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The Post-#MeToo Era of Feminism: A Qualitative Podcast Analysis of the Divine Feminine Traits

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ABSTRACT

The #MeToo movement brought renewed attention to the ways masculinist cultural logics-privileging dominance, control, and rationality-continue to shape organizational and educational contexts. In these contexts, what counts as appropriate expression tends to be tightly bounded, with women-particularly those navigating multiple forms of marginalization-often managing how, when, and whether to express aspects of themselves such as emotion, perspective, and personal voice. Rather than taking this constraint as given, the present study turns to how alternative possibilities are articulated in practice. It draws on narrative accounts shared by millennial women participating in a professional collective, focusing on six podcast conversations recorded before live audiences. Through an interpretivist thematic reading of these discussions, four interrelated areas of experience became salient: work–life challenges, the enduring influence of traditional gender norms, evolving attention to mind–body connections, and the articulation of what participants described as divine feminine traits. The findings suggest that authenticity is not merely a cognitive or discursive construct but is frequently experienced as embodied and, in many cases, shaped by earlier experiences of trauma that continue to inform professional identity. The study builds on feminist and organizational scholarship by examining women's experiences through an explicitly intersectional lens. These insights point toward the importance of trauma-informed pedagogical approaches, equity-oriented mentoring, and the broader institutional recognition of relational leadership and well-being practices.

Keywords: #MeToo movement; authenticity; feminist organization studies; intersectionality; relational leadership.

INTRODUCTION

The #MeToo movement became a pivotal moment in contemporary organizational and educational contexts, bringing renewed attention to forms of gendered harassment and silencing that had long been treated as routine. Estimates indicating that more than four in five women experience sexual harassment or assault over the course of their lives (Chatterjee, 2018) underscore the extent to which such inequities are structural rather than isolated or incidental. Beyond exposing individual incidents, #MeToo prompted a broader interrogation of the masculinist cultural logics that continue to shape professional environments—logics that privilege assertiveness, control, and rationality while marginalizing intuition, collaboration, and emotional intelligence (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Binns, 2008). Within these contexts, women's advancement often hinges on the ability to regulate or reshape aspects of identity in order to conform to dominant expectations of competence (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Roberts, 2005). These dynamics are particularly pronounced in higher education, where evaluative norms influence not only how knowledge is assessed, but also how emotional expression is interpreted and who is seen as naturally belonging, thereby embedding gendered assumptions within everyday practices of evaluation, progression, and institutional inclusion (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

A substantial body of feminist and organizational scholarship has demonstrated that gender does not operate in isolation, but is instead shaped through its intersections with race, class, and sexuality, producing differentiated patterns of exclusion and advancement (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000; Settles et al., 2020). Within higher education, these dynamics are particularly evident. Women of color, LGBTQ+ women, and those from working-class backgrounds often encounter both the devaluation of their scholarly contributions and disproportionate expectations related to service and mentoring—what has been described as "cultural taxation," with significant implications for well-being and career progression (Padilla, 1994; Turner et al., 2008). Importantly, these processes are not simply additive. Rather, they are mutually constitutive, meaning that institutional norms are experienced differently depending on how gender is simultaneously racialized, classed, and sexualized in specific organizational and academic settings (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000; Settles et al., 2020). This perspective has shifted scholarly attention away from generalized accounts of women's advancement toward more nuanced analyses of how inequality is reproduced even within environments that are formally inclusive. In this context, examining post-#MeToo organizational life requires attention not only to gendered expectations, but also to how particular forms of femininity are

constructed as acceptable—or unacceptable—across intersecting social positions (Settles et al., 2020). Despite these advances, less is known about how women themselves interpret and navigate these conditions in practice. In particular, there remains a gap in understanding how alternative repertoires of identity and leadership are articulated, legitimized, and enacted under intersectional constraints, and how such repertoires become intelligible and actionable within institutions structured by enduring masculinist norms. In this study, intersectionality functions not merely as contextual background but as an analytic lens guiding interpretation, foregrounding how participants' narratives of identity, emotion, and leadership are shaped by overlapping systems of gendered, racialized, classed, and sexualized expectations within organizational and higher education environments.

Emergent discourses on the "divine feminine" provide one such window. In this study, the "divine feminine" is approached not as an essentialist claim about women, but as a cultural and symbolic vocabulary through which participants make sense of capacities that have historically been devalued—such as authenticity, vulnerability, compassion, and relationality—in ways that challenge dominant definitions of professionalism and legitimacy (Calás & Smircich, 2006). Drawing on Jungian psychology alongside broader historical traditions, the divine feminine archetype encompasses qualities such as sensation, intuition, nurturance, and spirituality—attributes that have often been marginalized within patriarchal institutions but are increasingly recognized as relevant to resilience and leadership (Jung, 1953; Kleven, 2011). Within this framing, authenticity, vulnerability, compassion, and relationality can be understood as contemporary expressions of the divine feminine, offering a conceptual bridge between archetypal discourse and organizational constructs associated with more inclusive and relational forms of leadership. This perspective carries particular significance in higher education, which functions not only as a workplace but also as a site where future professionals are socialized into prevailing norms. The ways in which mentoring, evaluation, and belonging are structured within these environments are shaped by underlying cultural assumptions, especially in contexts such as faculty diversity initiatives and early-career development, where expectations around voice, comportment, and credibility remain deeply gendered and racialized (Padilla, 1994; Turner et al., 2008). In this sense, re-centering these capacities may offer a means of challenging entrenched masculinist paradigms and fostering more inclusive organizational practices (Calás & Smircich, 2006). Despite growing theoretical interest, however, there remains limited empirical work examining how women themselves interpret and mobilize these traits in everyday

organizational settings, particularly within higher education and related professional domains where systemic inequities continue to shape experience. From this, this study examines how 'divine feminine' traits become articulated as counter-repertoires to masculinist organizational logics and how these repertoires travel into higher education practices such as mentoring, leadership development, and trauma-informed pedagogical commitments (Calás & Smircich, 2006).

