

On the other hand, a fairly average family member is often praised and acknowledged for their average to no achievements. This creates the message

that much can be achieved with little effort. This results in dire results and gives rise to feelings of fraudulence when real work is required. Another identified factor is gender. Gender, as a cause of imposter syndrome, is based on societal values. A further study by Clance et al. (1995) unpacks the role society plays in the development of imposter syndrome. The value placed on gender roles impacts what children grow up believing about themselves and their capabilities. When society assigns a higher value to boys and less to girls, there is a likelihood that girls will grow up experiencing feelings of imposter syndrome.

The earlier study by Clance and Imes (1978) found a prevalence of Imposter syndrome among women. More recent developments in the field of work, such as those by Orbé-Austin and Orbé-Austin (2020), indicate that Imposter syndrome can occur in both men and women; however, it manifests differently in each gender. Orbé-Austin and Orbé-Austin (2020) emphasise that there are widely held beliefs about culture. Some beliefs offer advantages, while others present disadvantages. Imposter syndrome persists as a significant challenge for individuals who confront cultural stereotypes about their group. This may refer to individuals considered unsuitable for a particular work position or environment, potentially leading to feelings of Imposter syndrome.

2.2.2 *Factors that maintain imposter syndrome*

In their original study, Clance and Imes (1978) identified four types of behaviours that render the Imposter syndrome challenging to conquer. This is because the individual becomes entrenched in one or more of these behaviours, which then poses a challenge (Council, 2020). It has also been found that it is rare that one would exhibit all of the discovered behaviours. These factors appear to remain valid, and Orbé-Austin and Orbé-Austin (2020) refer to them as hallmarks of imposter syndrome.

The first one is diligence and hard work. This refers to a behaviour exhibited by an individual experiencing imposter syndrome. Orbé-Austin and Orbé-Austin (2020) explain that when an individual with imposter syndrome is faced with a task, they will feel insecure, unsure, and anxious about their ability to perform the task. This will lead them to work very hard to hide these feelings. After the task

has been performed and a goal is achieved with glowing feedback and compliments, the individual does not gain sustained gratification but instead repeats what Clance and Imes (1978) refer to as the imposter cycle. They are unable to break it because they do not attach personal value to the abilities they have just performed and completed.

The Imposter Cycle

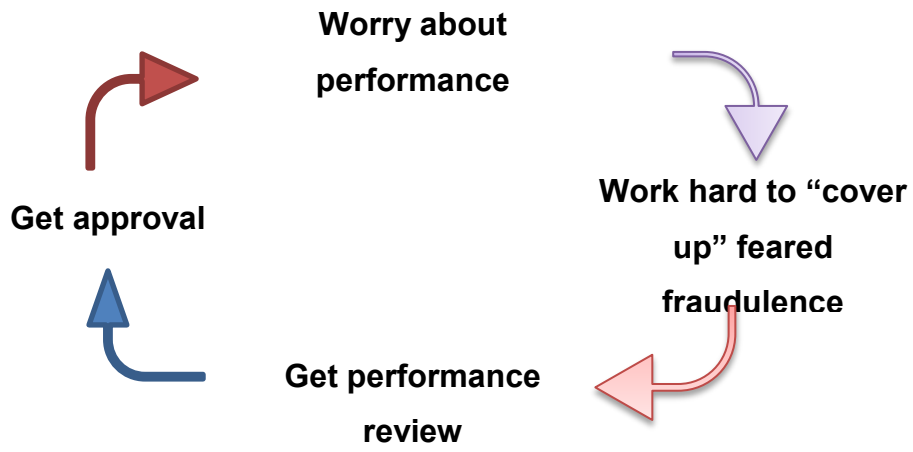


Figure 1: Imposter cycle

Source: Adapted from Orbé-Austin, 2020:5

The second behaviour is referred to as intellectual inauthenticity, where an individual may minimise their abilities and/or opinions in an effort to downplay themselves and protect others, thereby gaining prominence (Abraham, Prayoga, Murti, Azizah, Krishti, Fajrianti, & Manurung, 2022). This often exacerbates existing feelings of being fake. The third behaviour is charm and perceptiveness. This behaviour is exhibited by an individual who does not believe in their intellectual gift and abilities (Silver, 2022). They believe that they are not smart; on the other hand, they believe they could be smart and seek validation. These individuals employ charm and perceptiveness to target a person of influence who may be of assistance to them (Silver, 2022). They use charm and their astute skills of perception to identify and connect with in order to gain validation.

The last behaviour is seeking mentorship for external validation. This is a behaviour of seeking mentorship from an industry or institution senior (Chang, Guo, Cai & Guo, 2023). The danger that this behaviour poses is that, should the

mentorship have been acquired through charm and perceptiveness, the individual with imposter syndrome may not be secure in the positive feedback or validation because the mentorship was through charm (Orbé-Austin, 2020). There is, therefore, an indication that individuals who have imposter syndrome can benefit from applied interventions to alleviate the phenomenon. In their study, Clance and Imes (1978) found that therapy was an effective intervention. The study conducted by Zanchetta, Junker, Wolf and Traut-Mattausch (2020) also indicated that coaching was an effective intervention, while mentoring proved to be a useful intervention in another study conducted by Hutchins (2015).

2.3 Executive Coaching

The International Coaching Federation defines coaching as a partnership between a client and a coach in an inspirational process that is both creative and thought-provoking, enabling both to reach their full potential (ICF, 2022). Leading companies in South Africa have had coaching programmes in place for five to eight years, and they are predominantly used for leadership development and performance management (Kovacs & Corrie, 2017). The main beneficiaries of coaching in these companies have largely been executives, senior managers and the groomed talent (Brand & Coetzee, 2013). Leading South African companies integrate coaching into their organisation's talent management strategy or business strategy (Pandolfi, 2020). Organisations select external coaches based on their qualifications and experience and/or develop their own internal talent. Coach choices are also made based on potential industry experience and recommendations. Organisations usually contract them to work with executive and senior management levels (Passmore, 2019).

The Graduate School Alliance for Education in Coaching (GSAEC) provides an effective and efficient framework for Coaching. It outlines the skills and competencies required for a coach to understand, demonstrate and also embody in order to facilitate a successful coaching intervention, which is what would be required for imposter syndrome. This would further assist in meeting the Coaching objectives that may be expressed.

South Africa, which ranks 18th out of 156 countries in the World Economic Forum's 2021 Global Gender Gap Report, is a regional leader in gender equity. RSA ranks 3rd in the Sub-Saharan Africa region, after Namibia (ranked 1st in the region and 6th globally) and Rwanda (ranked 2nd in the region and 7th globally) (WEF, 2021). Despite the relatively good performances in three of the four pillars that constitute the index, i.e. Health & Survival (ranked 37th overall), Political Empowerment (ranked 14th overall) and the moderate score obtained in Educational Attainment (ranked 69th overall) – it is the performance in the pillar Economic Participation and Opportunity (ranked 92nd overall) that gives most cause for concern. As shown in Figure 2.2 below, tracking gender gains in South Africa from 2000 to 2017, women in South Africa today are the most qualified in the country's history. Figure 2.2 shows that gender parity was reached for primary and high school levels in 2017. However, there is a gender equality discontinuity when women transition from school to the workplace compared to their male counterparts. This confirms what was reported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as the continued complexity around empowerment in advanced capabilities.

South Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa	Upper middle income			
	2000		2017	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Education				
Net primary enrollment rate (%)	88	88	*85*	*84*
Net secondary enrollment rate (%)	63	57	*84*	*86*
Gross tertiary enrollment ratio (% of relevant age group)	..	..	*24*	*17*
Primary completion rate (% of relevant age group)	85	83	*82*	*81*
Progression to secondary school (%)	*99*	*97*	*98*	*93*
Lower secondary completion rate (% of relevant age group)	78	69	*78*	*73*
Gross tertiary graduation ratio (%)	..	..	*12*	*7*
Female share of graduates from STEM (%, tertiary)	..		*42*	
Youth literacy rate (% of population ages 15–24)	..	..	*99*	99
Economic structure, participation, and access to resources				
Labor force participation rate (% of population ages 15+)	49	64	49[a]	63[a]
Employment in industry (% of employed ages 15+)	15	36	12[a]	32[a]
Employment in service (% of employed ages 15+)	76	53	84[a]	62[a]
Women's share of part-time employment (% of total)	59		58[a]	
Employment to population ratio (% ages 15+)	31	47	35[a]	47[a]
Public life and decision making				
Seats held by women in national parliament (%)	30		42[a]	
Female share of employment in senior & middle mgmt. (% of total)	23		34[a]	
Proportion of women in ministerial level positions (%)	..		*42*	

Figure 2: Tracking Gender Gains in RSA from 2000 to 2017

Source: Adapted from World Bank, 2019:200

Women in leadership positions are associated with 50% higher returns on both company and share performance compared to companies with no females in their leadership teams (LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, 2019; UN Women, 2019; UNDP, 2019a, 2019b; World Bank, 2019). Moreover, women in leadership teams are more likely to advocate for pro-employee policies and shared value with local communities (UN Women, 2020a; UN Women, 2020b; WEF, 2020a). Female leaders are more likely to mentor and sponsor other women and members of underrepresented racial groups (Kaggwa, 2020; Khuzwayo, 2016; Nkomo, 2016; Sinden, 2017). Women in leadership are potent agents for good.

2.4 Theoretical foundation

Executive coaching has been identified as the intervention to be explored in this study. As previously mentioned, there has been a significant value in coaching, particularly in addressing imposter syndrome. As Rodgers (2012) states, in partnering with a client, a coach can create and increase awareness for the client and, through their partnership, bridge the gap between potential and the ability to produce and deliver on their expectations, while facilitating the agenda set by the client.

Coaching can therefore be regarded as a leadership development process that supports leaders' self-discovery, enabling them to examine, unearth, and unlock their hidden potential, facilitating transitions or addressing derailing behaviour (Coutu et al., 2009). Coaching can also be a beneficial intervention, as it has the ability to change mindsets, being underpinned by sound psychological theories and doctrine. It is, therefore, a useful intervention that can contribute to overcoming imposter syndrome (Zanchetta, Junker, Wolf, & Traut-Mattausch, 2020). The two following approaches are the approaches that could be employed in coaching interventions for imposter syndrome:

2.4.1 *Cognitive Behavioural Theory*

Imposter syndrome significantly impacts an individual's self-perception and self-regard, influenced by their thought process and mindset, particularly in relation to

their capabilities and skill set. As previously mentioned, Orbé-Austin and Orbé-Austin (2020) position Imposter syndrome as a set of thoughts, feelings and behaviours that one experiences and that have an impact on one's emotional well-being. In a coaching intervention, the overall objective is to support and empower the client experiencing imposter syndrome to change their mindset and achieve a more positive and useful perception of themselves.

Cognitive Behavioural Coaching (CBC) is an integrative approach that combines cognitive, behavioural, imaginal, and problem-solving techniques and strategies within a cognitive behavioural framework to enable coaches to achieve their realistic goals (Roskowski, 2010; Tomoiagă & David, 2023). This approach does not provide clients with solutions but rather guides them in a self-discovery process. Using the Socratic style of questioning, clients are challenged to examine self-limiting beliefs that prevent them from reaching their full potential (Mhlanga, 2020). Thus, the ultimate goal of CBC is for individuals to be empowered to become their own coaches (Maila, 2015; Watkins, Newbold, Tester-Jones, Collins & Mostazir, 2023).

This approach would be useful in assisting with the coaching process to make significant shifts in overcoming imposter syndrome.

2.4.2 *Gestalt approach to coaching*

Cox, Bachkirova, and Clutterbuck (2018) explain that Gestalt is a German term, when loosely translated can mean "shape; configuration; meaningful; organised whole" Gestalt coaching is based on Gestalt psychology and/or therapy which was originally developed to centre on the individual, however it has later developed to be inclusive of the wider community such as couples, families, organisations and teams (Cox et al., 2018; Starr, 2021). The Gestalt approach to coaching is designed to support individuals in their self-discovery process through their personal experiences (Cox et al., 2018). This process enables individuals to find wholeness and make sense of the shapes and patterns in their experiences.

Women, as members of society, in whatever role they may play, are part of a system (Snell, 2023). Women as leaders in the corporate space also operate within a system. A system that needs to operate efficiently and effectively. When parts of the system are affected, this will have an impact on the system (Snell, 2023). As this study examines imposter syndrome among women leaders in corporate South Africa, it aims to determine whether they can be supported and empowered with skills and strategies within the systems they operate within through coaching.

2.4.3 *Family dynamics, societal gender values and cultural beliefs.*

Family dynamics, societal gender values, and cultural beliefs have long been recognised as influential factors in the development of imposter syndrome. In their foundational study, Clance and Imes (1978) identified family relationships as a significant contributor to the internalisation of imposter feelings. The authors observed that in some family systems, children are assigned rigid roles early on — such as the “sensitive one” or the “achiever” — which often persist into adulthood and shape one’s self-perception. When these imposed roles are misaligned with actual competencies or when achievements are consistently dismissed or devalued within the family context, individuals may develop deep-seated self-doubt and a fear of being exposed as inadequate (Clance & Imes, 1978).

Orbé-Austin and Orbé-Austin (2020) reinforce this view, arguing that repeated family messaging can significantly influence whether individuals develop a secure or fragile sense of self. For example, when accomplishments are consistently attributed to external factors — such as luck or effort rather than intelligence or ability — children may learn to discount their own competence. Over time, this pattern reinforces the belief that success is undeserved, a core characteristic of imposter syndrome. Societal gender values further intensify this internal conflict, particularly in contexts where cultural norms prescribe limited roles for women. In many societies, including South Africa, historical and cultural constructs have often placed higher value on male achievement, while women have been expected to prioritise family and caregiving roles (Mabandla, 2018; Leite, 2019). Such expectations are reinforced from an early age, subtly shaping girls' beliefs

about what is appropriate or attainable. As a result, women may come to view leadership roles as inconsistent with their social identity, making them more susceptible to feelings of fraudulence when occupying such positions (Clance et al., 1995).

Furthermore, cultural beliefs play a significant role in shaping attitudes toward success, humility, and visibility. In some cultural contexts, self-promotion is discouraged, and women are expected to be modest and deferential. These norms can discourage women from owning their accomplishments or seeking recognition, thereby exacerbating feelings of imposter syndrome. The internalisation of these beliefs may lead women to feel as though they do not belong in high-performance or leadership environments, even when they are fully qualified. In summary, the intersection of family upbringing, societal gender roles, and cultural expectations contributes to the emergence and maintenance of imposter syndrome among women. These contextual factors create a foundation upon which self-doubt is reinforced, often well into adulthood and professional life. Understanding these dynamics is crucial in designing effective coaching interventions that aim to dismantle internalised barriers and promote authentic leadership among women in corporate South Africa.

2.5 Imposter syndrome on the development of women leaders in corporate South Africa.

Although significant strides have been made in promoting gender equality in South Africa through progressive legislation such as the Constitution of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996) and the Employment Equity Act (Act 55 of 1998), women remain underrepresented in executive roles across both the public and private sectors (Nkomo, 2016). This underrepresentation persists despite improved educational outcomes and qualifications among South African women (World Bank, 2019), indicating that structural and psychological barriers remain. One such psychological barrier is imposter syndrome — a phenomenon first identified by Clance and Imes (1978), characterised by chronic self-doubt and the inability to internalise success. Women leaders experiencing imposter syndrome often attribute their achievements to external factors, such as luck or timing, rather than

to competence (Tigranyan et al., 2021). This mindset hinders their ability to fully embrace leadership roles, take on challenging assignments, or actively pursue promotions.

Studies conducted in the South African context, such as those by Nakazwe-Masiya et al. (2017), support this view by identifying a negative correlation between imposter syndrome and assertiveness—a trait crucial to effective leadership. The presence of imposter syndrome can thus restrict women's confidence, visibility, and decision-making power, ultimately undermining their career progression. Societal expectations and workplace dynamics further compound these internal challenges. Leite (2019) and Mabandla (2018) highlight how traditional gender roles and cultural biases have historically positioned women as secondary, leading to internalised beliefs of inadequacy. Clance et al. (1995) also argue that imposter syndrome is often maintained by deeply rooted behavioural patterns, such as over-preparation, intellectual self-diminishment, or seeking external validation, all of which can inhibit professional growth. The continued influence of these psychological and social pressures creates an environment in which women may feel unworthy of their positions, fear exposure as frauds, or avoid upward mobility altogether. This not only limits individual career trajectories but also has organisational implications in terms of leadership pipeline development, retention of top talent, and overall transformation targets (Bowen & Botha, 2023). In summary, imposter syndrome serves as a significant self-limiting factor in the leadership development of women in corporate South Africa. Its impact is evident in the diminished confidence, constrained assertiveness, and hesitance to seize advancement opportunities among affected women leaders.

2.6 Effective executive coaching in alleviating imposter syndrome in women leaders in corporate South Africa.

Executive coaching has increasingly been recognised as a powerful developmental intervention for enhancing leadership capability, navigating career transitions, and addressing psychological barriers to performance. Within the scope of this study, executive coaching is examined as a tool that may assist

women leaders in managing and overcoming imposter syndrome, a phenomenon that undermines confidence, self-efficacy, and perceived leadership legitimacy. As noted in previous sections, imposter syndrome is perpetuated by patterns of negative thinking, perfectionism, and a fear of being exposed as inadequate (Clance & Imes, 1978; Orbé-Austin & Orbé-Austin, 2020). Coaching, particularly when grounded in Cognitive Behavioural Coaching (CBC), enables individuals to challenge and reframe these limiting beliefs (Maila, 2015; Roskowski, 2010). Through techniques such as guided discovery, reflective questioning, and structured goal-setting, coaching creates a space where clients can start to recognise internalised distortions in their self-perception and construct healthier leadership identities. Similarly, the Gestalt approach to coaching offers clients the opportunity to develop greater awareness of how they engage with their roles and relationships within broader organisational systems. This is particularly beneficial for women leaders, who may be navigating complex cultural and gender expectations that influence how they present themselves in professional settings (Cox et al., 2018; Snell, 2023).

Several studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of coaching in addressing imposter-related concerns. Zanchetta et al. (2020), for instance, found that individual coaching was more effective than group training in reducing symptoms of imposter syndrome among young professionals. Winter (2020) also supports the use of coaching as a method for enhancing psychological resilience and emotional self-regulation in professional women. These findings highlight coaching as a promising intervention for empowering women leaders to build confidence, increase assertiveness, and disrupt self-sabotaging behaviours commonly associated with imposter syndrome.

In the South African context, where women continue to be underrepresented in senior leadership positions despite high educational attainment (World Bank, 2019; Nkomo, 2016), executive coaching may serve as a strategic lever to address both personal and systemic barriers. When integrated into leadership development programmes, coaching can promote greater self-awareness, emotional agility, and alignment between personal and organisational goals — all of which are critical to unlocking leadership potential. This study seeks to explore

how executive coaches perceive their role in supporting women leaders who experience imposter syndrome. By examining their approaches, observations, and strategies, the research contributes to an understanding of how coaching can be leveraged as a meaningful intervention within South Africa's corporate leadership landscape.

2.7 PROPOSITION DEVELOPMENT AND LITERATURE ALIGNMENT

The formulation of research propositions in this study is based on a comprehensive review of relevant literature regarding imposter syndrome and its impact on women's leadership development, as well as the function of executive coaching as a developmental intervention. These propositions act as guiding assumptions, influenced by established theory and research, and align with the research questions outlined in Chapter 1.

Proposition 1: Perceived Prevalence of Imposter Syndrome in Women Leaders

Clance and Imes (1978) originally described imposter syndrome as a pervasive experience of self-doubt among high-achieving individuals who attribute their success to external factors, such as luck or effort. Subsequent research has shown that women, particularly in male-dominated or high-performance environments, are especially vulnerable to imposter feelings (Clance et al., 1995; Orbé-Austin & Orbé-Austin, 2020).

In the South African corporate context, women continue to encounter systemic barriers to advancement despite improvements in education and representation. Studies by Nakazwe-Masiya et al. (2017) and Bowen and Botha (2023) suggest that imposter syndrome is prevalent among professional women in South Africa and may be linked to diminished confidence and assertiveness — qualities essential for effective leadership.

Based on this evidence, we propose the following:

Proposition 1:

Executive coaches perceive imposter syndrome to be a widespread phenomenon among women leaders in corporate South Africa, significantly affecting their self-confidence, leadership identity, and ability to embrace professional success.

Proposition 2: The Impact of Imposter Syndrome on Leadership Development

The literature further suggests that imposter syndrome may hinder the development and progression of women leaders by influencing their self-perception and engagement with leadership roles (Leite, 2019; Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016). Women experiencing imposter syndrome may avoid promotions, underplay achievements, or withdraw from visibility — all of which hinder upward mobility.

Zanchetta et al. (2020) found that coaching can be an effective intervention in addressing imposter-related beliefs and behaviours, while Vergauwe et al. (2015) identified the phenomenon as a factor preventing progression to senior managerial roles. These studies underscore the importance of addressing imposter syndrome as a developmental barrier.

Accordingly, the second proposition is as follows:

Proposition 2:

Imposter syndrome is a self-limiting phenomenon that hinders the leadership development and career progression of women in corporate South Africa by affecting their self-perception, confidence, and decision-making capabilities.

2.8 Chapter conclusion

This chapter provided a comprehensive review of the literature relevant to the study of imposter syndrome among women leaders in corporate South Africa, as perceived by executive coaches. The review began by tracing the origins and evolving definitions of imposter syndrome, particularly the foundational work of Clance and Imes (1978), and highlighted the specific behaviours that sustain the

phenomenon. The chapter then explored how family dynamics, gendered socialisation, and cultural expectations contribute to the development and maintenance of imposter feelings in women.

The chapter also examined the impact of imposter syndrome on women's leadership development, drawing attention to how diminished self-confidence, reduced assertiveness, and fear of visibility may hinder career progression. This review was further supported by South African studies that highlight the ongoing underrepresentation of women in executive roles despite their academic qualifications and professional achievements. The theoretical frameworks underpinning this study — Cognitive Behavioural Coaching (CBC) and the Gestalt approach — were presented as lenses through which coaching interventions can be understood. These models emphasise the importance of reframing self-limiting beliefs, increasing awareness, and promoting behavioural change — all of which are relevant to addressing imposter-related challenges.

The chapter concluded by presenting a strong case for executive coaching as a potentially effective intervention in supporting women leaders affected by imposter syndrome. Key literature suggests that coaching can be instrumental in fostering resilience, authentic leadership, and psychological empowerment. From this review, two propositions were developed:

i. **Proposition 1:** Executive coaches perceive imposter syndrome to be a widespread phenomenon among women leaders in corporate South Africa, significantly affecting their self-confidence, leadership identity, and ability to embrace professional success.
ii. **Proposition 2:** Imposter syndrome is a self-limiting phenomenon that hinders the leadership development and career progression of women in corporate South Africa by affecting their self-perception, confidence, and decision-making capabilities.

These propositions form the conceptual foundation of the study and guide the research questions explored through qualitative inquiry. The following chapter outlines the research design, methodology, and data collection strategies employed to investigate the lived perceptions and experiences of executive coaches working with women leaders affected by imposter syndrome.

CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the research approach and design adopted in conducting this research. A qualitative exploratory approach was adopted based on the research objectives and the literature reviewed. This approach informed the research method and design, as well as the sampling methodology, data collection, and analysis process. The chapter then considers the validity of the study, its reliability and limitations, and concludes by outlining the ethical considerations of the study.

3.1 Research approach

The interpretivist philosophical approach was applied in investigating social phenomena, specifically focusing on the behaviours and techniques utilised by research participants within their natural contexts (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). The study employed an interpretive technique as its theoretical framework, aiming to elucidate the participants' social reality and lived experiences (Tuohy et al., 2013). This approach involved adopting an empathetic stance towards the individuals' perspectives (Pandey & Pandey, 2021). This study's approach explored the realities and personal encounters of Executive Coaches who work with coachees experiencing imposter syndrome. The objective was to obtain a comprehensive understanding of their perspectives and evaluations of their coaching methods and their impact on their coachees. This aligns with the interpretivism theory, as Executive Coaches can be regarded as social actors operating within the natural context of the organisation (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020).

The study adopted the inductive reasoning approach. Wardani and Kusuma (2020) describe this approach as a bottom-up process wherein the researcher analyses collected data to form and contribute to theory development. Additionally, due to time constraints, this research employed a cross-sectional design, meaning that data were collected only once (in contrast to longitudinal studies, which involve multiple data collection points) (Woiceshyn & Daellenbach, 2018). As such, all insights gathered represent a snapshot of what Executive Coaches experienced at the time of data collection (Young, 2019).

3.2 Research design

The primary objective of exploratory research is to enhance comprehension of a specific subject matter by acquiring new viewpoints and information from those not directly involved in the study (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Exploratory studies provide the means to understand a problem and gain progressively elaborated insights (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study employed an exploratory research design to investigate the experiences and perspectives of executive coaches who have coached women leaders and have personally experienced imposter syndrome.

3.3 Population and sample

This study focused on executive coaches as the primary participants. The decision to engage coaches — instead of directly involving women leaders who are experiencing imposter syndrome — was guided by the exploratory and interpretivist nature of the study. Executive coaches possess professional expertise and reflective insight gained from multiple interactions with high-achieving women leaders in South African corporations. As Winter (2020) notes, coaching relationships often unveil underlying psychological patterns, such as imposter syndrome, offering coaches a unique perspective to interpret recurring challenges.

