

Mitigating the Impostor Phenomenon among Female Middle Managers: Organisational Conditions and Support Mechanisms

Agata Karolina Pawlak

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Maria Bastida Dominguez

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Abstract

This dissertation discusses ways to address impostorism among female middle managers, who continue to be under-researched while having distinctive structural and identity-related challenges. Employing an integrative review approach, the research integrates empirical, conceptual, and theoretical literature from the fields of psychology, management, and gender studies to make sense of the cognitive, affective, and behavioural facets of Impostor Phenomenon (IP) and their precursors and organisational implications. Special focus is paid to organisational and structural aspects of impostorism, which have been scarcely investigated in contrast to individual-level factors, such as personality traits and low self-efficacy. Using a PRISMA-informed search and screening process as well as thematic synthesis approach, the review reveals organisational conditions which can enhance or attenuate impostorism and examines the limited but emerging evidence on workplace interventions. The review develops an organisational framework grounded in the literature, identifying conditions and practices that may help organisations support female middle managers and mitigate impostor-related experiences.

Keywords: Impostor Phenomenon; impostorism; women managers; middle management; organisational interventions; integrative review; psychological safety; gender; leadership.

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1. Introduction

The modern workplace is complex, performance-driven and calls for instant change in managerial requirements. In these environments, employees are forced to not only develop their technical skills. They must also meet the demands arising from the relationships, cultures, and identity that determine how they experience their professional lives, and at the same time managers have the extra requirement of balancing strategic and operational needs while keeping their own credibility and self-confidence (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

The impostor phenomenon (IP) has become a core research construct that has drawn widespread attention in this field. Originally defined by Clance and Imes (1978), IP is an enduring internalised sense of being inept that continues to be held even with evidence to the contrary. For those experiencing IP, success is not attributed to their abilities but to some outside force, like luck or timing. On the other hand, personal failures are internalised and seen as if there is something wrong with oneself. The construct has gradually become broader to include cognitive, affective, and behavioural elements, as well as more recent concepts like strategic impostorism, in which intentional strategies of self-presentation are used to meet social demands (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Tewfik, 2022).

Empirical studies have previously found that impostor feelings are common among different occupational groups and are linked to anxiety, burnout, poor well-being, and work impairment (Cokley et al., 2013; Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Vergauwe et al., 2014). The gender dimension has also been identified, as women tend to show greater levels of impostorism – particularly those in leadership roles or in positions connected with leadership – because of stereotype threat, the increased scrutiny they receive, and the mixed expectations that are placed on them (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Parkman, 2016). However, studies have tended to focus heavily on university, early-career professionals, or top management.

Middle managers within organisations find themselves in a unique situation of "structural squeeze." They are upwardly accountable to senior leaders and downwardly responsible for managing frontline teams, yet they rarely gain access to the power and resources that senior leaders enjoy. Female middle managers face an additional layer of overlapping predicaments, including constraints imposed by gender norms and a lack of role models and sponsorship. The "broken rung" effect, widely discussed in studies of women's career advancement, describes disparities in promotion to first-level management roles. Although it does not directly explain impostor syndrome, these structural inequalities may contribute to conditions associated with impostor feelings among some women managers. However, current academic research on this issue still retains a notable gap in both theoretical and empirical studies.

This dissertation aims to address this research gap by examining impostor syndrome among female middle managers as its core objective. It adopts an integrative literature review method to conduct this research. Drawing on academic literature from three core fields: psychology, management and gender studies, the thesis integrates the main dimensional variables

of impostor syndrome symptoms with a key focus on understudied research issues - underexplored organisational structural factors related to female identity coordination.

Methodologically, this paper conducts its research using a PRISMA-informed search strategy and thematic synthesis. Its core goals are to advance conceptual clarity of impostorism among female middle managers and identify the organisational conditions that shape this phenomenon. It contributes in three main ways: theoretical refinement, support for sustaining employee well-being and advancement of gender equity in leadership pathways.

This study will help advance a deeper conceptual understanding of women impostorism in middle management, present an empirically informed organisational framework for supporting female middle managers, and suggest practical strategies for improving well-being, retention, and leadership development for women managers.

2. Literature review

2.1. Women in middle management

Women who are in middle management hold a contradictory position within modern organisations, as they must meet the expectations of senior leadership while at the same time fulfilling the operational needs of their employee teams. Even though this dissertation looks in detail at female middle managers, there is still a lack of direct empirical evidence concerning this group. For this reason, the review draws upon wider academic work on women leaders, on professional women, and on organisational settings where the findings can be applied conceptually to middle management positions.

Women remain underrepresented in leadership pipelines, especially at the mid-levels of management, since these are the main stage through which one enters senior leadership positions. According to McKinsey's *Women in the Workplace* 2023 report, which focuses primarily on corporate America, women continue to face barriers at the first step into management. In 2023the number of women promoted to manager was eighty-seven for everyone hundred men who received the promotion, a difference which is referred to as 'broken rug' in the leadership pipeline. This early gap in promotions may be one of the reasons why women are underrepresented at higher levels within the organisation (McKinsey & Company, 2023). In today's performance-oriented modern workplace, widespread structural bottlenecks are continuously tightening. Managers must cope with a rapidly changing environment and with strict demands associated with their professional role identity, and this is especially true of mid-level female managers. As Eagly and Karau's 2002 study shows, gender stereotypes affect the way their competence and authority are evaluated. Meanwhile, these women must also fulfil a range of other strict work performance requirements, including those related to strategic goals and team management. Because middle management-specific studies are sparse, insights from research on women in leadership and professional roles are used to illuminate the structural and relational pressures that similarly shape middle managerial experiences.

Within this context, the Impostor Phenomenon is one of the main obstacles faced by women in management roles. A study by KPMG found that 75 per cent of highly performing executive women experience the Impostor Phenomenon at some point in their professional careers. Similarly, 56% feared others would eventually "find out" they were "not as capable as expected" (KPMG, 2020). Female middle managers in businesses frequently experience a greater level of emotional distress as a result of having limited access to mentors, role models, and support from the organisation. They also face three kinds of unconscious bias: being interrupted when speaking, having their opinions rejected, and being subjected to excessively strict scrutiny when they make mistakes. Moreover, middle managers have to deal with the double responsibility of managing both their superiors and their subordinates, usually without the power or resources that are available to senior leaders. This "sandwich pressure"

is associated with emotional exhaustion, which prior studies have correlated with impostorism, family-work conflict and burnout (Crawford et al., 2016). Therefore, female middle managers who experience impostor syndrome do not exercise individual psychological behaviours, but may reflect broader structural, cultural, and relational dynamics reported in organisational studies. Accordingly, this dissertation integrates both middle management-specific studies and wider research on women's leadership experiences. It recognises that the mechanisms identified in the broader literature are highly relevant to female middle managers due to their organisational location and role demands.

2.2. Definition of Impostor Phenomenon

The Impostor Phenomenon (IP) is a psychological and behavioural phenomenon which was first introduced by Clance and Imes (1978). It describes a continuous and internalised belief of one's fraudulence regardless of visible and objective evidence of one's competence. Individuals who are experiencing IP usually attribute their successes to external factors such as luck, timing, or interpersonal charm. Simultaneously, they internalise all failures because of their incompetency and inadequacy. The phenomenon was originally conceptualised and researched with a focus on high-achieving women. Modern female middle managers, in many respects, work under similar conditions as the 'high-achieving women' originally detected by Clance & Imes (1978), with increased visibility and low legitimation within their organisations but a lack of institutional safety. It is in the light of these structural tensions that they are described in the literature as vulnerable to internalising self-doubt as 'credible' even if objectively skilled. However, since then, subsequent research has attested that IP is affecting individuals regardless of gender, profession, and cultural contexts (Bravata et al., 2020). The IP is also commonly used as Impostor Syndrome within academic, managerial, psychological, and popular discourse. Today, it forms a critical piece of the academic conversation about occupational well-being, models of leadership and organisational culture.

Although the Impostor Phenomenon (IP) has been researched for decades and amassed a large body of studies, it still suffers from a vague conceptual definition. The academic community has debated four of its core attributes, including its nature as a cognitive bias, and this divergence is confirmed by Tewfik et al.'s 2025 study. The absence of a shared understanding and a clear definition makes it difficult to measure the phenomenon, to achieve theoretical integration, and to design effective interventions. Furthermore, recent scholarly work has also proposed wider constructs such as strategic impostorism which embody the social, relational, and performative dimensions of impostor-related experiences.

2.3. Cognitive, Affective and Behavioural Dimensions of Impostor Phenomenon

Although the Impostor phenomenon is widely discussed, its conceptual boundaries are still not defined. Clance and Imes (1978) originally framed IP as a cognitive distortion which is a persistent belief that one's achievements are unmerited. This cognitive framing emphasised

internal attributions (“I succeeded because of luck”) and the denial of competence (“I am not as capable as others think”). However, over time the concept expanded to include affective and behavioural elements, therefore further contributing to the drift.

2.3.1. Cognitive Dimension

The cognitive dimension is the conceptual core of the impostor phenomenon. It refers to the structures of one’s beliefs and interpretive biases that shape how individuals evaluate their competence, success, and failures. These distorted beliefs manifest through characteristic attribution patterns where success is established by external factors while failures are internalised as reflections of one’s deficiency. It is in close agreement with Weiner's (1985) attribution theory, a theory which concerns the way in which people's interpretations of success and failure affect their emotional and motivational responses. Moreover, people who are susceptible to the impostor phenomenon show cognitive rigidity; in this case it means that they keep their negative self-beliefs even when given positive feedback. They are additionally very selective in their responses to information which confirms their feelings of inadequacy. It lends support to self-verification theory (Swann, 1983), which states that people will search for and prefer information supporting their original set of beliefs. These cognitive distortions may eventually result in decreased self-efficacy, as the ability of individuals to internalise success and develop confidence about their own skills diminishes (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016).

2.3.2. Affective Dimension

The affective dimension of the impostor phenomenon describes the often-intense emotional experiences that accompany these thoughts. The emotional responses triggered by the cognitive distortions often are the driver of the distress associated with the phenomenon. Individuals repeatedly report chronic anxiety as well as the persistent fear of both failure and success. Another common reaction is shame after an achievement or recognition, as they feel they do not deserve any praise or visibility. Thompson, Davis, and Davidson (1998) refer to impostor syndrome as an 'intense feeling of intellectual phoniness'. Affective responses of this kind are frequently found alongside personality traits such as neuroticism, a connection between neuroticism and feelings of impostorism having been demonstrated (Vergauwe et al., 2014). The emotional toll of the impostor phenomenon is linked to considerable psychological strain, this comprising burnout, emotional exhaustion, and a lower level of well-being (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Swaidan & Jabbour Al Maalouf, 2025). What is more, affective triggers such as having one’s expertise questioned or confronting high-stakes evaluation can enhance impostor feelings. Therefore, it creates a vicious cycle in which emotional vulnerability reinforces cognitive distortions (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2016).

2.3.3. Behavioural Dimension

The behavioural dimension consists of the coping strategies individuals use in response to impostor thoughts and feelings. These strategies often function as attempts to manage anxiety or prevent perceived vulnerability. However, paradoxically, they also reinforce one’s

impostor beliefs. One of the most prevalent behaviours is over-preparation or overworking to compensate for one's perceived incompetence. While this is often described as resulting in high performance in the short term, it strengthens the belief that success depends on enormous effort rather than one's abilities (Georgescu et al., 2024). People also tend to engage in avoidance, since they often say that they avoid promotions or opportunities on the grounds that they are afraid of being evaluated. Another common behavioural response is procrastination; this being usually caused by perfectionist tendencies or a fear of failing. According to Klassen, Krawchuk, and Rajani (2008), low self-efficacy is a predictor of procrastination, indicating that the self-doubt associated with impostor syndrome is linked to low self-efficacy, and this may account for the participants' perception of task avoidance. Furthermore, many individuals engage in impression management strategies like self-deprecation or masking perceived flaws. Such behaviours correspond with Leary and Kowalski's (1990) impression management framework. This explains how individuals shape others' perceptions in a strategic manner to reduce social threat or manage expectations.

Current research has suggested a more accurate and clear definition of the impostor phenomenon by identifying impostor thoughts, impostor feelings, and impostorism. Tewfik (2022) claims that over many decades research has caused the cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects to be combined into a single, undifferentiated term. This is contributing to the ambiguity of the concept and inconsistent measurement. In her work, she proposes to return to the cognitive roots of the impostor phenomenon while still acknowledging the vast array of experiences that coincide with impostor propensities in real-world settings.

2.4. Impostorism

Following the distinctions proposed in recent scholarship, impostorism is conceptualised as a broader and integrative construct which involves the interplay of thoughts, feelings, and behavioural responses. Compared to the original definition of impostor syndrome in clinical settings proposed by Clance and Imes in 1978, contemporary measurements of workplace impostor syndrome have introduced that workplace interactions are centred on emotions. They also added two types of coping strategies into the discourse: over-preparation and impression management. This broader orientation is associated with research on self-regulatory cycles (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016), as well as with perfectionistic concerns and stress related to one's identity (Parkman, 2016). Moreover, the long-term effects of the impostor phenomenon are taken into account, indicating that impostorism is shaped by psychological factors and beliefs which are internal to the individual. Studies also describe impostorism as co-occurring with contextual influences including one's organisational culture (Georgescu et al., 2024), social comparison (Bravata et al., 2020) and structural inequity as experienced particularly by women and minority populations (Cokley et al., 2017; Gibson-Beverly & Schwartz, 2008).

Impostorism reframes the impostor phenomenon not as a pathology but instead as a situated response to social, cultural, and organisational pressures. According to a 2016 study by Hutchins and Rainbolt, impostor mindset can be triggered by four types of scenarios: challenges to one's professional competence, peer comparison, high-stakes evaluations, and

one's own personal success. A 2017 study by Cokley et al. points out that gender and minority group identity are associated with heightened self-doubt and reported impostor syndrome, and a 2016 study by Parkman also corroborates that impostor perceptions among marginalised groups such as women in leadership positions mostly stem from social injustice rather than personal flaws.

Impostorism also captures the performative dimension of competence. Individuals who experience impostorism repeatedly engage in hyperalert self-monitoring, strategic impression management, overworking and avoidance of visibility-enhancing opportunities (Vergauwe et al., 2014). Such behaviours act as adaptive strategies used to navigate environments where one's competence is constantly evaluated. Modern work cultures often strengthen impostorism through rapid skill obsolescence, constant comparison, and unclear expectations for one's performance (Georgescu et al., 2024). In such environments, impostorism is frequently reported in environments characterised by structural uncertainty rather than an individual pathology. What is important is that impostorism is a double-edged sword. Although burnout linked to impostor feelings is associated with greater emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and self-doubt (Swaidan & Jabbour Al Maalouf, 2025), some studies report associations between impostor feelings and ethical behaviour (Ferrari, 2005), foster empathy of individuals, conscientiousness, and inclusion in team dynamics (Whitman & Shanine, 2012). This sort of duality would challenge the premise that impostorism is maladaptive.