The purpose of this study is to examine how millennial women professionals articulate and enact divine feminine traits in navigating masculinist cultures, and to consider the implications of these practices for organizational and higher education contexts. Using this collective as an analytically generative site, the study develops insight into how gendered and intersectional constraints are negotiated through culturally available repertoires of meaning and practice. From this, this study asks how millennial professional women in a podcast collective make sense of and enact 'divine feminine' traits—especially authenticity, vulnerability, compassion, and relationality (including interconnectedness with community and nature)—as they navigate masculinist organizational cultures in the post-#MeToo era. How participants link challenges of authenticity to embodied histories of shame and trauma and to mind–body practices (e.g., mindfulness, spirituality) that shape emotion regulation, resilience, and work–life experiences. What implications these lived practices hold for leadership, mentoring, diversity initiatives, and trauma-informed pedagogy in higher education and allied professional settings. These research questions are answered using interpretivist methods to analyze six podcast episodes produced by a women's professional collective, the study traces how participants engage with archetypes of the divine feminine to navigate tensions between conformity and authenticity, suppression and expression, disconnection and community. The analysis contributes to feminist and organizational scholarship by theorizing how authenticity and relational leadership are narrated as institutionally contested capacities rather than purely individual attributes. It further clarifies how these narratives illuminate higher education concerns—especially mentoring, evaluation, and inclusion work—without assuming that the patterns observed are universally generalizable beyond the analytic context (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000; Settles et al., 2020).

In the first section of this research, I present the theoretical foundation, namely toxic masculinity and Victorian morality. In the second section, I outline the methodology, followed by my findings that are centred on the divine feminine traits through the lens of spirituality, mindfulness, and consciousness. Mindfulness involves maintaining awareness of the present

moment that has an orientation toward curiosity, openness, and acceptance (Bishop et al., 2004). Similarly, consciousness is a state of being aware of one's self, surroundings, and impact on the world. In the final section, I present my conclusions and implications for practice. By integrating intersectionality, feminist organization studies, and archetypal discourse, this research clarifies how divine feminine traits operate as interpretive resources through which participants make sense of authenticity, resilience, and relational leadership within contemporary organizational and higher education contexts.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Toxic Masculinity

Toxic masculinity refers to "... the need to aggressively compete and dominate others and encompasses the most problematic proclivities in men (Kupers, 2005, p. 713)," which include, but are not limited to: power, control, conquest, and aggression. Within the past decade, there has been an increase in discussion of toxic masculinity norms being pervasive in modern culture (Dematagoda, 2017; Oxley, 2015) and, specifically, in industrialized western economies. Oxley (2015) discusses the culture of toxic masculinity within government and policing. Others (e.g., Achilleos-Sarll and Martill, 2018) have studied toxic masculinity within the military. To this end, an outcome of toxic masculinity manifests in attempting to: enhance, grow, collect, and centralize power. In society, this has manifested with the need for one group (or country) to exert power and control over another that, on the surface, they perceive as different or less than they are. This often contributes to an 'us versus them' mentality. To achieve power over others, a large portion of governmental expenditure has been used on the military, for centuries.

Victorian Morality and the Rise of Feminism

Consistent with toxic masculinity, during the 19th century, the role of the feminine in society shifted. Victorian morality began in Britain during the rule of Queen Victoria that ranged from 1837 until 1901. During this era, rigid gender norms were repressive of women and their sexuality (Cole, 1983). Sex was considered wrong and shameful. It was expected to be hidden and it was something to be ashamed of. Women were expected to maintain their virginity (i.e., their purity) until marriage. Through this era (and beyond), men controlled and suppressed female sexuality (Smith, 1973). Women were confined to traditional domestic duties, such as caring for the household, raising children, and succumbing to the needs of men. Women had to present

affluently (even if they were not) and had to behave often in a subdued manner. There was much emphasis placed on the appearance of women.

Although Queen Victoria passed at the dawn of the 20th century, Victorian morality has influenced 20th century norms. It was not until the rise of the feminist movement, in the 1960s, did women begin to rebel against this repressive culture. Through this period (and beyond), feminists demanded equality on all levels: economic, financial, cultural, social, emotional, and political. With the advent of women entering the labour force and on the heels of the Civil Rights movement, greater awareness of the pay disparity between the genders became apparent. This led to the affirmative action movement that saw some improvement in pay differences between the genders. This also led to greater representation of females in senior roles in the labour force.

Starting in the 1990s, there was discussion around the sexual misconduct of males toward women in the workplace; however, consistent with Victorian morality, many of the female victims were often blamed. They were accused of being too attractive or provocative making it difficult for males to restrain themselves (von Sikorski & Saumer, 2020). Although not as pervasive as previous generations, primarily due to the counterculture of the 1960s, many claim that Victorian morality continues to affect all genders (Mitra, 2020), but especially the sexuality of women (Jane, 2017) in the 21st century. However, through the rise of the #metoo movement, greater awareness of these toxic norms emerged and although progress has been made, total equality has yet to be achieved. Beyond North American contexts, comparative scholarship shows that women encounter similar tensions across higher education and professional fields worldwide, though the specific intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality vary. Studies from Europe, Latin America, and Asia document how structural inequities and masculinist organizational logics are embedded in global academic and workplace systems, reinforcing the relevance of intersectionality as a transnational analytic lens (Bhopal, 2016; Morley, 2013).