By drawing on insights from these practitioners, the study explored how imposter syndrome is perceived to affect women's leadership development without requiring direct access to the women themselves. This approach enabled a broader, systemic understanding of the phenomenon across multiple corporate environments, rather than capturing isolated, individual cases. It also reflects the view of Fitzsimmons and Callan (2016), who argue that gender-related leadership barriers are best understood through both individual and systemic perspectives.
To ensure accuracy in framing, the study does not refer to participants' input as "lived experiences." Instead, the term has been revised throughout the dissertation to reflect accurate framing — namely, "perceptions," "professional observations," and "coaching insights." These terms more accurately capture the essence of the data provided, given that the executive coaches were reflecting

on their clients' challenges rather than narrating their personal experiences with imposter syndrome. This correction aligns with the interpretivist paradigm (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), ensuring conceptual clarity regarding the unit of analysis.

3.3.1 *Population*

The population relevant to this study consists of executive coaches who have provided coaching services to women leaders in corporate South Africa. These coaches come from diverse industries and backgrounds, including differences in gender and race. They work as either full-time or part-time coaches, offering in-person and/or remote sessions. Although Coaches and Mentors of South Africa (COMENSA) claims to have over 1,000 members in its database, a comprehensive master population list of executive coaches does not exist (COMENSA, 2023). However, several executive coaches practice in the field without formal qualifications or accreditations (COMENSA, 2023). This study focuses on executive coaches who possess formal qualifications and/or accreditations and have been active in coaching for at least three years. This criterion ensures that insights from these coaches represent best practices grounded in the latest coaching strategies and techniques (Gentles et al., 2015). 15).

3.3.2 *Sample and sampling method*

Purposive sampling was utilised in this study, as it is regarded as the most appropriate sampling method for qualitative research due to its capacity to incorporate the interpretation of an individual's lived experience (Mujere, 2016). The sample size was selected to achieve the depth and richness of description required (Rahi, 2017). Twenty executive coaches were initially targeted; however, data saturation was reached after interviewing 15 of them. In qualitative research, sample saturation is a commonly used technique for assessing the effectiveness of purposive sampling (Busetto et al., 2020; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). This occurs at the point during data collection when important concerns and insights have been thoroughly explored, ensuring that the emerging theories are supported by data (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). The concept of saturation is a widely accepted measure that safeguards against potential subjectivity in qualitative studies. It

serves as an effective criterion to ensure data reliability and quality (Sebele-Mpofu, 2020).

3.4 The research instrument

According to Busetto et al. (2020), a measurement tool allows researchers to obtain information from research participants. The most appropriate and efficient method for conducting exploratory research includes using peer-reviewed academic journal articles, questionnaires, and in-depth interviews (Barret & Twycross, 2018). The research instrument used in this qualitative study is a semi-structured interview. The interview guide was developed based on established theories and constructs identified in the literature review (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The questions were semi-structured, designed to be open-ended and non-leading to elicit as much information and reflection from the participants as possible (Kallio et al., 2016). An unstructured or semi-structured interview guide included a few predetermined questions, allowing the researcher to explore issues raised by the respondent (McGrath et al., 2019).

The interview guide was used to conduct semi-structured interviews with executive coaches who have coached women leaders experiencing imposter syndrome. The interview questions were open-ended, allowing participants to elaborate and clarify their opinions on the study issues from their unique perspectives (Husband, 2020). This guide ensured that each interview was focused and that the data collected was comparable (McGrath et al., 2019). The aim of the interview was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of coaches as they work with women leaders who face imposter syndrome. The Interview Guide consists of three sections. The first section, Section A, contains basic information about participants. Section B examines the participants' backgrounds, including their education and work experience, to demonstrate their credibility in the study. The final section of the Interview Guide, Section C, includes questions relevant to coaching women leaders who experience imposter syndrome and have received executive coaching. Refer to Appendix C of the Interview Guide.

3.5 Procedure for data collection

Executive coaches who have coached women leaders were identified and sourced through a personal network of coaches and mentors. Reliable coaching professional bodies, such as COMENSA and Africa Board for Coaching, Consulting and Coaching Psychology (ABCCCP), were contacted for referrals to executive coaches who met the study criteria. The researcher invited the identified coaches to participate in the interviews via email. This email included a participant information letter. Appendix A presents the participant information shared via email.

Executive coaches who confirmed their willingness to participate were contacted, and interviews were scheduled through a mutually agreed-upon, secure, and reliable virtual platform, such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom. All interviews were conducted online. Before the interview, participants were asked to complete and sign the consent form included in Appendix B. This consent may also be given verbally at the beginning of the interview, along with consent to record the session (Bos, 2020). The sessions were recorded to facilitate transcription.

The consent form stated that participation in the interview was voluntary and that participants could withdraw from the interview at any time without penalty (Husband, 2020). It also clarified the confidential nature of the interview, emphasising that the identities of both the executive coach and the women's leader coach would remain undisclosed in the research. Refer to Appendix B for the participants' consent form. A key tool during data collection was the interview guide, which ensured consistency between interviews and guided the interviewer's conduct. The interviewer took care not to lead the participants in any way and, importantly, not to reflect or convey judgment or biases in anything shared (Arifin, 2018).

3.6 Data analysis and interpretation

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews. This method is commonly utilized in qualitative research, offering a flexible approach to identifying and interpreting patterns of

meaning within textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). Given the exploratory nature of this study, thematic analysis was suitable for developing rich, detailed insights into executive coaches' perceptions and experiences regarding imposter syndrome. The data analysis adhered to the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006):

i. Familiarisation with the data: The researcher immersed herself in the data by reading and rereading transcripts and noting initial ideas.
ii. Generating initial codes: Relevant features of the data were systematically coded using qualitative data analysis software.
iii. Searching for themes: Codes were organised into potential themes by identifying patterns across the dataset.
iv. Reviewing themes: Emerging themes were refined and evaluated for internal consistency and coherence with the coded data. v. Defining and naming themes: Clear definitions were developed for each theme, including sub-themes where applicable, to capture the nuanced meaning in the data.
v. Producing the report: The final analysis was written up with supporting quotations to ensure the participants' voices were represented and to illustrate how the themes addressed the research questions.

Braun and Clarke (2021) later elaborated on their framework by introducing the concept of reflexive thematic analysis, which emphasises the active role of the researcher in developing themes. This reflexivity was applied in the current study, acknowledging that the researcher's interpretive lens shaped the analysis and construction of meaning from participants' narratives.

3.7 Trustworthiness

The primary objective of any research design is to demarcate, collect, and analyse data in a trustworthy manner. Results, recommendations, and conclusions based on trustworthy data support informed decision-making and inform research design outcomes that can be replicated (Byrne, 2017). Researchers use trustworthiness as a means to demonstrate a study 'worthy of

attention'. Trustworthiness is fulfilled by considering transferability, credibility, dependability and confirmability (Nowell et al., 2017). The four criteria for trustworthiness are discussed below.

3.7.1 *Transferability*

Transferability in qualitative research design is comparable to reliability in quantitative research design, and it is achieved when readers feel that the story being conveyed aligns with their own experiences (Tracy, 2010). This is achieved by gathering direct testimony (and displaying apt excerpts from transcripts in the analysis chapter) and through the use of rich/thick descriptions.

3.7.2 *Credibility*

The credibility of a study is confirmed by the extent to which other researchers and readers can relate to the experiences presented. Credibility refers to the alignment between the participants' experiences and how the researcher conveys them to the reader (Nowell et al., 2017). Noble and Smith (2015) describe credibility in research as the embodiment of plausible and persuasive inquiry. This study aims to enhance its credibility by employing methodologies recommended by Tracy (2010). The first method involves a meticulous incorporation of in-depth concrete details, emphasising the demonstration of information rather than mere exposition. Additionally, the study embraces the concept of multimodality, in line with Tracy's suggestion to integrate diverse voices into both the reporting and analysis stages. Furthermore, the research supports Tracy's proposition of validating findings by sharing transcripts and results with participants, seeking recognition and affirmation. This process serves a dual purpose, drawing on Tracy's notion of member reflections while also adhering to the data auditing principles outlined by Morse (2015). Through these collective efforts, the study strengthens the credibility of its research endeavour.

3.7.3 *Dependability*

The dependability of a study is established when the consumers of the research can effectively evaluate the research process. Researchers must ensure a process that is logical, traceable, and documented (Nowell et al., 2017), which is judged by the likelihood of obtaining similar findings from a replication study, such

as similar participants in a similar context (Wood et al., 2020). In this study, dependability was enhanced by openly reflecting on the researcher's biases and inclinations, as well as being transparent about the methods and challenges encountered (Roberts et al., 2019).

3.7.4 *Confirmability*

The confirmability of a study seeks to ensure that the research findings accurately reflect the research conducted. This requires that the research shows how findings were reached (Nowell et al., 2017). Confirmability is assessed by how accurately the results reflect the experiences and perspectives of the women leaders who experience imposter syndrome, as opposed to the researcher's inclinations, biases, or disconnected interpretations of the data (Morse, 2015; Roberts et al., 2019). Strategies already discussed that improved confirmability include data auditing, member reflections and self-reflexivity by the researcher. Koch (1989), as cited by Nowell (2017), suggests including reasons for theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices in the study to demonstrate the logic behind the decisions made.

3.8 Limitations of the study

Qualitative research inherently involves subjectivity, introducing potential biases that may affect the study's findings (Wood et al., 2020). Despite efforts to enhance trustworthiness, certain limitations persist. One significant limitation is the potential influence of the researcher's own preconceptions on the study's outcomes, a common challenge in exploratory research due to its subjective nature (Pandey & Pandey, 2021). Another limitation is the risk of unconscious bias in the research design and interview guide, as noted by Morse (2015). The selection of respondents, shaped by accessibility and perceived suitability, also impacts the generalizability of results. Consequently, findings may only apply to populations closely resembling the study's sample (Majid, 2018). These limitations highlight the necessity of maintaining ongoing awareness of potential biases throughout the research process.

Response bias presents an additional challenge, as participants—executive coaches in this study—may respond in ways they believe align with the researcher's expectations rather than providing fully candid insights (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To minimise this risk, the researcher guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity, ensuring that responses were anonymised in both the raw data and final report. Furthermore, since this is a cross-sectional study, it captures insights at a single point in time (Brough, 2019). Different responses might emerge if data were collected at another time, potentially affecting the study's relevance and conclusions.

3.9 Ethical considerations

Ethics significantly influence research design and methods, and qualitative researchers are involved in every stage of the research process (Husband, 2020). In addition to addressing fraud, pressure, and incentives, research ethics are crucial for the welfare of both participants and researchers (Arifin, 2018). The phenomenological research design domain of this work requires careful and transparent conduct to address ethical concerns. Conducting an ethical review was an ongoing process throughout the research enquiry, enabling researchers to engage in ethical practices and perform 'ethics in practice' (Bos, 2020).

The interview guide underwent peer review by the study supervisor to ensure that all data collected was specifically required to answer the research questions (Ghauri et al., 2020). A language editor verified that the questions were not leading in any way.

Before starting data collection, the researcher secured approval from the Wits Business School Ethics Committee, with ethics protocol number WBS/BE2527854/793. The institutional review board's evaluation and approval of the research plan were crucial for ensuring adherence to ethical standards prior to gathering any data (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). To uphold participant privacy and data protection, informed consent and permission for recording were obtained from each participant. Measures to maintain the anonymity of participants and the confidentiality of data were strictly followed (McGrath et al.,

2019). Confidentiality was essential for preserving participant trust and ensuring the private treatment of their shared information (Husband, 2020).

Each participant received clear details regarding the study's scope and purpose, as outlined in Appendix A (Participant Information Form) and Appendix B (Participant Consent Form). Participants were informed of their rights, including the option to withdraw from the study at any stage, ensuring voluntary and informed consent (McGrath et al., 2019). No incentives were offered to encourage participation (Rahi, 2017). Throughout the report-writing process, maintaining confidentiality was a priority, and all consent forms were collected and stored securely (Kallio et al., 2016). Pseudonyms were used to anonymise participants' contributions in the final report to protect privacy (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). In compliance with the Protection of Personal Information Act, all participant information was managed with high standards of confidentiality, sensitivity, and anonymity. The collected data has been securely stored in a password-protected online database and will be retained for five years, after which it will be responsibly disposed of (Nowell et al., 2017).

3.10 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter outlines the research methodology employed in this study, utilizing an interpretivist, phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of executive coaches working with women leaders who are affected by imposter syndrome. Using a purposive sample of fifteen qualified coaches, data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically. The chapter also addressed steps taken to ensure trustworthiness, including transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability, as well as the study’s ethical considerations. Key limitations, such as researcher bias and the study’s cross-sectional design, were acknowledged. This methodological framework establishes a solid foundation for exploring the research questions and contributes to a rigorous, ethical, and reliable study.

CHAPTER 4. Presentation of Findings

4.1 Introduction

This qualitative study investigated the effectiveness of executive coaching as an intervention to support and empower women leaders in South Africa who experience feelings of imposter syndrome. The research focused on insights from executive coaches who work with these women, aiming to understand their perspectives and evaluate the impact of imposter syndrome on women's professional development within corporate settings.

The study was guided by two central research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of executive coaches when coaching women leaders with imposter syndrome?
2. How is imposter syndrome perceived to influence the development of women leaders in corporate South Africa?

This chapter presents the study's findings, setting the stage for a detailed discussion in the following chapter, which will explore the implications, conclusions, and recommendations.

4.2 Sample Overview

Fifteen executive coaches with prior experience in coaching women leaders in corporate South Africa made up the sample for this research. The participants consisted of a wide collection of experts in leadership, organisational development, and coaching from different backgrounds. Their combined executive coaching expertise spans two to forty years, therefore offering a diverse variety of viewpoints on the subject of the imposter syndrome as experienced by women leaders in corporate South Africa. The educational backgrounds of the participants were most definitely varied and complex. Many earned postgraduate degrees in disciplines such as social sciences, business administration, and psychology. For example, Participant 5 had experience in industrial psychology and a master's degree in coaching; Participant 1 had an undergraduate degree in electromechanical engineering and an MBA. This range of educational

backgrounds illustrates the multidisciplinary approach of executive coaching and the many routes taken by professionals into this sector. Several participants, including Participant 2 and Participant 11, had sought specialized coaching certifications and additional qualifications in fields including NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) and various psychometric tools, attesting to a dedication to ongoing professional development in the coaching field.

The participants' professional paths were also varied; several had moved into coaching from accomplished professions in other fields. For instance, Participant 4 had more than 25 years of marketing experience before entering coaching, whereas Participant 12 came from journalism, media and television prior to coaching. These coaches approach their work with women leaders via a variety of lenses and approaches, bringing knowledge from different sectors and organizational settings. Regarding their coaching strategies, the participants displayed a spectrum of operational models. Some, like Participant 1 and Participant 6, had only begun their careers in professional coaching a few years ago. Others, such as Participant 11 and Participant 5, have developed long-standing, several-decade coaching techniques. While some of the coaches, like Participant 13, coupled coaching with academic responsibilities in business schools, many of the others worked as freelance consultants or had their own coaching companies. This range of operational approaches illustrates the adaptability and varied character of the South African coaching profession.

Throughout the sample, the coaches' knowledge of and exposure to women leaders experiencing feelings of imposter syndrome was significant. Although some participants, for instance Participant 1 had coached a small number of such clients, other participants like Participant 5 and Participant 11, reported coaching hundreds of women leaders experiencing similar challenges during their careers. This broad spectrum of experience offers a whole picture of how feelings of imposter syndrome show themselves in many leadership environments and career phases. Interestingly, several of the coaches pointed out that in the beginning of their coaching careers, imposter syndrome was not always clearly stated or characterised. Rather, it typically became a recurring motif as the coaching relationship grew. This remark draws attention to the often covert or

unconscious character of imposter emotions among highly successful women leaders.

The sample also showed a combination of techniques and coaching styles. While some coaches, like Participant 8, followed certain models like the GROW model, others, like Participant 14, used a more mixed, integrated approach drawing on several psychological and coaching paradigms. The complexity and multidimensional nature of navigating feelings of imposter syndrome in coaching environments is shown by the diversity of techniques. Ultimately, the sample offers a thorough and varied picture of executive coaches assisting South African women leaders. Their different backgrounds, experiences, and strategies provide a rich dataset for investigating the subtleties of imposter phenomenon and the function of executive coaching in resolving it among corporate South African women leaders.

Years of Coaching Experience. Experience Range: The coaching experience of the participants spans from 2 to 40 years, indicating a mix of seasoned and relatively new coaches. This diversity in experience levels contributed to a rich exchange of perspectives during the research. **Average Experience:** The average coaching experience across participants appeared to be around 8 years, showcasing a group with substantial collective expertise.

Gender. Gender Diversity: The participants included both male and female coaches, contributing to gender diversity in the sample. **Female Dominance:** The majority of participants were female, which could influence the research findings, especially when exploring the experiences of women leaders with feelings of Imposter Syndrome. The diverse educational backgrounds, coaching roles, and experience levels among the participants offered a well-rounded pool for exploring perceptions of executive coaches regarding women leaders experiencing feelings of Imposter Syndrome. The gender diversity and the varying years of experience provided a comprehensive understanding of how coaches approach and perceive the challenges women leaders face in the corporate environment.

4.3 Demographic profile of respondents

Table 1: Participant Profiles: Educational Backgrounds, Coaching Roles, and Experience Levels

The table below provides the demographic profile of the participants, aiming to provide context about the study

Participant ID	Educational Background	Current Coaching Work	Years of Coaching Experience	Gender
Participant 1	Electro-Mechanical Engineering degree, MBA – Leadership Coaching for Development	Coach	Three years	Male
Participant 2	Post Grad Dip in Management Masterlife Business Executive Coaching Enneagram NLP	Executive Coach	Three years	Female
Participant 3	High Dip in Marketing Psychotherapy Ontological Coaching Adult Development	Executive Coach	Seven years	Female
Participant 4	MBA Coaching for Development	Business Executive Coach	Two years	Female
Participant 5	Industrial Psychology Master's in Business Executive Coaching	Executive Coach	Eight years	Female
Participant 6	Not reported	Ontological Coach	Eight years	Male
Participant 7	Applied psychology for professionals Diploma in HR Management	Executive Coach	Ten years	Female
Participant 8	BA Honours Media Journalism Master's in Business Executive Coaching	Executive Coach	Five years	Female
Participant 9	Strategy, Innovation and Leadership	Business Growth Coach	Three years	Female
Participant 10	Bachelor's degree Cognitive Behavioural Psychology NLP	Executive Coach	40 years	Female

Participant ID	Educational Background	Current Coaching Work	Years of Coaching Experience	Gender
Participant 11	BSc. Post Grad Dip in Management Master's in Management Master's in Communication Enneagram TTI NLP	Executive Coach	12 years	Female
Participant 12	BCom Finance and Economics Dip Marketing Post Grad Business Admin MBA Certificate in Business Coaching Enneagram	Executive Coach	Eight years	Female
Participant 13	Master's in Business Executive Coaching	Executive Coach	Six years	Male
Participant 14	Master's in Business Executive Coaching	Executive Leadership Coach	12 years	Female
Participant 15	MBA Coaching for Development	Executive Coach	Eight years	Female

4.4 Insights from Executive Coaches on Guiding Women Leaders Battling Imposter Phenomenon

The first research question aimed to gain insights from executive coaches on their experiences coaching women leaders who are experiencing feelings of Imposter Syndrome. The below themes and sub-themes (Table 1) surfaced from the findings of the study and were reflected on based on Proposition 1 – There is prevalence of imposter syndrome in women leaders in corporate South Africa. This section of the report delves into the understanding of the Imposter Syndrome. It then explores the gap between expectations and reality when coaching women leaders who are dealing with this phenomenon. The discussion further extends to the obstacles these women leaders face and concludes with strategies that can aid them in overcoming feelings of Imposter Syndrome.

Table 2: Codes, sub-themes and themes Guiding Women Leaders experiencing feelings of Imposter Syndrome.

Codes	Subthemes	Themes
1. Belonging 2. Internal Struggle 3. Legitimacy concerns 4. Self-image 5. Uncertainty	Belonging and Legitimacy	Conceptualization of Imposter Syndrome
	Role Acceptance	
	Barriers to Professional Growth	
	Gender-Based Comparison in Self-Assessment	
	Professional Space and Identity	
1. Perceived high performance 2. Varied manifestations	Psychological Discrepancies in Self-Perception	Expectations vs. Reality: Coaching Women Leaders Experiencing the Imposter Phenomenon
	Impact on Professional Presence and Performance	
1. Internal and External Factors 2. Confidence issues 3. Personal history 4. Work environments	Internal Struggles	Barriers Experienced by Women Leaders with Imposter Phenomenon
	External Influences	
1. Negotiator for Own Life 2. CHROME Model 3. Reflective Exercise 4. Competitive 5. Engagement	Agency and Self-Advocacy, Structured Coaching Approaches, Achievement Acknowledgment, Assertive Professional Engagement	Strategies for Assisting Women Leaders Overcome the Imposter Phenomenon

4.4.1 *Conceptualisation of Imposter Syndrome*

The exploration of Imposter Syndrome elicited a variety of perspectives from participants, each shedding light on different facets of this psychological experience. One participant reflected on feelings of self-doubt upon receiving promotions, expressing a sentiment commonly associated with feelings of Imposter Syndrome: *"When I got promoted, you know, to consultant or manager, it's that thing of 'do I belong here, the White House as my white colleagues'?"* [Participant 1]. This statement underscored the prevalent issue of questioning one's legitimacy and sense of belonging when assuming higher professional roles. Another participant described feelings of Imposter Syndrome as a

significant psychological hurdle, encapsulating the internal conflict individuals grapple with: *"An Imposter Phenomenon is just this, as far as I want to call it, almost like a psychological barrier.… it's a self-inflicted crazy way of thinking about ourselves... we don't always feel like we've got the confidence to be able to step into the roles that we are playing already."* [Participant 4]. This depiction extends beyond a mere emotional description, emphasizing the Imposter Phenomenon as a self-imposed mental barrier that undermines confidence and hinders the ability to fully engage in current responsibilities.

A different participant succinctly characterized feelings of Imposter Syndrome as *"intellectual self-doubt"* [Participant 5], providing a nuanced perspective that zeroes in on doubt related specifically to intellectual abilities.

Participant 13 offered a concise yet comprehensive definition of the Imposter Phenomenon: *"The phenomenon, in short, it's that experience, that feeling as individuals where people feel that they should not be here, they can't really do this, or they don't belong in a certain space"* [Participant 13]. This brief description encapsulates the core of the Imposter Phenomenon—a pervasive sense of inadequacy and the perception of not belonging in a specific professional environment. They underscored gender-based comparisons and the influence of professional space on identity. The statement: *"The business world is still a boys club"* [Participant 2] alluded to the enduring gender dynamics within professional environments. The comparison between women and men highlighted the gendered aspect of the Imposter Phenomenon:

"With women, even if they know, 70% of something's not good enough, but men, on the other hand, only additional 30% of something they are rockstars" [Participant 4]. These insights portrayed feelings of Imposter Syndrome as a complex psychological challenge that encompasses doubts about competence, intellectual self-doubt, and a deep-seated questioning of belonging and legitimacy in professional spaces. The participants' language underscores this phenomenon's internal nature, emphasising the self-imposed barriers individuals construct within their minds. The gender-based comparison and observations about the business world further enriched the understanding of the feelings of

Imposter Syndrome in this context, underscoring the need to address systemic issues in professional environments. Overall, these conceptualisations illuminated the intricate and nuanced aspects of the feelings of Imposter Syndrome as experienced and articulated by the participants.

This core thinking was summed up by participant 5: *"Really, I think when my client presents with what I call the imposter syndrome or phenomenon."* It really is intellectual doubt. And that means that person, even though they are clearly very smart and successful. And they frequently doubt their own skills to complete tasks efficiently, especially when it comes to important tasks. This statement perfectly captures the odd nature of the feelings of imposter syndrome, in which great success and deep-seated fear live together.

Several coaches pointed out the difference between how women leaders with imposter syndrome are seen by others and how they feel about themselves. Participant 11 said, *"You meet someone who is sure of themselves, works hard, and is capable."* Then you see them as very worried, scared, doubtful, and questioning themselves. You also see them as almost harsh in how they see themselves. This observation brings up the fact that imposter thoughts are often hidden, so outsiders might not quickly understand what they are.

The coaches often said that imposter effect was a type of cognitive error or fake belief system. As Participant 14 put it, *"It's almost like they have a negative outlook on life, which is almost true. It seems like I'm going to lose it, and sometimes I feel like I deserve it. So, putting that sense of self-worth to the test."* From this point of view, imposter effect is not a fact, but a person's biased view of their own skills and value.

Interestingly, a lot of coaches said that the imposter effect often shows up as a fear of being seen or known. Participant 14 said, *"So the barrier will be not wanting to be seen in my experience. The higher up they go in the company, the more people see them, the more they are praised, and the more they are seen. And that's almost what makes me not want to be seen."* This fear of being seen

can make women leaders do things that hurt themselves, like turning down chances to move up or get noticed to avoid more attention.

In addition, the coaches expressed how social and cultural factors affect women leaders in South Africa's feelings of imposter syndrome. Background information was given by Participant 13: *"So there's something about our story, and there are studies about it, it is really deeply rooted in our past and in our history, to some extent, it's the ghost of apartheid. And it's not all racism; it's also sexism and patriarchy."* This point of view shows how important it is to think about the bigger social and cultural picture when thinking about the imposter problem among South African women leaders.