2.4.1. Strategic Impostorism as a unique conceptual tension

The core research object anchored in this study is genuine impostorism, which specifically refers to internalised self-doubt experienced by female middle managers and reinforced by structural factors. Strategic impostorism, a related secondary construct in the field, is defined in existing literature as a deliberate behaviour adopted by actors to achieve interpersonal or organisational goals rather than an internalised deficit. Although the two constructs are correlated, strategic impostorism falls outside the scope of the organisational mechanisms examined in this study and is included in this section for transparency. Rooted in impression management theory (Leary & Kowalski, 1990), strategic impostorism represents intentional efforts to construct others' perceptions of one's competence. Understating accomplishments or shakily speculating lower perceived danger are described as behaviours that may increase perceived likability or psychological safety. Under the classic "front-stage behaviour" framework in sociology and organisational behaviour, prior studies have noted that in evaluative, hierarchical settings, people use front-stage behaviours to manage their personal impressions (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). Leaders who use such behaviours are perceived as more trustworthy, and participants report greater trust and reduced hierarchical social distance (Edmondson, 1999; Owens & Hekman, 2012; Whitman & Shanine, 2012).

The strategic impostorism also arises as a response to social expectations related to gender and identity. By integrating two key perspectives—Rudman's (1998) finding that society highly values humility, and Eagly and Karau's (2002) observation that assertive behaviour is often perceived as threatening—individuals adopt this set of behaviours to comply with social norms,

avoid undue scrutiny, and reduce the pressure brought by stereotypes (Steele, 1997; Roberts, 2005). This behaviour constitutes a protective identity management strategy, rather than an external manifestation of internalised feelings of personal inadequacy. This paper defines the strategic impostorism examined in this section as a subtle situational variable rather than a core construct. It frames impostorism as a psychological experience reinforced by institutional structures rather than a strategic impression management behaviour, and the core analysis in this review will focus on systematic conditions that produce chronic uncertainty and identity threat.

2.5. Antecedents of the Impostor Phenomenon

Since Clance and Imes first proposed in 1978 that family dynamics and gender socialisation are the core causes of the impostor phenomenon, relevant research has evolved from viewing only a single contributing factor to reaching a new consensus that recognises the complex interactions of multiple factors, including individual traits and contextual conditions.

2.5.1. Dispositional Antecedents

There is a strong literature base to suggest personality plays a significant role in the development of the impostor phenomenon. Of the Big Five personality traits, neuroticism is the strongest and most robust correlate of impostorism, as it is characterised by elevated levels of anxiety, emotional instability, and self-criticism (Patzak et al., 2017; Vergauwe et al., 2014). Those high in neuroticism are more likely to take ambiguous feedback negatively and ruminate over perceived inadequacies, which is associated with higher reports of impostor feelings. Another strong predictor is perfectionism, specifically perfectionistic concerns. Concerns about making mistakes, being overly critical of work and worrying excessively about not meeting standards are characteristic of perfectionistic concerns (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). These behaviours closely resemble impostor cognitions, which are thoughts that play on the idea of never feeling adequate and beliefs that one's success is precarious or unwarranted. Empirically, it has been found that perfectionistic concerns and not perfectionistic strivings are strongly associated with impostor feelings (Damian et al., 2021).

One's self-beliefs are also crucial. Low self-esteem and self-esteem instability were implicated as main contributors to the development of impostorism (Schubert & Bowker, 2017). Those with low and unstable self-esteem will show dramatic shifts in sense of self-worth dependent on evaluative feedback or performance, rendering these individuals more vulnerable to such impostor thoughts when under stress or evaluation. Additionally, low self-efficacy - thinking that one cannot handle the job even if successful in getting it - mediates the association between impostorism and career-related variables including avoidance of leadership roles and lower flexibility (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016). Cognitive styles additionally add to impostor risk. Externals, on the other hand, attribute success not to internal causes but to luck or outside forces, much like the attributional patterns of impostors (Tovey et al., 2022). Rumination and fear of negative evaluation (FNE) together with social comparison orientation also are

associated with stronger IP beliefs by intensifying self-doubt and increasing sensitivity to perceived inadequacies (Leonhardt et al., 2017).

2.5.2. Developmental Antecedents

Family dynamics and early experiences in school provide a foundation for the development of one's impostor tendencies. Clance and Imes (1978) first suggested that impostorism evolves in the early years of life because of parents' inconsistent feedback, differential treatment between siblings or even parentification. Later research has confirmed that this finding contributes to the internalisation of self-doubt and fear of failure (Thompson et al., 1998; Sonnak & Towell, 2001). Some studies also suggest that first-born children or those constantly compared to their high-achieving siblings can be more susceptible to impostor thoughts due to greater expectations and constant comparison (King & Cooley, 1995). Early exposure to an environment premised on love or approval conditional upon performance might teach children that mistakes are indicative of personal failure, thus sowing the seeds from which adult impostor beliefs grow.

Educational environments can influence an individual's likelihood of developing impostor syndrome. A 1991 study by Kolligian and Sternberg shows that high-achieving students in competitive academic environments are prone to developing feelings of inadequacy. Moreover, advanced students at earlier grade levels find it difficult to get used to having equally able peers around them and might also experience feelings of being a fraud as a result of comparing themselves to people below them in ability. This phenomenon is especially common in the fields of STEM, in medical training, and in graduate school since the standards for high performance and the pressure to be evaluated are widespread (Parkman, 2016; Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2016).

2.5.3. Social and Cultural Antecedents

Impostor experiences vary as a function of social identity, which includes gender, race, ethnicity, and minority status. The early work showed that women appeared to be suffering from impostor phenomenon at a rate greater than would naturally be expected (Clance & Imes, 1978). However, more recent research has found equally high measures of impostorism among men in certain settings (Fried-Buchalter, 1997). Recent research supports that gender-typed socialisation, as opposed to gender per se, is the primary precursor. From an early age, women are socialised to value modesty, screen communal orientation, and interpersonal harmony, which is apt to result in more humble embellishment (attribution of success to external sources) of their strengths. On the other hand, these gender-typed norms directly contradict behaviours expected of middle managers like being self-advocates, negotiating or using upward influence. This identity is a source of tension that predisposes women experiencing these roles to impostor thinking.

Being a member of minority groups also places one at higher risk for impostorism. People from racial/ethnic minority groups are no exception and have stereotype threat, scrutiny threat, and responsibility to the group at their disposal (Cokley et al., 2013; Steele, 1997; Bernard

et al., 2017) to undermine confidence. Evidence indicates that impostorism has been reported as mediating the association between perceived discrimination and mental health outcomes among minority students and professionals (Cokley et al., 2017). Intersectional identities - the experience, for example, of being both a woman and a racial minority - can multiply experiences of impostorism by intersecting systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991).

Cultural norms also have an effect on impostorism; in collectivist societies where humility and group harmony are stressed, individuals tend to undervalue themselves or to credit their success to external factors (Heine et al., 1999). On the other hand, in an individualistic culture which prizes performance and self-promotion, people may experience impostor feelings when they think they are not meeting the ideal standards of performance (Chrisman et al., 1995).

2.5.4. Situational and Organisational Antecedents

In addition to dispositional and developmental factors, impostorism is influenced by situational triggers and organisational environment. Tewfik's (2022) differentiation of impostor thoughts versus impostor feelings suggests that impostorism can depend on situational activation rather than being a strictly trait-like phenomenon. Experts are now questioning the idea of frequent triggers, particularly when they see themselves as less capable than their more experienced colleagues or when they achieve a surprising level of success (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2016). In organisations where there is a strong emphasis on expertise, high performance and continuous assessment, worries about appearing incompetent may be made worse. Bourgoin and Harvey (2018) indicate that professionals often face a conflict between keeping up a credible professional image and recognising the need to keep learning, a situation which may help to lead to impostor feelings. Moreover, impostor thoughts can be increased in cultures that lack psychological safety and give out inconsistent feedback, causing employees to become confused about whether they are skilled or not (Edmondson, 1999). On the other hand, positive environment conditions which include strong mentoring relationships and relational leadership are associated with lower reports of impostor feelings, though existing research does not demonstrate direct correlation with reduced impostorism (Parkman, 2016).

Role transitions - from promotion to taking on new leadership accountabilities or entering an elite professional space, for example - are also powerful antecedents. Studies on leadership emergence have shown that contact with roles requiring visibility, decision-making power or expertise is a situation in which individuals regularly experience feelings of impostorism (Chakrabarti & Finkelstein, 2022). The impostor phenomenon has been identified as a common issue for entrepreneurs, which could be the result of the ambiguity, threat and identity complexity involved in founding new businesses (Cacciotti et al., 2016). Middle managers work in what is referred to in the literature as 'the structural squeeze,' positioned between strategic demands from above and operational requirements from below. This squeeze is further compounded for women by diminished access to informal networks, increased scrutiny, and gendered expectations of relationship competence, all of which are described as contextual factors associated with impostorism. Lastly, the digital world and social media are reported to increase social comparison and promote the construction of an image

of successful life. Younger professionals, who are further embedded in digital comparison cultures, report experiencing more impostorism associated with online visibility and performance pressure (Vogel et al., 2014).

A review of existing literature on impostor syndrome among female middle managers shows that this condition is a state of long-term self-doubt. This self-doubt is shaped by the interactions of four categories of factors: personal traits, developmental experiences, social identity pressures, and organisational conditions. Existing research uniformly concludes that impostor syndrome in this group is not an individual psychological flaw but is consistently described as shaped by systemic conditions. It can be alleviated through organisational interventions to support the development of equitable leadership.

2.6. Consequences of the Impostor Phenomenon

The impostor phenomenon has significant consequences for both individuals and organisations as it shapes one's psychological well-being, interpersonal behaviours, and career development. Despite being perceived as an internal struggle, IP often extends further into one's performance, leadership and even the culture of the whole organisation.

2.6.1. Psychological and Emotional Consequences

Psychological distress is one of the most frequently reported consequences of impostor syndrome. Studies by Sonnak & Towell (2001) and Vergauwe et al. (2014) show that individuals with high trait levels of this syndrome are prone to anxiety and chronic fatigue in scenarios involving evaluations or public scrutiny. This is reported to be associated with fear of being exposed as incompetent and their cognitive distortions. This emotional wear and tear correlate with burnout, particularly in highly demanding or competitive settings (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Burnout symptoms of exhaustion, reduced accomplishment and depersonalization are further compounded by the impostor cycle of overwork, short-term relief, and renewed self-doubt.

Impostorism is also linked to symptoms of depression, low life satisfaction, and reduced overall well-being (Cokley et al., 2013; Swaidan & Jabbour Al Maalouf, 2025). These results reflect participants' reports of internalised beliefs about themselves as well as the affective cost of pretending to be able. Crucially, perceptions of impostorism can exist alongside elevated levels of achievement. It is thus paradoxical that the academic perceived to be successful on the outside can feel this much self-doubt on the inside.

2.6.2. Behavioural Consequences

Impostor syndrome may have both positive and negative effects on a person's work performance. According to a 2024 study by Georgescu et al., the condition is usually associated with over-preparation and overworking. Individuals afflicted with it spend a lot of energy in order to compensate for their feeling of lacking ability. Though this kind of behaviour may

boost productivity in the short term, it will eventually lead to occupational burnout and destroy work-life balance over a period of time. It also reinforces the incorrect belief that success entirely depends on effort, which in turn intensifies the sense of being an impostor and establishes a negative cycle.

Conversely, behaviours including procrastination and refusing promotions, which Neureiter and Traut-Mattausch noted in 2016, may also emerge. Procrastination in educational settings, per research by Klassen et al. in 2008, is most often associated with fear of failure or perfectionism. The patterns of these avoidances are barriers to career development and narrow the opportunities for being seen in an organisation.

Existing research has not reached a consistent conclusion on the link between impostor syndrome and individual performance: Sakulku and Alexander proposed in 2011 that this syndrome increases cognitive load and undermines self-confidence, which in turn harms personal performance. In contrast, a 2022 study by Tewfik argued that this syndrome can motivate people to develop the habit of thorough preparation, thus improving interpersonal effectiveness. The association between the two remains unclear; its actual impact shifts based on specific contexts, coping mechanisms, and task characteristics, and it never inevitably leads to deficient performance.

2.6.3. Interpersonal and Relational Consequences

Impostorism also affects interpersonal dynamics. Those high on impostor features can also commonly employ impression management such as minimising successes or refraining from self-promotion (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). While such conduct can create a sense of humbleness, it is also perceived as contributing to others undervaluing the person's abilities, thus diminishing one's access to opportunities and recognition.

Impersonating members of marginalised sensitive groups first triggers a negative social tendency of reduced willingness to seek help. In 2016, Hutchins and Rainbolt noted that individuals in such groups worry that seeking help would reveal their perceived lack of competence, and this withdrawn silence is associated with reduced help-seeking, which participants report as hindering learning, collaboration, and career growth. Furthermore, this tendency is negatively correlated with capabilities such as assertiveness and negotiation skills, a conclusion supported by Babcock and Laschever's 2003 study. This pattern also obstructs the development of personal influence, and individuals report experiences of emotional alienation in interpersonal relationships, as individuals fear exposing their vulnerabilities. This relationship can stretch the bonds with colleagues, mentors, and bosses too thin and with-it social support and a buffer to workplace stress.

2.6.4. Career and Leadership Consequences

The impostor phenomenon relates to career development and leader emergence. Individuals who score high on impostorism are less likely to apply for promotions, accept leadership roles or agree to challenging assignments, the participants explaining this tendency as being due

to a fear of being seen as incompetent or of being publicly ridiculed (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016). This avoidance serves to inhibit career growth and has led to more underrepresented leadership tables, especially among women and minority business professionals (Parkman, 2016; Cokley et al., 2017).

In addition, when experienced in leadership contexts, impostorism can reduce leaders' confidence in their decision-making, increase leader reliance on others' opinions, and amplify leader sensitivity to criticism (Chakrabarti & Finkelstein, 2022). Individual leaders who are prone to impostorism might tend to delegate too much or shun the spotlight, as they are unwilling to use their authority. However, certain studies show that leaders with such tendencies are perceived as being more humble, empathetic, and sensitive to relationships, which may in turn improve team spirit (Owens & Hekman, 2012; Whitman & Shanine, 2012). This once again highlights the ambivalent nature of the connection between impostorism since it can both hinder and help to develop interpersonal strengths.

2.6.5. Organisational Consequences

In organisations, impostor syndrome can cause a number of negative effects at the level of the organisation, such as lower talent retention, inadequate innovation, and a lack of psychological safety. It also causes individuals to doubt their own abilities, so that they are unwilling to put forward ideas or take the lead on projects, thereby weakening the organisation's vitality. If the syndrome is widely present among a team, it can lead to excessive overtime and the development of a culture of silence, which hampers collaboration. The continued presence of these problems is mainly due to three underlying organisational factors: unclear feedback, too much internal competition, and unreasonable performance standards. On the other hand, environments that promote mentoring, inclusion and psychological safety are associated with lower reports of impostor feelings and encouragement of more well-being-friendly performance patterns (Edmondson, 1999; Parkman, 2016).

Existing academic literature consistently holds that the impostor phenomenon is never merely an individual's private internal struggle. Rather, it is a widespread problem within the work environment which has negative effects on people's psychological state, their behaviour, and their interactions with one another. Middle-level women in companies that are operating under strong structural pressures are subjected to greater scrutiny, face gender-based expectations, and have limited professional networks. These effects prevent the development and recognition of their leadership abilities, as a result of which the rate of organisational innovation decreases, and an unhealthy work culture is fostered.

2.7. Research gaps and justification for the study

Although the fields of psychology, education and organisational behaviour have accumulated a large body of research on the impostor phenomenon, a core research gap remains in this field. Most existing research findings focus on three groups, namely students, early-career professionals, and senior managers, while very few studies centre on middle managers,

especially female middle managers. This group faces unique challenges yet is underrepresented in both empirical and conceptual research. The core characteristics of middle management posts include high responsibility paired with limited authority, continuous performance evaluation, and ambiguous role expectations. They are antecedent factors that are associated with higher reports of IP, but these characteristics have never been analysed as an independent research subject.