Taken together, these literatures establish how masculinist norms have historically constrained women's identities and voices, while feminist and social movements have challenged these inequities. Yet, despite extensive documentation of toxic masculinity and repressive gender norms, less attention has been given to how countervailing discourses—particularly those emphasizing authenticity, vulnerability, compassion, and relationality—are emerging in the wake of #MeToo as sources of strength in professional and higher education contexts. This study addresses that gap by examining how divine feminine traits are articulated and enacted, thereby

extending organizational and educational scholarship on identity, leadership, and equity in the contemporary moment.

Divine Feminine Traits as Organizational Constructs

Within feminist organization studies, constructs such as authenticity, vulnerability, compassion, and relationality have increasingly been examined as mechanisms through which individuals resist dominant organizational expectations and cultivate more inclusive forms of practice (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Calás & Smircich, 2006). In this study, authenticity refers to the alignment between internal identity and external expression, particularly in contexts where individuals face pressures to conform to dominant norms (Roberts, 2005). Organizational research demonstrates that authenticity is unevenly accessible, as marginalized individuals often engage in identity regulation to maintain legitimacy within professional environments. In this study, authenticity is interpreted as a contemporary articulation of the divine feminine insofar as it revalues emotional expression, intuition, and embodied self-knowledge historically devalued within masculinist institutional cultures.

Vulnerability, similarly, has been reconceptualized in leadership scholarship as a relational practice that fosters trust, psychological safety, and collective learning rather than weakness (Boyatzis et al., 2012). Feminist scholars argue that vulnerability disrupts hierarchical power relations by enabling reciprocal recognition and shared meaning-making. Within divine feminine discourse, vulnerability represents openness to emotional experience and relational interdependence, challenging norms of stoicism and emotional suppression.

Compassion extends beyond individual empathy to encompass practices of care oriented toward collective well-being (Binns, 2008). Organizational studies link compassion to inclusive leadership, mentoring effectiveness, and supportive learning environments, particularly within higher education contexts. Framed through the divine feminine, compassion becomes a cultural-symbolic resource that legitimizes care as a form of professional competence rather than a deviation from it.

Finally, relationality emphasizes interconnectedness among individuals, communities, and environments. Relational leadership perspectives highlight collaboration, mutual accountability, and community-building as central organizational capacities (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). Within this study, relationality represents a key mechanism through which divine feminine discourse translates into organizational and educational practice, informing mentoring relationships, community formation, and inclusive pedagogical approaches. The present study therefore treats divine

feminine traits not as metaphysical claims but as analytically observable organizational constructs through which authenticity, vulnerability, compassion, and relationality are enacted and negotiated within intersectionally structured professional and higher education environments.

METHODS

This study employed an interpretivist thematic analysis to examine narratives of professional women within a podcast collective. Interpretivist approaches assume that meaning is socially constructed and emphasize understanding how individuals make sense of their lived experiences within broader cultural and structural contexts (Silverman, 2008). Thematic analysis is well suited to identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative data, particularly when the goal is to capture both explicit accounts and the latent structures that inform them (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

The dataset consisted of six publicly available podcast episodes, each approximately sixty minutes in length, recorded before a live audience of about eighty attendees. The podcast is dedicated to building community among professional women and regularly features leaders such as entrepreneurs, executives, artists, community activists, and political figures. While participants were by most measures relatively successful professionals, the collective was explicitly designed as a space for women to discuss experiences of marginalization, including those shaped by race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality.

Because the podcast transcripts are secondary data, detailed demographic information for each participant was not systematically collected or available for analysis. This absence represents a limitation. However, the central themes that emerged—trauma, shame, suppression, and resilience—are consistent with broader evidence documenting the inequities faced by women, and especially underrepresented women, in professional and higher education contexts (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000; Settles et al., 2020). As such, the insights generated from this collective provide a valuable lens into the cultural logics and lived challenges that resonate across marginalized groups in organizational life.

The dataset consisted of the first season of a women's collective podcast, comprising six episodes recorded between 2019 and 2020. The podcast was produced onsite at a collective in a large Canadian metropolitan area (details withheld for privacy) and featured hour-long conversations before a live audience of approximately eighty attendees. The collective itself was led by millennial women and designed to foreground voices from underrepresented communities, particularly Black, Indigenous, and other

women of color (BIPOC). Interviewees were invited based on their representation of underserved communities and their ability to share narratives of success and resilience, with the aim of providing role models for women with similar backgrounds and aspirations. The interviewer, a serial entrepreneur with a background in finance, had over a decade of experience working in the social enterprise sector and developing programs for underserved groups, bringing both professional expertise and community-based insight to the conversations. All six podcast episodes were transcribed verbatim into a word processing document. Transcription captured both the content of the podcast conversations and the interviewer's probes, though analytic emphasis was placed on participants' narratives. The interviewer employed an unstructured conversational style that invited discussions of childhood, career, personal relationships, and experiences of marginalization. This research was exempt from Research Ethics Board (REB) review because the dataset consisted of publicly available podcast episodes in the public domain, with no identifying private information collected or disclosed. Nonetheless, steps were taken to protect privacy, including withholding the podcast and city names. Guided by this theoretical framing, thematic analysis attended specifically to how participants articulated authenticity, vulnerability, compassion, and relationality as culturally meaningful responses to masculinist organizational norms.