Several coaches said that the imposter syndrome is often linked to issues of identity and inclusion, especially for women of colour who work in mostly white or male-dominated workplaces. Participant 1 shared his experience: *"Even here in South Africa, we have this mental model of the leadership of a white male, right? Everything in the system, including our own views, is set up so that white men are seen as more successful. This means that even if I'm not white, my whole relationship with the system is based on the idea that being a white man is a sign of leadership."* This comment shows how internalised social rules and stereotypes can make people feel like they are imposters.

The coaches also stressed that feelings of imposter syndrome are not a fixed state but an ongoing process that can change over time and in various settings. Participant 8 stated: *"It doesn't necessarily come as this as what I'm bringing coaching, but in the course of working with someone, it may."* This means that feelings of imposter syndrome may appear or get worse during times of change or more duty.

A big part of how the coaches thought about the imposter syndrome was how it affected behaviour and performance. Many people said that feeling like an imposter could make you try to prove yourself too much and be too perfect. *"On the one hand, they are constantly doubting themselves, and on the other hand, you're over there trying to make a point,"* said Participant 15. "*You are always*

trying to make a point. That's why you always play to the crowd." This behaviour is a sign of the imposter effect and can cause stress and a general decline in health.

Several coaches also noted how the imposter syndrome keeps happening on its own. Participant 4 stated: *"I think people will really look at you the moment you think, 'Oh my God, I'll come across as a ballpark. Because the words you use will be so sorry."* This shows that the fear of being caught as an imposter can actually cause people to act in ways that hurt their self-esteem and performance, making the fear come true. When the coaches thought about the imposter effect, they also knew that it happened a lot and was normal. Participant 13 said, *"I can say for sure that at least more than 60% of the women leaders who come in for coaching are experiencing it or have experienced it."*

It's important to note that several coaches stressed that the imposter syndrome is not inherently bad but can be a normal reaction to success and growth. Participants 11 and 12 remarked, *"I guess total ignorance would be the opposite of imposter syndrome." It could get worse. So, you know, almost or arrogance, most likely ignorance or arrogance."* From this point of view, having some self-doubt can be good because it can make you more humble and help you to keep learning. The coaches also talked about how outward approval can make someone feel like an imposter. *"And it's interesting that when we coach, we don't coach, in vacuums, we teach each person, right? According to what you've seen, the harder they work, the harder it is for them at home."* stated Participant 2. This all-around view acknowledges that imposter feelings are caused by a lot of different personal, professional, and social factors working together.

A lot of coaches said that the imposter effect often shows up as not wanting to claim or internalise success. Participant 11 said, *"I knew a woman who took on so much that she was having a hard time at home with her kids and her husband at work. In any case, she couldn't give it her all. She was also getting tired*". This observation shows how feeling like an imposter can make you work too hard and not appreciate what you've done. The coaches' understanding of the feelings of the imposter syndrome also included an awareness of its possible good points.

"There is a good side to imposter syndrome," said participant 3. *“And what I'm feeling is that it's a chance to really question yourself, to go ask for help, and if you have the courage, it's a chance to get views from people you trust and respect.”* From this point of view, imposter feelings can help you grow and think about yourself if you deal with them in a healthy way.

4.4.2 *Expectations vs. Reality: Coaching Women Leaders Experiencing the Imposter Phenomenon*

The executive coaches who were interviewed for this study gave a lot of information about how their original ideas and their real experiences of coaching women leaders experiencing feelings of imposter syndrome were very different. There are often surprising differences between how these leaders act and how they are struggling on the inside. This theme also looks at how coaches are learning to understand how feelings of the imposter syndrome show up in successful women.

Many coaches said they initially had the expectation of meeting strong, successful women who had their work lives under control. This expectation was made clear by Participant 1: *"So, like, the way I set things up or the way I've been noticing, we have this chemistry session, right?" Before you talk to these people, they tell you a bit about their work and other things. At first, I thought, "Wow, these people are amazing!"* This expectation was often based on how successful and accomplished these women leaders seemed to be and how high up they were in their organisations.

However, what often happened in coaching sessions was very different from what people thought at first. Participant 1 said the contrast: *"And again, both conversations that we talked about now previously was very much in their minds. It is very much a problem that needs to be solved. Like I need this promotion, or I need to convince this board of something, or I am tired of dealing with high conflict that needs males or technical people and it’s a very specific thing that they articulated.”* This discovery of inner turmoil and self-doubt hiding behind a façade of confidence was a theme that ran through many of the coaches' experiences.

Participant 14 elaborated on this discrepancy: *"So my expectation is so you see, these high- powered women will walk in on these leadership development programmes, and it's all about a woman who manages and advocates and they're going to conquer the world. Okay. In other words, I thought the women would be strong and have their lives together. But when you start working with them, you find out the opposite is true. These people are hiding behind a mask and going through a lot of things. They're really suffering in silence in some ways."*

Several coaches agreed with this idea of *"suffering in silence"*, which showed how high-achieving women can experience feelings of the imposter syndrome. Participant 5 noted: *"Really, I think when my client presents with the, what I call it, the imposter syndrome or phenomenon. It really is intellectual doubt. And that means that person, even though they are clearly very smart and successful. And they question and doubt their own ability to effectively deliver pieces of work, particularly high-profile pieces of work."*

Also, the coaches said they were surprised by how much imposter syndrome could affect even the most successful and top women leaders. Participant 14 shared an interesting event: *"Recently I worked with a well-known person in South Africa. And they were very cocky at the first two meetings. On the third session, they broke down and cried. That means it was a mask."* This story shows how deeply ingrained feelings of imposter syndrome can be, even in women who have reached the top of their fields.

Another surprise that many coaches found was that a lot of their clients suffered from imposter syndrome. Participant 13 said, *"I can say for sure that at least more than 60% of the women leaders who come in for coaching are experienced in it or have experienced it." So many people have it. Some coaches had first thought that imposter feelings were rare or unique among high-achieving women, but this high frequency made them think again.* Interestingly, a number of coaches said that the imposter syndrome wasn't always named or described at the start of coaching sessions. Participant 8 said: *"It doesn't necessarily come as this as what I'm bringing to coaching, but in the course of working with someone, it may."* It

was normal for the coaches to see imposter feelings show up as an underlying theme instead of a problem that needed to be solved.

Coaching women who experience feelings of imposter syndrome often entailed addressing deeply ingrained beliefs and behaviours. Participant 14 said: *"So it's almost tackling the issues ahead on rather than avoiding them, which is what imparts that as opposed to allowing them to deal with whatever they feel is a hindrance."* People often had different ideas at the start, thinking that the main focus would be on skill development or job planning.

The coaches' experiences also showed that feelings of imposter syndrome often showed up in strange ways. It could lead to more than just simple self-doubt. It could cause complicated patterns of behaviour. *"They don't take space now, the women who have urges, they don't take space,"* said participant 15. "*That is why they move from extremes. Some people don't take up room; they say sorry. It seems like they aren't sure."* Coaches frequently had to change their methods and standards due to the variety of forms.

Something else that surprised many coaches was how strong and growth-oriented their clients were, even though they were going through the difficulties with feelings of the imposter syndrome. Participant 3 shared, *"And I've noticed that the strongest people are the ones who come in looking a little broken, weak and things like that. For once, when you start working with them, you can really dig into what you know, you find out certain things, you see how resilient they are, and they really have their stuff together."*

In conclusion, the experiences of these executive coaches show that there is a big difference between original expectation and the reality of coaching women leaders who are experiencing feelings of the imposter syndrome. They usually thought the women they met would be publicly strong and successful, but what they found were deep-seated inner battles, deep-seated self-doubt, and many different ways that imposter feelings showed up. Because of this difference, coaches had to change how they worked with their clients, learn more, and come

up with more complex ways to help them overcome the feelings of the imposter syndrome and embrace their real leadership skills.

4.4.3 *Barriers Experienced by Women Leaders with Imposter Phenomenon*

In exploring the barriers faced by women leaders who have experienced feelings of the Imposter syndrome, participants' insights revealed a nuanced interplay of internal and external factors. Participant 4 highlighted the multifaceted nature of these barriers, pointing to internal and external sources: *"I think it's ourselves. There are a lot of confidence issues, and there's history as well. Sometimes there's pain. It's also some work environments."* This perspective underscored the complexity of the challenges, acknowledging the role of individual confidence, personal history, and external work environments as contributors to the barriers women leaders face. Participant 7echoed a similar sentiment, emphasising the internal aspect as the primary obstacle: *"I would think that barrier number one is the self. We come with a fear: will I measure up?"* Here, the focus was squarely on self-perception and the fear of falling short, portraying the internal struggles that women leaders grapple with in the face of the imposter syndrome.

Participant 12 reinforced the idea that the most significant barrier lies within the individuals themselves: *"It's themselves and nobody else. It's how they perceive themselves because the bulk of it is about you and what you believe about yourself and represent."* This insight underscored the critical role of self-perception and beliefs about one's capabilities in contributing to the feelings of imposter syndrome. The narrative concludes with Participant 14 emphasising the impact of negative self-talk, pointing to the internal dialogue that perpetuates feelings of inadequacy: *"It's that voice that says, 'you're not worth it, or what do you have to say? It's that negative self-talk. "*This element adds a psychological dimension to the internal barriers, highlighting the detrimental influence of self-critical thoughts on women leaders' confidence and sense of worthiness.

The mental battle with self-doubt and feelings of failure was a major barrier that many coaches recognised. The Participant made this point very clear: *"They doubt and question their own ability to complete tasks effectively, especially when*

the tasks are important." There are also a lot of signs, so I'm sure we'll get to it. Most of the time, though, it's about fear of being found out: "I'm not as good as I think I am." This inner barrier usually shows up as a constant fear of being caught as a fake, even when there is proof of ability and success. Participant 10 added, *"They are actually wearing a mask, they're actually going through a lot of things." They're really suffering in silence in some ways."* This kind of inner conflict can be especially sneaky because it's often kept from coworkers and bosses, which makes it hard to talk about freely.

The propensity for women leaders experiencing feelings of the imposter syndrome to minimise their accomplishments and have trouble accepting praise was another significant barrier that was discovered. *"You see their faces light up when they've accomplished something,"* said Participant 2. *After that comes your but, you know, and that's why it's okay. Yeah, but I studied it, and I did pretty well, even though I didn't believe it. Then not taking the praise."* People who don't want to fully own their wins can make it harder to move up in their careers and get better chances.

A lot of coaches also said that women leaders who experience feelings of the imposter syndrome often have trouble standing out and making their voices heard at work. Participant 15 said, "The women with urges don't take up space anymore. They don't." People who have trouble expressing themselves and their thoughts can miss out on chances and not be fully involved in decision-making.
In South Africa in particular, the coaches also pointed out societal and cultural hurdles that add to feelings of imposter syndrome experienced by the women leaders. Participant 13 said this: *"So there's something about an hour because studies in South Africa, they say it's really deeply rooted in our past and history; to some extent, it's the ghost of apartheid." And it's not all racism; it's also sexism and patriarchy."* This observation shows how structural and past inequalities can worsen imposter syndrome in women leaders.

"Even here in South Africa, we have this mental prototype around the leadership of white male, right?" Participant 1 said more about this social barrier. *“Everything in the system, including our own views, is set up so that white men are seen as*

more successful. This means that even if I'm not white, my whole relationship with the system is based on the idea that being a white man is a sign of leadership." This internalisation of societal rules and beliefs about leadership can be a psychological barrier for women leaders.

An important barrier that was found was that women who experience the imposter phenomenon tend to overwork and try to be perfect as a way to make up for how inadequate they feel. One participant gave an example: *"I knew a woman who took on so much that she was having a hard time at home with her kids and her husband at work." In any case, she couldn't give it her all. She was also getting tired."* This kind of overcompensation can cause stress, which is bad for both your personal and work health. Additionally, the coaches said that women leaders who experience the imposter phenomenon often have trouble setting limits and declining extra duties. *"They will quit,"* said participant 4. *Someone will find out. "Yes."* This trouble setting limits can make people feel overwhelmed and support their feelings of not being good enough.

of being seen and being looked at more closely, which comes with job growth, was named as one of the most difficult barriers. Person 14 said, *"So the barrier will be not wanting to be seen in my experience." The higher up they go in the company, the more people see them, the more they are praised, and the more they are praised. And that's almost what makes me not want to be seen."* This fear of becoming more visible can make people hurt themselves and not want to go for higher-level jobs. It's hard for women leaders to talk about how they feel like imposters, and the coaches brought this up as a barrier. Participant 15 said, *"The challenge is isolation, I think, because they this is not a topic that you're going to be talking about, with your peers, with your boss."* The idea that women are the only ones going through these feelings is reinforced by this isolation, which can keep them from getting help.

Another barrier that was named was how hard it was to get around in work situations that are usually controlled by males. *"Now that you're a mum or whatever, they get promoted, and now they ask, 'Am I getting promoted because of the colour of my skin?'"* And because those are more casual talks, I've never

had to help someone through them. This shows that things are even more difficult for women of colour who are in leading roles. The coaches concluded by saying that feelings of imposter syndrome can be a barrier to real leaders. Participant 14 said, *"We work around bringing you out into the person you're meant to be, and to be able to celebrate and live with that and accept that and embrace it, and then showcase that."* Women leaders may not be able to fully realise their leadership potential and effect because they find it difficult to be themselves.

In summary, the participants' insights converged on the idea that the primary barriers faced by women leaders experiencing feelings of the Imposter Syndrome are internal. Confidence issues, self-perception, negative self-talk, and the fear of not measuring up constitute formidable challenges. Additionally, the acknowledgement of external factors such as work environments adds a layer of complexity, portraying a holistic understanding of the multifaceted nature of these barriers.

4.4.4 *Strategies for Assisting Women Leaders Overcoming feelings of the Imposter Syndrome*

In the domain of coaching women leaders grappling with feelings of Imposter Syndrome, participants shared valuable insights into their strategies, shedding light on empowering approaches to navigate self-doubt and foster professional growth. Participant 1 underscored the essence of coaching, emphasising a pivotal aspect: *"Coaching is mainly to decide what your own priorities are...be the negotiator for and in your own life. "*This approach focuses on instilling a sense of agency and self-advocacy. By encouraging women leaders to proactively shape and negotiate their priorities, the coaching framework aligns with the participant's belief in the power of personal agency.

Another participant delved into a structured coaching model employed to guide women leaders: *"How we've actually done it with them is to get them to follow the GROW model where we say what is your goal? What are the realities? What are the realities that you are facing? What options do you have? And what is the way forward? So, in all the things that we've done, we will speak about leaders leading from within",* said Participant 14. Following the GROW framework, this model

emphasises goal setting, reality assessment, options exploration, and a forward-looking perspective. It provides a structured pathway for women leaders to navigate the challenges the Imposter Syndrome poses. Participant 8 shared a practical and affirming approach: *"When I deal with a lot of women that are dealing with impostor syndrome, so I go back to let's look at what you've actually achieved. So, let's actually put it down one by one. What have you achieved."* By engaging women leaders in a reflective exercise to document their achievements, this strategy serves to counteract self-doubt. It encourages a tangible acknowledgement of accomplishments, anchoring them in a positive self-perception.

Additionally, Participant 11 emphasised a bold and assertive stance for women leaders: *"Compare yourselves with these people toe to toe. Compete in your meetings, toe to toe. People have something to say. If you haven't answered, do not hold back, respond. "*This approach challenges women leaders to stand confidently alongside their peers, fostering a competitive spirit and dispelling self-limiting beliefs. Encouraging active participation in professional settings is positioned to overcome the hesitancy often associated with feelings of the Imposter Syndrome.

In essence, these coaching strategies converge on empowering women leaders to define their priorities, navigate challenges through structured models, celebrate achievements, and assertively engage in professional arenas. By intertwining personal agency with targeted coaching methodologies, these insights offer a holistic approach to guide women leaders towards overcoming the Imposter Phenomenon and realising their full potential (Figure 1).

Figure 3: Insights from Executive Coaches on Guiding Women Leaders Battling Imposter Syndrome

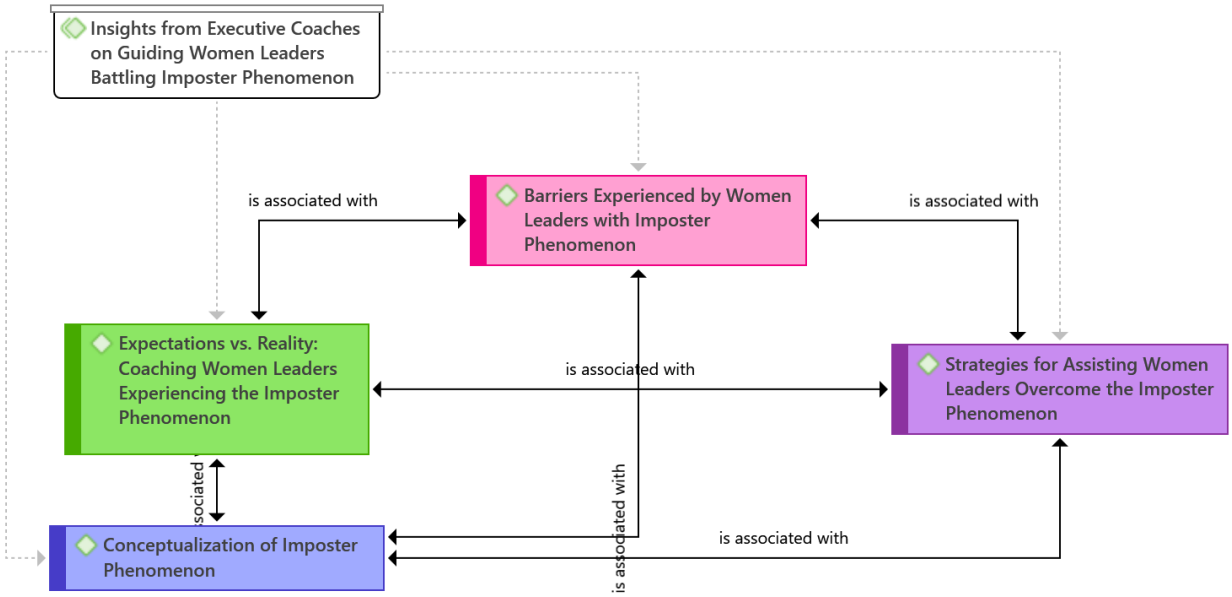


Figure 3 presents a network view of the key themes that emerged from executive coaches' experiences when guiding women leaders experiencing imposter syndrome. While the themes are visually connected through the “is associated with” links, it is important to move beyond visual proximity to extract deeper meaning.

This diagram reflects how conceptualisation of imposter syndrome is intricately linked to expectations placed on women in leadership, the barriers they face, and the specific coaching strategies used in response. For instance, the link between *self-doubt*, *professional space and identity*, and *coaching strategies* indicates that imposter syndrome often arises in environments where women feel the need to over-perform to validate their legitimacy — a finding that mirrors Clance and Imes’s (1978) original observations on the imposter cycle.

The network also demonstrates how coaches use tailored approaches to disrupt this cycle, drawing on tools that bridge internal self-perception and external behavioural change. Importantly, the convergence of multiple themes toward *agency*, *reflection*, and *coaching structure* suggests that coaches perceive their role not merely as support systems, but as catalysts for deeper identity work and empowerment.

Thus, this diagram serves as a visual representation of the interwoven cognitive, emotional, and structural challenges — and illustrates how coaching becomes the mechanism through which these layers are unpacked and transformed.

In summary, the perspectives provided by executive coaches shed light on the nuanced nature of the feeling of the imposter syndrome as experienced by women leaders. The conceptualisation revealed the internal struggles associated with belonging, confidence, and legitimacy, emphasising the need to address these psychological barriers. The exploration of coaching expectations versus reality underscored the importance of individualised, awareness-driven approaches to help women leaders recognise their capabilities.

Barriers experienced by women leaders illuminated the complicated relationship of internal and external factors, with a predominant emphasis on self-perception and confidence issues. The strategies discussed for assisting women leaders in overcoming feelings of the imposter syndrome emphasised the role of coaching in instilling agency, employing structured models, and fostering a positive self-perception through reflective exercises. Empowering women leaders to define their priorities, celebrate achievements, and assertively engage in professional arenas emerged as central themes in these strategies.

These insights provided a foundation for developing targeted interventions and support mechanisms for women leaders. By acknowledging the internal and external dynamics at play, executive coaches contribute to a holistic understanding of the Imposter Phenomenon, paving the way for more inclusive and empowering professional environments. Through continued research and application of these strategies, a culture where women leaders not only conquer the challenges posed by the Imposter Phenomenon but thrive in their leadership roles with confidence and authenticity can be cultivated.

4.5 Perceived Impact of Imposter Phenomenon on the Advancement of Women Leaders in South Africa's Corporate Sector

The second research question investigates the perceived influence of the Imposter Phenomenon on the development of women leaders in corporate South Africa. The codes and sub-themes, as presented in Table 2, surfaced from the findings of the study and were reflected on based on Proposition 2 – Imposter Syndrome is a self-limiting phenomenon and can lead to job dissatisfaction.

Navigating the complex terrain of leadership in South Africa's corporate sector is an intricate journey, especially when shadowed by the pervasive feelings of the imposter syndrome. This phenomenon, characterised by persistent self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy, has profound implications for the advancement of women leaders. This section delves into the perceptions, impact, characteristics, coaching approaches, and transformative changes experienced by women leaders grappling with feelings of the imposter syndrome. Through participants' insights, the research unravelled the intricacies of how these leaders navigate their professional journeys and the barriers they confront in their pursuit of success.

Table 3: Perceived Impact of feelings of the Imposter Syndrome on the Advancement of Women Leaders

Code	Subthemes	Themes
1. Lack of confidence 2. Seeking validation 3. Feeling inadequate	Facade of Confidence	Navigating Leadership with Imposter Phenomenon
1. Communication 2. Authenticity 3. Progression	Masking and Revealing	
1. Internal struggle 2. Anxiety 3. Self-awareness 4. Self-presentation	Dual Nature of High Achievers	

Code	Subthemes	Themes
1. Vulnerability 2. Coaching 3. Trust	Emotional openness	
1. Fear 2. Insecurity 3. Comfort zone 4. Resistance to change 5. Underestimation of capabilities 6. Self-limiting beliefs 7. Gender bias 8. Trust issues 9. Lack of self-awareness	Psychological Barriers to Growth	The Impact of Imposter Phenomenon on Career Growth
1. Fear of judgment 2. Lack of self-expression 3. Inadequacy 4. Resentment 5. Fear 6. Sadness 7. Questioning 8. Avoidance 9. Hesitation 10. Modesty 11. Self-consciousness	Emotional Turmoil and Behavioural Responses	Typical Characteristics/Feelings Observed in Women Leaders Experiencing the Imposter Phenomenon
1. Introspection 2. Empowerment 3. Self-reflection 4. Coaching techniques 5. Goal-oriented 6. Personality 7. Positive psychology 8. Decision-making 9. Assessment 10. Goal-setting	Empowering Strategies and Personal Development	Coaching Approach and Tools for Women Leaders Experiencing the Imposter Phenomenon

Code	Subthemes	Themes
1. Observation 2. Confidence 3. Feedback 4. Transformation 5. Career transition 6. Confidentiality 7. Psychological safety 8. Personal growth 9. Self-confidence 10. Expectations 11. Confidence 12. Development 13. Self-work	Evolutionary Elements in Coaching	Noticeable Changes During and After Coaching

4.5.1 *Navigating Leadership with feelings of Imposter Syndrome*

Participant 1 observed that women leaders initially project a facade of confidence, suggesting a mastery of their professional skills. This is encapsulated in the participant's statement, *"When they show up, they have all their armours on, like 'I'm really good at what I do. "*This can be seen as a defence mechanism against feelings of inadequacy associated with feelings of Imposter Syndrome.

Another participant noted that women leaders tend to mask their true feelings during coaching sessions, gradually revealing more as the coaching relationship deepens. This is reflected in the statement, *"Like with any coaching, there's a bit of masking. As we get comfortable in the relationship, it gets a bit deeper",* observed Participant 4. This suggests an initial reluctance to expose vulnerabilities, potentially linked to the feelings of the imposter syndrome, and growing trust and comfort in revealing authentic concerns as the relationship deepens. Another participant highlighted the dual nature of women leaders grappling with feelings of the imposter syndrome. They appear both unsure and anxious while also displaying characteristics of high achievers. This is captured in the statement, *"They show up as unsure, demonstrating slight anxiety. They also show up as high achievers"*, Participant 5. This suggests an internal conflict where women leaders grapple with self-doubt despite external success, aligning with the common traits associated with feelings of the imposter syndrome.

Yet Participant 9 emphasised the vulnerability of women leaders during coaching sessions, stating, *"Vulnerable. I mean, coaching is a very vulnerable space."* This suggests that women leaders may feel exposed and open to addressing deeper issues, potentially related to feelings of imposter syndrome, during coaching sessions.

The complicated interaction between women leaders' internal battles and the outward challenges they face in corporate settings is revealed by the theme Navigating Leadership with feelings of the imposter syndrome. which appears in many of the conversations. Despite their successes and abilities, highly skilled women frequently struggle with self-doubt and a constant fear of being "found out," according to executive coaches.