The first gap in the current field of impostor syndrome research is that existing academic findings have not specifically examined the manifestations of impostorism among the group of female middle managers. Even though neither Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruity theory nor McKinsey's (2023) industry report directly looks at impostor syndrome in this group, both do point out the difficulties which may lead to feelings of impostorism. These are gender-based leadership stereotypes, increased scrutiny, exclusion from informal networks, and obstacles in the leadership pipeline. Female middle managers hold a special position within the organisation, coming between junior employees and senior executives. As a result, they have to show that they are competent, possess good interpersonal skills and have organisational legitimacy, while at the same time having to cope with a lack of sponsorship, support, and access to role models. It is reasonable to assume that such pressures could lead to situations that are conducive to experiencing impostorism, based on the evidence regarding barriers to career progression. Nevertheless, the specific ways in which impostorism manifests among female middle managers have not been thoroughly explored. Because there is no research that combines gender, level of management and organisational context, our understanding of how impostor phenomenon might develop and be experienced within these organisational and structural constraints remains limited.

A second gap is associated with scarce findings on organisational antecedents and structural issues. Individual-level antecedents are widely understood to include personality traits such as perfectionism and self-esteem (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016; Vergauwe et al., 2014). However, we know little about how components of an organisation's culture, leadership behaviours, appraisal systems, or power structures may drive impostorism in women managers. Few apply theories of organisations to their work, and those that do tend to concentrate on the academic or the high-pressure professional services sector (Bourgoin & Harvey, 2018). This leaves the mainstream corporate environments mostly underrepresented.

Lastly, there is no evidence-based interventions that have been empirically evaluated. Although emerging reviews indicate that individual interventions – such as coaching, cognitive reframing and psychoeducation – are the focus of current intervention efforts, there are few examples of how structural and cultural changes are being dealt with (Para et al., 2024). This imbalance is also a problem since impostorism might not be just individual psychological issue. It has been suggested that impostor feelings can be influenced by wider social experiences, such as perceived discrimination and marginalisation (Cokley et al., 2017). It is therefore important to take into account the way systemic organisational factors may contribute to impostor experiences. For women in middle management, who typically encounter greater pressures

together with limited institutional support, there is still a lack of organisationally based strategies. Therefore, this study aims to answer the research question:

What organisational approaches discussed in the literature can be used to address impostorism in female middle managers?

With these limitations in mind, an integrative review of women in middle management is timely and relevant. Consolidating this dispersed evidence will help communicate how impostorism functions in organisations, learn what organisational conditions make it worse or better and assess existing interventions. As such this study contributes to theoretical insights, fills an important gap in empirical knowledge, and supports the development of evidence-based organisational practices designed to enhance well-being, retention, and leadership advancement of women in middle management roles.

3. Methodology

3.1. Methodological approach

This dissertation uses the integrative review methodology, which is a rigorous design that has been developed to synthesise knowledge from different empirical and theoretical studies to achieve new insights on complete phenomena. Integrative reviews can diverge from a systematic review in the inclusion of empirical and non-empirical literature due to their nature of including diverse types of studies such as quantitative or mixed-methods and theoretical/concept articles. Such flexibility is important for the study of impostorism, which is a construct that crosses psychological, gender, leadership, and organisational level domains.

The integrative review is especially suitable for this study for three reasons. First, the literature on impostorism is conceptually divided, marked by different definitions and dimensions such as impostor thoughts, impostor feelings and impostorism. An integrative review facilitates the assimilation of these threads into a logical conceptual framework. Second, empirical work that takes women in middle management roles as a specific point of analysis is thinly spread across academic disciplines and the knowledge stream, thus necessitating an approach capable of capturing diverse perspectives. Third, the purpose of this dissertation is not only to summarise current knowledge but also to generate an applied multi-level framework for corporate targeting strategies, and such a research contribution fits well with the generative function of integrative reviews.

The review adopts a PRISMA-informed approach to enhance transparency in the reporting of the literature search and study selection process Specifically, PRISMA principles were applied to document database searching, record identification, duplicate removal, screening decisions, eligibility assessment, and the final inclusion of studies, as illustrated through a PRISMA-style flow diagram presented in Appendix A. However, this dissertation does not claim full adherence to PRISMA standards for systematic reviews. As an integrative review, its purpose is to synthesise a broad and conceptually diverse body of evidence, including empirical, theoretical, and conceptual literature. Consequently, several PRISMA elements associated with systematic review methodology were not applied, including restrictions to narrowly defined study designs, formal risk-of-bias assessment procedures, exhaustive coverage requirements, and quantitative evidence synthesis. Instead, study selection emphasised conceptual relevance, methodological rigour and thematic contribution to the research objectives that are consistent with established integrative review methodology.

3.2. Research design

3.2.1. Search Approach and Sources Consulted

To cover additional interdisciplinary research sources, searches were completed of the following major academic databases indexing materials from psychology, management, leadership, gender, and organisational behaviour:

- Scopus
- Web of Science Core Collection
- PsycINFO (APA)
- Google Scholar (additional search for grey literature, working papers and recent publications that have not been indexed)

This study adopted an iterative search during the scoping phase to refine the relevant keywords and concepts. When conceptual saturation had been reached, the search strategy was then decided upon and carried out over all databases. The searches were completed on June 5th, 2026, and covered publications from 1978 to 2026. Search expansion decisions included the addition of organisational culture, psychological safety, leadership development, and workplace interventions. No further changes to the search strategy were made after the title and abstract screening had begun.

3.2.2. Search terms

A search strategy based on a structured approach was created in order to find out about impostorism among women in managerial situations and the organisational factors that affect these experiences. After carrying out an initial scoping phase, the search terms were adjusted and finally decided upon before the formal screening process started.

This final search strategy combined four concept blocks: impostorism, gender, managerial roles, and organisational context. The core Boolean search string was:

(“impostor phenomenon” OR “impostor syndrome” OR “impostorism”)
AND
(women OR woman OR female OR “female manager*” OR “female leader*” OR gender)
AND
(“middle manager*” OR “mid-level manager” OR “middle leadership” OR manager* OR leader*)
AND
(“organisational culture” OR “organizational culture” OR “leadership development” OR “workplace development” OR “workplace intervention” OR “psychological safety”)

The search strategy was adapted to the syntax requirements of each database. Search were performed within the title, abstract and keywords fields where database functionality permitted.

Field restrictions, filters, and execution dates are given in Appendix B to ensure transparency and reproducibility.

The search focused on journals published in English and included all publications from 1978 to 2026. The start date was selected because the impostor phenomenon was first introduced in the academic literature in 1978. No limitations were placed on the study designs, so that qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, conceptual, theoretical and review literature could be included.

For Google Scholar, the same core search concepts were applied using simplified search expressions. Given the large volume of results returned by Google Scholar, screening was restricted to the first results ranked by relevance for each search query. Additional records were identified through backward and forward citation tracking of relevant studies. All Google Scholar searches were completed on June 5th, 2026.

3.2.3. Literature Identification and Screening

This study adheres to the requirements of integrative review methodology and sets broad literature inclusion parameters, which are included below:

Inclusion parameters

- Addressed impostorism, impostor phenomenon or related constructs.
- Were published in English.
- Included works and papers published between 1978 and 2026.
- Examined women's experiences in managerial or leadership contexts.
- Explored organisational, structural, or cultural factors.
- Contributed conceptual, theoretical, or empirical insights.
- Were published in peer-reviewed journals or high-quality academic outlets.

Definition of high-quality academic outlets and grey literature eligibility

For this review, peer-reviewed journals that are included in Scopus, the Web of Science Core Collection or PsycINFO were regarded as high-quality academic publications. Moreover, certain grey literature could be accepted if it offered relevant conceptual, theoretical, or emerging empirical insights which were not yet broadly available in the peer-reviewed literature. The grey literature that was considered eligible was restricted to:

- SSRN and similar academic working papers written by researchers who are affiliated with recognised higher education institutions or research organisations.
- Reports issued by well-established professional, governmental, or international organisations.
- Postgraduate dissertations or capstone projects carried out at accredited universities.

Grey literature was not treated as equivalent to peer-reviewed studies but rather was mainly used for the purpose of identifying emerging themes, theoretical developments, workplace

interventions, and current organisational practices which are relevant to impostorism among women in management. In order to maintain a high standard, all grey literature sources were evaluated using four criteria: whether the authorship and institutional affiliation could be identified; whether the methodology and evidence base were transparent; whether sources were relevant to the review's objectives; and whether they were consistent with the findings from peer-reviewed academic literature. Those sources that did not meet these criteria were excluded.

Exclusion criteria

- Focused exclusively on student populations without organisational relevance.
- Examined impostorism solely as a clinical or diagnostic construct.
- Were published without accessible full text.
- Were solely opinion, non-scholarly essays, or mass media without academic bases.
- Lacked relevance to gender, organisational context, or managerial experience.

This study did not impose any restriction on the methodology of the included literature, which allowed qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, conceptual and theoretical works to be included.

3.2.4. Article selection process

The process of selection was based on a structured, multi-staged approach. A PRISMA-style flow diagram is provided in Appendix A.

1. **Initial search and export**
   1046 records were identified through database searches, and an additional 128 records were identified through Google Scholar and grey literature. They were later exported to reference management software (Zotero). 214 duplicates were removed.

2. **Title and abstract screening**
   The titles and abstracts among retrieved articles were then reviewed for inclusion/exclusion criteria. 731 studies were excluded that were undoubtedly beyond the needed scope (e.g., student samples, clinical focus, lack of organisational context).

3. **Full-text screening**
   Articles were filtered to include relevance to impostorism, gender and manager context. At this stage, 157 full texts were excluded.

4. **Quality appraisal**
   While integrative reviews permit methodological heterogeneity, all the studies were also assessed for conceptual clarity and methodological rigour as well as relevance to the review.

5. **Backward and forward citation tracking**

Reference lists in included studies were reviewed for further sources. Citation tracking in Google Scholar also revealed more recent papers referencing reference texts. An additional 20 eligible studies were identified through citation tracking.

6. **Final dataset**
   A total of 92 studies were included in the integrative review. The last group of articles was a well-balanced combination of empirical papers, conceptual works and reviews related to research purposes.

3.2.5. Article quality appraisal

While integrative reviews permit the inclusion of methodologically diverse sources, all full-text studies were subjected to a structured quality appraisal before inclusion in the final synthesis. The appraisal was conducted by the author using a standardised assessment framework adapted from integrative review guidance and designed to accommodate empirical, conceptual and review literature. Each study was evaluated against four criteria:

- Conceptual clarity (clear definition and application of impostorism or related constructs).
- Methodological rigour (appropriateness and transparency of research design, methods, and analysis).
- Relevance to the review objectives (direct contribution to understanding impostorism among women in managerial or organisational contexts).
- Credibility of evidence (adequacy of supporting evidence, argumentation, and reporting)'

Evaluations of the studies were made on each criterion by means of a three-point scale (1 indicating a low level, 2 a moderate level and 3 a high level). After this, an overall judgement was given. Those studies which obtained mainly low ratings on the various criteria were excluded from the review, while those showing moderate or high quality and adequate relevance were kept.

The results of the quality appraisal were stated in the form of inclusion or exclusion decisions. Any studies which were found to have insufficient conceptual clarity, inadequate methodological transparency, or a lack of relevance to the research objectives were excluded. It was therefore because of this that the final sample consisted of those studies which had been judged to have adequate methodological quality and relevance and were therefore included in the synthesis.

The appraisal of the quality influenced the synthesis since it gave more interpretive weight to the results of studies that showed stronger methodological rigor and more solid conceptual bases. Although studies rated as having moderate quality were included in order to obtain a variety of different viewpoints and to identify emerging themes, their findings were interpreted with caution and taken together with those from higher-quality studies. Thus, the

review's credibility was improved without losing the range of evidence which is typical of the integrative review methodology.

3.2.6. Data extraction

This study focused on extracting information related to concepts, background, and organisational associations. The following information was extracted for each study:

- Bibliographic details (author, year, journal)
- Type of study (qualitative, quantitative, conceptual, review)
- Characteristics of the samples
- Definitions and conceptualisations of impostorism
- Antecedents and contextual triggers
- Organisational, structural, and cultural mechanisms
- Gendered dynamics and intersectional factors
- Implications for middle managers
- Proposed interventions or organisational practices

The literature integration method used in this study covers the rich diversity of existing literature.

3.2.7. Thematic analysis

The collected data were analysed thematically according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step methodological procedure:

1. **Familiarisation**
   All selected articles were read at least twice to achieve comprehensive knowledge of the studies.

2. **Initial coding**
   Codes were developed inductively to represent recurring ideas, e.g. gendered expectations, role ambiguity, leadership identity, coping behaviours, or organisational culture.

3. **Theme development**
   Codes were then clustered into preliminary themes, representing patterns between studies.

4. **Theme review**
   Themes were developed to reflect internal homogeneity and uniqueness. Similar issues were combined or reordered.

5. **Theme definition and naming**
   A precise conceptualisation of each construct was made and corresponded to the research questions.

6. **Synthesis and integration**
   The themes were synthesised into a narrative account that knits together antecedents, experiences, and mitigation initiatives to create an applied organisational framework.

The integrative analysis adopted in this study can integrate diverse types of heterogeneous research evidence and develop a comprehensive, multi-level understanding of impostor syndrome within this context.

4. Organisational mechanisms emerging from literature

4.1. Relational and Sponsorship Mechanisms

Relational mechanisms such as mentoring, sponsorship, role modelling and access to networks are continually discussed in the literature as potential organisational strategies that are potentially relevant to impostorism among female managers. However, most evidence reflects associations or reported perceptions rather than evaluated intervention outcomes. These mechanisms are important as the impostor phenomenon tends to arise in environments that lack organisational recognition, informal access to knowledge acquisition, and visible support. Ibarra (1993) and Ely et al. (2011) found that women are excessively excluded from access to relevant resources. Meanwhile, Dasgupta (2011) and Parkman (2016) noted that relational support is associated with lower reported impostor feelings as it can reduce stereotype threat and provide identity affirmation. This chapter synthesises existing research on relational interventions and sponsorship mechanisms with a focus on alleviating impostor syndrome among female middle managers. A separate subsection is also included to examine the unique cultural significance of male sponsorship in low-egalitarian cultures.

4.1.1. Mentoring Mechanisms

Mentoring has been well-recognised in academic research as a crucial developmental relational intervention in organisational settings that supports employees' psychological and career growth. Kram's (1988) seminal framework draws a distinction between two core functions: career development intervention, which includes sponsorship, exposure, and coaching; and psychosocial intervention, which incorporates emotional support, role modelling, and identity affirmation. For women who experience impostorism, the psychosocial dimension is shown to be especially relevant as it addresses the internalised doubts and identity threats that define impostor feelings (Parkman, 2016). Mentors help women reinterpret evaluative feedback, normalise uncertainty during role transitions, and develop cognitive resilience — elements that distinguish mentoring from more structurally oriented interventions.