Consistent with interpretivist qualitative research, reflexivity was incorporated to acknowledge how the researcher's positionality shapes interpretation. The analysis is informed by a scholarly orientation grounded in organizational studies, feminist theory, and higher education research concerned with equity and inclusion. This perspective sensitized the analysis to themes of marginalization, identity negotiation, and relational forms of leadership that may otherwise remain underexamined within masculinist organizational frameworks. At the same time, reflexive attention was paid to avoiding essentialist interpretations of gender by treating the divine feminine as a cultural–symbolic discourse rather than an inherent characteristic of women. Interpretations were therefore grounded closely in participants' narratives, with analytic decisions guided by iterative engagement with the data and alignment with established theoretical constructs. This reflexive positioning enhances transparency by situating findings within the interpretive lens through which meaning was constructed.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using an interpretivist thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2019), which emphasizes identifying patterned

meaning across narratives while attending to the social and cultural contexts in which accounts are produced. Because the dataset consisted of publicly available podcast transcripts rather than interviews conducted by the researcher, thematic analysis provided the most appropriate approach to capture both explicit descriptions and underlying cultural logics. At the same time, I drew selectively on grounded theory techniques—particularly open coding as described by Strauss and Corbin (1990)—to support a systematic, line-by-line engagement with the transcripts. This hybrid approach allowed for the inductive generation of initial codes without claiming to follow a full grounded theory design, which would require procedures such as theoretical sampling and constant comparative analysis that were not feasible given the secondary dataset.

All six episodes were first transcribed verbatim and reviewed line-by-line. During initial coding, I employed open coding techniques to break down the data into discrete segments, resulting in 590 inductive codes across the corpus. These codes were then compared, grouped, and refined through iterative cycles of categorization into broader conceptual categories. Through constant reflection and memoing, I examined latent connections among codes and evaluated the salience of recurring ideas. Higher-order themes were then constructed through clustering conceptually related codes, focusing particularly on how participants narrated experiences of trauma, shame, suppression, resilience, and emerging forms of relational leadership. In Table 1, I outline a descriptive analysis of these themes to demonstrate the frequency that they appeared in the data. By following this word repetition approach (D'Andrade, 1995), I was able to assess the most important themes that emerged from the data (Overall & Wise, 2016).

To enhance rigor and transparency, I maintained an audit trail of coding decisions and thematic refinements, including memos documenting shifts in interpretation. Reflexive notes were kept throughout to account for the researcher's positionality and interpretive influence. Finally, themes were triangulated with existing feminist, organizational, and intersectionality scholarship to support theoretical coherence and enhance credibility. As a sole coder, I ensured reliability through maintaining a detailed audit trail of coding decisions, memo-writing to document reflexive engagement with the data, and triangulating emergent themes with existing feminist, organizational, and intersectionality scholarship to strengthen credibility (Nowell et al., 2017). This analytic process ensured that the themes presented in the results are both grounded in participants' narratives and meaningfully connected to broader scholarly debates. Thematic sufficiency was achieved when patterns in the data became recurrent across episodes, and no new higher-order themes were

generated through continued coding and comparison. As Braun and Clarke (2019) note, saturation in thematic analysis is not a fixed endpoint but reflects the point at which additional data no longer add meaningful variation to the themes under development.

Table 1
Open-coding Examples

Theme	Number of occurrence
Mental health	23
Interconnectedness to others and community	21
Spirituality	21
Authenticity	18
Victorian morality	13
Connectedness to nature	9
Feeling	9
Fear	8
Trauma	8
Altruism	7
Emotions in the workplace	7
Health	7
Appearance	6
Insecurity	6
Shame	6
Work challenges	6
Vulnerable	5
Compassion	4

According to Table 1, 18 themes emerged that appeared to be important to developing a deeper understanding of feminism in the post-#metoo era. The most important theme, consistent across each of the interviews, was mental health. In the workplace, the women were discussing the issues that they experienced not only with gender imbalances, which was an important issue, but their mental health, in general, around work-life imbalances. These concerns are consistent with the issues that have been occurring in society for over a decade. In particular, employees are increasingly expected to work longer hours, take on more responsibilities, and

complete tasks in increasingly aggressive timescales (Bickford, 2005). These expectations are contributing to workplace stress. According to the extant literature, workplace stress led to nearly 800 million lost workdays per year in the United States and Europe (Mark & Smith, 2008; Overall, 2016). The healthcare expenditures for employees that experience stress in the workplace are approximately 46% higher than those who do not. Workplace stress costs roughly $125 billion across the US, Europe, and Britain (Mark & Smith, 2008; Overall, 2016). All of this is translating into productivity losses, work-life imbalances, and health problems. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 500,000 Canadian workers were calling in sick every week due to mental health issues. Mental health was costing this economy $50 billion annually (with $6 billion directly affecting organizations through productivity losses) (Overall, 2020).

Interconnectedness to others and a sense of community was a consistent theme that emerged through the interviews. Women wanted to be in the presence of other women, to share their experiences, to rely on one another, and to heal in a community. Community and building a safe place for women to congregate were of central importance to this collective of women. This need for community is also an important theme in the divine feminine traits presented earlier.