"You'll get highly competent women, for example, who will talk to you about the fact that when I'm in a general meeting, I can't bring myself to say anything," said Participant 11*. But I have a lot of thoughts and don't want to raise my head."* This reluctance to participate, even though they have useful ideas, is a trait of imposter syndrome. Another coach who saw the internal struggle said, *"They play down their own strengths and weaknesses; they doubt themselves first, so they don't need other people to be their enemy. Tell the truth, you are already our new enemy, and you don't need anyone to blame you.".* When women leaders try to prove their worth by being perfect and working too much, they often end up overcompensating and getting burned out.

Systemic hurdles and social standards add to the difficulty of navigating leadership roles while dealing with feelings of imposter syndrome. Participant 10 brings up this intersection: *"What's important to me about women executives is that they have support. We need to change how people think about support."* And this gives them more access to the platform, or maybe the places where they can meet up. This finding shows how important it is to make safe spaces where women can talk about and deal with their imposter feelings without worrying about being judged or punished.

Many coaches say that feelings of imposter syndrome can make people self-sabotage or not want to seek chances for growth, which can have a big effect on their job. Participant 13 gives a moving example: *"I knew a woman who took on so much that she was having a hard time at home with her kids and her husband at work." In any case, she couldn't give it her all. She was also getting tired.* For example, this shows how the need to overcompensate can actually hurt performance and well-being, making it seem like you're not good enough.

Taking on leadership roles also means facing and questioning limited beliefs and opinions that you hold inside. *"You cannot move, and I often tell my female clients, you cannot move to the next row,"* says Participant 5. This participant stressed how important it is to do this work on yourself. If you haven't changed on a personal level. *“We might be able to get up the ladder, but you can't. Still, you'll have what we call "stunted growth" on the inside.”* This realisation shows how important it is to deal with the reasons behind imposter syndrome instead of just focusing on accomplishments or praise from others.

To assist women leaders in overcoming these challenges, the coaches use a variety of tactics. Participant 2 talks about a method that focusses on reframe and self-appreciation: *"Case studies are also used a lot." So sometimes all it takes is easing the stress and saying, "Okay, let's use another example where we're both looking into it and judging it, and they come back, because, as I said, it's a vulnerable space."* By looking at their experiences and skills through a more objective view, this way helps clients gain a better understanding of them.

Learning to own one's words and accomplishments is another important aspect of navigating leaders with feelings of the imposter syndrome. Participants 14 and 15 share a strong technique: *"So I often tell people, if you're happy, they can come to a meeting with you." It will only name me and my coaches... Wants to look at them, right? Whatever we do, or experience with how things are done here to help me that she wants to, and then my situation, where I just sit in the room and watch, that's it."* This method lets coaches give their clients direct feedback on how they act at work, which helps them close the gap between how they see themselves and how things really are.

The path of leaders while dealing with feelings of imposter syndrome is often changing. Participant 8, reflected on success: *"I had departmental head who couldn't just stand up and have very difficult conversations with their team members; I had people who couldn't stand up and give presentations in front of 50 people, you know what I mean?" There have been a lot of changes, no matter how small. I think the most important thing is becoming aware of how I question myself and how that doubt holds me back."* This change in behaviour and understanding shows how growth and strength can happen when imposter feelings are dealt with properly. In the end, the theme of Navigating Leadership with feelings of Imposter Syndrome shows that women leaders have to deal with a complicated world. It means facing your own fears, fighting societal hurdles, and coming up with ways to truly take on leadership roles. The views of the executive coaches show how important it is to make helpful settings, learn more about yourself, and build resolve when you have ongoing self-doubt. As women leaders learn to deal with these challenges, they not only become more successful but also open the way for other generations of women to follow.

4.5.2 *The Impact of Imposter Phenomenon on Career Growth*

Feelings of the Imposter Syndrome profoundly impacts career growth, often acting as a barrier that holds individuals back. One participant noted, *"It holds them at a space until it is dealt with",* [Participant 2]. This suggests that the Imposter Syndrome can stagnate career progression, keeping individuals in a state of limbo until they confront and address their feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy. Moreover, it can lead individuals to underestimate their capabilities, thereby limiting their potential. This is reflected in the statement, *"It's limited them. They put limitations on what they thought they were capable of*", said Participant 10. Such self-imposed limitations can prevent individuals from taking on new challenges and opportunities, hindering their career advancement.

Furthermore, feelings of the imposter syndrome can cause individuals to shrink back, not fully occupying their rightful space in their professional sphere. This is captured in the participants' observation: *"They don't take the space they deserve",* said participant 11. This reluctance to claim their space can result in missed opportunities for growth and recognition. However, there is a silver lining.

There is a path forward for those who recognise and acknowledge the experience of feelings of the imposter syndrome. As one Participant 13 pointed out, "Those that have made a name and acknowledge, they start working on it. Those who don't know, they get stuck, they don't break that cycle. ."This suggests that awareness and acknowledgement of feelings of the imposter syndrome are the first steps towards overcoming it and unlocking career growth. The imposter syndrome can significantly impact career growth, but individuals can break free from its grip and realise their full potential with awareness, acknowledgement, and action. The effects feelings of the imposter syndrome have on Career Growth is a major theme that runs through all of the interviews. It shows how deeply ingrained self-doubt can have a big impact on the careers of women leaders. The executive coaches always talk about how absurd feelings of imposter syndrome are. This is when successful women have trouble believing in their own abilities and often unintentionally get in the way of their own progress.

Participant 5 articulated this: *"I think it's limited them." Because they could have applied for jobs that were open. Because they thought they couldn't do something, I didn't think they were ready for that. Think about what you could add instead of what you could learn in the long run."* This comment sums up a theme that ran through all of the interviews: women who experience feelings of the imposter syndrome tend to put themselves down and miss out on chances to grow and progress because they think they are not ready or competent enough. People who put limits on themselves can have big effects, as Participant 13 noted, *"Oh, amazingly, almost stay stagnant." In fact, in some of them. They can be downgraded sometimes, so it's unlikely that they'll ever reach a point where they stop moving forward. Some people say they were given the wrong position and have been thought of as having been promoted too soon or not meeting the image*." In these cases, they are almost certainly thinking about demoting someone. This harsh account shows how feelings of the imposter syndrome cannot only stop someone from moving up in their job, but it can also cause them to fall backwards in their professional standing.

The sneaky factor about feelings of imposter syndrome is that it can make a false belief come true. Participant 4 talks about this situation: "Stuck in their own ways,

it holds them back." *When people ask them to forget, learn, or relearn something, they refuse. They are deeply committed to believing what they are telling themselves, which slows down their job growth. Or, they act like they're good until they're not, which makes everything uncomfortable because they don't believe in themselves."* This observation shows how the inner fight can show up in actions that make the person feel even worse about their own shortcomings, producing a circle that is hard to break without help.

As Participant 11 points out, the effect on job growth isn't always clear right away: *"I personally believe that it is not lack of skill."* It's not a lack of skill. It's a lack of confidence. This idea shows how feelings of the imposter syndrome can be hard to spot, since success on the outside can hide deep-seated fears that get in the way of long-term job growth.

There are many types of behaviours that can hurt your job that are caused by feelings if imposter syndrome. Participant 2, provides an interesting example: *"I had a few who were able to move into the positions they've been looking at, but this was after coaching." After the coaching. Okay, so they felt like they had been scared even before that. You should know that I want that job once you know that. Yes. You're too scared to say it out loud. Or even to try to get it."* This unwillingness to go after wanted job roles or express goals is a big barrier to career progress that usually needs help from outside sources to get past.

The effects go beyond people's individual job paths; they also change how organisations work. Participant 6 says, "I think because they set their standards so high." They can't enjoy the present moment. Plus, they learn along the way. Seeing one as a beginner, you know, and I think that's the key, yeah." Feelings of imposter syndrome can make it hard to take advantage of learning chances or fully engage in your present job. This can hinder both personal and organisational growth.

It's also common for social and organisational systems that do not recognise or deal with these internal issues to make feelings of imposter syndrome even worse for job growth. Participant 10, points out this systemic issue: *"I think leaders name*

and especially as the world leaders, we need to realise that this is a common thing around some of our female leaders as males, base need for us as males to start having things in place to address this early to address this, but to support people who experience this phenomenon." This call for organisational support and understanding shows how important it is to take a broader look at leadership development that deals with the imposter syndrome directly.

The coaches stress that feelings of the imposter syndrome do not have to stop job growth. These internal hurdles can be beaten by women leaders with the right help and guidance. They can retake their job paths. Participants 8 and 9 each provided positive examples: *I have met a lot of heads who couldn't stand up and have tough talks with their team members. These were people who couldn't even give speeches in front of 50 people, you know what I mean? There have been a lot of changes, no matter how small. I think the most important thing is becoming aware of how I question myself and how that doubt holds me back. This change shows what can happen when feelings of the imposter syndrome are dealt with properly.*

Feelings of imposter syndrome have a wide-ranging and deep effect on job growth, changing not only individuals but also the way organisations work and the leadership environment as a whole. By recognising and removing these internal hurdles, organisations may be able to find and develop top-level leadership talent and create more welcoming and effective work environments. It's smart what Participant 14 says, *"A most key ingredients to people letting you see them." So, they don't have to put on a show for you.*" This realisation shows how transformational it could be to make spaces where women leaders can truly connect with their skills and goals, without feelings of the imposter syndrome getting in the way.

4.5.3 *Typical Characteristics/Feelings Observed in Women Leaders Experiencing feelings of the Imposter Syndrome.*

In observing women leaders experiencing feelings of the imposter syndrome, several common characteristics and feelings emerged. One of the most noticeable traits is a tendency towards self-restraint, as one participant noted,

"They tend to not self-express, they hold back their views", said Participant 4. This suggests a reluctance to voice opinions or share ideas, possibly stemming from a fear of judgment or criticism. Emotionally, these women often grapple with feelings of anxiety, fear, and inadequacy. As Participant 6 succinctly put it, *"Those emotions of anxiety, fear and inadequacy."* Participant 12 echoed this sentiment, stating, *"There is anxiety. There is unhappiness, and I don't know if I want to call it sadness."* These emotions paint a picture of internal turmoil, hinting at the emotional toll feelings of the imposter syndrome can take.

Moreover, these women often downplay their accomplishments, avoiding discussions about their achievements and challenges. This is captured in the statement, *"Downplaying what they've achieved, not speaking to their achievements, shying away from speaking about what challenges them, what they find difficult, almost concealing style, and avoiding."* observed Participant 15. This behaviour suggests a desire to remain inconspicuous, possibly due to a fear of scrutiny or disbelief in their own success.

As such, women leaders experiencing feelings of the imposter syndrome often exhibit self-restraint, emotional distress, and a tendency to downplay their achievements. These characteristics provide a glimpse into the complex internal landscape of these individuals as they navigate their leadership roles.

4.5.4 *Coaching Approach and Tools for Women Leaders Experiencing feelings of the Imposter Syndrome.*

Coaching women leaders who are experiencing feelings of the imposter syndrome requires a nuanced and individualised approach. As one coach explained, *"So my approach is really to get the individual empowered. And empowerment takes them on journeys of reflection and looking back at how they do things, and so on",* Participant 7. This approach emphasises empowerment, encouraging women leaders to reflect on their actions and behaviours, fostering self-awareness and personal growth. However, the coaching approach is not one-size-fits-all. It must be tailored to the individual, taking into account their unique personality and character. As another coach noted, *"It's always different. It depends on the character, the personality of the person that you're coaching"*

Participant 8. This highlights the importance of adaptability in coaching, adjusting techniques and strategies to meet the specific needs of each individual.

In terms of tools, some coaches use an integrated model that offers a holistic approach to coaching. One coach shared, *"I use an integrated model. This is just a holistic approach to the design flow that comes with coaching. The tools I use are the enneagram insights and MBTI"*, said participant 13. These tools, including the enneagram insights and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), provide valuable insights into personality traits and preferences, aiding in the coaching process. Finally, some coaches adopt a transformational approach, focusing less on past experiences and more on future growth. As one coach described, *"I think I described it as transformation, in my approach, in that I don't dwell much on what has happened historically in their career journey. One of the main groundings in terms of coaching has been around the GROW Model"*, said participant 14. The GROW Model, which stands for Goal, Reality, Options, and Will, provides a structured framework for coaching and guiding individuals towards achieving their personal and professional goals.

To this end, coaching women leaders experiencing feelings of the imposter syndrome involves a blend of empowerment, adaptability, holistic tools, and a forward-looking, transformational approach. Each coaching journey is unique, reflecting the individual's personality, experiences, and aspirations.

Many of the participants stressed that building trust and psychological safety is an important part of the coaching method. This was well articulated by Participant 11: *"I think one of the skills I bring that makes a difference is that I can get along with most coaches, but not all of them." It's also important to know when people don't get along and help them work on that. Yes. When I first start coaching, I work hard to build a relationship with them because I want them to know that I won't judge them. This is because many of them feel very exposed in that setting.* Focusing on making a place where no one will judge lets clients talk about their imposter feelings honestly, often for the first time.

The coaches always stress how important it is to take a client-centred, whole-person approach. Participant 4 talks about how she works: "I use the GROW module a lot because that's what I was trained on." *Because of the Enneagram, I also put a lot of stuff from some of my clients. That's why I'll add some results from some Enneagram work to it. I also use the storytelling method, which says that someone has to tell their story. This multifaceted method lets you dig deep into the client's experiences, beliefs, and habits, giving you a solid base for dealing with feelings of imposter syndrome."*

A big part of many coaches' methods is stressing how important it is to challenge and change limited ideas. *"So, with cognitive behaviour, coaching, or therapy, you have to help them understand that everything is in their mind and in their brain. It's all thinking,"* says Participant 5. Yes? So, you need to make them check to see if what they're thinking is true. This cognitive method helps clients see and question the assumptions that are driving their imposter feelings. This creates new ways for them to think about themselves and act.

Using certain tools and tests is a big part of how many coaches do their jobs. Participant 14 talks about the Enneagram: *"But the Enneagram is a great one."* Yes? It's great because it looks at more than just your actions and attitude; it tries to figure out what's really going on behind the scenes. Along with other tools like MBTI and Insights Discovery, this one helps people understand themselves better and see trends that might be making them feel like imposters.

Direct study of clients at work is a unique and effective method that several coaches have talked about. Participant 14 talks about this method: *"I tell people that if you're happy, they can come to a meeting with you. It will only name me and my coaches... Wants to look at them, right? Whatever we do, the inbound setting, or experience with how things are done here to help me that she wants to, and then my situation, where I just sit in the room and watch, that's it."* This method lets coaches give specific comments based on what they see happening in the real world. This helps close the gap between how clients think they are doing and how well they are actually doing.

A lot of coaches stress how important it is to use action-oriented methods that push clients to face their fears and question what they think they know. Participant 2 offers this example: *"For example, for each session, what is the goal for that session?" Where do we want to go? Where would we like to be? Check out what kinds of chances they look at. Does it look like something that we could use to judge it? And then, you know, finally, then, so, yeah, how do I put it? I'm not sure if you understand, but if you look at, say, the goal, look at where they are now."* Clients can move past ruminating and into active involvement with their challenges with the help of this focus on specific actions and goals.

The coaches also stress how important it is to deal with the bigger picture when imposter feelings happen. Participant 10, stresses the need for structural change: *"I think what's important for me, for women executives, is that they have, we almost change the way people think about support. And this gives them more access to the platform, or maybe the places where they can meet up*." This way of thinking acknowledges that the feelings of imposter syndrome isn't just a problem for one person but is often caused by and kept going by the way organisations and society are set up.

Recognising and appreciating one's own accomplishments is a subject that runs through many of the coaching methods. Participant 8 talks about this part: *"In fact, I have met a lot of heads who couldn't stand up and have tough talks with their team members. These were people who couldn't even give speeches in front of 50 people, you know what I mean? There have been a lot of changes, no matter how small. I think the most important thing is becoming aware of how I question myself and how that doubt holds me back. This change shows what can happen when feelings of the imposter syndrome are dealt with properly.* Focusing on becoming more self-aware and enjoying small victories helps clients see themselves in a more fair and accurate way.

The coaches also stress how important it is to deal with the mental and emotional parts of imposter syndrome. Participant 11 says, "*Most of the tools I use are ones that are based on NLP. This means that if you want, I can help people make a safe place. They can go there whenever they need to feel safe. In that case, yes,*

they are thinking tools." These integrated methods help clients come up with useful ways to deal with feelings of imposter syndrome in real life.

The coaches stress how important it is to make their method unique for each client. This is well said by Participant 6: *"And I don't know if I want to call it a programme that." Okay, so today we said we would do this and stick to this plan because I don't care what's going on at home, at work, or anywhere else. This is the plan, and I'll keep your eyes safe. We need to get this done. Also, I'm very flexible with my coaching style because I don't know who will show up, when they'll show up, or what needs to be talked about in that session*." One thing that makes coaching for imposter syndrome work is being able to adapt to and respond to the client's current wants and experiences.

4.5.5 *Noticeable Changes During and After Coaching*

The transformative journey of coaching emerged vividly through the insights of the participants. *"You literally see when people's faces light up. You look at the cognitive, the visual, the audio, you see a new year, you listen to like a change in voice or the faces may be changed, or there's a dropping of the shoulders*", said participant 2. This succinct description captured the holistic nature of transformation, encompassing cognitive shifts, visual cues, and audible changes, symbolising a rebirth of sorts. As coaching unfolded, participants witnessed a spectrum of changes. *"My clients have gone from a space of complete paralysis, of not wanting to move forward to then having the courage to try and to believe in themselves",* Participant 5 testified. The narrative unfolded as individuals transitioned from a state of stagnation to one of empowerment and self-belief, a testament to the transformative impact coaching can have on breaking through barriers.

Yet, the journey is not always linear. *"It varies. Like I said, some people will check out because the expectation is that they're going to come into the space, and you are going to collaborate with them in blaming everybody else. When the realisation is that it is a lot of work, and then they don't want to go there. And then sometimes they'll come back. It's like, okay, now I'm ready to face. Another one is confidence; this gained confidence, sometimes it can be very extreme",* said

by Participant 9. This candid acknowledgement of non-linearity emphasised the complexity of the transformative process. Some individuals may resist initially, grappling with the intensity of self-discovery, only to return with a newfound readiness to confront challenges. For some, the coaching space becomes a sanctuary for authentic expression. *"They have, in the sense that for some people, it might be the first place that they bring this issue. Just knowing that they haven't been ridiculed, criticised, or judged for bringing it is such a relief that it doesn't make them lesser than others, and then the process of working with them to take on that, as opposed to avoiding dealing with it",* as said by participant 15. This insight unveiled the coaching space as a haven where individuals feel safe to voice their deepest concerns without fear of judgment or ridicule, paving the way for healing and growth. In essence, coaching embarks on a transformative journey, empowering individuals to overcome obstacles, build confidence, and ultimately, believe in themselves. The path may be challenging and nonlinear, but the outcomes are profoundly rewarding, resonating with the idea that coaching is not merely a process but a catalyst for personal and professional metamorphosis.

Figure 4: Perceived Impact of Imposter Phenomenon on the Advancement of Women Leaders

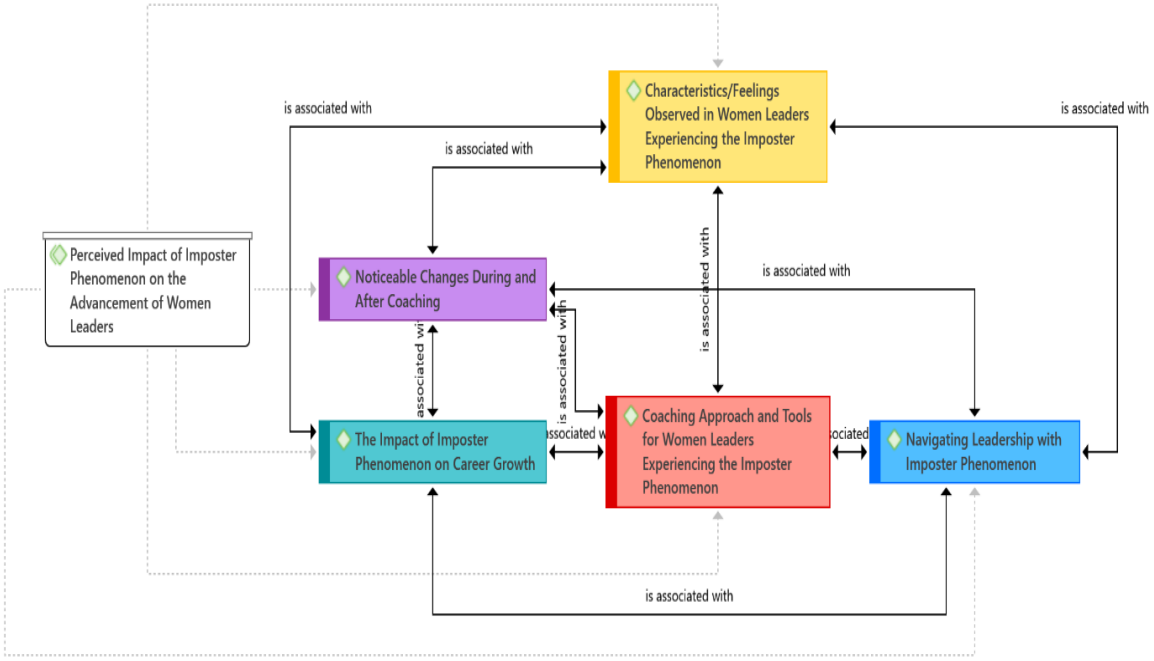


Figure 4 illustrates how various themes and sub-themes coalesce around the perceived impact of imposter syndrome on women's leadership advancement.

The “is associated with” links highlight how imposter-related feelings are embedded within broader leadership challenges such as *decision-making*, *visibility*, *confidence*, and *professional trajectory*.

This diagram is significant because it not only confirms the pervasiveness of imposter syndrome but also clarifies its mechanisms of influence. The strong association between *self-perception*, *career stagnation*, and *organisational culture* indicates that executive coaches observe how internal psychological barriers are often reinforced by external workplace dynamics — such as bias or a lack of supportive networks.

Moreover, links between *coaching interventions*, *self-confidence*, and *leadership performance* illustrate the perceived transformative potential of coaching. Coaches shared that once these internal beliefs are challenged within a safe coaching space, visible shifts begin to occur in how women lead, speak up, and pursue opportunities.

Therefore, this network map affirms Proposition 2 — that imposter syndrome is a self-limiting phenomenon — and visually reflects how it cascades across emotional, behavioural, and organisational domains. The figure helps both researcher and reader grasp the relational nature of these barriers and how coaching can intervene at multiple points of influence.

In summary, feelings of Imposter Syndrome cast a substantial shadow on the career trajectories of women leaders in South Africa's corporate domain, hindering their progress and shaping their experiences. As revealed by participants, these leaders often don armours of confidence, mask their vulnerabilities, grapple with internal conflicts, and navigate a vulnerable space during coaching. The impact on career growth is evident, with feelings of Imposter Syndrome acting as a formidable barrier that limits potential and stifles progress. Yet, amid these challenges, there is room for transformation. The recognition of the feelings of Imposter Syndrome serves as a catalyst for change. Participants attested to the noticeable changes during and after coaching, where the individuals transition from states of stagnation to empowerment. The coaching

space becomes a sanctuary for authentic expression, allowing women leaders to voice their concerns without judgment. In essence, coaching emerged as a transformative elixir, empowering women leaders to overcome obstacles, build confidence, and ultimately believe in themselves. The nonlinear path, marked by moments of resistance and readiness, underscores the complexity of the transformative process. Coaching becomes a powerful vehicle for personal and professional metamorphosis through a blend of empowerment, adaptability, holistic tools, and a forward-looking approach. Navigating the landscape of women leaders facing feelings of the Imposter Syndrome, it becomes clear that while the challenges are significant, the potential for growth and realisation of full potential is equally profound. The narratives shared by participants paint a nuanced picture of resilience, empowerment, and the enduring human spirit's ability to overcome even the most ingrained self-doubt.

4.6 Chapter Conclusion

A complex interaction of psychological, social, and organisational elements is shown by the investigation of the feelings of Imposter Syndrome in women leaders as indicated by the insights shared by the executive coaches. Far from being a simple example of self-doubt, this phenomenon shows to be a major barrier to the full realisation of women's leadership potential in corporate South Africa and beyond. The impressions made by executive coaches highlight the pervasiveness of imposter emotions, which are often derived from systemic prejudices and internalised social expectations. These emotions show themselves as an ongoing sensation of dishonesty even in face of objective proof of achievement and ability. The discrepancy between coaches' original expectations and the reality they come across emphasises the sometimes secret character of this fight and the vital need of establishing non-judgemental, secure environments for actual development.

One important discovery is the contradictory character of the feelings of Imposter Syndrome in which highly successful women both show confidence and carry great self-doubt. This inner struggle affects not just personal well-being but also organisational performance and professional advancement. The experiences of

the coaches highlight how imposter emotions may cause self-sabotaging actions, resistance to seek promotion prospects, and a propensity to overwork to show one's value – all of which can finally impede both personal and organisational development. The tools and coaching strategies covered provide a lighthouse of hope for overcoming this obstacle. Coaches construct potent environments for change by combining embodied practices, cognitive reframing, and systemic awareness. The key in enabling women leaders to rediscover their natural strengths and value is clearly developing self-awareness, questioning limiting ideas, and encouraging self-appreciation.

Significantly, the study emphasises that overcoming feelings of the imposter syndrome calls for a more general change in organisational cultures and society standards rather than just personal accountability. Fostering lasting transformation depends critically on the need for supportive surroundings, normalising feelings of self-doubt, and addressing systematic prejudices. One cannot exaggerate the transforming power of coaching in this environment. Coaches document notable changes in their clients' self-perception, confidence, and readiness to face fresh challenges. These developments help individual women leaders as well as having the power to set a domino effect that shapes organisational cultures and opens the path for next generations of women in leadership.