Mentoring as a type of organisational intervention operates across multiple levels. At the individual level, it enhances the self-efficacy, sense of belonging and perceived legitimacy of mentees. At the interpersonal level, mentoring provides women with supportive developmental conversations and reflective guidance rather than direct access to influential networks — a function addressed more fully in sponsorship and network mechanisms. At the organisational level, it is embedded into leadership development systems and diversity initiatives, acting as a compensation mechanism for gendered structural barriers. Well-established theoretical frameworks suggest possible mechanisms through which mentorship may support female middle managers. Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1986) posits that observing female mentors' behaviours can reduce workplace uncertainty and strengthen

mentees' leadership identities. Drawing on Eagly and Karau's (2002) Role Consistency Theory, existing research notes that female mentors can alleviate perceived conflicts between gendered temperament and leadership. Identity Work Theory (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010) and Stereotype Threat Theory (Steele, 1997) explain mentorship's role in supporting professional identity construction and mitigating stress related to stereotypes. Meanwhile, Social Capital Theory (Coleman, 1988) further corroborates that mentorship acts as a channel for women to access core resources and buffer the effects of impostorism.

Numerous studies in organisational behaviour suggest that mentoring may provide relevant psychosocial and career support for women in managerial positions. However, the evidence base varies in its direct relevance to impostorism and to female middle managers specifically. Ragins in 2011 and Higgins and Kram in 2001 show the wider benefits of mentoring, such as improved career development, access to organisational knowledge, and receipt of professional support. While these findings offer indirect evidence of the possible value of mentoring in dealing with the factors linked to impostorism, they do not directly assess any reduction in feelings of impostorism. Still more direct evidence is provided by studies like Dennehy and Dasgupta (2017), which showed that women who were mentored by female role models experienced less self-doubt and had greater professional confidence. Although this research was not carried out among female middle managers, it does indicate a possible psychological mechanism by which mentoring could help in reducing impostor-related experiences. Theoretical support for this point is also given by Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruity theory, a theory which enables an explanation of the ways in which mentors can help women in dealing with the gendered organisational expectations and leadership norms. According to this view, mentors can provide validation, guidance, and support relating to identity that may alleviate some of the social and psychological conditions linked to impostorism. Even though most of the studies carried out so far have concentrated on students, early-career professionals, or women as a group rather than on female middle managers in themselves, recent research (O'Neil et al., 2007; Buse et al., 2013; Atewologun & Sealy, 2014; Para et al., 2024) indicates that mentoring schemes might be especially appropriate for women in middle-management positions since these individuals usually face role ambiguity, performance pressures, and leadership difficulties at this stage in their careers. Yet the current evidence is still mostly correlational and does not prove a direct causal effect of mentoring on decreases in impostorism.

While mentorship offers a range of benefits, research shows that this measure alone is insufficient to eliminate impostorism in the workplace. Ibarra (1993) found that in male-dominated settings, women are far less likely to be selected by senior leaders under informal mentorship systems. O'Meara et al. (2020) note that the small number of senior female mentors are overburdened by the "minority tax", leaving them unable to take on excessive mentorship workloads. Furthermore, mentorship cannot provide the visibility and access to power required to reduce impostor syndrome, as these critical factors are far more closely tied to sponsorship. Therefore, complementary relational mechanisms must be adopted to supplement mentorship efforts.

4.1.2. Sponsorship Mechanisms

The core characteristics of workplace sponsorship are fundamentally distinct from those of mentoring. As defined by Hewlett (2013), mentors only provide guidance and support while sponsors use their organisational influence to secure opportunities for the individuals they back and publicly advocate for them. At its core, sponsorship is a power transfer mechanism. Sponsorship is theorised to address two core pain points that exacerbate impostor syndrome: lack of external recognition and difficulty gaining entry to core professional networks.

The mechanism for workplace sponsorship functions at various levels within an organisation. On an individual level, it gives women external recognition, combats the self-criticism they have internalised, and enables them to confirm the validity of their own achievements. At an interpersonal level, it uses the relationships with sponsors to help women obtain political capital, strategic information and the promotion routes which are controlled by senior leaders. At the structural level, it breaks through homogeneous talent pipelines to enable women to enter elite decision-making circles. The supportive role of workplace sponsorship in women's career development can be jointly validated by four classic theories from organisational behaviour and social psychology. Social Capital Theory (Coleman, 1988) defines this sponsorship as a channel through which women can access high-value resources, countering the resource deprivation imposed by gendered structures. Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) posits that sponsors' public endorsement can resolve perceived conflicts surrounding women's leadership identities. Identity Construction Theory (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) helps women build a coherent leader identity, while Attribution Theory (Martinko et al., 2007) mitigates the cognitive distortions linked to impostor syndrome.

The academic community holds that workplace sponsorship is strongly associated with women's career advancement. Ibarra, Carter, and Silva (2010) found that women with sponsors are more likely to secure promotions, high-impact tasks, and exposure to leadership pathways. Women at mid-level positions are the group most severely impacted by impostor syndrome, and the worsening of this condition stems from internalised self-criticism. A 2020 study by Feenstra et al., proposes that sponsorship from senior leaders can serve as an effective intervention, based on participants' perceptions of increased recognition and opportunities, though its effectiveness in reducing impostorism has not been empirically established. Public endorsement from senior leaders can resolve cognitive dissonance while also providing opportunities to verify one's capabilities through leading strategic projects and representing the organisation to external stakeholders. Bravata et al. (2020) added that sponsorship can boost employees perceived organisational support, an indicator that is negatively correlated with impostor feelings. Sponsorship can also help middle managers navigate organisational politics and gain recognition from senior leaders, the exact context in which this group is prone to developing impostorism.

However, gendered homophily in leadership networks as well as the tendency of senior male leaders to prefer sponsoring similar people to them creates barriers to women's access to sponsorship (Ibarra, 1993). Additionally, single sponsorship can generate feelings

of dependency and limit women's autonomy. The lack of formal sponsorship systems may also contribute to the continuation of existing inequalities in access to important networks and career opportunities. As a result, organisations should introduce clear and structured sponsorship procedures in order to provide wider access to developmental relationships and lessen the stigma linked with cross-gender sponsorship.

4.1.3. Male Sponsorship in Low-Egalitarian Cultures

In low-egalitarian cultures, male sponsorship carries symbolic authority because organisational gatekeeping is concentrated among men. This cultural dynamic makes male endorsement not only a career accelerator but also a mechanism for challenging entrenched gender norms — a function not present in sponsorship systems in more egalitarian contexts. According to a 2004 study by House et al., organisational power is concentrated among men and core professional networks are controlled by male gatekeepers in low-egalitarian cultures. For women to advance in their careers, they must receive endorsement from high-status men who can secure development opportunities for them. The external validation generated by this endorsement is perceived as counteracting women's internalised self-doubt and breaking the entrenched narrative that "women lack sufficient competence."

Recent empirical studies have reached a core consensus that in contexts of low gender equality dominated by patriarchy or collectivism, male sponsors are perceived as crucial for women's career advancement due to men's gatekeeping roles. Research by Bano and Nadeem (2024) shows that three types of actions taken by male leaders can expand women's access to essential work tasks and are reported to be associated with lower gender-related stress. These actions are speaking up for women, providing them with opportunities for professional exposure and challenging stereotypes about women's work abilities. Middle female managers who face role ambiguity, work under high-intensity supervision and are prone to impostor syndrome are the group discussed in the literature that needs this type of support most urgently.

Although male workplace sponsorship is often regarded as a pathway to support women's career development, this practice is not without challenges in cultural contexts characterised by low gender equality. Sponsorship relationships that are cross-gender can be limited by gender stereotypes, power imbalances and worries regarding how these kinds of relationships are seen within organisations. Studies on sponsorship show that having access to influential sponsors is a keyway in which women are able to achieve visibility, obtain development opportunities and improve their chances of advancement – especially in situations where senior leadership roles are still predominantly held by men. At the same time, the effectiveness of sponsorship is determined by the organisation's norms and by how well developmental relationships are supported through clear and inclusive institutional practices. It follows that male sponsorship can be seen as an important yet context-dependent means of helping women deal with the structural obstacles they face in their careers. Although existing research indicates that such support can boost women's professional confidence and enhance their opportunities for advancement, direct evidence showing that male sponsorship leads

to a reduction in impostorism is still scarce and needs to be the subject of further empirical research.

4.1.4. Role Models and Representation

The existing literature suggests that female role models can alleviate the impostorism experienced by women in management and leadership positions. The leadership prototype implicit in most organisations is currently tied to inherent masculinity. The visibility of successful female leaders can alter gendered assumptions about competence, and exposure to relatable female role models is associated with reduced internalised self-doubt among this group of women. This line of reasoning aligns with role congruity theory and echoes the research conclusions put forward by Ely et al. in 2011.

The role model intervention is discussed as potentially influencing multiple hierarchical levels of the organisation. At the individual level, it can reduce women's self-doubt and enhance their leadership self-efficacy, and at the interpersonal level, it provides behavioural scripts to support women in navigating male-dominated workplace environments. At the organisational level, it breaks the masculine leadership prototype and sends signals that the organisation values women's leadership. Finally, at the structural level, it challenges implicit biases related to job suitability and drives the transformation of organisational norms. The effectiveness of female leader role models can be underpinned by multiple classical theoretical mechanisms. Bandura's (1986) Social Learning Theory provides women with behavioural templates to navigate leadership challenges, while Eagly and Karau's (2002) Role Congruity Theory mitigates identity threat triggered by stereotypes. The Identity Work Theory put forward by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) and Ibarra et al. (2010) support women in constructing their "possible selves". Finally, Calvard's (2018) research on sense of belonging relieves the psychological stress of feeling like an outsider.

Workplace role models are associated with reduced self-doubt and enhanced leadership self-efficacy, which may suggest a potential buffering mechanism to address impostorism among female middle managers. Forson et al. (2025) demonstrate that female role models moderate the relationship between impostor feelings and women's career expectations, thus helping women reinterpret self-doubt and maintain engagement in organisational contexts where identity threat is silent. Ibarra and Petriglieri (2016) add that women can leverage role models to construct "possible selves" and expand their perceptions of the accessibility of leadership. Similarly, Sealy and Singh (2010) verified that most senior women in male-dominated environments view role models as a core factor shaping their career decisions. Atewologun and Sealy (2014) reported that role models are reported by female minority managers as helpful for coping with stress from their intersecting identities. Derks et al. (2016) discuss the queen bee phenomenon as response to organisational discrimination and gender-based identity threat, highlighting the importance of organisational contexts and social identity processes in shaping women's experiences at work. This point offers a theoretical basis for explaining why supportive role models and inclusive environments might be valuable to women who are experiencing identity-related difficulties. Similarly, Calvard (2018) in a conceptual way

connects impostor feelings with issues of belonging, identity, and workplace inclusion, proposing that social cues and relationships which affirm one's identity can affect the way people understand and react to self-doubt. Women may find it easier to picture leadership as something they can achieve when they see other people who have the same gender identity succeeding, a benefit which could be especially significant for female managers at a middle stage in settings that have unclear power structures and a high level of regulatory demands.

However, relying solely on role model representation is far from sufficient. Without ties to mentorship programmes, sponsorship schemes or informal developmental interactions, role models only remain empty symbols. In addition, the creation of elite role models that are unattainable increases feelings of impostorism amongst middle managers and employees. Lastly, concentrating only on superficial representation rather than promoting institutional change results in a misleading impression of progress. Existing literature strongly argues that organisations must combine role model representation with structural supports that enable women to engage in deep, interactive development.

4.1.5. Access to Formal and Informal Networks

Accessing both formal and informal social networks within an organisation comprises a structural and relational intervention and is the core mechanism shaping the trajectory of women's career development and their experiences of impostor syndrome. For female middle managers, exclusion from core informal networks is associated with heightened impostor feelings through marginalisation, restricted access to information and insufficient visibility of their leadership.

The network-based workplace gender intervention can be implemented and advanced across four types of organisational levels. At the individual level, the measure enhances women's self-efficacy and perceived legitimacy through information provision and peer recognition. At the interpersonal level, they support the building of connections with senior executives and peers to gain tacit knowledge and navigate organisational politics. At the organisational level, they rely on women's professional associations and employee resource groups to build internal communities and accumulate social capital. Meanwhile, at the structural level, they dismantle exclusive informal networks and facilitate women's access to the core resource distribution network. Access to professional networks is frequently associated with higher self-efficacy and reduced feelings of marginalisation, factors linked to impostorism among working women, which is underpinned by multiple theoretical mechanisms. Coleman's (1988) Social Capital Theory buffers self-doubt by relying on network resources, while Bandura's (1986) Social Learning Theory reduces uncertainty through role models within networks. Eagly and Karau's (2002) Role Congruity Theory resolves identity misplacement through inclusion in network systems, and Ibarra and Petriglieri's (2010) Identity Work Theory supports the construction of professional identities.

Evidence from multinational corporations in South Korea shows that even when firms implement formal gender equality policies, the local informal *yongo* network system still erects

structural barriers that hinder women's job participation and career promotion. Horak and Suseno (2022) note that these gendered networks are reported to restrict women's development while the informal *inmaek* networks built by women have inherent limitations as they lack the political capital held by mainstream male-dominated networks. Research conducted across Western contexts also corroborates this predicament. Ibarra (1993) and Ely et al. (2011) find that women excluded from the "old boys' club" not only lose access to sponsorship, strategic information, and high-visibility work tasks. They also internalise doubts about their own professional legitimacy, which women report as contributing to feelings of impostor syndrome. Grimme et al. (2026) show that formal female networks can increase social support, expand network density and facilitate the accumulation of social capital. However, these gains rarely translate into access to influential organisational actors or strategic career opportunities. This underscores the persistent limitations of women's social capital in gendered organisational systems.

As channels for the transmission of social capital, the resources carried by these networks are unevenly distributed in gender-differentiated organisational structures. Horak and Suseno (2022) point out that informal networks built on personal ties often function as gatekeeping mechanisms that exclude women, leaving them without access to tacit knowledge, insufficiently exposed to senior organisational leaders and with intensified feelings of marginalisation which worsens their impostor-related experiences. While existing formal workplace social networks can provide a certain level of support to female middle managers, they impose limits on women's professional authority. Meanwhile, women-exclusive networks entrench fixed identities, consume additional energy, and squeeze the space available for women's career development. Existing literature suggests that organisations need to dismantle informal exclusionary mechanisms and expand channels for women to access influential mixed-gender networks.

4.1.6. Visibility Mechanisms

Visibility mechanisms differ from role models by centring women's own public performance rather than observation of others. Visibility enables women to show their competence in real time, get feedback about their performance, and develop their leadership identity by putting themselves into practice. It is believed that visibility mechanisms—such as being given important tasks, receiving public recognition, having opportunities to speak, and taking part in strategic committees—have an impact on leadership identity and may be linked to reduced impostor feelings, although the empirical evidence mainly shows only associations rather than the results of interventions that have been tested. Nevertheless, in organisational settings where the typical image of a leader includes masculine characteristics, women face what is known as the visibility paradox: although they attract a great deal of attention because they represent their gender group, they have difficulty in securing substantial development opportunities, which in turn increases their self-doubt and worsens their impostor feelings (Brescoll, 2011).