Spirituality was a consistent theme that emerged throughout the podcast episodes. Interviewees were willing to discuss their spirituality, religious background, and also their mind-body connection. Although spirituality has often been associated with religion, they are distinct terms and have been treated differently, at least in the sciences and higher education, for decades (Estanek, 2006). Religion is aligned to sacred institutional organizations, which are often heavily rule-based (Amram, 2005). On the contrary, Thompson (2011, p. 164) defines spirituality as "… transformational, moral, and ethical and claim that spirituality assumes integrity, honesty, goodness, knowing, wholeness, congruency, interconnectedness, teamwork, etc." Spirituality involves maintaining a connection to one's higher (or expanded) consciousness, experiential elements, and transcendence that deepens one's self-awareness, awareness of others, awareness of the higher levels of consciousness, emotional intelligence, and their connection to the world around them (Amram, 2005). By maintaining a connection to their spirituality, interviewees were willing to tap into their feelings more openly through vulnerability. Spirituality was often discussed within the context of mindfulness, consciousness, and indigenous teachings.

Other important themes involved authenticity and speaking one's truth. Several of the women experienced challenges with authenticity in the workplace. Many, as a result of the predominance of masculine norms in the workplace, felt less able to be fully authentic. They felt unable to be vulnerable, to speak about their experiences, reveal what was truly bothering them, or even present their feminine nature. They felt that they had to 'pretend' or conceal their emotions as it is often considered inappropriate to show one's emotions in the workplace. Consistent with the toxic masculinity norms that pervade society (Overall, 2021a), concealing one's emotions appears to have contributed to workplace challenges, which has had a negative effect on the mental health of the women.

Victorian morality, and the effect that this has had on women, was an important theme across several interviews. Aspects of this involved feeling pressure about one's appearance. There were conversations about shame and insecurity that many felt about being female, in general, and, in particular, about their sexual behaviour. These traumas ultimately fueled feelings of insecurity that were deeply rooted in feelings of inadequacy. To compensate for these feelings, many of the interviewees spoke about relying on altruistic behaviour to maintain the peace in their interactions and also in the workplace.

From the aforementioned themes, I returned to the transcripts for an additional review of the data through axial coding (Silverman, 2008) whereby the data was "…put back together in new ways after open coding, by making connections between categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 96)". Through axial coding, relationships between themes within specific episodes were found, which were also apparent across other episodes. According to the axial codes in Table 2, four categories were created: (1) work-life challenges, (2) traditional gender norms, (3) mind-body connection, and; (4) divine feminine traits. The work-life challenges category encompassed the themes of emotions in the workplace, work challenges, and authenticity themes. The themes that emerged from the traditional gender norms category involved: Victorian morality, shame, trauma, insecurity, fear, and appearance. The mind-body connection category consisted of the spirituality, health, and mental health themes. Many of the divine feminine traits described earlier, namely: vulnerability, feeling, compassion, interconnectedness to others, community, and connectedness to nature, emerged as themes in the data and, as a result, formed this final category. Each of these categories and their respective themes are discussed in the ensuing section.

Table 2
Axial Codes

Category	Themes
Work-life challenges	(1) Emotions in the workplace, (2) Work challenges, (3) Authenticity
Traditional gender norms	(1) Victorian morality, (2) Shame, (3) Trauma, (4) Insecurity, (5) Fear, (6) Appearance
Mind-body connection	(1) Spirituality, (2) Health, (3) Mental health
Divine feminine traits	(1) Vulnerable, (2) Feeling, (3) Compassion, (4) Interconnectedness to others, community, and nature

RESULTS

In this section, the themes are interpreted through an intersectional lens, recognizing that experiences of authenticity, emotional expression, and leadership are shaped not only by gender but by intersecting structures of race, class, sexuality, and professional status. This framing allows the analysis to situate individual narratives within broader systems of organizational and higher education inequality introduced earlier in the manuscript. These themes are interpreted as empirical expressions of the divine feminine constructs outlined in the theoretical foundation, enabling analysis of how archetypal discourse becomes translated into organizational identity and leadership practices.

This results section is organized into four interrelated thematic domains that build conceptually on one another. First, 'work-life challenges' foregrounds how masculinist workplace norms shape authenticity, emotion management, and work–life strain. Second, 'traditional gender norms' situates these challenges within broader cultural scripts (e.g., Victorian morality) that participants connect to shame, trauma, insecurity, and fear. Third, 'mind-body connection' shows how participants describe embodied and spiritual practices as mechanisms for meaning-making and restoration. Finally, 'divine feminine traits' synthesizes how authenticity, vulnerability, compassion, and relationality are enacted as counter-repertoires that participants mobilize in workplace and higher education-adjacent contexts. Taken together, these themes demonstrate a patterned movement from

constraint and suppression toward relational agency and identity reconstruction.

Work-Life Challenges

This theme captures the everyday organizational pressures through which participants experience constrained authenticity, emotion suppression, and work–life strain. It establishes the institutional conditions that later themes connect to gendered cultural scripts, embodied consequences, and relational forms of agency.

Authenticity

Many of the women found it challenging to be authentic in a masculine-dominated labour-force. To avoid causing controversy and to keep the peace in their interactions not only at work, but also in their personal lives, Interviewee #1, #3, and the host, felt the need to suppress their: authenticity, female characteristics, and emotions, which led them to feel inauthentic. In the workplace, there was much fear about speaking one's truth, communicating one's desires, and advocating for one's needs. This is consistent with the extant psychology literature whereby it is suggested that people will not speak their mind to avoid upsetting others (Impett et al., 2012).