This study emphasises the importance of ongoing investigation of the feelings of the imposter syndrome especially in different cultural settings. It demands a more sophisticated knowledge of how interacting identities—such as ethnicity, culture, and financial background—affect women leaders' experience of imposter emotions. Ultimately, overcoming the feelings of the imposter syndrome in women leaders becomes very essential for producing more inclusive, varied, and powerful leadership environments. Combining focused coaching interventions with structural improvements might help to release great leadership potential and propel more fair and creative organisational cultures. Not just for individual women but also for the benefit of whole companies and society, the road of overcoming imposter emotions provides a route to more real, confident, and powerful leadership – not only in challenges.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a detailed discussion that aligns the data analysed in Chapter 4 with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. The discussion is structured around the study's two central research questions, guiding an exploration of the themes and sub-themes identified in the previous chapter. The primary aim here is to evaluate the validity of the research findings by examining them in light of existing literature, providing insights that answer the research questions. The discussion will thus focus heavily on integrating findings with the literature, allowing a comprehensive analysis of the study's contributions.

The research questions addressed in this chapter are:

1. What are the perceptions of executive coaches when coaching women leaders with imposter syndrome?
2. What is the perceived influence of the imposter syndrome on the development of women leaders in corporate South Africa?

5.2 Discussion pertaining to Research Question 1

This section responds to Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of executive coaches regarding coaching women leaders who experience imposter syndrome? It addresses Objective 1 of the study, which is to explore how executive coaches perceive and experience the process of coaching women leaders who exhibit symptoms of imposter syndrome. The findings strongly support Proposition 1, which posits that imposter syndrome is widely perceived by executive coaches as a common and impactful phenomenon that affects women leaders' confidence, self-perception, and sense of leadership identity.

Across the interviews, executive coaches consistently described how women leaders in corporate South Africa present with high levels of competence yet struggle to internalise their achievements. Coaches reported that many of their clients display characteristics typical of imposter syndrome: persistent self-doubt, attribution of success to external factors, and a deep-seated fear of being

exposed as “frauds.” These perceptions align with the foundational work of Clance and Imes (1978) as well as more recent studies by Bravata et al. (2020) and Orbé-Austin & Orbé-Austin (2020), who note that imposter syndrome is particularly common among women in high-achievement contexts.

Participants explained that imposter syndrome in women leaders often manifests subtly during coaching conversations. One coach reflected:

“She’ll say things like, ‘I don’t know why they picked me for this role,’ or ‘I hope I don’t mess this up.’ It’s not always dramatic, but it’s a recurring undertone — a quiet self-doubt that runs deep.” (Participant 4)

Another coach elaborated on how perfectionism and overwork frequently accompany imposter thoughts:

“Many of them feel they have to go above and beyond all the time just to prove they belong. It’s exhausting — and yet they don’t see how capable they really are.” (Participant 6)

This insight echoes Bravata et al. (2020), who found a strong link between imposter syndrome and chronic overwork among women professionals. It also supports Nakazwe-Masiya et al.’s (2017) observation that self-doubt often coexists with a reluctance to assert authority, further limiting leadership effectiveness.

Interestingly, some coaches noted that imposter syndrome was more likely to surface during moments of career acceleration — such as promotions, high-stakes presentations, or board-level exposure — where visibility increases and self-doubt intensifies. These trigger moments often created cognitive dissonance, where external recognition clashed with internal feelings of inadequacy.

Additionally, cultural context emerged as a key lens through which coaches interpret the prevalence of imposter syndrome in their clients. A few participants

reflected that women of colour in corporate South Africa may feel an even greater pressure to “prove” themselves, due to both racial and gendered expectations:

“There’s this double scrutiny — being a woman and being Black — and it amplifies that feeling of ‘Do I really belong here?’” (Participant 2)

These perspectives align with Bowen & Botha (2023), who emphasise the intersection of race, gender, and leadership legitimacy in the South African workplace. Coaches reported that this intersectional experience often heightened emotional labour and reduced psychological safety for women leaders, making coaching a vital reflective space.

Finally, the coaches emphasised that imposter syndrome is not merely a personal issue — it is often a symptom of systemic dynamics. One coach noted:

“It’s not just her mindset — it’s the environment that reinforces it. When you’re the only woman in a senior room, and your opinions are second-guessed, the self-doubt is not imagined — it’s reinforced.” (Participant 1)

In summary, coaches perceive imposter syndrome among women leaders as a complex and multi-layered phenomenon. While it manifests through internalised doubt and perfectionism, it is shaped by broader cultural, organisational, and relational contexts. Coaching provides an important platform for surfacing and challenging these patterns, as explored further in the next section.

Theme 1 - Conceptualisation of Imposter Syndrome

In the 1970s, the term "Imposter Syndrome" found its roots through the observations and work of two female psychologists, Clance and Imes (1978). These psychologists identified a recurring phenomenon among highly intelligent and high-performing women they encountered in their professional practice. These women consistently grappled with an unsettling fear of being exposed as fraudulent, despite their evident intelligence and achievements in academia or their careers (Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021). This initial exploration laid the foundation for the understanding and recognition of Imposter Syndrome, a

concept that has since evolved and gained recognition in the broader discourse surrounding psychological well-being and self-perception (Breeze, 2018).

More recent studies have been conducted and contributions made to the exploration and understanding of Imposter syndrome. Orbé-Austin and Orbé-Austin (2020) have offered a definition of the imposter syndrome as a set of "thoughts, feelings and behaviours" that may be experienced by an individual thus affecting their emotional wellbeing. They also refer to Imposter syndrome as feelings experienced by individuals perceived as successful. They also state that as much as 70% people are said to experience imposter syndrome. There is also now documented experiences of the imposter syndrome among both men and women in different professional spaces including varying ethnic and racial groups. (Bravata, Dena M., et al 2020).

(Cokley, Harris, Hall, 2024) agree with the notion that women who experience imposter syndrome continue to feel inadequate despite their proven and legitimate academic and professional achievements which may serve as evidence of their capabilities. They share factors that contribute toward the development of the imposter syndrome such as family dynamics and society's role in the engineering of specific gender roles in one's early life.

Council (2020) also discusses key behaviours that were identified by Clance and Imes (1978), which have been further explored and emphasised by others including Orbé-Austin and Orbé-Austin (2020). These are behaviours that are found to maintain the feelings of the imposter syndrome and make it challenging to overcome. These behaviours are: diligence and hard work; intellectual inauthenticity; charm & perceptiveness and seeking mentorship for external validation. (Windridge, 2024) discusses the work done by (Josa, C), who has utilised neuroscience and the psychology of performance to identify four traits of imposter syndrome that are closely related to the behaviours that were originally identified. The four traits being: people pleasing, perfectionism; paralysis and procrastination. These have recently been popularly referred to as the "4 Ps of the imposter syndrome" and are also seen to be the key elements of what Clance and Imes (1978) referred to as the Imposter Cycle. A behavioural pattern that one

is unable to break due to the inability to identify value to one's ability to successfully perform a tack that has already been achieved.

In exploring the perceptions of the participants on feelings of the imposter syndrome that were experienced by the women leaders they coached the following subthemes emerged: Gender- based comparison in self-assessment; belonging and legitimacy; role acceptance; barriers to professional growth; professional space and identity. There are links and relationships in the sub-themes that emerged, and some will be discussed simultaneously in the relationship drawn while others will be discussed independently.

5.2.1 *Sub-theme 1: Gender-based comparison in Self-Assessment / Belonging and legitimacy*

The role of society in influencing gender roles by placing different value on gender and thus contributing to the development of the imposter syndrome among women is referred to in the original study by Clance and Imes (1978). Gender disparity has been an ongoing worldwide phenomenon and has also influenced the South African landscape by placing women at a disadvantage with black women more of a disadvantage through apartheid and culture (Hutson, 2007, Mabandla, 2018, Mudau, Mokoboki, Ravhuhali & Mkhize, 2021).

In this study, it was evident how women leaders experienced feelings of imposter syndrome in the corporate space and business in relation to their male counterparts. Organisational culture, particularly of traditionally male dominated industries and organisations, serve as a signal of "not belonging" in that space in relation to the male counterparts and contributes to feelings of imposter syndrome. Participant 13 refers to the women experience of structural engineering of an organisation that communicates *"you should not be here"*, which leads to immediate self-doubt which underpins the imposter syndrome as authored by (Council, 2020). This is regardless of qualification, experience and acumen.

Participant 2 refers to the challenge experienced by women when entering into spaces and positions as "first female ever to". As much as this can be viewed as

a positive stride, it cements the feelings of not belonging. As Participant 2 further recounts the challenge women face to belong when no one else like them has ever occupied a similar position, there is a tendency to question your belonging and worth. This is a self-view women will have of themselves in an assessment conducted of themselves in comparison to others, especially their male counterparts. As Participant 4 remarks, this is a self-view many women she has encountered and coached will hold regardless of the legitimate evidence available of their performance and competence.

5.2.2 *Sub-Theme 2: Role acceptance*

The results of this study show that the feelings of the imposter syndrome that the women leaders in corporate South Africa experience depend critically on acceptance of roles. Despite possessing the required credentials and successes, executive coaches noted that their clients typically struggle to really embrace their leadership roles. This inner struggle fits Clance and Imes' (1978) original conception of the Imposter Phenomenon, in which highly successful people struggle to absorb their achievements. Particularly in mostly white or male-dominated environments, the coaches' observations of women leaders challenging their belonging in high-level positions reflect the results of Fitzsimmons and Callan (2016), who underlined the influence of gender forces on women's advancement into leadership roles.

The findings of the study add to earlier research by offering context-specific analysis of how problems with role acceptance show themselves in South African corporate environments. Using lines *like "do I belong here, the White House as my white colleagues?"* coaches said their clients often felt uncomfortable. This attitude captures the complex interaction of racial and gender dynamics in post-apartheid South Africa as Hutson (2007) and Mabandla (2018) have argued. The continuation of these emotions among very successful women emphasises the deep-rooted character of the Imposter Phenomenon and its resistance to external validation alone.

Interestingly, this study discovered that excellent performance often coexists with role acceptability problems, leading to a paradox whereby women leaders shine

in their roles while yet internally questioning their validity. This result gives Vergauwe et al. (2015) who found the Imposter Phenomenon as a hindrance to job advancement more complexity in their work. It implies that the phenomena can last even when women progress in their professions, therefore influencing their leadership style and decision-making process. The coaches' notes of clients' resistance to fully occupy their professional space or express their thoughts in meetings offer specific illustrations of how problems with role acceptance could affect daily leadership practices.

5.2.3 *Sub-Theme 3: Barriers to Professional growth*

The Imposter Phenomenon was found to provide both internal and external obstacles to professional development. These results provide fresh analysis of the South African setting and mostly support already published material. The executive coaches often spoke about internal hurdles including self-doubt, fear of failure, and perfectionism. These closely fit the traits of the Imposter Phenomenon reported by Clance et al. (1995) and investigated more recently by Mak, Kleitman, and Abbott (2019). The "diligence and hard work" trend found in early Imposter Phenomenon research is matched by the coaches' notes of clients' inclinations to overwork and strive for perfection as compensatory behaviours.

Nonetheless, the present research expands our knowledge by stressing how these internal constraints interact with outside elements particular to the corporate environment of South Africa. Reflecting the "double-edged sword" of racism and sexism in South African companies Hutson (2007) and Mudau et al. (2021), coaches noted that their clients sometimes experienced extra problems connected to racial and gender biases. The continuation of these institutional obstacles in spite of corporate practices and increasing regulation fits Leite's (2019) contention that equality laws by themselves cannot guarantee fair results. The research reveals, among other things, a "fear of visibility" as a major obstacle to professional development. As women leaders developed in their professions, coaches saw that they often were more reluctant to stand out or assume prominent roles because they feared more scrutiny and possible exposure of their perceived shortcomings. Although prior Imposter Phenomenon research has not explored this fear of visibility in any detail, it may have a special expression in the

framework of women's leadership in South Africa. It implies that interventions meant to boost confidence and challenge self-limiting ideas could have to especially target this fear of more visibility and its possible effects on professional growth.

The study also showed that often subtle manifestations of obstacles to professional development included unwillingness to speak out in meetings or uncertainty to apply for promotions. These results coincide with the study by Nakazwe-Masiya et al. (2017) on the correlation between assertiveness in South African professionals and the Imposter Phenomenon. The present study broadens this work by including particular cases of how lack of assertiveness might impede professional development and by providing understanding of possible coaching techniques to solve these problems.

5.2.4 *Sub-Theme 4: Professional Space and identity*

A key component of the Imposter Phenomenon experience for South African women leaders turned out to be professional space and identity. The results of the research expose a complicated interaction of personal identity, organisational culture, and more general society standards. Coaches noted that their clients sometimes found it difficult to really assert their work space, both physically and metaphorically. For women of colour who felt like outsiders in mostly white or male-dominated corporate workplaces, this difficulty was especially significant. These findings line up with the intersectional perspective promoted by academics such as Nkomo (2016), who underlined the significance of analysing women's leadership experiences in South Africa from several angles.

The findings of the study illustrate the particular manner in which professional identity is negotiated in the post-apartheid South African setting, therefore augmenting earlier research. Many of their clients, according to coaches, struggled with internalised ideas about leadership and frequently connected it with white man traits. This result speaks to Hills' (2015) analysis of how racial and gender hierarchies from the apartheid era still influence modern leadership impressions. However, this current study offers fresh understanding of how these internalised ideas show up in the daily experiences of women leaders and the

techniques coaches use to assist in challenging and reinterpretation of these constrictive ideas.

One interesting feature of the results is the conflict between authenticity and adaptation in the development of professional identity. Coaches saw that their clients sometimes felt under pressure to fit conventional leadership models, so maybe compromising their real selves in the process. This conflict reflects the "intellectual inauthenticity" Clance et al. (1995) have identified as a hallmark of the Imposter Phenomenon. But the current study expands this idea by looking at how it interacts in the South African setting with racial and cultural identities. Some coaches claimed success in guiding clients in including their cultural assets into their leadership approaches, therefore subverting the assumption that professionalism calls for adherence to a single, usually Western ideal.

The study also found that professional space and identity problems changed as women progressed in their careers rather than being fixed. As their clients assumed more senior responsibilities and had fresh difficulties claiming their territory at higher organisational levels, coaches saw that the Imposter Phenomenon often become more severe. This result gives Fitzsimmons and Callan's (2016) work on the gendered accumulation of professional capital more complexity and suggests that the Imposter Phenomenon might influence women's perceptions and use of their acquired experience and talents.

It was also interesting to note that the current study revealed that several features of the Imposter Phenomenon—such as increased self-awareness and a drive for ongoing development—could possibly be used as advantages in leadership situations. This viewpoint is consistent with more recent research, including Zanchetta et al. (2020), which contends that, given appropriate direction, any degree of self-doubt can be beneficial. According to this study, coaches have a difficult task in helping clients strike a professional identity that is both confident and receptive to development between healthy self-reflection and crippling self-doubt.

Finally, the results on role acceptability, obstacles to professional development, and professional space and identity offer a whole picture of how the Imposter Phenomenon shows in the lives of women executives in corporate South Africa. The findings mainly confirm the body of knowledge already in publication on the Imposter Phenomenon and provide fresh understanding of its particular manifestations in the South African setting. Even while legal and business regulations have evolved, the study emphasises how consistently historical and social elements shape women's leadership experiences. It also highlights the difficult ways in which internal psychological processes mix with outside institutional obstacles to provide particular difficulties for leaders in the humanities.

The results highlight the need of customised coaching strategies addressing both systemic and personal challenges. They contend that successful interventions ought to incorporate techniques for negotiating difficult organisational and social dynamics in addition to boosting confidence or questioning limiting ideas. The findings of the study also highlight the possibility of using features of the Imposter Phenomenon as accelerators for real leadership development and expansion, therefore providing a more complex picture of this psychological experience.

Lastly, the results of the study add to the increasing body of knowledge of studies on women's leadership in various cultural settings, thereby stressing the need of culturally sensitive techniques to grasp and solve the Imposter Phenomenon. These revelations provide insightful direction for creating more efficient support systems and interventions for women executives struggling with imposter emotions as corporate South Africa keeps working for more diversity and inclusion in leadership.

5.3 Theme 2 – Expectations vs Reality in coaching women leaders experiencing Imposter Syndrome

In this theme, the respondents shared their perceptions of the women leaders specifically the differences between their initial expectations of the high achieving and competent leaders and the actual leader they encounter in the coaching

process. Though the initial engagement displays the profile of a high flying and competent woman, the coaching process unveils and discovers the self-doubt and inner conflict. This next section provides a discussion of the sub-themes that emerged in Theme 2.

5.3.1 *Sub-Theme 1: The Facade of Confidence*

The results of the study discover a startling difference between the reality executive coaches faced working with women leaders experiencing feeling of the imposter syndrome and their initial expectations. Coaches regularly described their clients as extremely competent, accomplished people who seemed to have their professional life under great control. This outward display of confidence and ability fits the standard description of high achievers experiencing feelings of the imposter syndrome, first noticed by Clance and Imes (1978). The observations of the coaches confirm the theory that people experiencing feelings of the imposter syndrome often excel in their industries and achieve notable achievement despite their own concerns.

However, when the coaching process allowed for better engagement and connection, a more complicated reality surfaced. Coaches spoke of a slow revelation process when their clients' well-crafted facades began to unveil underlying self-doubt and anxiety. This result highlights the common secret nature of these emotions in high-achieving people, therefore adding complexity to the body of knowledge already on Imposter Syndrome. The findings of the study imply that among women leaders in South African business environments, the capacity to keep a convincing exterior of confidence while grappling with significant self-doubt may be especially developed. Although this ability could help one negotiate demanding work settings, it may also help to sustain Imposter Syndrome by stifling honest communication and acceptance of these emotions.

The study revealed that women who had attained higher degrees of leadership often displayed more clear differences between internal self-perception and outside achievement. This observation is consistent with the results of Vergauwe et al. (2015), who observed that professionals' inability to progress to more senior managerial positions could be mostly caused by the imposter Syndrome. The

current study, however, expands this knowledge by implying that even individuals who do advance could nevertheless suffer with more intense guilt about fraudulence. For both coaches and organisations, this relentless and maybe growing character of the imposter syndrome in successful women leaders poses a special difficulty.

The confidence coaches show also connects with the idea of "intellectual inauthenticity" Clance et al. (1995) describes. With coaches stating that their clients often felt driven to present an image of relentless competency, even when they were struggling or uncertain, the current study offers specific case studies of how this inauthenticity shows in the South African corporate setting. Maintaining a perfect appearance not only aggravates the imposter syndrome but also makes it difficult to ask for help and practise authentic leadership.

5.3.2 *Sub-Theme 2: The Unveiling of Vulnerability*

The executives coaches noted a significant change in their engagements with the clients as their relationships developed, marked by the slow revealing of vulnerability. Both coaches and clients were surprised by this process of disclosure since it emphasises the depth and frequency of the imposter syndrome even among very successful women leaders. The results of the study in this regard help to clarify how the imposter syndrome functions in professional environments, especially in connection to executive coaching relationships.

Often following multiple sessions of keeping a calm façade, coaches reported instances of breakthrough whereby clients would suddenly confess deep-seated worries and concerns. These disclosures often revolved on themes of not fitting, anxiety of being "found out," and a continuous sense of dishonesty in spite of empirical proof of ability and achievement. This fits the main features of Imposter Syndrome as reported in the literature, but the current study offers insightful analysis of how these emotions develop in the particular setting of executive coaching sessions.

The revealing of vulnerability frequently highlighted the intersectional character of Imposter Syndrome for South African women leaders. Coaches said that

elements including ethnicity, cultural background, and socioeconomic history regularly compounded the experiences of their clients. This result validates the efforts of academics such as Nkomo (2016), who have underlined the need of analysing women's leadership experiences in South Africa from several angles of identification. The present research expands this knowledge by showing how these intersectional elements show themselves in the particular setting of the imposter syndrome and how coaching partnerships handle them.

The results were fascinating in that the process of revealing vulnerability, although first difficult, frequently produced major coaching process innovations. Once clients felt safe enough to share their self-doubts and worries, coaches said, new paths for development and improvement opened up. This observation is consistent with more modern viewpoints on the imposter syndrome, such as those offered by Zanchetta et al. (2020), who hold that appreciating and overcoming these emotions could perhaps result in more real leadership styles and more self-awareness.

The study clarified, though, that the process of revealing vulnerability was not always clear-cut or straight forward. Coaches reported cases where clients would swing between transparency and hiding behind confident façade. This dynamic character of the coaching process in addressing the imposter syndrome emphasises the necessity of patience, tenacity, and adaptability in the coaching approaches. It also emphasises the need of establishing, for clients, a constantly safe and non-judgemental environment where they may gradually explore these delicate concerns.

5.3.3 *Sub-Theme 3: Bridging the Gap: Coaching Strategies and Challenges*

The difference between expectations and reality in coaching women leaders with the imposter syndrome made particular techniques necessary to close this discrepancy more important. Coaches reported using a variety of strategies to assist their clients in balancing their internal sense of fraudulence with their outside achievement. Usually combining cognitive reframing, behavioural treatments, and investigation of more complex psychological patterns. These

techniques and approaches were applied by coaches in an effort to achieve transformation.

Using evidence-based approaches to challenge clients' self-limiting beliefs was one often used strategy coaches noted. This often at times included walking clients through a methodical review of their accomplishments, abilities, and positive comments from others. Coaches sought to progressively change their clients' self-perceptions by pushing them to face the gap between their actual achievements and their subjective emotions of inadequacy. This method fits cognitive-behavioural methods that have showed promise in treating the imposter syndrome as covered in the literature (e.g., Zanchetta et al., 2020).

The results of the study, however, imply that for many clients, especially those with well rooted imposter syndrome, just cognitive techniques were not enough to completely resolve their condition. Coaches noted the importance of combining more comprehensive approaches addressing emotional, physical, and relational components of their clients' experiences with cognitive skills. This multifarious approach shows a change in coaching techniques, transcending mere challenge of ideas to include a more whole perspective of personal and professional growth. Helping clients to internalise their achievements and good feedback presented a major difficulty noted by coaches. Many coaches noted that rather than attributing their clients' successes to their own ability, many of them tended to credit luck, timing, or other people's efforts. This inclination fits the standard definition of the imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978), but this current study offers understanding of how this attribution style endures even in the face of repeated success and acknowledgement. Often through repeated exercises in self-awareness and the development of internal validation, coaches discussed developing techniques to help clients "own" their accomplishments.

The study also underlined the need of helping women leaders with the imposter syndrome by addressing cultural and institutional elements. Many of their clients, according to the coaches, battled internalised society ideas about gender roles, leadership, and success. For women of colour, who sometimes encountered more layers of prejudice and stereotyping, this was especially evident. Coach

descriptions of including talks of systematic inequalities and cultural dynamics into their sessions to enable clients to place their experiences within more general society patterns, therefore addressing these challenges. This strategy conforms with requests in the literature (e.g., Leite, 2019) for a more complex knowledge of how social and cultural elements help to sustain the imposter syndrome in underprivileged populations.

The study revealed an unusual discovery: some clients may first experience aggravation of the imposter syndrome from coaching itself. Coaches documented cases when clients' self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy were momentarily heightened by their growing attention on personal growth and introspection. This finding emphasises the difficult and perhaps contradictory nature of using coaching to treat the imposter syndrome. It implies that as part of the development process coaches should be ready for occasional setbacks and rising client discomfort.

The study also clarifies the significance of the coaching relationship itself in close proximity to reality, therefore bridging the expectation gap. Coaches underlined the significance of establishing a non-judgemental, safe environment where clients might feel free to share their weaknesses and investigate their worries. Many said that the calibre of the coaching partnership was frequently more indicative of favourable results than any one method or intervention. This result conforms with other general studies on the value of the therapeutic relationship in psychological treatments and implies that, in cases of Imposter Syndrome, the relational component of coaching could be especially important.

Ultimately the issue of Expectations vs Reality, in coaching women leaders who are experiencing feelings of the imposter syndrome, exposes a complicated and nuanced picture of how this phenomenon shows up and is managed in executive coaching partnerships. The results of the study support and expand on current knowledge on the imposter syndrome, therefore providing insightful analysis of its representation in the South African business environment. The noted disparity between internal self-perception and outside achievement emphasises the ongoing and sometimes covert character of the imposter syndrome in highly

successful women leaders. While it gives chances for development and real self-expression, the slow revealing of vulnerability inside coaching partnerships offers a view into the depth and complexity of these experiences. The difficulties and techniques mentioned by coaches in closing this discrepancy between expectations and reality highlight the need of multifarious, culturally sensitive methods addressing both personal and institutional elements. These results provide significant direction for creating more successful treatments to help women leaders in overcoming the imposter syndrome and realising their full potential as the field of executive coaching develops.

5.4 Theme 3 – Barriers experienced by Women leaders experiencing Imposter Syndrome

A third theme that was explored was around the possible barriers experienced by the women leaders who experience feelings of the imposter syndrome. This section discusses the sub-themes that emerged within this theme.

5.4.1 *Sub-Theme 1: Internal Psychological Barriers*

The results of the study expose a complicated terrain of internal psychological barriers women leaders with the imposter syndrome in corporate South Africa must negotiate. Deeply ingrained in the mentality of high-achieving women, these obstacles sometimes endure even with outside success and appreciation. The executive coaches noted repeatedly that their clients battled persistent self-doubt, dread of failure, and a nagging sense of fraudulence. These findings closely match the central features of the imposter syndrome as first reported by Clance and Imes (1978) and later developed by other scientists.