Visibility can function across multiple hierarchical levels of an organisation to support women managers in the workplace and advance gender equality. At the individual level, through

enhancing the visibility of strategic work to eliminate self-doubt. Then, at the interpersonal level, by gaining recognition from senior leaders to accumulate capital and secure executive sponsorship. At the organisational level, it highlights contributions in public forums to dismantle gender-based assumptions, while at the structural level, it integrates the framework into organisational talent systems to break exclusionary practices. Visibility can mitigate female leaders' impostor syndrome through multiple mechanisms. Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) notes that public demonstrations of competence can dismantle the stereotype that "women are unfit for leadership", while Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1986) holds that visible engagement in leadership not only sets an example for others but also reinforces one's own leadership identity. Identity Work Theory (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010) shows that visibility supports women to refine their leadership identities through practical feedback. Finally, Calvard's 2018 empirical study confirms that visibility can strengthen a sense of organisational integration and reduce the psychological stress tied to impostorism.

The academic community generally suggests that workplace visibility is strongly associated with an individual's career advancement. Studies conducted by Ely et al. in 2011 and by Ibarra in 1993, respectively, corroborate this logic from dimensions of internal psychology and external resources. Women who are in middle-management roles and who encounter unclear job authority as well as a high degree of workplace scrutiny tend to need to depend more on being visible in order to combat the negative self-evaluations they have about their own abilities and to gain opportunities for career advancement. Earlier empirical studies have divided workplace visibility into two main dimensions: relational and structural. An analysis by Acker (2006) shows that visibility within managerial hierarchies strengthens female leaders' perceived legitimacy and reduces the psychological burden stemming from stereotypes. These findings align with the conclusions of Calvard (2018), which demonstrate that visibility is associated with a stronger sense of belonging and reduces identity threat - two mechanisms that are associated with impostorism.

In workplace environments, merely increasing the visibility of female middle managers without matching supporting measures is reported to coincide with greater impostor feelings when unsupported. A 2016 study by Rosette et al. points out that in male-dominated environments, tokenised identity generates performance pressure. Moreover, visibility that lacks support of mentoring, sponsorship, and inclusive leadership leaves women vulnerable to criticism while cutting them off from the resources needed to succeed. Finally, symbolic measures that rely solely on public recognition foster negative perceptions of performative inclusion and require women to take on additional representative labour, including serving on diversity committees and speaking out on gender issues. Only when visibility is paired with mentorship programmes, sponsorship systems, and peer support, and embedded in an inclusive culture, can these women internalise their leadership legitimacy and smoothly achieve career promotion.

This review synthesises a wide range of prior research to argue that to alleviate impostorism among mid-level female managers, organisational intervention programmes must cover three core domains: relational support, structural support, and identity support. Drawing on existing

literature, five recurrently discussed mechanisms can be extracted: mentorship programmes, sponsorship schemes, role modelling, structured visibility mechanisms, and access to formal and informal networks. The main strength of these measures lies in the fact that they at the same time address both the psychological factors which lead to impostor feelings and the organisational conditions that keep this phenomenon going. The relevant literature confirms the value of relational mechanisms and adds to the fundamental argument already found in current research, namely that impostorism is strengthened by complex exclusionary structures, and therefore it is necessary to combine relational support with specific structural changes in order to break down the informal gatekeeper networks and ensure that visibility is incorporated into inclusive leadership systems. Only an integrated, coordinated strategy represents the solution that is consistent with available literature.

4.2. Management and Evaluation Practices

Organisations' management and evaluation practices are frequently associated with impostorism among women in middle management positions. The impostor phenomenon is not simply an internal cognitive bias based on individual psychology since it is also deeply present in organizational settings. A study carried out by Gullifor et al. in 2023 found that the participants felt more afraid in ambiguous situations, when faced with inconsistent evaluations and in the absence of developmental feedback—an indication of a possible connection with impostor feelings. Female managers who are affected by organizational norms that are gendered and by systematic pressures experience changes in their professional identities, suffer from continuously increasing self-doubt and show clear signs of professional vulnerability. A qualitative study by Garnett and Kinnear (2026) notes that female managers consistently described receiving negative cues throughout their careers, which they associated with stronger impostor feelings. A 2024 study by Para et al. proposes that interventions targeting women's leadership development need to avoid the pitfall of relying solely on individual coping strategies and should support this development with three core management practices: reducing work uncertainty, establishing transparent assessment standards, and cultivating supportive supervisory relationships.

4.2.1. Quality of Feedback

In the field of organisational studies, literature consistently associates high-quality developmental feedback with lower impostor feelings and suggests it may operate as a possible mechanism influencing employees' self-evaluations. This mechanism primarily targets women holding middle management positions, functions at the interpersonal and team leadership levels and is delivered by supervisors to shape employees' perceptions of their own capabilities, work performance, and sense of belonging. The existing literature dispels the perception that high-quality feedback is merely a tool for performance management and redefines it as a relational process capable of shaping employees' cognition. For female middle managers who face heightened scrutiny, gendered expectations and ambiguous authority, feedback quality exerts a significantly greater degree of influence.

A study into the workplace carried out in 2023 by Gullifor and others discovered that indistinct, excessively critical, and inconsistent negative feedback can worsen impostor feelings, while structured and behaviour-focused feedback is thought to reduce the cognitive biases associated with impostorism. Developmental feedback, which has both cognitive guidance and behavioural orientation and is grounded in the Cognitive Theory of Bandura (1986), can eliminate cognitive ambiguity and break the link between self-doubt and impostor syndrome using external cues. If the cues are vague and conflicting, people who have a tendency towards impostorism tend to make negative attributions about themselves (Harvey & Katz, 1985). In a comparable way, the Attribution Theory (Martinko et al., 2007) states that these individuals downplay positive feedback and accept negative cues, implying that the way in which feedback is presented is important. The theoretical mechanism through which feedback inhibits impostorism intersects with the development of identity-based leadership. It is said that high-quality feedback serves to provide external validation, and this can help in the development of a clear leadership identity and in overcoming internalised beliefs of inadequacy. This effect is especially significant for female middle managers who have to meet conflicting expectations with regard to competence, warmth, and authority.

Most mainstream feedback interventions in the current human resources field are conducted primarily at the supervisor-subordinate level, but their effectiveness is constrained by organisational systems. Establishing three types of optimisation conditions, such as transparent performance standards, structured assessment processes and regularly aligned communication, can reduce assessment ambiguity. This exact type of ambiguity is associated with impostor syndrome, which Cokley et al. confirmed in 2017. Furthermore, Garnett and Kinnear (2026) reported that participants frequently experienced ambiguous or inconsistent feedback, which they felt contributed to self-doubt and uncertainty about their leadership capabilities. Although there is existing evidence from intervention studies suggesting that feedback-focused approaches may be beneficial, this evidence mainly shows perceived improvements rather than any definite reduction in impostorism. Para et al.'s 2024 scoping review put forward types of organisational levers that can reduce employees' impostorism, which require addressing self-doubt and normalising learning as core prerequisites to take effect. These interventions are low-cost, scalable and can support the development of women's leadership without major structural adjustments.

Existing research points out that while feedback as an intervention boasts considerable application potential, it still carries limitations that cannot be overlooked. First, its implementation is highly reliant on supervisors' capabilities as inappropriate feedback can intensify individuals' impostor feelings and exacerbate gender bias. Second, a single independent feedback mechanism cannot resolve structural injustice. Only supporting plans that eliminate bias, balance workloads, and clarify promotion paths can guarantee the long-term effects of feedback. Finally, feedback also adds new emotional labour costs for managers, and this burden becomes especially prominent in high-pressure workplace settings.

4.2.2. Clarity and Transparency of Evaluation Criteria

A clear and transparent organisational performance evaluation system is associated with reduced uncertainty and may function as a mechanism influencing impostorism among women in middle management positions. Within an integrative review framework, these practices are defined as a structural-level intervention that influences employees' perceptions of their own capabilities, their identity legitimacy, and their assessments of their career prospects. Unlike interpersonal interventions such as feedback and coaching, this system covers the full process of performance evaluation for all hierarchical levels and can accurately address the three specific circumstances faced by this group, such as ambiguous role expectations, gendered scrutiny, and inconsistent promotion pathways.

In the field of organisational research, the impostor phenomenon tends to develop rapidly in environments marked by ambiguous contexts, opaque expectations, and the adoption of subjective evaluation mechanisms. A systematic review carried out in 2023 by Gullifor et al. states that uncertainty regarding performance standards leads to increased anxiety and contributes to self-doubt. This is also supported by Role Ambiguity Theory (Jackson & Schuler, 1985), which shows that unclear expectations reduce self-efficacy and cause a greater degree of negative self-attribution among people who have impostor tendencies. Performance evaluation criteria that are clear, measurable, and universally applicable and based on the Social-Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) are said to enable employees to adjust their self-assessments and thus help reduce the cognitive distortions associated with impostorism. On the other hand, subjective and relationship-based evaluations, which are common in management positions, create gaps in interpretation. Studies by Correll et al. (2007) and Heilman & Haynes (2007) similarly demonstrate that subjective and ambiguous evaluation practices disproportionately disadvantage women as they reinforce feelings of illegitimacy and heighten the self-doubt associated with impostor-related experiences.

Empirical evidence proposes that transparent and structured organisational evaluation systems are perceived as fairer and may reduce conditions associated with impostorism, though direct intervention effects remain underexplored. The 2026 qualitative study of female leaders by Garnett and Kinnear found that unclear promotion expectations in male-dominated manufacturing environments were described by participants as contributing to impostor-related thoughts. The studies carried out by Aguinis et al. (2011) and Shore et al. (2010) point out that competency-based scoring rubrics, behaviour benchmarks and standardised rating scales are able to cut down on bias and improve the feeling of fairness. Furthermore, Para et al.'s 2024 review clearly states that this kind of organisational change should act as a necessary complement to interventions at the individual level. Effective results can be achieved through the use of clear organisational evaluation criteria provided that these are co-ordinated with other measures. When combined with high-quality feedback, they help employees accurately interpret development guidance and reduce misinterpretation of constructive criticism. Similarly, they support leadership development programmes, build a stable framework for female managers, clarify job requirements, and enable these managers to track their own progress.

Although the transparent performance evaluation system has many widely recognised practical advantages, it still carries a host of core limitations that require trade-offs. Organisations must invest resources to train evaluators and ensure uniform standards across departments. The system's rigidity restricts management autonomy, and deeply rooted biases only expose inequity rather than enable improvements to unfair conditions. What is more, employees with a high impostor tendency are likely to misinterpret evaluation standards and other supporting interventions are needed to remedy these overall shortcomings.

4.2.3. Recognition Practices

Recognition practices are frequently described as mechanisms that may influence impostor feelings by shaping employees' interpretations of their contributions. Such practices are defined as dual-level interventions operating at the interpersonal and organisational cultural levels which shape how employees interpret their own contributions, value, and legitimacy. Distinct from visibility mechanisms that focus on public exposure and strategic positioning, these practices are reported to counteract the internalised deficit narratives created by the predicaments this group faces and stabilise their professional mindsets.

Bandura's 1986 Social Cognitive Theory proposes that individuals calibrate their self-efficacy using external cues, and the consistent evidence of personal competence provided by ongoing recognition can offset the negative self-attribution linked to impostorism. Deci and Ryan's 2000 Self-Determination Theory points out that affirmation of competence is a core psychological need, and recognition can strengthen employees' sense of mastery to meet this need. The organisational justice framework developed by Colquitt et al. in 2001 demonstrates that recognition can enhance individuals' sense of belonging and reduce the cognitive and emotional stress imposed by organisational evaluation systems. The organisational employee recognition practice system can cover multiple operational levels of an organisation and adapt to the authority and responsibility design of each level to roll out targeted implementation measures. At the supervisory level, advance regular recognition from direct supervisors, while at the team level, set up peer review and recognition programmes. At the organisational level, establish company-wide benchmark awards. The core advantage of this set of recognition interventions is that they can provide tangible support for the development of female leadership.

Existing empirical studies report that workplace recognition practices are associated with reduced self-doubt and improved well-being, which suggests it may play a role in addressing impostor-related experiences. Gabriel et al. (2018) similarly found that explicit recognition from supervisors and colleagues strengthens employees' professional identity and reduces self-doubt. Bravata et al. (2020)'s systematic review notes that organisational support that includes recognition can improve self-esteem. Newman et al. (2017)'s research on workplace well-being confirms that recognition can reduce job burnout, and Correll et al. (2007)'s study demonstrates that structured recognition can offset systematic gender bias in the workplace. Recognition practices within an organisation do not operate in isolation but interact with other mechanisms. They are combined with transparent assessment standards to clarify performance

expectations and are embedded in leadership programmes to strengthen the identity of new leaders.

While the various recognition practices common in workplaces can bring certain positive benefits to organisations, these measures also have many limitations and risks that require careful trade-offs. Generalised praise undermines team trust and exacerbates employees' impostor syndrome. Furthermore, excessively rewarding visible external behaviours undermines the rights and interests of female employees who carry out work that is behind the scenes and focused on relationships. Lastly, a lack of transparency in how things are carried out easily leads to suspicions of favouritism and the fact that relying only on recognition is unable to overcome the structural injustices in the workplace.

4.2.4. Psychologically Safe Supervision and Supportive Leadership Behaviours

Psychological safety oversight and supportive leadership are associated with lower impostor-related stress and are theorised to influence how individuals interpret interpersonal risk. Under an integrative framework, these mechanisms are categorised as relational interventions that operate at the interpersonal and team levels. These interventions are embedded in organisational cultures that shape how individuals interpret risk, feelings of vulnerability and sense of belonging, which separates them from structural interventions centred on assessment systems. These mechanisms rely on the daily, dynamic functioning of leaders' practices such as modelling openness, validating employees' concerns, and creating safe spaces for expression.

The classic team psychological safety model proposed by Edmondson (1999) states that when individuals perceive their interpersonal environment as free of threats, they are more willing to engage in behaviours such as learning, seeking help, and admitting mistakes. For the impostor-prone group who are extremely sensitive to negative evaluations and the exposure of their true identity, three types of supportive leadership behaviours - empathy, active listening and constructive guidance – are reported to reduce perceived interpersonal risks tied to their uncertainty about being exposed and weaken the cognitive patterns that sustain their impostorism. The Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) states that supervisors can enhance employees' self-efficacy and offset the self-doubt tied to impostorism through three key behaviours such as normalising learning, acknowledging their own fallibility and framing challenges as development opportunities. The Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory put forward by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) further supplements this framework, noting that high-quality superior-subordinate relationships centred on trust and respect can also buffer this negative mindset.

Existing empirical evidence indicates that psychological safety is linked to lower anxiety and greater help-seeking, which are factors associated with impostorism. However, direct reductions in impostor syndrome have not been conclusively demonstrated. A 2020 systematic review by Bravata et al. shows that this syndrome triggers anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and reduced willingness to seek help and a climate of psychological safety is associated with lower

anxiety and greater help-seeking, factors linked to impostorism. Garnett and Kinnear (2026) observed that participants viewed supportive relationships with supervisors as helping them cope with the emotional strain created by gendered organisational expectations. Meanwhile, Newman et al. (2017) and Frazier et al. (2016) confirm that supportive leadership is associated with lower self-concealment traits tied to impostorism. Existing research proposes three types of organisational-level intervention measures to strengthen psychological safety supervision: leadership development programmes, coaching and inclusive leadership behaviour training. These measures aim to empower managers to master relational skills such as building a climate of trust. Interventions implemented only at the team level are not sufficient to achieve desired effects. Organisations also need to align their internal norms and reward supportive leadership styles rather than punitive or competitive ones.