The fear of speaking one's truth and inauthenticity were learned at a young age for Interviewee #1. She revealed that she had experienced childhood trauma that led her to avoid speaking up or being truly authentic. She learned that suppressing and being inauthentic were safer. In the inner child literature (e.g., Wesley, 2019), it is suggested that one's experiences in childhood, often around trauma, impact behaviour in the latter years of one's life. The inner child embodies one's childlike feelings, instincts, intuition, spontaneity, and vitality (Wesley, 2019). Wesley (2019, p. 446) suggests that the inner child is "... part of one's inner self, a part that is with us from birth, but often unknown to us until some later critical moment in life brings it into our awareness, often as an image in a vivid dream or fantasy." The fear of speaking one's truth led to mismanaged expectations for the interviewee, often resulting in her disappointing people in both her personal and professional career.

Interviewee #2 spoke about the importance of authenticity in one's communication; however, she often fell short in achieving this. In her life, she realized that she stayed in relationships for too long out of her own fear and insecurity. Overtime, the interviewee expressed that her inauthenticity, inability to speak her truth, and suppressed emotions manifested in physical health issues. Participants attributed some physical strain to prolonged

emotion suppression at work; scholarship on emotional labor similarly links suppression to stress and burnout (Grandey et al., 2012).

The host sympathized with this as she also struggled with inauthenticity. Like Interviewee #2, she stayed in a marriage for too long. She managed her unexpressed emotions with substance abuse, which enabled her, temporarily, to avoid speaking her truth. She also surrounded herself with other women that were in similar circumstances of suppressing their feelings of dissatisfaction with their partners. This helped the host with normalizing her patterns of behaviour. However, like Interviewee #2, the host started to experience physical health issues from her suppressive patterning, overtime.

Interviewee #3 expressed authenticity in terms of power. She believed that inauthenticity leads to powerlessness. If one does not speak their truth, they, often out-of-fear, give their power away to another. This is consistent with the extant feminist literature that suggests that women have been conditioned to give their power away to others (Rowe-Finkbeiner, 2004; Zungu, 2019). This often manifests in one's personal life, but it also occurs in the workplace. Within the workplace, Interviewee #3 spoke about authenticity within the context of accountability. She believed that those who are inauthentic are often less likely to be fully accountable or even willing to be accountable for their actions. To avoid these situations, Interviewee #3 specifically asks her staff to 'call her out' for being inauthentic, which helps her to maintain both accountability and authenticity. To avoid instances of inauthenticity in the workplace, Interviewee #6, an entrepreneur, spoke about the importance of having honest, albeit difficult conversations, in the workplace. By being honest, she felt that she was better able to retain her authenticity.

Emotions in the Workplace

Consistent with the previous section, the narrative across the episodes involved experiencing challenges with displaying one's emotions or vulnerability in the workplace. Each woman held the perception of being unable to fully express themselves, which led them to feel inauthentic. For example, Interviewee #1 expressed issues about becoming emotional in the workplace and feeling the need to suppress these emotions as she believed that it was taboo. Interviewee #4 shared these sentiments while Interviewee #6 said that she had been trained to not display her emotions at work. To overcome these issues, this podcast community is creating a safe and

supportive environment for women to express their most intimate fears, emotions, and challenges.

Work Challenges

A common theme across the interviews involved women experiencing disconnection from others and, in some cases, their family. Some felt unable to fully engage with their family. Many found that their responsibilities at work conflicted with their obligations at home. Interviewee #1 felt that because she overworked and was overstressed, her libido was affected - she found it difficult to enjoy intimacy. She was not able to be fully present as her mind was often gravitating toward work. To address these challenges, interviewees spoke about the need to change the workplace environment to not only allow for an improved work-life balance, but also to better allow all genders to feel comfortable being authentic at work.

Although these narratives foreground the pressures of overwork and disconnection common to many professionals, research demonstrates that women of color, first-generation professionals, and LGBTQ+ employees often experience compounded work–life strains. They are more likely to shoulder disproportionate diversity-related responsibilities or emotional labor while simultaneously navigating systemic bias in evaluation and promotion processes, intensifying the authenticity and work–life conflicts described here (Hochschild, 1983; Wingfield, 2019; Rosette & Livingston, 2012). Taken together, the work-life narratives show that authenticity and emotional expression are not merely individual preferences but are shaped by norms of professionalism that reward constraint and penalize visibility. Participants frequently interpret these pressures as inseparable from wider cultural expectations about womanhood, sexuality, and respectability, which are addressed in the next theme.

Traditional gender norms

This theme situates participants' work and identity challenges within broader gendered moral frameworks that shape shame, sexual regulation, and vulnerability to harm. It clarifies how structural workplace pressures are reinforced by cultural norms that become internalized as fear, insecurity, and self-surveillance.

Victorian Morality

In the traditional gender norms category, a common theme that emerged through each of the episodes was Victorian morality. Although the reign of Queen Victoria ended at the dawn of the 20th century, aspects of the

moral framework that existed at that time continues to pervade over a century later. To this end, Interviewee #2 argued that society, in general, makes people feel judged for their sexual behaviour. Although all genders are said to experience this, she believed that women experience far more shame around their sexuality, which is consistent with the extant literature (e.g., Kellie, 2019). She spoke about her feelings of awkwardness around sexuality as she was raised in an environment where sex was considered taboo. She learned not to talk about sex and that sex was not for the pleasure of women, but men. Interviewee #2 argued that she experienced ancestral shame, which she said, was associated with her religious upbringing. Consistent with Victorian morality, she learned that the role of women was to fulfil the sexual needs of their husbands. She learned that women were responsible solely for the desires of men. In particular, she experienced shame around not only sexuality, but also menstruation and masturbation. Consistent with this, Interviewee #1 spoke about her experiences with 'slut shaming', which involves all genders shaming females for their sexual behaviour.