The current study deepens our knowledge by offering extensive, context-specific insights on how these internal conflicts show up in the South African work environment. Particularly in mostly white or male-dominated environments, coaches noted that their clients typically felt more like they did not belong. Often mixed with the imposter syndrome, this sense of otherness resulted in a double load of felt inadequacy. The results of the study in this field align with the work of Nkomo (2016), who underlined the intersectional difficulties experienced by

South African women leaders but add subtlety by specifically tying these experiences to the imposter syndrome.

One very startling discovery was the frequency of what several coaches described as "intellectual self-doubt" among their clients. This showed up as a constant doubt of one's cognitive capacity and decision-making ability even in fields where the person had previously shown constant excellence. Many times, this intellectual self-doubt resulted in overcompensation behaviours include too much meeting preparation or avoidance of work delegation. Although these actions might help to reduce anxiety, coaches saw that they eventually encouraged dishonesty and helped to cause burnout. This cycle of self-doubt and overcompensation fits the "diligence and hard work" pattern noted in early imposter syndrome studies but offers fresh understanding of its particular expression in high-level leadership positions.

The investigation also exposed a major internal hurdle in the form of internalised society expectations and preconceptions regarding leadership. Many women leaders claimed finding it difficult to balance their individual leadership approaches with accepted standards of aggressiveness and decisiveness sometimes connected with male leaders. Often, this inner struggle resulted in a sense of inauthenticity since women felt under pressure to adopt forced or artificial leadership styles. This result expands on the research of Fitzsimmons and Callan (2016) about gendered expectations in leadership by specifically tying these pressures to the experience of the imposter syndrome.

Interestingly, the study discovered that as women progressed in their professions, internal obstacles would often intensify. Against what would be expected, coaches noted that their most successful clients often had more intense feelings of the imposter syndrome. This contradictory rise in self-doubt in line with growing success gives our knowledge of the course of the imposter syndrome in professional environments fresh direction. It implies that rather than being considered as a one-time fix, interventions could have to be continuous and change as women advance in their professions.

5.4.2 *Sub-Theme 2: External Systemic and Cultural Barriers*

Although the experience of the imposter syndrome was much influenced by internal psychological obstacles, the study also underlined the great importance of external systematic and cultural barriers. These outside elements sometimes reinforced and aggravated internal doubts, which made it difficult for women leaders to get over their guilt of dishonesty.

The interviews revealed among the most notable outside obstacles the ongoing gender prejudice in business culture. Coaches noted that their clients regularly came across microaggressions, subtle (and occasionally overt) discrimination, and exclusion from unofficial power systems. These encounters fed women's imposter syndrome, therefore undermining their sense of legitimacy and belonging in leadership roles. This result fits more general studies on gender inequality in the workplace but offers particular understanding of how such bias interacts with and magnifies the imposter syndrome in women leaders.

The study also highlighted the important influence on the imposter syndrome experience of South Africa's particular historical and cultural setting. Many of their clients, especially women of colour, struggled with the legacy of apartheid and how it still affected business structures and ideas of leadership, coaches said. Often, this extra layer of complexity heightened emotions of not fitting or belonging in leadership posts. Although academics such as Hutson (2007) and Mabandla (2018) have explored the wider consequences of South Africa's historical background for women's progress, the present study offers particular insights on how these elements support the imposter syndrome.

Particularly in some sectors or at higher levels of management, the absence of clear role models and mentors for women executives was another important outside obstacle noted. There are so few women in senior leadership roles and coaches noted that their clients frequently found it difficult to see themselves in those roles. This lack of representation added to their isolation and strengthened their uncertainty about their capacity to achieve at higher degrees. Previous studies have shown the value of mentors and role models in overcoming the imposter syndrome. This current study emphasises the particular difficulties in

the South African environment where such leaders may be especially rare in some sectors.

The study also revealed how organisational cultures might help to sustain the imposter syndrome. Coaches detailed settings in which vulnerability was considered weakness, mistakes were harshly punished, and perfectionism was valued. Such societies produced a haven for the imposter syndrome, which makes it challenging for women to admit their difficulties or get help. This result broadens our knowledge of how organisational elements maintain these feelings of the imposter syndrome and implies that interventions might have to deal with organisational level cultural changes instead of only personal coaching.

5.4.3 *Sub-Theme 3: Interplay Between Internal and External Barriers*

The study's important realisation was the complicated interaction among internal psychological hurdles and outside structural and cultural impediments in the experience of the imposter syndrome among women leaders. This conversation set off a self-reinforcing cycle that made it especially difficult for women to overcome their guilt over dishonesty and really appreciate their leadership positions. Coaches noted that internal self-doubt was frequently prompted or aggravated by outside experiences of prejudice or exclusion. Being stopped or disregarded in meetings, for instance, could support a woman's internal story that she doesn't belong or isn't prepared to lead. On the other hand, self-doubt and internal worries can cause women to turn away from possibilities or hesitant to stand out, therefore supporting external impressions of their inappropriate fit for leadership posts. Internal and external elements interact in a complicated web of barriers that can be challenging to separate and treat.

The study found that women at the junction of several marginalised identities showed very strong interplay. Women of colour, for example, frequently encountered exacerbated difficulties negotiating both racial and gender stereotypes in the workplace. As these clients negotiated several layers of perceived outsider status, coaches saw that they often suffered more severe imposter syndrome. This result fits intersectional theories of women's leadership

experiences (e.g., Nkomo, 2016) but offers fresh understanding of how these intersecting identities particularly affect the experience and expression of the imposter syndrome.

One fascinating feature of the results was the part cultural values and norms play in forming both internal and external obstacles. Some of their customers battled cultural norms of humility or group achievement that ran counter to the self-promotion sometimes demanded in business environments, coaches noted. When women assert themselves or claim credit for their successes, this cultural contradiction could heighten perceptions of dishonesty. Although other studies have addressed cultural factors influencing the imposter syndrome, the present work provides insightful analysis of its particular expressions in the multicultural South African environment.

The study also underlined how a self-fulfilling prophecy impact may result from the interaction of internal and external constraints. Women's own self-doubts about their capacity could result in actions (like indecision where decision-making is required or over-preparation) that others later saw as evidence of incompetence or unsuitability for leadership. These outside reactions therefore strengthened the women's inner uncertainty, so fostering a vicious cycle. To stop this cycle, coaches stressed the requirement of interventions addressing both internal thought patterns and outside actions concurrently.

One of the significant discoveries was the possibility of overcoming the imposter syndrome by means of favourable interaction between internal and external elements. Coaches related stories of how internalised by their clients, external affirmation and support could cause major changes in confidence and self-perception. Likewise, internal efforts on self-belief and assertiveness sometimes resulted in changes in outside behaviour that improved the treatment and impression of women in their companies. This realisation points to the possibility of virtuous cycles in treating the imposter syndrome, in which development in one area might inspire development in another.

Finally, the issue of obstacles faced by women leaders with the imposter syndrome exposes a multifarious terrain of difficulties spanning internal psychological processes, exterior systematic and cultural elements, and the subtle interactions among them. The results of the study validate and expand current knowledge on the imposter syndrome, therefore providing insightful analysis of its particular expressions in the corporate environment of South Africa. The continuation of these obstacles, even among very successful women, emphasises the necessity of comprehensive treatments addressing both personal psychology and more general organisational and social aspects.

The research emphasises the need of culturally sensitive strategies considering the particular historical and social setting of South Africa. It also emphasises the need of constant assistance and intervention since, as women progress in their professions, the imposter syndrome seems to develop and occasionally get more severe. The intricate interaction of internal and external impediments implies that successful solutions will call for cooperation among individual coaching initiatives, organisational culture improvements, and more general society transformations of ideas of leadership and gender roles. For organisational executives, executive trainers, and legislators trying to help women rise into leadership positions, these results have major ramifications. Understanding the several dimensions of the obstacles encountered by women leaders with the imposter syndrome helps stakeholders create more all-encompassing and successful plans to create inclusive, encouraging environments in which women can flourish and lead truly.

5.5 Theme 4 – Strategies for assisting women leaders overcome Imposter Syndrome

A fourth theme that was explored was the strategies for assisting women leaders over feelings of the imposter syndrome. This section discusses the sub-themes that emerged within this theme.

5.5.1 *Sub-Theme 1: Empowerment through Self-Advocacy and Agency*

The study revealed a strong emphasis on empowering women leaders to develop self-advocacy skills and a sense of personal agency as a key strategy for overcoming the imposter syndrome. Executive coaches consistently reported the importance of guiding their clients towards taking ownership of their career trajectories and professional identities. This approach aligns with the broader literature on women's leadership development, such as the work of Leite (2019), which emphasizes the need for women to actively shape their professional environments rather than passively adapting to existing structures.

Coaches described various techniques aimed at fostering self-advocacy. One prominent strategy was encouraging clients to become *"negotiators for their own lives,"* as one coach aptly put it. This involved helping women leaders identify their priorities, articulate their needs, and assertively communicate their value to their organizations. The emphasis on self-negotiation represents an evolution from earlier approaches to addressing the imposter syndrome, which often focused more on internal cognitive restructuring. By incorporating elements of practical skill-building in areas like negotiation and self-promotion, coaches are addressing both the psychological and practical dimensions of the imposter syndrome.

Another key aspect of empowerment strategies was helping women leaders recognise and leverage their unique strengths and perspectives. Coaches reported working with clients to identify their distinctive leadership qualities, often rooted in their diverse experiences and backgrounds. This approach aligns with recent literature on authentic leadership and diversity in management, such as the work of Nkomo (2016), which highlights the value of diverse leadership styles in enhancing organizational performance. By encouraging women to embrace their authentic selves rather than conforming to traditional leadership stereotypes, coaches are not only addressing the imposter syndrome but also contributing to a broader shift in leadership culture.

Interestingly, the study found that empowerment strategies often involved a delicate balance between building confidence and maintaining a healthy level of self-reflection. Coaches noted that while it was crucial to boost their clients' self-belief, it was equally important to avoid swinging to the opposite extreme of overconfidence or arrogance. This nuanced approach reflects a sophisticated understanding of the imposter syndrome not as a simple deficit to be corrected, but as part of a complex spectrum of self-perception that requires careful calibration.

The empowerment strategies described by coaches also frequently involved encouraging women leaders to take calculated risks and step out of their comfort zones. This often meant supporting clients in pursuing challenging assignments, speaking up in high-stakes meetings, or applying for promotions they might otherwise have considered beyond their reach. By framing these actions as opportunities for growth rather than tests of worthiness, coaches helped their clients gradually expand their sense of capability and belonging in leadership roles.

5.5.2 *Sub-Theme 2: Structured Coaching Approaches and Tools*

The study revealed a variety of methodologies and methods used by executive coaches helping women leaders overcome the imposter syndrome. These approaches gave individuals specific plans for both personal and professional growth and a framework for handling the cognitive and behavioural features of Imposter Syndrome.

Several coaches discussed the GROW methodology (Goal, Reality, Options, Will), applied especially to combat the imposter syndrome. Using this approach, coaches helped clients create precise goals, realistically evaluate their present circumstances, investigate several ways to overcome self-doubt, and make a committed to particular activities. This method's methodical approach fits cognitive-behavioural approaches that have demonstrated success in treating Imposter Syndrome, as shown in research including Zanchetta et al. (2020). But the present research expands our knowledge by showing how these approaches

are especially used in executive coaching situations involving South African women leaders.

To enable clients to have more thorough understanding of their personality traits, leadership styles, and any blind spots, coaches also mentioned applying several psychometric instruments and tests. Often cited as useful tools for increasing self-awareness and overcoming limiting self-perceptions were the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and the Enneagram. Although the use of such techniques in coaching is not new, the study offers fresh insights on how they are especially useful to combat the imposter syndrome, usually by enabling clients to recognise their distinctive strengths and reframe perceived shortcomings as possible assets.

One fascinating result was the way structured coaching methods included narrative and storytelling devices. Many coaches spoke of coaching clients through activities involving reinterpretation of their professional paths as heroic narratives or investigating different angles of view of prior events. This method uses narrative therapy ideas but focusses especially on women's leadership and the imposter syndrome. Coaches sought to change strongly rooted ideas about self-worth and belonging in leadership roles by assisting clients in building more empowering stories about their skills and successes.

The research also uncovered the application of embodied coaching methods, which centre on the physical expressions of confidence and leadership presence. To help clients establish a more authoritative and real physical presence, coaches noted including body language techniques, voice modulation exercises, even mindfulness activities. This all-encompassing method of treating the syndrome — which takes psychological and physical factors into account— represents a change in coaching strategies and fits current studies on the function of embodied cognition in leadership development.

5.5.3 *Sub-Theme 3: Cultivating Support Networks and Organizational Change*

Although much of the coaching was directed on personal growth, the study also underlined the critical need of larger support networks and organisational change in enabling women leaders to overcome the imposter syndrome. Emphasising the need of building ecosystems of support outside the coaching relationship, coaches stressed that sustained change sometimes calls for changes at both personal and systemic levels.

Encouragement of clients to create and use professional networks—especially with other women leaders—was one of major tactics. Coaches said they helped clients find possible sponsors, set up peer mentoring groups, and guided them in building "personal boards of directors" made of reliable consultants. This strategy expands the relevance of social capital—as highlighted by Fitzsimmons and Callan (2016)—by especially addressing how such networks might assist reduce the imposter syndrome, in line with studies on the value of social capital in job advancement. Women leaders could normalise their experiences, exchange coping mechanisms, and get confidence by means of mutual support by relating with others who have gone through comparable difficulties.

The investigation also uncovered coaches' attempts to interact with the larger organisational settings of their customers. Many said they collaborated with top leadership and HR departments to establish more inclusive environments that would help prevent or reduce the imposter syndrome. To honour and value different leadership styles, this sometimes included pushing for modifications in performance assessment systems, promotion criteria, and leadership development programs. Such organizational-level interventions echo the arguments of academics like Leite (2019) on the need of structural changes to support women's advancement since they reflect an awareness of the Imposter syndrome not just as an individual psychological issue but as a phenomenon formed by systematic factors.

The study revealed a creative method called "shadowing," whereby coaches would watch their clients in actual work environments to offer specific feedback

and encouragement. This approach let coaches spot certain situations when the imposter syndrome showed up in professional contacts and help clients in real-time to create more confident and authentic behaviours. Although resource-intensive, this method provided a degree of tailored assistance that many coaches felt very useful in breaking strongly rooted self-doubt and hesitancy.

The research also underlined how crucial cultural sensitivity is for building support systems and pushing organisational transformation. Working in the South African setting, coaches stressed the significance of considering the particular historical and cultural elements influencing women's leadership experiences in the nation. This frequently entailed guiding clients across difficult intersecting identities and resolving residual consequences of apartheid-era practices on business cultures. Coaches who recognised and addressed these cultural particularities were able to create more complex and successful plans for helping women leaders overcome the imposter syndrome.

Ultimately, the issue of ways to help women executives overcome the imposter syndrome exposes a complex strategy including personal empowerment, approaches of structured coaching, and more general organisational and social interventions. The results of the study confirm and expand on already published research on treating Imposter Syndrome, therefore providing insightful analysis of the particular difficulties and opportunities given in the business environment of South Africa.

The focus on empowerment via self-advocacy and agency marks a change in coaching strategies, transcending simple confidence-building to provide women leaders with useful abilities for negotiating challenging professional settings. While the emphasis on building support networks and organisational transformation recognises the systemic character of the difficulty, the disciplined coaching approaches and tools provided offer a strong framework for treating both the cognitive and behavioural elements of the imposter syndrome.

For organisational executives, executive trainers, and legislators trying to help women rise into leadership positions, these results have major ramifications.

Effective therapies, they contend, must simultaneously target individual psychology, interpersonal dynamics, and more general organisational and social structures at several levels. Through a more inclusive and supportive atmosphere created by such a thorough approach, stakeholders may enable women leaders to flourish, so contributing to more varied and successful leadership in South African companies and beyond.

5.6 Discussion pertaining to Research Question 2

This section responds to Research Question 2: How do executive coaches perceive the influence of imposter syndrome on the leadership development and career progression of women leaders in corporate South Africa? It addresses Objective 2, which is to examine how executive coaches perceive the impact of imposter syndrome on leadership growth. The findings support Proposition 2, which posits that imposter syndrome acts as a self-limiting barrier to women's leadership development by affecting self-confidence, decision-making, and career advancement behaviours.

The coaches in this study consistently reflected that imposter syndrome leads to patterns of avoidance, withdrawal, and under-visibility in the workplace. These behavioural tendencies, though internally driven, have significant external consequences on women's professional trajectories.

"She won't raise her hand for a stretch project. She'll say she's not ready — even when she's clearly the best person for the job." (Participant 5).

This comment captures what Fitzsimmons and Callan (2016) describe as self-limiting behaviour rooted in perceived inadequacy. Coaches explained that women who experience imposter syndrome often hesitate to take up leadership opportunities, delay applying for promotions, or choose to remain behind the scenes, even when capable. This dynamic contributes to what Bowen & Botha (2023) refer to as the "leaky pipeline" in leadership advancement.

A major theme raised was the impact on decision-making and confidence. Coaches noted that women leaders struggling with imposter syndrome often engage in overthinking, second-guessing, or over-consulting. This pattern can slow down execution, dilute influence, and reduce the perception of strategic leadership:

“Even in the C-suite, I’ve had clients who defer to others constantly because they’re afraid of being wrong — it holds them back.” (Participant 9)

Another coach noted that some women, despite being in senior roles, required ongoing affirmation from others to validate their decisions — a process that reduced their autonomy and visibility as decisive leaders.

In addition, coaches perceived that imposter syndrome influenced how women narrated their success. Many clients, they noted, downplayed achievements in performance reviews, interviews, or executive meetings:

“It’s like they’re trying to hide their brilliance. They say, ‘I was lucky,’ or ‘The team did it’ — rarely do they own their value.” (Participant 8)

Such tendencies align with Orbé-Austin & Orbé-Austin (2020), who highlight that women with imposter feelings often externalise success and internalise failure — a cognitive distortion that can undermine leadership identity and executive presence. Several coaches expressed concern that, over time, imposter syndrome may contribute to burnout or even leadership exit. When combined with performance pressure, emotional exhaustion, and low internal validation, some women opt to leave high-stakes environments entirely — a decision that affects not only their individual growth but organisational diversity efforts.

One participant concluded: “If it’s not addressed, it leads to self-sabotage — or worse, self-removal. And these are our top women leaders.” (Participant 3)

Taken together, the coaches’ insights suggest that imposter syndrome is not only an individual developmental challenge but a leadership barrier with systemic

implications. Its influence touches confidence, decision-making, self-promotion, and retention — making it a critical concern for talent management, succession planning, and organisational transformation.

The role of coaching in mitigating these effects will be further explored in the next section, where coaches reflect on the strategies they use to support women leaders affected by imposter syndrome.

5.7 Theme 1: Navigating Leadership with Imposter Phenomenon

The first theme that was explored in the second research question was navigating leadership within imposter syndrome. This section discusses the sub-themes that emerged within this theme.

5.7.1 *Sub-Theme 1: The Paradox of High Achievement and Self-Doubt*

The results of the study expose a startling paradox about how women leaders experiencing feelings of the imposter syndrome negotiate their responsibilities in corporate South Africa. Executive coaches regularly noted that their clients' internal self-perception and outward success clearly did not match. This paradox shows up as high-achieving women concurrently showing great skill in their professional responsibilities and carrying deep-seated reservations about their ability and worthiness to assume leadership roles.

This finding is quite similar to the original conception of the Imposter Phenomenon by Clance and Imes (1978), who observed that exceptional achievers sometimes find it difficult to internalise their accomplishments. This current study expands this knowledge by offering rich, context-specific insights on how this paradox manifests in the particular terrain of post-apartheid South African business environments. Coaches said that in professional environments, their clients frequently put on a front of confidence that cleverly hides their inner conflict. *"When they show up, they have all their armaments on, like 'I'm really good at what I do,'"* one coach said, quite rightly. This external display of skill

contrasts with personal confessions of self-doubt to underscore the difficult psychological terrain these women must negotiate.

Interestingly, this study has also revealed that women often experienced this contradiction rising on the corporate ladder. Against what might be expected, coaches noted that their most successful clients often suffered more intense Imposter Phenomenon. This result suggests that more responsibility and prominence may aggravate rather than reduce sentiments of fraudulence, therefore adding a new perspective to our knowledge of how Imposter Phenomenon develops during a career. This observation emphasises the need of continuous support and action even at the highest levels of leadership since it questions oversimplified ideas that Imposter Phenomenon is only a phase to be outgrown.

The study also showed how this conundrum of great success and self-doubt affected decision-making and leadership styles. Many of their clients, according to the executive coaches, turned to hyper-vigilant or perfectionistic methods of working to offset their perceived shortcomings. Although this frequently produced excellent results, it came at the expense of intense stress, exhaustion, and a mistrust of team members who were delegated to or trusted. This result speaks to the "diligence and hard work" pattern found in early Imposter Phenomenon studies but offers fresh understanding of its particular expressions in high-level leadership roles within the South African setting.

5.7.2 *Sub-Theme 2: Cultural and Contextual Influences on Leadership Navigation*

The study revealed important cultural and environmental elements that particularly influence how women leaders experiencing Imposter Phenomenon negotiate their responsibilities in corporate South Africa. Coaches regularly emphasised how their clients' experiences of leadership and self-perception were shaped by the nation's complicated historical and social scene.

One recurring topic that surfaced was the ongoing impact of racial hierarchy from the apartheid era on business cultures and leadership impressions. Many of their

clients, especially women of colour, struggled with internalised assumptions about leadership. This assumption often connected power and competence with whiteness and masculinity, according to coaches. This inner struggle made the already difficult task, of negotiating leadership jobs while suffering Imposter Phenomenon, even more complicated. The results of the study in this regard complement the efforts of academics such as Nkomo (2016), who have underlined the need of including intersectional identities into analysis of women's leadership experiences in South Africa. The current study, again, offers particular understanding of how these intersectional issues interact to aggravate Imposter Phenomenon.

The rapid changes South African business environments underwent in the post-apartheid era was another important contextual element noted. Many of their clients, coaches observed, were typically "firsts in their professions - the first woman, the first person of colour, or the first from their cultural background to assume senior leadership roles in their companies". These women were under great pressure to perform flawlessly and represent whole demographics even if their accomplishments were innovative. Often, this pressure heightened the symptoms of fraudulence and anxiety of failure connected with Imposter Phenomenon. The results of the study in this regard offer insightful analysis of the particular difficulties experienced by trailblazing women leaders in transitional socio-economic environments.

The study also showed how women leaders negotiate their roles in light of conventional cultural beliefs. Coaches said some of their clients found it difficult to balance the self-promotion sometimes demanded in business environments with cultural standards stressing humility and group accomplishment. Particularly when women were expected to participate in activities that seemed contradictory to their cultural background, this cultural dissonance could aggravate sentiments of inauthenticity and dishonesty and fraudulence. Although other studies have discussed cultural factors influencing Imposter Phenomenon, the present study provides complex analysis of its particular expressions in the multicultural South African setting.

5.7.3 *Sub-Theme 3: Strategies for Authentic Leadership Amidst feelings of Imposter Syndrome*

Though the Imposter Phenomenon presents a great deal of difficulty, the study found a variety of techniques used by women leaders—often in tandem with their coaches—to traverse leadership roles authentically and successfully. These techniques combine more general organisational and cultural transformation with personal coping mechanisms.

One important tactic noted was the evolution of a more complex and adaptable concept of leadership itself. Coaches said they were helping clients to see the importance of several leadership styles and to question conventional, sometimes masculine-coded ideas of leadership. This strategy fits modern leadership ideas stressing emotional intelligence and honesty. Coaches sought to lower the cognitive dissonance between their clients' self-perception and their leadership roles by helping women leaders identify and use their particular skills and viewpoints. This approach not only resolved feelings of the imposter syndrome but also helped companies to diversify their leadership approaches more generally.

One further crucial tactic was developing selective vulnerability as a leadership quality. Coaches explained helping their clients to strategically communicate their difficulties and doubts with reliable team members and fellow coaches. This deliberate openness helped to normalise the feeling of self-doubt, strengthened bonds with team members, and ironically, usually raised impressions of the leader's authenticity and relatability. This approach marks a change from past tactics that might have pushed leaders to always exude confidence. It recognises the possibility for vulnerability, when well controlled, to improve rather than compromise the potency of leadership.

The study also underlined the need of creating strong support systems as a means of negotiating leadership while going through Imposter Phenomenon. As Imposter emotions grew stronger, coaches advised their clients to establish relationships with peers, mentors, and sponsors who might offer validation, direction, and reality-checking. Many times, this networking strategy was

compared to building a "personal board of directors"—a reliable set of advisers able to provide several points of view and assistance. The focus on creating these support systems corresponds with studies on the value of social capital in career progression, as highlighted by Fitzsimmons and Callan (2016), but it also extends it by especially addressing how such networks can assist reduce feeling of Imposter Syndrome.

The study revealed a creative approach: intentional use of "imposter feelings" as a stimulus for development and education. Some coaches claimed guiding their clients in redefining their self-doubt as a possible source of inspiration for further development and empathy rather than as a weakness to be conquered. This method fits more modern ideas on Imposter Phenomenon that acknowledge its possible adaptive purposes under correct control. Through guiding clients to effectively direct their increased self-awareness and drive for excellence, coaches helped convert a possible liability into a leadership asset.