While psychological safety supervision holds considerable development potential, it still faces many limitations and trade-offs. The establishment of psychological safety is highly context-dependent, and in competitive environments with high workloads and punitive evaluation systems, even supportive supervisors struggle to foster a climate of safety. Second, psychological safety is unevenly distributed. A 2010 study by Shore et al. points out that within the same team, female and ethnic minority employees perceive lower levels of psychological safety due to stereotype threat and differential treatment. Third, practising supportive leadership requires investing a large amount of emotional labour and time, which creates huge implementation barriers for middle managers who are already under high work pressure. Finally, if only relational-level psychological safety interventions are promoted without matching structural reforms to address problems including bias, unfair workload distribution, and ambiguous promotion rules, then their long-term effects will be limited.

4.2.5. Leadership Development and Capability-Building Interventions

A key mechanism for reducing impostorism amongst female middle managers is to provide leadership development and capability-building interventions. These can be described as strategies at two levels, addressing both the individual and the organisation, with the aim of strengthening leadership identity, raising self-efficacy and acquiring the skills needed to cope with complicated situations. Different from feedback and recognition procedures which depend entirely on personal interactions, these interventions are formal and structured and take into account both the psychological and behavioural aspects of leadership ability.

Leadership development is said to have an effect on impostor syndrome, the key mechanism being one that stems from the Social Cognitive Theory put forward by Bandura in 1986; according to this theory, it is the case that mastery experiences, social modelling and cognitive restructuring which influence self-efficacy, and it is on this basis that leadership development programmes make use of structured activities such as simulations, assignments, coaching and reflection in order to help people reorganise their views of their own abilities and get rid of self-doubt. Ibarra et al, (2010) proposed the Identity-Focused Theory, which helps individuals build a stable leadership identity, offset the identity instability that triggers impostor feelings and

alleviate the conflicting expectations women face regarding authority, approachability, and competence.

A substantial body of research suggests that leadership initiatives may provide conditions that help individuals manage challenges associated with self-doubt, although direct evidence regarding their effectiveness in reducing impostor feelings remains limited. Bravata et al. (2020), in a systematic review of the impostor phenomenon literature, noted the scarcity or rigorous intervention studies and highlighted the need for further research on potential treatment and development approaches. In wider body of literature on leadership development, Ely et al. (2011) and Garnett and Kinnear (2026) found that women in leadership positions saw mentorship, peer support, and development networks as useful resources for reflecting on the challenges of leadership and for building their confidence. Likewise, Bozer and Jones (2018) looked at the research into workplace coaching and stated that coaching is linked to variety of positive outcomes such as increased self-awareness, learning and professional development, even though its exact effect on impostor feelings has not been firmly established. Avolio and Hannah (2008) also maintained that leadership development programmes which include peer learning and structured reflection can create supportive learning environments and promote a collective understanding of leadership experiences. Even though these studies do not directly show a reduction in impostor feelings, they do indicate that the leadership development practices in question may enhance the psychological resources and social support systems that are theoretically connected with dealing with impostor-related experiences. Moreover, leadership development interventions are probably most effective when they are part of more extensive organisational support systems; for instance, clear evaluation systems can help to lessen the uncertainty about performance appraisals, and supportive supervision can improve leader-member exchange and support the development of a positive leadership identity.

Even if diverse types of leadership development interventions do deliver some practical benefits to participants, existing literature notes that these measures still carry important limitations and inherent trade-offs. They require substantial organisational investment of funds, time, and management support. Additionally, if participant selection processes favour individuals who already hold advantages, they will entrench class inequality. Moreover, without alignment with broad organisational reforms, they cannot overcome core structural barriers. Finally, they may impose additional pressure on some women to engage in self-correction, while failing to eliminate the root organisational causes that fuel impostorism.

This review of published review and empirical literature suggests that organisational management and evaluation practices are important factors associated with impostor-related experiences among female middle managers. The evidence provided by Gullifor et al. (2023) and Garnett and Kinnear (2026) show that ambiguous working environments, inconsistent assessment procedures, unclear expectations, and a lack of developmental feedback are frequently linked to increased self-doubt, uncertainty and concerns relating to impostor syndrome. The literature further suggests that several organisational practices may help address these conditions. The research carried out by Gullifor et al. (2023), Garnett and Kinnear (2026) and Para et al. (2024) points to the potential benefit of receiving high-quality developmental

feedback and of having less ambiguous assessments. The work examined by Aguinis et al. (2011), Shore et al. (2010), Correll et al. (2007), Heilman and Haynes (2007), and Para et al. (2024) show that transparent and well-structured evaluation systems could lessen the sense of unfairness and uncertainty connected with impostor experiences. The evidence mentioned by Gabriel et al. (2018), Bravata et al. (2020) and Newman et al. (2017) shows that recognition practices are linked to a stronger professional identity, better well-being, and reduced self-doubt. In a similar way, the findings given by Frazier et al. (2016), Newman et al. (2017), Bravata et al. (2020) and Garnett and Kinnear (2026) indicate that psychologically safe and supportive supervisory relationships may assist employees in dealing with the anxiety and interpersonal risks connected with impostorism. Lastly, the studies conducted by Ely et al. (2011), Bozer and Jones (2018), Avolio and Hannah (2008), and Garnett and Kinnear (2026) show that leadership development, coaching, mentoring, and peer-support programmes can enhance self-efficacy, leadership identity, and professional support networks. Overall, the literature implies that it is unlikely that any one intervention will be able to deal with impostorism on its own; instead, comprehensive organisational strategies which combine clear evaluation procedures, developmental support, recognition, psychological safety and leadership development may establish the conditions needed to help reduce the experiences of impostorism among female middle managers.

4.3. Organisational, Structural and Cultural Conditions

Most prior studies frame the impostor phenomenon as an isolated individual cognitive bias, however emerging literature recognises this phenomenon as simultaneously shaped by workplace structures and culture. Current organisational research has led to a growing body of literature linking impostor feelings with systemic injustice in the workplace rather than with deficiencies in individual ability. Female managers, because they are situated at the junction of strategy and operations, come under heavy scrutiny, are subjected to conflicting expectations, and have limited autonomy (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997; Harding et al., 2014). All of which are reported to be linked with stronger impostor feelings. Studies by Eagly and Karau (2002) and Ely and Meyerson (2000) point out that upholding masculine leadership norms punishes women no matter whether they demonstrate agentic behaviour or communal behaviour. This culture also compounds with barriers such as non-transparent promotion pathways, which women describe as contributing to impostor-related experiences. Para et al. (2024) propose shifting to adopt systemic organisational interventions by defining these as context-shaping experiences embedded within organisations, rather than defects rooted in individual personal character.

4.3.1. Workload, Resource Allocation and Role Overload

Organisational conditions such as high work intensity, numerous resource constraints and long-term role overload are consistently associated with stronger impostor feelings among female managers. Middle managers are required to answer to senior leadership while taking charge of rolling out business operations on the ground. This squeezed state is reported to coincide

with greater stress, creating a persistent situation of excessive workload and insufficient resources. This situation is associated with stronger self-doubt, feelings of inadequacy and compensatory overwork (Harding et al., 2014; Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2016; Vergauwe et al., 2014).

From the perspective of organisational interventions, the targets of structural workload interventions are job design, staffing and performance expectations. Sort the three types of meso-level intervention cases as follows: workload audits, systems for the equitable allocation of resources, and pragmatic goal-setting procedures. According to the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory developed by Bakker and Demerouti (2017), problems such as work stress and reduced self-efficacy are caused by a combination of high work demands and inadequate resources. Drawing on Brescoll's (2011) research, middle female managers additionally face gendered expectations to complete emotional labour and maintain workplace relationships, leading to an especially prominent demand-resource imbalance. This theory suggests a possible mechanism through which such interventions may influence these managers' impostor feelings. By increasing resource adequacy to reduce long-term stress, which is described as potentially enhancing perceptions of personal competence and associated with lower cognitive load caused by self-doubt.

Existing empirical studies consistently report an association between workplace workload and impostorism. Hutchins et al. (2017) and Neureiter and Traut-Mattausch (2016) found that high job demand, time pressure and role overload within organisations are associated with stronger impostor feelings, which occur at disproportionately high rates among female leaders and professional groups. Parkman (2016) pointed out that issues faced by middle managers such as understaffing, foster the feeling that one is "never doing enough", a sentiment that aligns with the perfectionist traits of impostorism. Qualitative research, including the study by Clance and Imes in 1978, indicates that women tend to regard structural overload as a personal failure, a situation which the participants said reinforced a vicious cycle of self-blame. Measures aimed at dealing with workload and the allocation of resources have an interaction with role clarity, a fundamental structural factor which influences workplace impostorism. The cognitive uncertainty felt by female middle managers because of their position between top-level leadership and frontline staff increases their feelings of incompetence. Based on the literature reviewed, three organisational mechanisms can be identified as potentially addressing these conditions: increased decision-making authority, structured communication processes, and transparent organisational priorities. Decision-making authority is informed by Floyd and Wooldridge's (1997) work on the strategic influence and role of middle managers, while structured communication and transparent priorities are consistent with research suggesting that clarity, information sharing and supportive organisational environments can reduce uncertainty and improve workplace functioning (Newman et al., 2017). Together, these mechanisms are theorised to reduce work ambiguity and the organisational conditions associated with impostor-related cognitions, distinguishing them from interventions that focus primarily on individual coping strategies.

Structural workload interventions are not without limitation, nor do they eliminate the need for trade-offs. Reducing workload intensity conflicts with organisational performance pressures centred on lean efficiency. Without supporting cultural changes, workload cuts are easily interpreted as a lack of ambition and resilience. Women additionally face unique stereotype-based scrutiny, a conclusion validated by Heilman's 2012 study. Reforms to resource allocation require sustained leadership commitment and are easily undermined by budget constraints and shifts in strategic priorities. Williams et al. (2013) propose that structural adjustments alone cannot eradicate the deep cultural norms that give rise to workload overload. Resource-focused reforms are also prone to failure due to budget or strategic changes, and only when paired with the psychological safety and inclusive leadership mentioned by Newman et al. (2017) are these interventions perceived as more effective.

4.3.2. Role Ambiguity and Role Conflict

Role ambiguity and role conflict are structural antecedents of impostor mindset in organisational settings that have been consistently associated in prior research with particularly prominent impacts on female middle managers. Middle managers sit at the intersection of clashing strategic and operational demands (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997; Harding et al., 2014). On top of this structural pressure, women must additionally contend with compounding gender norms and visibility pressures (Hutchins et al., 2017; Parkman, 2016), which make them far more likely to develop self-doubt and engage in compensatory overwork.

The workplace role ambiguity and conflict intervention framework applies at the meso-level of organisations and teams. It includes four actionable implementation measures: structured communication protocols, clear definition of decision-making authority, cross-level alignment meetings, and role boundary negotiation. This framework, which is rooted in Jackson and Schuler's (1985) Role Ambiguity Theory, is a structural reform initiative rather than an individual skill-building programme, with its core focus on adjusting the distribution of authority, information, and expectations within organisations. Drawing on gender stereotype research by Eagly and Karau (2002) and Heilman (2012), role ambiguity may contribute to cognitive patterns associated with impostor syndrome among female middle managers. These interventions need to centre on organisational-level adjustments rather than improvements to individual capabilities.

Quantitative studies by Neureiter and Traut-Mattausch (2016) and Vergauwe et al, (2014) demonstrate that in professional management settings, three types of stressors - anticipatory ambiguity, contradictory instructions, and conflicting demands – are associated with self-doubt, emotional exhaustion, and overwork. Qualitative research by Hutchins and Rainbolt (2016) points out that middle female managers often internalise conflicting role requirements as personal flaws, which is a cognitive pattern that aligns with the core logic of impostor syndrome. Starting from the existing body of literature, it is possible to identify three main types of interventions as a result of synthesising the mechanisms examined in studies relating to leadership, role clarity, coordination, and psychological safety. The first of these is known as role definition interventions, whose purpose is to lessen the uncertainty about

responsibilities, authority, and performance expectations by means of practices such as providing clear role descriptions, assigning explicit decision-making rights, and implementing structured onboarding procedures. Research into role ambiguity always shows that greater role clarity is linked to reduced strain and increased effectiveness (Jackson & Schuler, 1985). The second type of intervention is that which focuses on coordination and alignment, aiming to deal with the conflicting expectations that arise across the boundaries of an organisation. This kind of intervention involves cross-functional planning, established routines for sharing information, and various mechanisms designed to improve coordination between the different units of an organisation. Huy (2001) stresses the role of middle managers in integrating the strategic and operational requirements across different areas of the organisation and states that effective coordination mechanisms can lessen the tensions caused by incompatible expectations. The third type of intervention is that concerned with boundary negotiation, aiming to help managers to question, renegotiate or prioritise competing demands. For such interventions to be effective it is necessary to have psychologically safe environments in which employees can put forward their concerns and challenge expectations without the fear of suffering adverse consequences. Research into psychological safety and employee voice indicates that such conditions promote effective boundary management and lessen the personal costs associated with speaking up (Edmondson, 1999; Newman et al., 2017).

While the four existing types of workplace gender equality interventions hold potential value, each carries limitations that require trade-offs to be weighed. Role-clarification interventions increase organisational rigidity and narrow the scope of flexibility available to middle managers. Coordination-focused interventions incur high resource costs by requiring sustained alignment from leadership and cross-departmental collaboration. Moreover, boundary negotiation-type interventions rely on organisational culture and will fail in environments with low psychological safety and deeply entrenched bias. Meanwhile, structural reforms cannot fully root out cultural contradictions (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Rudman, 1998). The dual expectation that women must demonstrate both affinity and authority give rise to these role conflicts.

4.3.3. Organisational Support for Work-Life Balance

Adopting work-life balance (WLB) is associated with reduced stress and may indirectly influence impostor syndrome among women working in middle management positions at enterprises. Existing research has confirmed that middle management groups at enterprises face far greater duty-related pressure than staff at any other organisational level, and women within this group must additionally bear unique gender-specific pressures. The WLB support provided by organisations can function as a structural buffer, reduce physical and mental exhaustion, protect psychological resources and indirectly lower negative cognitions linked to impostor phenomenon.

Existing suggests that work-life balance (WLB) interventions operate at multiple levels of the organisation. Based on wider reviews of the literature on work-life balance, the various interventions can be divided into two types: structural interventions and supervisory

interventions. Structural interventions involve flexible work arrangements, predictable scheduling, redistribution of the workload, and formal family-supportive policies. These organisation-level practices alter the temporal, spatial and workload conditions of work so as to help employees handle both their work and non-work responsibilities. On the other hand, supervisory interventions concentrate on the immediate interpersonal environment of the employees. A prime example is family-supportive supervisor behaviour (FSSB), which refers to supervisor behaviours that offer emotional support, instrumental aid, role modelling, and creative work-family management (Hammer et al., 2009). The two types of intervention are in agreement with Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), this theory stating that stress arises when there is a threat to or depletion of resources that are valued by an individual. Looking at it from this point of view, structural practices lessen resource loss by offering more control and flexibility, and supportive supervisors assist employees in keeping and restoring their emotional and cognitive resources through ordinary work interactions. For women in middle management, who typically must meet both professional and family demands, such interventions could help reduce chronic resource depletion. Crawford et al. (2016) argue that resource-enhancing workplace conditions can reduce emotional exhaustion and improve well-being, suggesting a potential pathway through which WLB interventions may alleviate factors associated with impostor feelings.