Interviewee #3 spoke about poor sexual education in primary and secondary schools at the end of the 20th century and leading into the 21st century. This lack of a foundation of knowledge around sexuality contributed to perceptions of sex as taboo, which ultimately contributed to feelings of confusion for her. The host argued that without having a proper foundation, she experienced sexual harassment and sexual assault in the workplace leaving her to feel that this behaviour was normal.

There were conversations about women experiencing shame for being single and, consistent with Victorian morality, the pressure to marry. Both Interviewee #6 and the host acquiesced to the pressure to marry at a young age and both marriages ended in divorce. Importantly, as a whole, the evolving views of sexuality in the lifetime of the interviewees and the host allowed them to reflect on how history has enabled them to view their sexuality differently.

Shame

Consistent with Victorian morality, Interviewee #1 experienced shame related to her sexual experiences and libido challenges, which led her to self-blame. In the second interview, the host mentioned that because she reached puberty at a young age, she experienced body shaming, which stimulated confusion and frustration within her. Interviewee #5 experienced shame around her inability to balance motherhood and her career. She felt that she was falling short in her ability to meet the needs of her children.

Interviewee #6 said that, due to social norms around females, she experienced feelings of shame for getting a divorce, which was echoed by the host.

Trauma

Aligned to the issues raised during the #metoo movement, several of the interviewees and those in the community expressed being sexual trauma survivors. Interviewees #1, #2, #3, #4, and the host disclosed that they had experienced sexual trauma at a young age. Interviewee #3 presented details of how her unaddressed trauma manifested in physical health issues. This is consistent with the extant literature, whereby it was suggested that survivors of sexual trauma experienced both long-term physical health issues and economic challenges (Peterson et al., 2017). As a result of their trauma, many in the community experienced difficulties in communicating their experiences. They did, however, acknowledge that communities such as the one cultivated through this podcast and the rise of the #metoo movement allowed them to know that they are not alone.

Through several conversations, the women talked about the importance of doing inner child psychological healing to aid with integrating their sexual trauma. According to the extant literature (e.g., Böge et al., 2020), mindfulness practices, like meditation, were helpful in addressing childhood trauma. In particular, Böge et al. (2020) determined that those who participate in inner child mindfulness practices showed a decrease in psychopathological symptoms. In his study, Puthenangady (1999) found that those who were exposed to inner child mindfulness interventions displayed significant improvements in: promoting psychosocial adjustment, developing positive attitudes, and conflict resolution. To this end, Interviewee #1 spoke about the importance of spending time with one's inner child and healing any unresolved trauma.

Building on the importance of this, Interviewee #3 spoke about how her childhood trauma had a negative impact on her business. In particular, she would hire unqualified people that were detrimental to her business. She did this because she felt pity for them as she often saw herself in them. It was not until she focused on resolving her childhood trauma that she was able to see that she was actually self-sabotaging.

Fear

As a result of their shame, trauma, and the traditional gender norms, many of the women experienced heightened levels of fear. One of the women expressed experiencing fear and insecurity when she was in the presence of men. In these instances, she said that she feared for her safety. Consistent with

the inauthenticity theme, some of the interviewees (i.e., Interviewees #1, #3, and #4), expressed experiencing fear for standing up for themselves in the workplace and also in their personal lives. They were afraid of losing their job and also being abandoned.

Insecurity

Several women expressed feeling insecure in a variety of contexts. Consistent with the Victorian morality theme of appearance, Interviewee #1 expressed feeling insecure about her ethnicity. She also expressed insecurity about her age and appearance. She is finding that, as she ages, she is becoming increasingly insecure about her physical appearance. This is causing her to experience feelings of unworthiness and inadequacy. Interviewee #6 echoed these sentiments - she often feels insecure in her body. She found it difficult to face her insecurity and often suppressed these feelings through escapism. According to the extant literature (e.g., Overall, 2021b), to overcome negative emotions like insecurity, individuals often turn to various forms of escapism, such as: emotional consumption, alcohol, drug abuse, promiscuity, and the consumption of unhealthy food (Overall, 2016). In many cases, individuals become dependent on their modes of escapism and will rely on them perpetually.

Appearance

Aligned with the insecurity theme, several women shared their concerns about their appearance and focusing significant resources on maintaining this. Many of the women shared that they feel inadequate about their appearance. They are constantly comparing themselves to others and are being compared to others. Many expressed feelings of not being good enough. This manifests not only in their personal lives, but also in their careers. Although these traditional norms appear to be changing, they continue to have an effect on how women interact in the world.

Interviewee #6 elaborated on the insecurity that she experienced with her appearance. Her upbringing – throughout her childhood and early adult years - was very much rooted in Victorian morality. She felt that she was constantly being judged by her appearance. Because her mother was attractive, she felt pressure to be attractive, too and, as a result, she experienced negative emotions about her appearance. This caused her to focus too much attention on her appearance and weight. She disclosed experiencing

challenges with dieting that contributed to an eating disorder, which subsequently led to her hospitalization.