Finally, the Navigating Leadership with feelings of the imposter syndrome topic exposes a complicated interaction of psychological, cultural, and contextual elements influencing the experiences of corporate South African women executives. The contradiction of great success coexisting with extreme self-doubt emphasises the ongoing and often secret character of Imposter Phenomenon, even among very successful people. The particular cultural and historical background of South Africa accentuates the requirement of subtle, culturally sensitive approaches to leadership development and the imposter syndrome intervention, therefore adding more levels of complexity to this navigation.

The techniques used by women leaders and their mentors to negotiate these obstacles show both resiliency and creativity. These women are not only overcoming their own experiences with the imposter phenomenon but also helping to bring about more general changes in leadership culture by redefining leadership, deliberately using vulnerability, creating strong support networks, and reframing Imposter sentiments as possible strengths.

These results have important ramifications for South African and international coaching programmes, organisational policies, and leadership development initiatives. They contend that good assistance for women leaders needs to go beyond broad confidence-building activities to handle the particular cultural and contextual elements influencing leadership experiences. Organisations can create more inclusive environments that let different leadership talents blossom by knowing and addressing the intricate dynamics of Navigating Leadership with feelings of the imposter syndrome, so improving organisational performance and helping to contribute to more general societal transformation.

5.8 Theme 2: The Impact of Imposter Syndrome on Career Growth

The second theme that was explored was the impact of imposter syndrome on the career growth of the women leaders. This section discusses the sub-themes that emerged within this theme.

5.8.1 *Sub-Theme 1: Self-Imposed Limitations and Missed Opportunities*

The results of the study show that the imposter syndrome has a major influence on the career development of women leaders in corporate South Africa, mostly shown by self-imposed restrictions and missed opportunities. Executive coaches regularly found that clients experiencing feelings of the imposter syndrome often hesitated to apply for roles they were objectively qualified for, pursue promotions, or engage in high-profile projects. This self-limiting behaviour is quite similar to the findings of Clance and Imes (1978), in their seminal work on Imposter Phenomenon, where they observed that high-achieving women often undervalue their own competency and attribute their successes to outside events instead of their own ability.

By offering particular instances of how these self-imposed constraints manifest in the South African corporate environment, the present study expands this knowledge. One coach said, for example, "It's limited them. They set restrictions on their own perceived ability." This observation is consistent with the results of

Vergauwe et al. (2015), who discovered that Imposter Phenomenon may be a major determinant of professionals not moving to more senior managerial posts. The current study, however, highlights how these restrictions show up in a post-apartheid environment, where women—especially women of colour—may experience extra layers of self-doubt resulting from historical and continuous systematic inequality.

This current study also discovered that as women attained increasing degrees of leadership, the influence of Imposter Phenomenon on career development usually intensified. This contradictory rise in self-doubt accompanied by growing achievement gives our knowledge of the path of Imposter Phenomenon in the workplace fresh direction. It fits the findings of Hutchins (2015), who observed that among highly successful academics, Imposter Phenomenon might last and even get more severe. The current study expands this result to the business sector and implies that interventions could have to be continuous and change, to adapt to individual developmental needs, as women advance in their professions. The studies also showed that self-imposed constraints sometimes showed themselves in minute forms that would be easy missed. Coaches said, for instance, that their clients regularly engaged in self-sabotaging activities which include over-preparing for meetings to the point of weariness or hesitating to speak up in high-stakes conversations. Although these actions were mostly driven by a need to prove one's competency, by restricting visibility and strategic contributions they finally hampered professional development. This result fits the study of Neureiter and Traut-Mattausch (2016), who discovered that among professionals, career planning and career striving were adversely correlated with Imposter Phenomenon.

5.8.2 *Sub-Theme 2: Impact on Leadership Style and Decision-Making*

The study revealed important ways in which feelings of Imposter Syndrome shapes the decision-making and leadership styles of women leaders in corporate South Africa. Many of their clients according to the executive coaches, developed perfectionistic and risk-averse leadership styles to offset their supposed

shortcomings. This sometimes led to micromanagement, trouble assigning work, and a resistance to take big strategic decisions.

These results line up with those of Cokley et al. (2015), who indicated that reduced risk tolerance and more anxiety among professionals could result from feelings of the imposter syndrome. But the present study broadens this knowledge by offering particular instances of how these tendencies show themselves in leadership positions in South Africa. One coach, for example, related a client who was reluctant to use creative ideas in her department even though she understood their possible worth because of concern about failure and consequent exposure as a "fraud."

The study also found that the feelings of the imposter syndrome sometimes resulted in a leadership style marked by too strict control and micromanagement. This fits the research of Rohrmann et al. (2016), who discovered that those experiencing feelings of the imposter syndrome may turn to overworking as a coping strategy. The present work clarifies this knowledge by showing how these actions could affect organisational culture and team dynamics. Coaches said that their clients' perfectionistic impulses sometimes inhibited team members' initiative and originality, therefore perhaps restricting the general development and innovation inside their companies.

Interestingly, the study revealed that if appropriately directed, several features of Imposter Phenomenon—such as increased self-awareness and a motivation for ongoing improvement—may be used as leadership assets. More recent research, including Zanchetta et al. (2020), which contends that, under appropriate control, some degree of self-doubt can be adaptive, fits this viewpoint. According to this study, coaches have a challenging task of guiding clients to strike a balance between constructive self-reflection and crippling self-doubt, therefore promoting a leadership style that is both assured and receptive to development.

5.8.3 *Sub-Theme 3: Long-Term Career Trajectories and Organisational Impact*

The study shed important light on the long-term effects of feelings of Imposter Syndrome on the paths of women leaders as well as its wider consequences for South African organisational performance. According to coaches, ongoing Imposter emotions could cause career stagnation. The executive coaches shared that some clients stayed in roles they had outgrown out of anxiety about exposure at higher levels. This finding fits Parkman's (2016) research on the Imposter Phenomenon's potential for causing career discontent and declining job performance over time.

This current study expands this knowledge by stressing the particular difficulties experienced by women CEOs in the fast-changing business scene of South Africa. Many of their clients, coaches observed, were typically trailblazing leaders—the first woman or person of colour in their leadership capacity—which added more pressure and heightened imposter emotions. This result speaks to the work of Nkomo (2016), who underlined the particular difficulties experienced by women leaders in post-apartheid South Africa, but also provides fresh understanding of how the feelings of the imposter syndrome interacts with these contextual elements.

The study also indicated the possibility for a "brain drain" impact, whereby highly gifted women can choose to leave companies completely or opt out of leadership tracks because of the psychological toll of ongoing Imposter emotions. This fits the medical sector studies of Mullangi and Jagsi (2019), who observed that fatigue and attrition among women professionals could be caused by feelings of the imposter syndrome. This current study highlights the possible loss of varied leadership skills should the imposter syndrome not be properly addressed, therefore extending this worry to the business sector in South Africa.

It is interesting to note that this current study has also revealed that the effect of feelings of the imposter syndrome on professional development was not always exactly negative. Some coaches shared stories of clients who, with focused interventions and support, were able to use their Imposter emotions as a trigger

for real leadership development and personal growth. This viewpoint fits the study of Jarrett (2010), who proposed that Imposter emotions might inspire people to keep innovating and always improving. The current study offers particular case studies of how this positive channelling of Imposter emotions can arise in the South African business environment, therefore presenting a more complex picture of the possible influence on career paths of the phenomena.

Finally, the theme of The Impact of Imposter Phenomenon on Career Growth exposes a complicated and multifarious impact on the professional growth of women leaders in corporate South Africa. The results of the study confirm and expand on current knowledge on the imposter syndrome, therefore providing insightful analysis of its particular expressions and effects in the South African environment. The self-imposed constraints and lost chances underlined in the study emphasise the need of focused treatments addressing both personal psychology and institutional obstacles to women's progress. The study's disclosed effects on leadership style and decision-making processes point to feelings of the imposter syndrome not only influencing personal career paths but also having more general consequences for team dynamics and organisational culture. This result underlines the need of including the imposter syndrome into more general leadership development and organisational performance policies.

The research's long-term career consequences and possible "brain drain" effect draw attention to how urgently the imposter syndrome in women leaders should be addressed. The study also highlights the possibility for favourable results when the Imposter emotions are properly controlled and directed, so implying a more complex strategy for treatments. Policymakers in South Africa and beyond as well as executive coaches and organisational leaders have major ramifications from these results. They propose that good plans for helping women's professional development should transcend general skill development to handle the particular psychological and social elements causing the imposter syndrome. Understanding and reducing the effects of the imposter syndrome on professional development would help stakeholders endeavour to produce more inclusive, varied, and successful leadership pipelines in South African companies and beyond.

5.9 Theme 3: Typical Characteristics/Feelings Observed in Women Leaders Experiencing the Imposter Phenomenon

A third theme that was explored was the typical characteristics observed in Women leaders experiencing feelings of imposter syndrome. This section discusses the sub-themes that emerged within this theme.

5.9.1 *Sub-theme 1: Persistent Self-Doubt and Fear of Exposure*

Among the most notable traits noted in women leaders experiencing feelings of the imposter syndrome were ongoing self-doubt and a general anxiety of being "exposed" as phoney. Executive coaches regularly found that their clients harboured deep-rooted concerns about being found as insufficient or unworthy of their positions, notwithstanding objective proof of competency and accomplishment. This result closely fits the initial conceptualisation of the Imposter Phenomenon by Clance and Imes (1978), who characterised it as an internal sensation of intellectual phoniness in highly successful people.

But the present study broadens this knowledge by offering comprehensive, context-specific case studies of how these emotions show themselves in the South African corporate scene. Coaches detailed client who over-prepared for meetings to a great degree, questioned their choices frequently, and had great anxiety about possible failure. *"There is anxiety," one coach said. “I'm not sure whether I want to call it unhappiness; there is discontent."* Parkman's (2016) research on Imposter Phenomenon's correlation with higher anxiety and lower job satisfaction among professionals speaks to this discovery.

Interestingly, the study revealed that the degree of self-doubt sometimes rose with professional development. Women in the highest leadership roles often reported the most intense sentiments of fraudulence, a result that gives our knowledge of how the imposter syndrome develops more complexity. This is consistent with studies by Neureiter and Traut-Mattausch (2016), who observed that as people become more successful, feelings of the imposter syndrome could linger and perhaps get more severe.

Often characterising these women's professional life as a continual undercurrent, the fear of exposure affected their behaviour and decision-making process. Clients would often credit luck, timing, or the efforts of others rather than their own skills, coaches said. This trait fits the "discounting" behaviour noted by Clance et al. (1995) as fundamental component of Imposter Phenomenon. The present study offers particular instances of how this discounting shows up in leadership roles, including rejecting compliments or reluctant to own responsibility for effective projects.

5.9.2 *Sub-Theme 2: Overworking oneself and perfectionism*

Extreme perfectionism and overworking were another clear trait seen in women leaders experiencing feelings of the imposter syndrome. Coaches regularly found that their clients compensated for their perceived shortcomings by setting unrealistically high goals for themselves and working long hours and through great preparation. This result fits the research of Rohrmann et al. (2016), which revealed a significant correlation between professional perfectionism tendencies and imposter phenomenon.

The present study expands this knowledge by showing how overworking and perfectionism especially show themselves in leadership positions in the South African corporate scene. Coaches spoke about clients who would painstakingly analyse every element of their team's work, struggle with task delegation, and put in significantly more hours than average to guarantee perfect performance. "They set their standards so high," one coach said. They cannot savour the here-now. This realisation emphasises the negative effects that such actions can have on personal well-being as well as leadership capacity.

This current study also revealed that these perfectionistic inclinations sometimes included the whole profile of leadership and went beyond mere job responsibilities. Women leaders experiencing feelings of the imposter syndrome sometimes felt under pressure to keep a perfect image in terms of personal presentation as well as professional ability. This is consistent with the idea of "impression management" Leary et al. (2000) mentioned in connection with the

imposter syndrome, but the current study offers particular insights on how this plays out in the framework of women's leadership in South Africa.

The study also found that many people turned to overworking as a coping mechanism to reduce fear about possible failure or exposure. Many of the coaches, said the women leaders coached, said they were working longer and harder than their rivals as a means of "earning" their positions and pre-emptively offset any possible criticism. This result speaks to the research of Cokley et al. (2015), who discovered that among minority professionals, Imposter Phenomenon was linked to higher burnout and workload. The present research expands this knowledge by showing how these practices could become second nature in leadership styles, therefore influencing team dynamics and organisational culture.

5.9.3 *Sub-Theme 3: Problems internalising success and positive feedback.*

One remarkable finding of the study was the difficulty women leaders experiencing feelings of the imposter syndrome faced in internalising their triumphs and embracing favourable comments. Coaches regularly found that their clients tended to minimise personal accomplishments, credit outside events for their victories, and reject compliments from superiors and colleagues. This fits the "inability to internalise success" that Clance and Imes (1978) pointed out as essential component of Imposter Phenomenon.

The present research offers insightful analysis of how this quality shows up in the particular setting of South African women's leadership. Coaches reported clients who would justify promotions as resulting from affirmative action policies instead of merit, or who would concentrate only on little shortcomings in otherwise excellent projects. One coach observed, "Downplaying what they have achieved, not speaking to their achievements, shying away from speaking about what challenges them, what they find difficult, almost concealing style, and avoiding." Reflecting the intersectional character of Imposter Phenomenon in the South African setting, this inclination to minimise achievements was typically more prominent among women of colour.

Many times, this difficulties in internalising success set off a cycle of more self-doubt and anxiety. The study revealed that women's basic views about their insufficiency stayed mostly unaltered even as they gathered evidence of their competency through promotions, effective projects, or good feedback. This discovery fits the cognitive model of Imposter Phenomenon put forward by Kolligian and Sternberg (1991), which stresses the part strongly rooted beliefs play in prolonging imposter emotions.

Interestingly, the study found that this quality might have major effects on leadership efficacy and professional growth. Coaches said that clients' unwillingness to own and share their successes often resulted in less visibility inside their companies and lost chances for promotion or highly visible projects. This result expands the work of Neureiter and Traut-Mattausch (2016) on the detrimental influence of Imposter Phenomenon on career planning by offering particular instances of how difficulty internalising achievement can impede leadership development in the South African corporate setting.

Finally, the issue of Typical Characteristics/Feelings Obsessed in Women Leaders the Imposter Phenomenon exposes a complicated psychological terrain that greatly influences leadership behaviour and effectiveness. The study's consistent self-doubt and fear of exposure, perfectionism and overwork, and difficulty internalising success fit several fundamental characteristics of Imposter Phenomenon noted in past studies. But the present research deepens our knowledge by offering rich, context-specific insights on how these traits show themselves in the particular setting of post-apartheid South African business leadership.

The results show how common Imposter Phenomenon is, influencing even the most objectively successful women leaders. They highlight the requirement of complex, culturally sensitive solutions for handling these problems in coaching interventions and leadership development courses. The study also exposes the possible long-term effects of these traits on more general organisational culture as well as personal professional paths.

Policymakers in South Africa and beyond as well as executive coaches and organisational leaders have great ramifications from these revelations. They contend that good support for women leaders should go beyond surface-level confidence-building to target strongly rooted cognitive patterns and behaviours linked with feelings of the imposter syndrome. Understanding and resolving these typical traits can help stakeholders create more inclusive, encouraging surroundings where women leaders may fully appreciate and use their skills and successes. This can therefore help to improve leadership diversity and effectiveness in South African companies as well as support more general society reform.

5.10 Theme 4: Coaching Approach and Tools for Women Leaders Experiencing feelings of the Imposter Syndrome

The fourth theme that was explored was around the coaching approach and tools for women leaders experiencing feelings of the imposter syndrome. This section discusses the sub-themes that emerged within this theme.

5.10.1 *Sub-Theme 1: Holistic and Individualized Coaching Strategies*

The study found that while helping women leaders experiencing feelings of the imposter syndrome in South Africa, executive coaches used a very customised and holistic approach. Repeatedly coaches underlined the need to customise their approaches to every client's developmental need, their particular background, cultural setting, and particular expressions of the imposter syndrome. This strategy conforms with the advice of Hutchins (2015), who argued for the need of considering contextual elements and personal variations in handling Imposter Phenomenon in occupational environments.

The study revealed that many times, coaches combined several theoretical models and useful tools to develop a complete intervention plan. One coach, for example, related using "an integrated model... a holistic approach to the design flow that comes with coaching." Usually, this multifarious approach included components of somatic practices, narrative therapy, and cognitive-behavioural

methods. The integration of several approaches speaks to the study of Zanchetta et al. (2020), who discovered that coaching combined with training interventions was successful in decreasing the impact of the Imposter Phenomenon among young professionals.

The study also found that coaches regularly adapted classic coaching strategies to especially target Imposter Phenomenon. Several coaches, for instance, said they used modified versions of the GROW model to assist clients in objectively evaluating their present circumstances, create reasonable goals, investigate techniques for overcoming self-doubt, and commit to action. This adaptation of existing coaching models to solve Imposter Phenomenon marks a fresh contribution to the field, therefore extending the effort of Whitmore et al. (2016) on the use of the GROW model in executive coaching.

Given the complicated sociopolitical background of South Africa, the study also underlined the need of cultural sensitivity in coaching techniques. Considering racial, gender, and cultural background, coaches underlined the significance of knowing and working with the intersecting identities of their clients. This is consistent with the work of Nkomo (2016), who underlined the need of looking at several aspects of identity when analysing South African women leaders. The present work expands this knowledge by offering particular instances of how these intersectional elements are handled in coaching programmes for Imposter Phenomenon.

5.10.2 *Sub-Theme 2: Evidence-Based Instruments and Evaluations*

The study found a variety of evidence-based instruments and assessments coaches used to let women leaders identify and overcome feelings of Imposter Syndrome. Many coaches said they helped clients get deeper understanding of their personality traits, talents, and possible blind spots by employing psychometric instruments such the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), the Enneagram, and other emotional intelligence assessments. This application of validated assessment instruments conforms with the advice of Mak et al. (2019),

who underlined the need of applying accurate and valid measures in investigating and handling imposter phenomenon.

Coaches also talked about helping clients challenge and reinterpret their self-limiting ideas by applying cognitive restructuring strategies. This frequently included walking clients through exercises to recognise and challenge their negative self-talk, a technique consistent with the cognitive-behavioural techniques to address and work through the experienced feelings of the imposter syndrome underlined by Clance et al. (1995). The present research expands this knowledge by offering particular cases of how these approaches are used in the framework of executive coaching for South African women leaders.

One fascinating discovery was the regular application of narrative and storytelling devices in coaching activities. Many coaches said they guided clients through activities like reframing their professional paths as heroic tales or investigating other readings of prior events. This method uses narrative therapy ideas but applies them especially in the framework of women's leadership and the feelings of the imposter syndrome. Coaches sought to change strongly rooted ideas about self-worth and belonging in leadership roles by assisting clients in building more empowering stories about their skills and successes.

The study also exposed the use of somatic activities and embodied exercises as means of overcoming feelings of the imposter syndrome. To assist clients, create a more authoritative and real physical presence, coaches detailed using body language training, voice modulation exercises, and mindfulness practices. This all-encompassing approach, which takes psychological and physiological elements of Imposter Phenomenon into account, marks a change in coaching techniques and fits current studies on the function of embodied cognition in leadership development, including work of Ladkin and Taylor (2010).

5.10.3 *Sub-Theme 3: Developing Support Systems and Methodical Interventions*

The study underlined the need of spreading coaching interventions outside of one-on-one meetings to include the development of support systems and

structural changes inside companies. The executive coaches routinely advised their clients to create and use professional networks with other women executives. Often this included helping clients find possible sponsors, organising peer mentoring groups, and directing them in building "personal boards of directors" made of reliable consultants.

This focus on creating support systems fits the studies of Fitzsimmons and Callan (2016) on the value of social capital for professional development. Still, the present work expands this knowledge by particularly addressing how such networks might reduce feelings of the imposter syndrome. Connecting with people who have gone through similar difficulties reportedly helped coaches normalise their clients' experiences, offer chances for discussing coping mechanisms, and increase confidence by mutual support. Interestingly, the study found that many coaches considered their job as advocating organisational change in addition to serving specific clients. Working with HR departments and top leadership, coaches detailed building more inclusive environments that might assist to prevent or feelings of the imposter syndrome. To honour and value different leadership styles, this sometimes included suggesting adjustments to performance assessment systems, promotion criteria, and leadership development programmes.

This methodical approach fits the claims of Leite (2019), who underlined the importance of structural adjustments to assist in the progress of women in workplaces. The present research offers particular instances of how executive coaches could serve as catalysts for such transformations, therefore bridging the gap between more general organisational cultures and individual experiences feelings of the imposter syndrome. The study also revealed creative ways to increase the effect of coaching programmes. Several coaches said they used "shadowing" methods, in which they would watch their clients in actual workplace settings to offer specific feedback and encouragement. Although resource-intensive, this method provided a degree of tailored assistance that many coaches felt especially useful in breaking strongly rooted self-doubt and uncertainty in professional contacts.

Ultimately, the focus of Coaching Approach and Tools for Women Leaders, the Imposter Phenomenon exposes a sophisticated and multifarious collection of techniques used by South African executive coaches. The results of the study validate and expand current research on handling feelings of the imposter syndrome, therefore providing insightful analysis of the particular difficulties and possibilities given in the business environment of South Africa. The focus on comprehensive, customised coaching techniques shows a knowledge of the complex psychological experience moulded by personal, cultural, and institutional elements of the imposter syndrome. Combining creative narrative and somatic treatments with evidence-based tools and assessments offers a strong basis for treating the cognitive and behavioural elements of the imposter syndrome.

The emphasis on building support systems and pushing for systematic change recognises that successful interventions have to operate at several levels concurrently, thereby addressing individual psychology, interpersonal dynamics, and more general organisational structures. For organisational executives, executive trainers, and legislators trying to help women rise into leadership positions, these results have major ramifications. They propose that tackling feelings of the imposter syndrome calls for an all-encompassing strategy covering more general cultural and organisational transformation projects than only personal coaching sessions. By using such a multifarious strategy, stakeholders can build more inclusive and encouraging surroundings where women leaders may flourish, therefore contributing to more varied and successful leadership in South African companies and beyond. The knowledge acquired from this research provides insightful direction for creating more complex and culturally sensitive coaching solutions to handle feelings of the imposter syndrome in many spheres of work.

5.11 Theme 5: Noticeable Changes During and After Coaching

The other theme that was explored from the findings was the noticeable changes during and after coaching. This section discusses the sub-themes that emerged within this theme.

5.11.1 *Sub-Theme 1: Shift in Self-Perception and Confidence*

The study showed women leaders who received coaching to address and overcome feelings of the imposter syndrome achieved changes in confidence and self-perception. Executive coaches regularly said they saw their clients' views towards their own skills and achievements undergo remarkable transformations. This is consistent with the results of Zanchetta et al. (2020), who recorded how well coaching interventions help young professionals experiencing feelings of the imposter syndrome be less affected.

Coaches talked of seeing their clients' internal narratives and self-talk gradually but profoundly changing. One coach eloquently described this change: "You practically witness when people's faces light up. You look at the cognitive, the visual, the audio; you notice a new year; you listen to like a change in voice, or the faces may be transformed; or there's a drooping of the shoulders." This multifarious observation of change—including cognitive, linguistic, and physical elements—offers a rich picture of how changes in self-perception show themselves practically.

According to the study, these shifts in self-perception usually resulted in more eagerness to seize chances for professional development and challenge. One coach observed, *"My clients have gone from a space of complete paralysis, of not wanting to move forward to then having the courage to try and to believe in themselves."* This remark fits the research of Neureiter and Traut-Mattausch (2016), who discovered that tackling feelings of the imposter syndrome could improve striving behaviours and career planning. It was also fascinating to note that this study found that the path to more confidence was usually not straight-forward. Particularly when confronted with fresh problems or more exposure in their professions, coaches noted that clients occasionally suffered brief setbacks or periods of uncertainty. Still, these variations were usually seen as inevitable and somewhat expected aspects of development. This result gives our knowledge of the evolution of the imposter syndrome more complexity and implies that interventions should equip clients for possible ebbs and flows in their confidence level.

5.11.2 *Sub-Theme 2: Improved Decision-Making and Leadership Styles*

Among women leaders experiencing feelings of the imposter syndrome, who had been coached, the study found notable changes in leadership behaviours and decision-making processes. Coaches said they saw their clients show more comfort with delegation, adopt more aggressive communication styles, and show more readiness to take measured risks in their leadership positions. This is consistent with the research of Ladegard and Gjerde (2014), who discovered that psychological empowerment and self-efficacy of leaders might be much enhanced by means of leadership coaching.

Among the most obvious improvements noted was a change from perfectionistic impulses towards a more realistic and balanced style of leadership. Coaches reported clients choosing more cooperative and trustworthy leadership styles instead of micromanagement and too independent leadership. The leaders gained personally from this metamorphosis, but their teams and organisational cultures also improved. One coach noted, "They have in the sense that for some folks, it can be the first place they bring this concern. Knowing that they haven't been laughed at, attacked, or criticised for bringing it's such a relief that it doesn't make them less than others. Then, the act of working with them to take on that, as opposed to avoiding dealing with it, releases that."