Current empirical studies report that work-life balance interventions are associated with reduced work stress and enhanced individuals' perceived competence. Allen et al. (2013) confirmed that general WLB measures such as flexible work arrangements can reduce work-family conflict and improve satisfaction and mental health among managerial and professional groups. Hammer et al. (2009) and Odle-Dusseau et al. (2012) found that supportive supervisors are reported to buffer the negative impacts of high job demands, reduce occupational burnout and improve self-efficacy. A study targeting female leaders by Kossek et al. (2009) pointed out that well-aligned flexible policies and supportive environments can help reduce these women's feelings of guilt and tendency to overwork. Although these studies do not directly examine impostor syndrome, they address several psychological and occupational stressors, such as burnout, self-efficacy deficits, and excessive work demands, that have been identified elsewhere in the impostor syndrome literature as relevant correlates of impostor experiences.

Although WLB interventions are often regarded as an effective solution to optimise workplace ecosystems, studies by Williams et al. (2013) and Kossek et al. (2009) jointly note that such measures still carry unavoidable limitations and trade-offs. If women overuse flexible work arrangements, they will instead reinforce gendered divisions of labour, trigger doubts about women's professional commitment and undermine women's career development. In addition, the effectiveness of these policies is highly dependent on organisational culture and employees in work environments that prioritise constant on-duty availability dare not use these measures. Moreover, supervisory support is unevenly distributed, and women's access to resources relies heavily on the individual discretion of management members. Finally, these measures cannot resolve the deep-seated structural contradiction of overloaded middle managers.

4.3.4. Promotion Pathways and Talent Management

Internal promotion pathways and organisational talent management systems are core factors that shape the sense of legitimacy, sense of belonging and professional self-confidence of female middle managers. This group faces threefold gendered barriers, a claim corroborated by the classic studies of Ibarra et al. (2010) and Ely and Meyerson (2000). Organisations can use talent management approaches as a lever to provide this group with development opportunities, executive sponsorship, and professional social capital that are associated with improved confidence and may relate to impostor-related experiences.

Most organisational interventions currently used to promote the career development of mid-level female managers operate primarily at two core levels: the strategic level and the structural level. The strategic level includes three types of interventions: leadership reserve development, succession planning, and sponsorship programmes. The structural level encompasses categories such as job rotation assignments, leadership development programmes, and targeted talent identification processes. These interventions, which are built on the social capital theory proposed by Burt (1998) and Ibarra et al. (2010), are intended to address the structural disadvantages that lead this group to develop impostorism. These disadvantages arise from the group's exclusion from informal networks and sponsorship channels. The role congruency theory proposed by Eagly and Karau (2002) can also explain the core underlying logic of these interventions, which work by eliminating gender role mismatch and legitimising women's leadership potential.

Current empirical evidence indicates that talent management interventions are perceived to reduce women's professional self-doubt and enhance their career confidence. Hewlett et al. (2011) distinguish between mentorship programmes that only provide psychosocial support and sponsorship models in which senior leaders proactively endorse their protégés, noting that the latter significantly improves women's access to challenging tasks, promotions, and strategic visibility. De Pater et al. (2009) found that participating in leadership development programmes boosts women's leadership self-efficacy and reduces their internalised doubt about their readiness to advance in their careers. McCauley et al. (1994) pointed out that job rotations and cross-functional projects are reported to increase women's perceived competence by creating multiple scenarios for them to demonstrate their wide range of capabilities.

Although various workplace talent management interventions are often expected to support women's career advancement, these measures have under-recognised limitations and trade-off costs and may even hinder women's promotion instead. First, sponsorship programmes leave women overly reliant on individual senior leaders, making them vulnerable to disruptions caused by leadership turnover. Second, leadership development programmes increase women's time burdens, as confirmed in research by Kossek et al. (2009), which exacerbates their already unbalanced work-family conflict. Third, job rotation assignments raise work complexity, and a lack of matching supporting measures intensifies women's impostor syndrome. Fourth, talent identification systems that assess potential based on masculine norms, as research by Heilman (2012) points out, reproduce gender bias at the unconscious level. Finally, interventions that

only focus on individual-level change cannot dismantle structural barriers at the macro cultural level.

4.3.5. Inclusive Organisational Culture and Bias Reduction

Inclusive organisational culture and bias-elimination mechanisms are associated with reduced identity threat and may influence impostorism among female middle managers. Ely & Meyerson (2000) and Heilman (2012) point out that impostor feelings are far from merely an individual cognitive distortion. Instead, they are cognitive responses shaped by multiple structural factors. Hutchins et al. (2017) confirm that three risks faced by female middle managers - subtle bias, stereotype-driven scrutiny, and exclusion from informal networks - exacerbate impostor-related emotions. Inclusive culture can function as a systemic buffer to reduce identity threat and help these women internalise recognition of their own capabilities.

All current interventions designed to foster inclusion and eliminate implicit and explicit biases in various workplace organisations cover a complete three-tier system: the macro level, meso level and micro level, with each tier corresponding to clear intervention content and on-the-ground implementation goals. These interventions uniformly rely on two core social psychology theories: the Social Identity Theory proposed by Tajfel and Turner in 2004 and the Stereotype Threat Theory put forward by Steele in 1997. Aligned with the research conclusions of Nishii (2012), it is confirmed that when an organisational culture conveys clear inclusion signals, identity threats among female groups are reduced, their psychological safety is enhanced, and cognitions associated with impostor syndrome decrease.

Multiple empirical studies consistently report that an inclusive workplace culture is associated with lower self-doubt among female and ethnic minority employees and enhances their leadership confidence. Carmeli et al. (2010) and Shore et al. (2010) found that open, fair, inclusive leadership can boost this group's psychological safety and reduce their identity anxiety. Bohnet (2016) verified that bias-mitigating interventions such as structured decision-making are associated with a narrower gender gap in leadership evaluations. Nishii (2012) pointed out that team-level initiatives to fairly distribute developmental stretch tasks can strengthen women's sense of belonging. Parkman (2016)'s research provided reverse corroboration that environments marked by underrepresentation of these groups can exacerbate impostorism.

Most inclusion culture-building and bias intervention efforts advanced by organisations today carry non-negligible limitations and trade-offs. A study conducted in 2000 by Ely and Meyerson highlighted the fact that a great many cultural change programmes only manage to achieve symbolic compliance and that diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives which lack accountability do not change the fundamental power structure. Likewise, in 2016 Dobbin and Kalev observed that bias-reduction training which is poorly designed often leads to resistance and has the effect of deteriorating the interpersonal atmosphere in the workplace. This study further identifies three additional limitations of these practices. First, middle managers are constrained by overlapping work demands and cannot consistently implement inclusion

requirements. Second, only correcting individual-level bias shifts the responsibility for organisational adaptation onto women. Third, women and racial minorities who lead diversity and inclusion work are forced to take on additional emotional labour, yet receive no corresponding recognition for this work, nor have their official workloads adjusted to account for this added responsibility.

4.3.6. Psychological Organisational Safety

According to Edmondson's (1999) definition, psychological safety means that there is a common belief that it is safe to take interpersonal risks in a work environment and is connected to a reduced fear of exposure which is related to impostorism. Research carried out by Ely and Meyerson (2000) and Hutchins et al. (2017) shows that female middle managers experience severe scrutiny and are subjected to contradictory gender norms, and psychological safety can alleviate their anxiety by promoting self-expression and encouraging them to seek help.

Interventions to improve psychological safety need to cover multiple organisational levels. At the leadership level, organisations can implement inclusive leadership, leader humility and supportive management and shape a positive climate by modelling vulnerability, acknowledging one's own fallibility, and encouraging open dialogue. This mechanism has been validated by Carmeli et al.'s 2010 study and Owens & Hekman's 2012 study. At the structural level, tools such as structured debriefs can be rolled out. A 2005 study by Van Dyck et al. reports that this practice can reduce the stigma associated with making mistakes. At the cultural level, organisations can establish norms of respectful communication and reward learning rather than perfect performance. Drawing on Edmondson's 1999 Team Learning Theory, psychological safety acts as a prerequisite for employees to speak up and ask questions and can counteract the silence and over-preparation that characterise impostor syndrome.

Psychological safety can alleviate the negative cognitions associated with impostor syndrome, reduce self-doubt and enhance individuals' perceived ability. To mitigate the negative impacts of workplace impostor experience, existing research has outlined feasible pathways spanning the team, leadership, and individuals' levels. Newman et al. (2017) found that employees in teams with higher psychological safety described fewer negative cognitions associated with impostor feelings. Carmeli et al. (2010) proposed that inclusive leadership can predict higher psychological safety and lower anxiety among employees in professional and managerial positions. Nishii (2012) and Shore et al. (2010) pointed out that willingness to voice concerns, challenging biased assumptions and seeking developmental opportunities can alleviate the related feelings of loneliness and excessive vigilance. Van Dyck et al. (2005) also confirmed that organisational-level error management culture can improve resilience of marginalised employees and reduce fear-driven behaviours.

While these interventions are perceived as valuable for organisational effectiveness, their on-the-ground rollout remains hindered by a range of non-negligible constraints. Psychological safety cannot be mandated through administrative orders, and the requirements for leaders

to provide sustained behavioural demonstrations are difficult to fulfil in organisations with high turnover, inconsistent leadership capability, or strong hierarchical norms. Moreover, interventions that encourage the disclosure of vulnerability exhibit clear group differences across gender and racial lines. Heilman (2012) points out that for women, admitting uncertainty can reinforce the gender stereotype that they "lack competence". These interventions may also conflict with performance-driven cultures that put emphasis on competition, individual achievement, or error avoidance. Finally, high-pressure middle management positions lack sufficient resources, and the absence of clear accountability further leads them to be misinterpreted as undue leniency.

This paper reviews existing relevant literature and first refutes the pre-existing belief that impostor feelings arise from individual flaws. Drawing on conclusions synthesised from the reviewed literature, this section identifies three categories of conditions - organisational, structural, and cultural - as the crucial determinants of the impostor phenomenon among mid-level female managers. It cites the main judgement of the target document, which states that the core driver of this phenomenon is systematic injustice in the workplace rather than insufficient individual ability, supporting evidence. Furthermore, this dissertation outlines specific structural triggers which collectively amplify this group's self-doubt and emotional exhaustion. This review derives seven intervention measures - workload audits, equitable resource allocation, role clarification, cross-level alignment mechanisms, work-life balance policies, transparent promotion pathways, and inclusive cultural reforms - that span across the macro, meso and micro levels. It argues that addressing structural antecedents may relate to conditions associated with impostorism among female middle managers.

5. Discussion

As an integrative review, this study rejects the dominant view that attributes impostor syndrome among female middle managers to individual psychological defects and instead proposes that this is an organisational phenomenon associated with organisational contexts. The literature cited in the review points out the organisational features which cause these reactions, for example a lack of inclusiveness, unclear evaluation criteria, limited access to role models, restricted visibility, and irregular developmental feedback. According to the research carried out by Gullifor et al. in 2023, the participants felt a greater fear of having their identity exposed in such situations. It also clarifies that this phenomenon is described as shaped by organisational conditions and is in no way caused by inadequate personal ability.

5.1. Impostorism as an Organisationally Embedded Phenomenon

This paper argues that academic understandings of impostor syndrome must shift from framing it as an "internal individual psychological flaw" to a "context-activated phenomenon." Drawing on existing literature, this review identifies five types of organisational environments that are associated with greater impostor feelings:

- Non-inclusive cultures and male-dominated leadership prototypes (Ely et al., 2011; Eagly & Karau, 2002).
- Vague evaluation criteria that create uncertainty around performance expectations (Gullifor et al., 2023).
- Limited role model resources that restrict identity affirmation (Calvard, 2018; Sealy & Singh, 2010).
- Insufficient individual visibility that undermines recognition and perceived legitimacy (Brescoll, 2011; Acker, 2006).
- Exclusionary informal networks that limit access to political capital and tacit knowledge (Ibarra, 1993; Horak & Suseno, 2022).

Previous academic research has often attributed impostor syndrome among working women to irrational self-doubt at the individual level. Drawing on studies of Ibarra (1993) and Ely et al. (2011), this paper points out that women excluded from informal workplace networks often report internalising doubts about their professional legitimacy, which exacerbates this phenomenon. This suggests a possible link between impostorism and organisational structural injustice. When evaluation systems are unclear, leadership norms are gendered and access to developmental resources is uneven, impostor feelings may be more likely to emerge.

5.2. The Structural Vulnerability of Female Middle Managers

A core insight of this review is that female middle managers are caught in a structural contradiction. They are required to fulfil core responsibilities including team management and strategy implementation, yet they lack the corresponding authority, resources, and recognition to support their work.

General middle managers are situated at the intersection of strategic and operational needs and inherently carry role ambiguity. For female middle managers, this attribute is exacerbated by societal gender expectations, a judgement that is supported by research from Eagly and Karau (2002) and Bano and Nadeem (2024). The condition leads to an increase in cognitive load and makes it more likely for people to feel like impostors. Furthermore, female middle managers are often placed in the spotlight, so that their performance, behaviour, and other work-related characteristics are closely examined. However, they do not have sponsor support, political capital or high-level patronage and are thus caught in the situation of "being seen but not supported". According to Rosette et al. (2016) and Garnett and Kinnear (2026), women in leadership roles stated that they experienced greater self-doubt and feared being exposed as inadequate when dealing with scrutiny and the gendered expectations particular to manufacturing environments. Lastly, women who hold middle-level positions in organisations are held responsible for the results of their teams, but they have only limited power to make decisions and cannot readily affect the organisation's priorities. A 2024 study by Para et al. points out that participants reported stronger negative psychological states when resources were insufficient. This paper proposes that the risk of impostor syndrome among mid-level women stems from multiple structural pressures as their positionalities are not confined to a single hierarchical stratum.

5.3. The Issue of Individual-Level Interventions

The crucial contribution of this study is its division of interventions targeting women’s impostorism into state that interventions which concentrate exclusively on personal change tend to put the responsibility on the women themselves, conceal the presence of structural inequalities, reinforce the notion of individual deficiency, and leave organisational practices unchanged. On an individual level, interventions aim at enhancing people's ability to cope by means of methods such as coaching, mentoring as a way of promoting self-development, confidence-building programmes, and cognitive reframing techniques. Although these approaches can help women deal with self-doubt and tackle maladaptive beliefs, they do not directly deal with the organisational conditions which lead to impostor experiences. Recent research warns against depending only on individual-level solutions. Para et al. (2024) state that interventions which concentrate exclusively on personal change tend to put the responsibility on the women themselves, conceal the presence of structural inequalities, reinforce the notion of individual deficiency, and leave organisational practices unchanged.

The remaining three levels are directed at the broader workplace environment; interpersonal measures focus on relational mechanisms such as mentorship, sponsorship, supervisor support, and psychological safety, while organisational measures include transparent performance evaluations, inclusive leadership practices, equitable promotion systems, and various activities that improve organisational culture. Lastly, structural interventions look at general employment arrangements and institutional factors, such as work-life balance policies, flexible working arrangements, workload management, and formal equality frameworks.

The evidence examined in this study together indicates that impostor syndrome among women in managerial positions is the result of individual, relational, organisational, and structural factors interacting with one another. It therefore seems unlikely that an effective intervention can be achieved through a single practice or at one level only; rather, a coordinated strategy involving multiple levels is needed if both the psychological symptoms and the underlying organisational circumstances linked to impostor experiences are to be dealt with.

5.4. Impostorism as a Diagnostic Indicator of Organisational Dysfunction

This paper argues that patterns of impostor experiences may serve as a diagnostic signal of organisational conditions that warrant examination, rather than being understood solely as an individual problem requiring personal adjustment. The literature examined in this study indicates that impostor experiences can arise as a result of interaction between structural mechanisms, organisational factors, interpersonal experiences, and individual characteristics. Although personal traits, one's personal history, career paths and biographical experiences may account for a person's vulnerability to feeling like an impostor, similar patterns of impostorism in certain organisational contexts may also point to working conditions that deserve further investigation.

From this perspective, the subjective experiences associated with impostor phenomenon can highlight several categories of organisational conditions that have been linked to self-doubt, exclusion or diminished professional confidence:

- Biased evaluation systems (Gullifor et al., 2023).
- Masculine leadership prototypes (Ely et al., 2011).
- Exclusionary informal networks (Ibarra, 1993).
- Inconsistent feedback (Harvey & Katz, 1985).
- Unclear promotion pathways (Feenstra et al., 2020).
- Insufficient recognition and visibility (Acker, 2006; Calvard, 2018).

Garnett and Kinnear (2026) propose that women encounter negative signals that intensify impostor syndrome throughout their entire professional lifecycle. These signals are rooted in organisational design and culture. Organisations must shift from helping women "manage" this symptom to auditing internal processes that participants report as contributing to impostor

experiences. This study frames this issue as an organisational responsibility, thereby clarifying the core research value of this work.

6. Contributions of the Study

This dissertation centres on the domains of impostorism, gender and organisational behaviour, and delivers multiple original contributions across three core dimensions: theoretical, methodological, and practical. Focusing on female middle managers, a group that has received limited attention in prior empirical and conceptual research, this work advances nuanced, fine-grained understandings of the emergence and operational logic of the impostor phenomenon within organisational systems.

6.1. Theoretical Contributions

The first theoretical contribution of this study is that it further reframes impostor syndrome as a multi-level organisational phenomenon, rather than an individual-level psychological deficit. In 1978, Clance and Imes defined this construct as a cognitive bias stemming from internalised self-doubt. The study shows that the experiences of female middle managers regarding this phenomenon are influenced by structural ambiguity, gendered expectations, and the nature of their interpersonal relationships. Drawing on the contextual activation approach developed by Bravata et al. (2020) and Hutchins and Rainbolt (2016), it incorporates research results from the fields of psychology, management, and gender studies, and thus contributes to the further development of this concept as a socially embedded academic construct.

Second, this dissertation deepens insights into gendered attributes of impostor syndrome. Drawing on research by Eagly & Karau (2002) and Steele (1997), it demonstrates that three types of mechanisms disproportionately affect women on the edge of assuming leadership positions. It further proposes that gendered organisational structures, evaluative criteria and cultural norms are associated with impostor-related experiences, overcoming the limitation of prior research that only examines correlational relationships.

Finally, this study fills a gap in the field of middle management research. It shows that the identity requirements for middle managers to balance strategic expectations and operational responsibilities can trigger impostor experiences, and it also expands research on managerial identity by demonstrating that these dynamics intersect with gender and organisational culture to shape individuals' self-perceptions of their own capabilities.

6.2. Methodological Contributions

This dissertation takes the impostor phenomenon, a research topic spanning multiple academic disciplines, as its study subject. To address the fragmentation issue plaguing existing research on this topic - where prior studies are scattered across three core fields: psychology, management, and gender studies, yet lack systematic cross-disciplinary integration - this paper adopts the integrative review method. It relies on a PRISMA-guided reporting process and a thematic synthesis approach to consolidate dispersed research conclusions, build a coherent

conceptual framework, and verify the application value of the adopted method. This study also identifies three core categories of research gaps: inconsistent definitions of impostorism, limited attention to organisational antecedents and a scarcity of studies focusing on middle management groups, laying a solid foundation for subsequent rigorous related research.

6.3. Practical Contributions

This academic dissertation identifies evidence-informed mechanisms - including mentorship and sponsorship - classified into four levels: individual, interpersonal, organisational, and structural. It proposes multi-level interventions discussed in the existing literature as mechanisms to address conditions associated with impostorism within organisations, which is capable of simultaneously targeting both the psychological antecedents and structural barriers of this phenomenon. The integrated coordination strategy is a promising integrated approach as it translates this cognitive insight into a feasible, a conceptual guide for organisations.

Second, this dissertation provides concrete recommendations for organisational practice for HR, DEI, and leadership development. These recommendations translate theoretical insights into practical organisational design practices:

- Mentoring and sponsorship systems should be formalised to avoid gendered homophily and ensure equitable access (Hewlett, 2013).
- Visibility mechanisms should be paired with structural support to avoid tokenism and performance pressure (Rosette et al., 2016).
- Feedback systems should be structured, behaviour-based and consistent to reduce cognitive ambiguity (Gullifor et al., 2023).
- Network access should be expanded through mixed-gender professional groups and dismantling exclusionary informal networks (Horak & Suseno, 2022).
- Role model representation should be integrated with developmental interactions rather than symbolic inclusion (Calvard, 2018; Sealy & Singh, 2010).

Third, this review defines impostor syndrome as a barrier to the formation of leadership identity in female middle managers. It puts forward actionable organisational implementation measures such as restructuring promotion pathways, embedding psychological safety into leadership development, guaranteeing fair access to high-visibility tasks, and building a culture that embraces diverse leadership identities. These findings are particularly suited for organisations seeking to increase the gender diversity of their senior leadership teams.

Finally, this dissertation advances the cause of change in organisational culture by showing that impostorism may indicate underlying structural injustices. It follows that to deal with impostorism, inclusive leadership practices, transparent communication, the fair distribution of resources, the removal of gendered gatekeeping mechanisms and the incorporation of both relational and structural support into everyday life in an organisation must all be put into place.

Thus, reducing impostorism should be seen as part of a wider process of organisational transformation and not as a series of separate measures.

7. Limitations

Although this dissertation delivers substantive research contributions, it has core limitations that require disclosure. First, the integrative review employed in this study is constrained by the availability and quality of existing literature. The body of research focused on impostor syndrome among female middle managers is insufficient. As noted in a 2020 study by Bravata et al., most existing studies use cross-sectional self-report designs, which cannot support causal inference, thus the conclusions of this review are only suggestive in nature.

Second, four overlapping terms: impostor feelings, impostor thoughts, impostor syndrome and impostorism are used interchangeably across relevant research. Although this study has attempted to clarify these terms, the lack of unified measurement operationalisation still restricts the precision of comparative analysis.

Third, the present integrative review focused on impostor syndrome has potential publication bias. Studies reporting significant or negative outcomes related to this syndrome are more likely to be published, while organisational intervention studies with null or mixed results are often underreported, which distorts the evidence base and skews it toward extreme individualised interpretations.

Finally, this study did not collect primary raw data. While it can achieve broad theoretical integration, it cannot capture the lived experiences of female middle managers, and future empirical research needs to be conducted to validate and expand the conceptual insights of this study.

8. Directions for Future Research

This study generates multiple promising future research directions. The first core direction centres on female middle managers, who hold critical positions within organisations but have not received sufficient scholarly attention. This group's experiences of impostor syndrome differ from those of entry-level working professionals and senior executives, so qualitative research is well-suited to explore the processes through which they navigate identity tensions, organisational ambiguity, and gendered expectations.

Second, future research should adopt a longitudinal multilevel design to explore the long-term impacts of leadership behaviours, evaluation climates, workload structures, and team dynamics on individuals' impostor experiences, and clarify causal pathways to identify intervention leverage points.

Third, future research should adopt experimental or quasi-experimental designs to evaluate the intervention effects of three types of protective mechanisms, namely sponsorship, mentorship, and psychological safety, to fill the empirical gaps in the field and specify the applicable populations and scenarios for these effective measures.

Fourth, it should conduct intersectional empirical research, drawing on the research logic of Cokley et al. (2017), to explore the differentiated impostor experiences of women holding multiple minority identities and deepen understanding of the interaction between identity and organisational contexts.

Finally, future research should advance the construction of fundamental core concepts, clarify the boundaries between impostor-related thoughts, impostor-related feelings, and the broad overarching phenomenon, to improve the field's theoretical consistency and cross-study comparability through unified definitions and validated assessment tools.

9. Conclusion

This dissertation set out to answer the research question: What organisational approaches discussed in the literature can be used to address impostorism in female middle managers? The integrative review shows that the literature indicates the organisational approaches can be divided into three interconnected groups of mechanisms, namely relational and sponsorship mechanisms; management and evaluation practices; and organisational, structural, and cultural conditions. Together, these mechanisms work to lessen the experiences associated with impostorism by improving access to support, recognition, developmental opportunities, clarity, fairness, and inclusion in organisations.

Another conclusion from the review is that no one mechanism is identified in the literature as being adequate all by itself. On the contrary, the evidence indicates that relational support is most likely to be effective only when it is combined with clear management practices and more extensive structural and cultural changes. It is therefore the approach towards organisation that is most strongly supported by the literature an integrated, multi-level approach which tackles both the psychological experiences and the working conditions linked to impostorism.

However, it is important to distinguish between conclusions directly supported by the reviewed evidence and those inferred for the target population of female middle managers. The literature directly supports the proposition that these organisational mechanisms are associated with reduced self-doubt, stronger leadership identity, greater psychological safety, improved access to resources and enhanced career confidence across various groups. On the other hand, the conclusions about the effectiveness of these measures specifically for female middle managers must remain more cautious since a small number of studies concentrate solely on this group or directly assess reductions in impostorism. The dissertation therefore states that these mechanisms constitute evidence-informed organisational strategies which could help in tackling impostor phenomenon among female middle managers, but more definite causal claims will need to wait until future research based on interventions and tailored to specific populations is carried out.

The conclusion to the research question shows that the literature does not point to one single best intervention, instead indicating that a coordinated response from the organisation is one that brings together relational, managerial, and structural measures. It can produce situations in which female middle managers are more likely to feel that they are legitimate, receive support, be recognised and be included, thus tackling the factors linked to impostorism.

Declaration of Authenticity

Clarification of the meaning and regulatory implications of the Declaration of Authenticity

The declaration of authenticity binds its signatory to the content of the statements for all legal, regulatory, and disciplinary purposes in light of the legal regulations in force at the University of Porto (U.Porto) and its organisational unit, the School of Economics and Management (FEP.UP).

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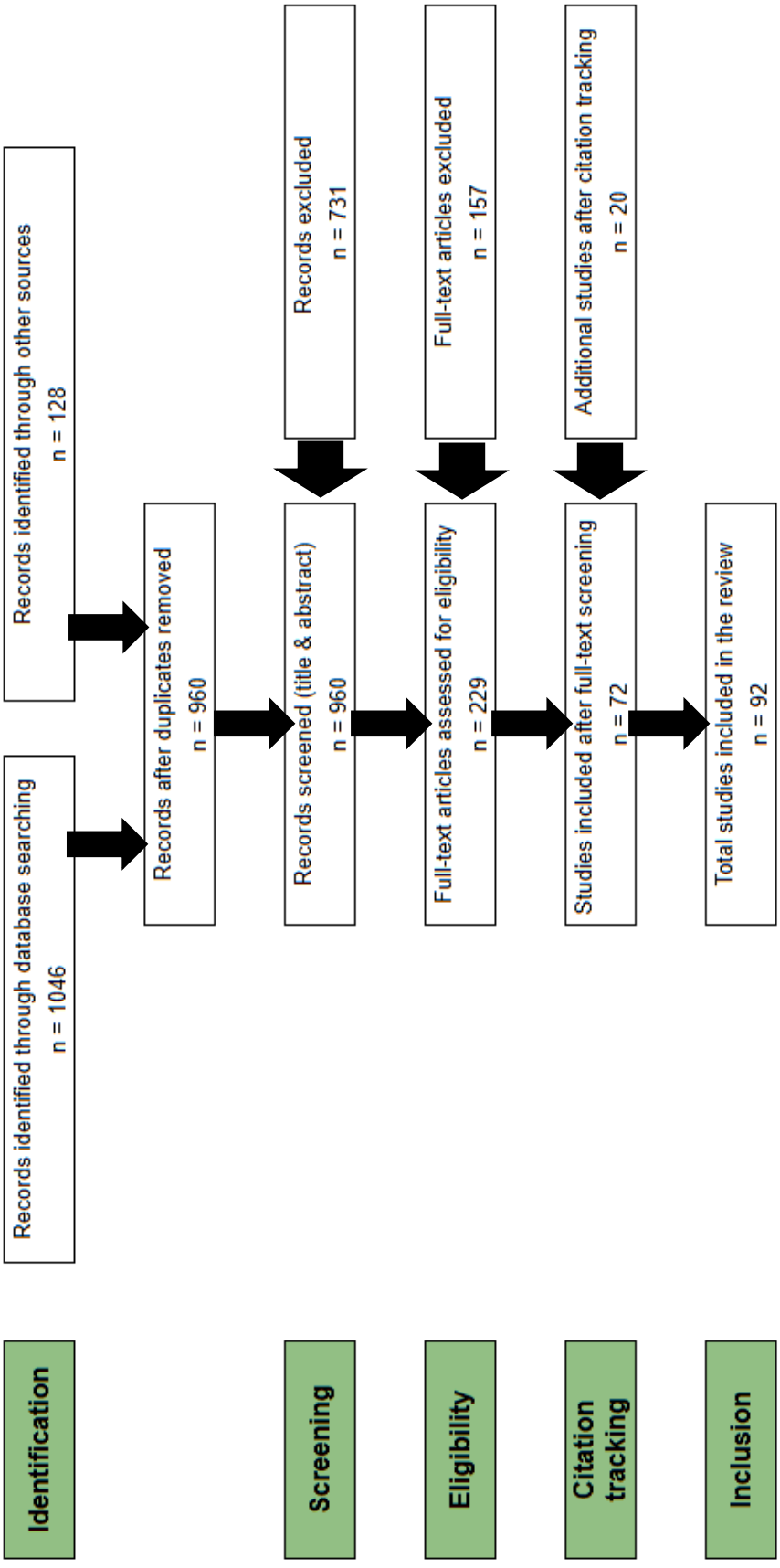
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Appendix A: PRISMA diagram



Appendix B

Table B1. Overview of Search Sources and Parameters

Database	Rationale for Inclusion	Fields searched	Date Range	Language Filter	Search Execution Date
Scopus	Broad interdisciplinary coverage of management, psychology, gender studies, and organisational research	Title, Abstract, Keywords	1978-2026	English	05.06.2026
Web of Science Core Collection	High-quality multidisciplinary academic literature and citation indexing	Topic Search (Title, Abstract, Author Keywords, Keywords Plus)	1978-2026	English	05.06.2026
PsycINFO (APA)	Specialist coverage of psychological and behavioural science research	Title and Abstract	1978-2026	English	05.06.2026
Google Scholar	Supplementary identification of grey literature, recently published studies, and citation tracking	Full-text search platform	1978-2026	English where possible	05.06.2026

Table B2. Search Development and Expansion Decisions

Stage	Purpose	Added Terms/ Refinements
Initial scoping search	Identify core literature on impostorism	impostor phenomenon, impostor syndrome, impostorism
Gender refinement	Focus on women's experiences	women, woman, female, female managers, female leaders, gender
Manager refinement	Increase relevance to organisational leadership contexts	middle manager, mid-level manager, middle management, middle leadership, manager, leader
Organisational-context refinement	Capture antecedents and mitigation factors in organisations	organisational culture, leadership development, workplace development, workplace interventions, psychological safety
Final strategy	Integrated all concept blocks using Boolean AND operators	Final search string fixed before screening commenced