The study also showed improvements in decision-making procedures since coached executives showed more confidence in their assessments and less concern over possible mistakes. This result speaks to the work of de Vries et al. (2019), who discovered that executive coaching might improve leaders' capacity to make difficult decisions under pressure. The present work expands this knowledge by especially connecting these developments to the reduction of feelings of the imposter syndrome. Fascinatingly, several coaches said that when their clients worked through their Imposter emotions, they developed a more complex and authentic leadership style. These women started to use their particular viewpoints and experiences as assets instead of only copying conventional leadership styles. This observation is consistent with modern ideas of real leadership, such as put forth by Avolio and Gardner (2005), and implies

that addressing feelings of the imposter syndrome might help to produce more varied and inclusive leadership models.

5.11.3 *Sub-Theme 3: Ripple Effects on Organisational Culture and Professional Pathogeny*

The study found that the changes shown in women leaders who underwent coaching to address feelings of the imposter syndrome typically had more general effects on their organisational cultures and career paths. Following the coaching interventions, several of their clients reported faster career advancement, obtaining promotions or assuming increased responsibility they might have avoided in the past. This result is consistent with the research of Mullangi and Jagsi (2019), who maintained that tackling experienced feelings of Imposter Syndrome could help to keep gifted women in leadership pipelines.

The study also found proof of a "ripple effect," whereby the improved performance of coached leaders affected their more general workplaces. Coaches related stories of clients of theirs who actively mentored younger colleagues and advocated more inclusive policies, therefore becoming champions for other women in their companies. This is consistent with what Nkomo (2016) found about the possibility of women leaders bringing about radical change in South African companies. One intriguing discovery was the possibility of coached leaders having more general impact on organisational culture. Many coaches said that as their clients grew more real and vulnerable in their leadership approaches, it opened room for more honest conversations about professional issues and self-doubt inside their departments and teams. This culture change towards more psychological safety fits the work of Edmondson (1999) on team learning and may have major ramifications for organisational success and creativity.

The study also showed that changes in coached leaders sometimes went beyond their work life. As they learnt to better control their Imposter emotions, coaches saw that many clients improved in their general well-being and personal connections. This whole impact underlines the widespread nature of Imposter

Phenomenon and the possibility of coaching interventions to have broad favourable results.

Finally, the theme of Noticeable Changes During and After Coaching offers convincing data on how well focused interventions address feelings of the imposter syndrome among South African women leaders. The results of the study validate and expand current knowledge on the effects of coaching, therefore providing insightful analysis of the particular changes noted in the framework of the Imposter Phenomenon and women's leadership development. Although earlier studies on the psychological advantages of coaching match the increases in self-perception and confidence reported by coaches, they offer a more complex picture of how these changes show up in leaders experiencing feelings of the imposter syndrome. The noted improvements in leadership qualities and decision-making techniques provide specific instances of how overcoming Imposter emotions could result in noticeable improvement in professional performance.

Most importantly, the knock-on effects for organisational cultures and professional paths point to the fact that coaching interventions for feelings of the imposter syndrome have advantages much beyond the individual leader. These programmes have the power to propel more general organisational and social transformation by enabling women to overcome their self-doubt and embrace their leadership capability. Policymakers, organisational leaders, and executive coaches alike should find great relevance in these results. Not only as a way to help individual women leaders, but also as a tactic for creating more inclusive, varied, and successful leadership cultures in South African companies and beyond, they highlight the benefit of funding focused coaching programs to address Imposter Phenomenon. Future studies should probe the long-term viability of these developments and look at how the advantages of coaching for Imposter Phenomenon could be scaled to influence more numbers of rising leaders.

5.12 Chapter Conclusion

Analysing Imposter Phenomenon from executive coach points of view exposes a complex terrain of psychological, cultural, and systemic challenges among corporate South African women leaders. The study reveals how frequent Imposter emotions are, even among very successful women, and how much they influence career development, organisational cultures, and leadership styles. The study underlines the contradicting amplification of Imposter Phenomenon with career success, the influence of South Africa's unique historical and cultural background, and the numerous strategies applied by coaches to tackle these issues. Although they offer new perspectives on their presentation in the South African corporate environment, the qualities of women leaders experiencing feelings of the imposter syndrome—including constant self-doubt, perfectionism, and trouble internalising success—identified match current studies.

Strong evidence of how well targeted interventions address feelings of the imposter syndrome come from the examination of coaching techniques and results in the study. Coach's full, tailored strategies provide a good basis for supporting women leaders since they mix innovative ideas with evidence-based techniques. The obvious changes observed during and after coaching—including changes in self-perception, better leadership behaviours, and more general effects on organisational culture—showcase the transformational potential of these interventions. These findings have significant implications for corporate policy, leadership development plans, and more general initiatives aiming at promoting gender equality in South African businesses. They argue that not only is addressing Imposter Phenomenon vital for the professional growth of individual women but also for motivating more varied, inclusive, and successful leadership cultures in the business sector.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to draw final conclusions from this study; to provide appropriate and actionable recommendations and suggestions for future research emanating from the study. The chapter will cover conclusions based on the two research questions of the study, which will be followed by recommendations made which will also include implications thereof and suggestions for future research.

6.2 Conclusions regarding Research Question Chapter 1

The first research question of the study sought to explore and understand how the executive coaches experienced the women leaders with feelings of the imposter syndrome, in their engagements during the Coaching journey. The findings showed similarities in coach experiences of the women leaders coached. All the executive coaches were firmly familiar with the concept of the imposter syndrome, through personal study and coaching experience in their daily practices. However, it was interesting to note their similar process of discovery of the imposter syndrome in their clients, the women leaders they coached. The women leaders did not typically profess to be experiencing imposter syndrome feelings as the leading need for coaching. Their true feelings were masked during coaching as they were reluctant to expose any vulnerability. However, it was through the engagement and the information and details shared that the layers were peeled off revealing the existence of the imposter syndrome feelings.

The findings also highlighted the discomfort experienced by some of the women leaders at the understanding of the imposter syndrome as the need to confront it in themselves. The executive coaches shared a common initial perception of the women leaders. The initial perception was that of confident, suitably qualified, well achieved, strong leading women, often first in their fields or industry. Upon further engagement and investigation, the women leaders shared their lived experiences: the women leaders coached expressed feelings of strong self-doubt despite known previous achievements and qualifications. They expressed

feelings of not belonging in the spaces, roles and/or organisations they were in. they were fearful and reluctant to put their hands up for roles and even tasks they had previously successfully performed. They expressed feelings of extreme anxiety at performing these tasks as those depicted in “the imposter cycle” discussed in chapter 2. They often viewed and perceived themselves as frauds (imposters) who were at risk of being soon discovered and exposed. This often caused them perpetual anxiety in their roles. This was also often accompanied by a need to work really hard in order to protect themselves and camouflage their feelings of inadequacy.

Self-doubt was by far the most common feeling expressed by the executive coaches as the experience of the women leaders. It was startling for the executive coaches to note that self-doubt was experienced by women leaders who boasted impressive achievements and qualifications under their belts. Women who had continuous tangible evidence of their abilities yet continued to doubt the very same abilities with every task at hand before them. This was also attributed to entering previously male dominated roles and industries as well as the under representation of women in senior leadership roles in organisations.

The executive coaches also noted that the women leaders often had difficulty in fully embracing their assigned leadership roles due to feelings of “not belonging”. They entered roles previously occupied by their male counterparts and often no person of their same race, gender nor culture thus leaving them to deduce that they are in a space they do not belong in. The self-doubt was also an underlying theme regarding the feelings of “not belonging” and “inability to fully embrace roles”. This was accompanied by a fear of failure which led to a fear of visibility and exposure, which was perceived as often underpinning the imposter syndrome. The women leaders were found to hold back significantly. This showed up as difficulty in effectively occupying and asserting their professional space. They experienced pressure to fit conventional leadership models they were not accustomed to. This was also further influenced by possible racial and cultural identities. It also influenced and contributed to the leadership styles the women leaders resorted to using.

The dynamics between internal and external struggles is another key perception to be noted from the engagements between the executive coaches and the women leaders. This largely refers to the self-perception and self-beliefs held by the women leaders. These were found to be the highest contributing factors to the existence and feelings of the imposter syndrome. As much as one's environment and subsequent experiences contribute to cementing some of these self-beliefs and feelings of the imposter syndrome, it really does depend on what the individual believes about themselves. It is the self-limiting beliefs that one might have held from earlier life experiences and messaging.

The perceptions gained and shared by the executive coaches in engaging with the women leaders provide valuable insights int the experiences of the women leaders. These are insights which may help one better understand the factors that may lead to and maintain feelings of the imposter syndrome. These are insights which also provide better understanding and appreciation of the impact of the imposter syndrome on how an individual performs and achieves tasks, how they lead and respond to the leadership of others and how they show up.

6.3 Conclusions regarding Research Question 2

The aim of the second research question of the study was to gain understanding of the impact of the imposter syndrome on the development of the women leaders. Previously conducted studies have highlighted the impact of the imposter syndrome. This part of the study sought to gain specific insight on how the imposter syndrome has influenced the career development of women leaders in corporate South Africa.

Part of an Executive Coache's professional responsibility is to create and hold a safe space for vulnerability for the coaching intervention to be effective. The client in turn holds a similar responsibility of allowing for vulnerability in order for effective engagement and coaching. The coaches noted the women leaders were generally initially guarded in the coaching sessions. They were resistant and reluctant to let their guard down and allow themselves to be vulnerable. They would avoid talking about the challenges they faced, hiding their self-doubt and

the inadequacy they felt. Despite being high achievers, they demonstrated traits of being anxious and uncertain due to the personal self-doubt.

The above are some of the main themes previously discussed in chapters 4 and 5. They fuel the fear of criticism and judgement in the women leaders, and this leads to them holding back and avoiding self-expressing. If their views, opinions, ideas etc are not known and/or seen they cannot be easily criticised. Regardless of how impeccable these may be or previously have been. This leads the women leaders to underestimate, underrate and at times even discount their own capabilities which in turn limits their capabilities. This hinders them from accepting new challenges and available opportunities that may be presented to them. Some may outright avoid them. They opt to shrink and not occupy their rightful spaces and roles despite the qualifications, experience and proven track record. Some have opted to exit their organisations while on an upward trajectory, this placing a cap on their career growth and development. Some women leaders have reportedly experienced career stagnation as a result of not being able to shift from self-inflicted limits. Progress and development are hindered significantly.

The Executive Coaches also made note that arriving at levels of vulnerability with these women leaders required the establishment of deep trust between themselves as coaches and the women leaders being coached. These would have been levels of trust that may have been difficult to establish on their own in their operating environments but largely due to self-limiting beliefs held by the women leaders. These are the levels of trust that were achieved through the applied coaching skills and process of the coaches during the coaching. Another valuable note made by the executive coaches was that the women leaders who allowed themselves to be vulnerable, were able reach solid levels of awareness and acknowledge their feelings and experiences. This also empowered them to make connections valuable and relevant connections between what they believed about themselves, their feelings and experiences.

There was a marked difference in the development of the women leaders who acknowledged their challenges and were part of an intervention programme.

6.4 Recommendations

This study has gained and provides valuable insights on the imposter syndrome and its impact through literature reviewed, the perspective of the executive coaches and the researcher's coaching experience. These are insights that can also be of value to other stakeholders in the field. This section of the report will outline a set of recommendations, and implications, that will be beneficial to the wider coaching community in their practices; the organisational policy makers and women – both in leadership and those aspiring to develop into leadership.

6.4.1 *Recommendations for Executive Coaching Practices*

The sample of this research study was made up of Executive coaches with a varied mix of background and experiences. This provided for a varied mix of their exposure to women leaders and their own personal and individual experiences. This would allow other coaches a great opportunity of learning from peers with similar to same experiences in future practices and reflection from past experiences.

a) Imposter Syndrome vs Imposter Phenomenon

Clance and Imes coined the term Imposter Phenomenon in the 1970s following their initial study of 178 women. As previously mentioned, this was a term used in reference to being a fraud and with a fear of being exposed as such despite evidence of their intelligence and achievements.

Over time, the Imposter Phenomenon has been popularly and widely referred to as the imposter syndrome. According to psychologists, using the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual as a source, a syndrome is a disease or a mental disorder. However, other sources define a syndrome as a number of things happening simultaneously with identifiable patterns. Therefore, the use of the term imposter syndrome is technically not incorrect.

The recommendation to coaches is to apply sensitivity in their practice and general engagement with clients and the subject by avoiding using the term Imposter Syndrome and use Imposter Phenomenon. This study has shown a set of women leaders reluctant to show vulnerability to openly express and share their feelings and experiences. The data available, of the experiences shared, leads one to believe that the use of Imposter Syndrome could be problematic terminology. It may even further contribute to the need to hide one's true feelings as it is associated with ill-health or a disorder. An environment that may not have adequate education and support for conditions viewed as disorders may pose a further threat to clients thus discouraging them from seeking an intervention that might be of assistance and further development.

b) Coaching Approach

The approach a coaching uses in a coaching intervention is not prescribed. However, an appropriate approach is the approach that is best suited to effectively address the needs of the clients and best facilitate meeting their intended objectives.

The second recommendation made to coaches is based on the coaching success shared by the executive coaches in this study. It is recommended that coaches engaging in future coaching with clients experiencing feelings of the imposter syndrome, consider an approach targeted at supporting the client to acknowledge, accept and take action in order to achieve desired and effective shifts. The recommended coaching approach is one that will achieve transformation – the Transformational coaching approach.

Coaching clients are all unique with specific needs and the executive coaches interviewed noted that a blanket approach would not be effective. The coaching approach that can assist client experiencing feelings of imposter syndrome and was common among the interviewed coaches is one that interrogates a client's belief system

particularly based on themselves and how that affects how they generally show up, perform and develop. This would also assist in highlighting and self-limiting beliefs that the client holds about themselves that they are often unaware of. The lack of awareness is often the reason why the client may not make connections between their self-limiting beliefs and the challenges they have in their professional and personal lives too. Then coaching would then seek to assist and support the client to expel self-limiting beliefs after gaining solid awareness.

The executive coaches in this study have highlighted that the women in this study live and experience a particular reality that has proven to not be entirely useful. Through a coaching approach of mindset change, coaches can assist and support clients to achieve shifts that give clients an opportunity to create new and more useful realities for themselves.

It is also imperative for organisations to establish and maintain a culture of coaching in order to support the workforce at all levels. It is equally imperative for organisations to include skilled and experienced coaches in designing effective programs targeted at achieving individual transformation and overall organisation transformation where there may be needed. This would ensure that the appropriate coaching frameworks are used, and effective tools made available in the organisation to support and maintain development. Development strides made by individuals may be thwarted in an environment not fully equipped to support their development which may lead to perpetual frustration for all.

6.4.2 Recommendations for Organisational Policies

Organisational policies are put in pace to ensure that the organisation is governed and operates effectively in order to achieve its overall mission and objectives.

Organisational policies should in essence ensure mutual value and benefit for the organisation and all other entities connected to it including its workforce.

Accommodation for development need be made in policies in organisations to demonstrate commitment. However, these should be coupled with solid strategies and action plans. Organisational policies that can cover support for areas such as the imposter syndrome and similar are Internal Organisational Development policies. These polices can include specifics on the organisations' regulations on development for its workforce and leadership. Reasonable accommodation can also be made for addressing organisational development needs as they arise. Regular discoveries and developments are being made worldwide and a willingness to incorporate developments as they are being made is key.

This study has further highlighted the importance of representation and support in the organisations. Effective programmes in organisations that can allow for this can help women leaders, and women in general, platforms for safe and accessible support. This can be made possible through mentorship programmes that provide relatable mentor and mentee pairing. Effective programmes targeted at bridging the gap are also key. In an effort to address underrepresentation of women, some organisations have accelerated the career progression of its workforce without providing necessary tools and support to effectively facilitate the transitions and thus unconsciously setting them up for failure. Programmes of this nature can assist alleviate this and also contribute to more successful transitions for the benefit of individuals and organisations as a whole.

6.4.3 Recommendations for Women leaders

The executive coaches in this study have offered valuable insights from a huge number of women leaders who have experienced feelings of the imposter syndrome. This is an indication of how common an occurrence this is. This should further somewhat help alleviate personal apprehension toward experiencing similar feelings and more so expressing and sharing them.

Self-awareness for women is critical because this will help one make sensible assessments of one's experiences and feelings in order to identify the effective support and intervention. It would be of great benefit for women experiencing feelings of the imposter syndrome to create new and more useful realities for themselves in order to change what they believe about themselves. This study has highlighted the role that has been field by executive coaches in guiding and supporting many women leaders overcome. It is highly recommended for women leaders to seek assistance and support through coaching, mentorship, women development programs geared at addressing the imposter syndrome and/or challenges associated with it. There are also well-designed programmes and literature containing effective tools and strategies that one could ese and apply to overcome the imposter syndrome

6.5 Limitations of the study

6.5.1 *Overview of limitations*

The imposter syndrome in its nature is a delicate and sensitive subject. Those who experience feelings of the imposter syndrome do not typically lead by professing these feelings outright. However, through targeted and carefully guided questions and conversation they are discovered to fit the criteria, which they themselves are able to confirm. The study therefore focused and relied on the perceptions of those who have had the privilege of engaging in these conversations with the women leaders experiencing the imposter syndrome – the executive coaches. The first and most significant limitation of the study was the available ready source used. The perception of the executives, though most useful and valuable, did not allow for extracting first hand experiences from the women leaders.

The second limitation of the study was conducting the interviews with the participants on virtual platforms vs face-to-face interviews. However, the virtual platforms allowed for ease of availability and convenience for the participants. They allowed for access to executive coaches across the country, who have also worked with women leaders across the country.

6.6 Impact of Limitations

The perceptions of the executive coaches were based on their personal experiences of the women leaders they coached. Executive coaches are well trained in deep understanding and interpretations of information and feelings shared and expressed by their clients. However, there could still remain the human factor which may lend itself to subjectivity especially in instances where executive coaches themselves may have experienced similar feelings of the imposter syndrome.

The impact of conducting the interviews on a virtual platform were varied. Though convenient, conducting the interviews on a virtual platform limited authentic connection and organic engagement with the respondents. Particularly because the majority of the participants were unknown to the researcher with no previously established relationship. The researcher relied heavily on the quality of the interview questions, personal and professional skill to effectively engage. Unpredictable intermittent network disturbances also had a significant impact on the use of the virtual platforms.

6.7 Suggestions for future research

This study has demonstrated how women leaders in corporate South Africa have experienced feelings of the imposter syndrome. It has also demonstrated its impact on their development as well as the effectiveness of coaching as an intervention to support the women leaders to overcome feelings of the imposter syndrome. However, opportunity still exists to explore, gain more knowledge and understand this subject widely.

The following are suggestions for future research based on the findings and progress of the current study:

a) A study is needed to better understand the impact of feelings of the imposter syndrome on women leaders directly from the women leaders themselves.

b) A mixed method study can also be beneficial to provide statistical data on the effectiveness of Coaching to overcome feelings of the imposter syndrome and support development within this context.
c) This study noted that feelings of the imposter syndrome are not unique to women. A study inclusive of men with feelings of the imposter syndrome can also be beneficial to further explore the similarities and differences in their experiences. This would assist in gaining a better understanding of a wholistic human experience with the imposter syndrome.

6.8 Final Reflection

6.8.1 *Reflection on the Research Journey: Positionality of the researcher*

The imposter syndrome has been studied and researched since the 1970s. There are different ongoing developments and discoveries being made about its dynamics, its impact, those who experience and suffer from it and how to overcome it. The experience of the research process in studying this subject was intriguing both personally and personally. The opportunity to draw from insights and learnings of previous studies and also to contribute to the existing body of knowledge was both challenging and intellectually stimulating. As a novice researcher, the research process was both challenging and educational. As a coach, the process of conducting interviews was enjoyable and challenging. The engagement with the participants was an enjoyable experience as it gave valuable insights and perspectives. The experience was challenging because engaging with fellow coaches felt daunting and one felt as if one was being assessed. These feelings were also alleviated though because the participants also provided feedback and extra unsolicited information based on their experiences when they identified gaps they could offer to close for the benefit of the study. The experiences were also different because other participants required slightly more probing for further details to be shared.

This study afforded the opportunity to acquire and develop the true meaning of research skill. It highlighted the line between theory learnt and the application thereof. It also highlighted the need for patience and passion. In future, better

planning and preparation will be key. The research steps needed to work in a process and one's time was not within one's control. Progress was often determined by the availability of participants and the institutional administrative process. The importance of better planning and time management was a crucial lesson learnt.

6.9 Contribution to Knowledge

This study has made valuable contributions to specific areas of knowledge. The areas of knowledge referred to are: the understanding of the Imposter Phenomenon; Coaching and women leaders.

a) Understanding of the Imposter Phenomenon

Remarkable work has been done to unveil and provide understanding of the Imposter Phenomenon since the initial study in the 1970s. Women across the globe, experience related yet different experiences. The South African women leader experience is a different and unique one purely because of the setting. This study had contributed to a better understanding of this phenomenon in the South African context, its impact on the women leaders and South African women in general who have had an experience of Imposter Phenomenon feelings.

b) Coaching

There has been a significant contribution to the Coaching Practice made by this study. Coaches operate more effectively with a better understanding of the general underpinning factors of a subject. This study has highlighted and discussed those in Chapter 2, 4 and 5. This study has also offered effective suggestions of a specific coaching approach that has been effectively applied to gain success in the past. There is much value in those consolidated experiences and perspectives from the interviewed coaches.

c) Women Leaders

Women have generally been marginalised in society. There are notable efforts being made to address this culture. However, it remains work in

progress. This practice is no different in the workplace. This study has contributed to the existing knowledge for the empowerment of women. This study offers knowledge to women for the effective leadership of self and others, both personally and professionally. This study also contributes to a better understanding of the impact of the Imposter Phenomenon on development and career growth. This should be valuable knowledge for those in leadership of others in support of their development.

6.10 Closing Remarks

This study sought to draw more attention to the Imposter Phenomenon by providing an understanding of what it is and particularly its impact on women leaders in South Africa. The study also sought to assess whether coaching was an effective intervention in supporting and assisting women leaders experiencing feelings of Imposter Phenomenon to overcome it. The experiences of the women leaders, through the coaches, has given more weight for the better consideration and treatment of the Imposter Phenomenon, not only for people who share in these feelings and experiences but also for the organisations and environments within which these women and other individuals could be operating in. It has also made a call for individuals to take responsibility for one's own development and support of talent within organisations.

One of the most exciting outcomes of this study was the confirmation that coaching is indeed an effective intervention for Imposter Phenomenon for women leaders in corporate South Africa. This confirms findings of a study conducted by Zanchetta, Juker, Wolf and Traut-Mattausch (2020) in Germany.

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APPENDIX A: ETHICS CLEARANCE

Graduate School of Business Administration
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

Wits Business School

Wits Business School Ethics Committee
Constituted under the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical)

Ethics Clearance Certificate

Ethics protocol number: WBS/BE2527854/793
This certificate is only valid with a legitimate ethics protocol number and signed by the Researcher (below).

Project title	Exploring imposter phenomenon: perspectives from executive coaches in South Africa
Investigator / Researcher	Mrs Nonhlanhla Mkhize
Nature of Project	MM (Business & Executive Coaching)
Decision of the Committee	Approved, provided stakeholders and participants are guaranteed confidentialty.
Issue Date of Certificate	2024/02/22
Expiry date	Date of submission of the project / research report
Chairperson	Ms Ayanda Magida ☎ +27 11 717 3953 +27 82 907 1104 ayanda.magida@wits.ac.za

Declaration by Researcher

One copy must be signed by the Researcher and returned to the Chairperson of the Wits Business School Ethics Committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.

Signature

23/02/2024
Date:

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">Research Interview Guide</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">SECTION A – Profile
Name of Participant:
Name of Researcher:
Date:
Time:</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">SECTION B – Background
1. Please introduce yourself briefly.
2. What is your educational background?
3. Please tell me more about your current position as an executive coach. Do you have any subordinates or partners? How many?
4. How long have you been an executive coach? Share about both the current position and earlier positions.
5. What is your understanding of the Imposter Phenomenon?
6. How many women leaders who have experienced the Imposter Phenomenon have you coached?</td></tr>
<tr><td>SECTION C – Interview Questions
Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of executive coaches when coaching women leaders with an Imposter Phenomenon?</td><td>1. Describe your experiences working with women leaders who have experienced the Imposter Phenomenon. (PROMPT: What was your initial expectation of the women leaders who have experienced the Imposter Phenomenon you coached? What was the actual experience of coaching women leaders who have experienced the Imposter Phenomenon?)
2. Please share what you believe the barriers to women leaders who have experienced the Imposter Phenomenon are.</td></tr>
</table>

	3. **How do you help women leaders who have experienced the Imposter Phenomenon move into their next career role or level?** 4. **What barriers or challenges do women leaders who have experienced the Imposter Phenomenon typically face?**
Research Question 2: What is the perceived influence of Imposter Phenomenon on the development of women leaders in corporate South Africa?	1. **How have the women leaders who experienced the Imposter Phenomenon shown up during Coaching?** 2. **How has the Imposter Phenomenon impacted your clients' growth in their careers?** 3. **What are the typical characteristics/feelings you have observed in women leaders experiencing the Imposter phenomenon that you have coached?** 5. **What has been the Coaching Approach when coaching women leaders experiencing the Imposter Phenomenon? What tools do you use when coaching women leaders who have experienced the Imposter Phenomenon (e.g. 360-degree feedback, assessments, etc.)?** 4. **How do you help them move through barriers or challenges?**

	5. Have there been any noticeable changes during and after Coaching?