Although she suffered quietly, Interviewee #6 would present as though she 'had it together'. She focused much of her attention on competing with others and attempting to be seen. She felt validated by being seen by others. This mentality is consistent with the extant literature (e.g., Overall, 2018) whereby individuals attempt to compete with others through their consumption patterns (i.e., keeping up with the Joneses). This is what Interviewee #6 spoke about – she attempted to be constantly keeping up with the Joneses. Like the extant literature, she was driven toward attaining an affluent lifestyle. Overall (2018) argued that the main platforms where individuals display their affluence is through social media.

While participants highlighted shame and insecurity as rooted in Victorian morality and gendered expectations, intersectional analyses indicate that these dynamics are heightened when gender norms intersect with racialized stereotypes, heteronormativity, and class disadvantage. Women of color, LGBTQ+ women, and working-class women frequently report intensified appearance-based scrutiny, policing of sexuality, and heightened vulnerability to harassment in professional settings (Crenshaw, 1991; Wingfield, 2019; Rosette & Livingston, 2012).

Across accounts of Victorian morality, shame, and trauma, participants repeatedly emphasize that gendered norms become embodied—experienced as fear, disconnection, and stress that exceed purely cognitive explanation. This sets the stage for the next theme, where participants describe mind–body and spiritual practices as mechanisms for integrating these experiences and reclaiming agency.

Mind-Body Connection

This theme examines how participants describe embodied and spiritual practices as resources for restoring balance, integrating trauma, and reclaiming authenticity. It functions as a bridge between experiences of constraint and the emergence of relational capacities that participants later frame as divine feminine traits.

Spirituality

In the mind-body connection category, spirituality was an important theme that emerged in each of the six episodes. In the first episode, the conversation touched on spirituality and eastern practices, such as Buddhism and traditional indigenous knowledge involving the mind-body connection. In the conversation, the interviewee and host spoke about experiencing

challenges with maintaining balance in their lives. They had suggested that because of the demands at work, with increasing expectations and responsibilities, which is a common theme in society (Overall, 2018, 2021b), they had experienced difficulties with maintaining a healthy mind-body connection. The interviewee had experienced health challenges from being unbalanced. Similarly, the host suggested that she was so far out-of-balance with her mind-body connection that she experienced a burnout that manifested in a near death experience (NDE). This trauma led to a heightened level of conscious awareness. A similar trauma-based experience of consciousness occurred for Interviewee #1.

By being more present and balanced, Interviewee #1 spoke about the importance of being in nature and healing in nature through mindfulness practices, like yoga, meditation, and walking meditation. By doing this, she said that she was able to achieve a higher state of awareness. In this way, she started to place greater emphasis on putting her own needs first and not sacrificing herself for others (i.e., altruism), which, as was discussed in the previous sections, due to traditional gender norms, women have historically experienced challenges with.

To help her overcome the challenges that she experienced with her eating disorder, Interviewee #6 spoke about using mindfulness practices, like yoga, to help her to integrate her trauma. Through yoga, she has had many transformative experiences. Consistent with the Buddhism belief system, Interviewee #6 also spoke about treating her body as a temple by maintaining a healthy mind-body connection.

Interviewee #3 spoke about intuition and developing her intuition, which involves imagination, inner knowing, and wisdom. Although intuition is an important feminine characteristic that, as mentioned earlier, does not receive as much praise in the workplace compared to masculine traits (Overall, 2021a), successful businesspeople have suggested that they use their intuition while making important decisions (Sadler-Smith & Shefy, 2004).

Health

Several interviewees spoke about experiencing job burnout. Both Interviewee #1 and the host disclosed that their job burnout was related to their inability to relinquish responsibilities to subordinates. They both had a perceived need to do everything. By doing this, they both found that they had pushed themselves too far, leading to an unbalanced mind-body connection, which manifested in health deterioration. In both instances, this health deterioration motivated each woman to look within through the use of mindfulness practices. Interviewee #6 expressed a similar experience. By

going within and balancing the mind-body connection through yoga, she discovered trauma that, originating in childhood, had been suppressed for years.

Following the Jungian approach to psychology (e.g., Seaward, 1995), these women started to embrace their feelings and emotions with the hopes of healing their trauma. To this end, Interviewee #1 and #6 sat with their emotions more freely to understand what areas of the body were being impacted most by them. By feeling into their emotions, they were able to release them more effectively as opposed to keeping those emotions stored in the body. Interviewees #1 and #6 also focused on eating healthier diets and self-care.

Mental health

Throughout the episodes, the women – who are predominantly millennials - spoke freely about their mental health. Interviewee #1, #3, #6, and the host spoke openly about how their mental health challenges eventually manifested into physical health issues overtime. To this end, it is important to mention that not all people will experience mental distress, in the first instance. Some people will experience physical symptoms as unresolved trauma that is stored in the body manifests in illness. However, once illnesses emerge, the mind will start to bear the burden of these subconsciously stored ailments. Eventually, if unresolved, mental health issues will arise as the mind begins to suffer.

As mentioned, Interviewee #6 suffered from an eating disorder that was ultimately tied to her need to be seen. She felt that she was not seen as a child and, in order to receive the attention that she needed, at a subconscious level, she developed an eating disorder. Her trauma led her to become emotionally incapacitated as she was uncomfortable in her own skin. To help her to integrate her mental health challenges, she had relied on psychological support in combination with mindfulness practices. Like Interviewee #6, many of the women found that by turning to mindfulness, faith, and spirituality, they were able to resolve their trauma and overcome from some of the greatest challenges that they had experienced in their lives.

The emphasis participants placed on mindfulness and mental health resonates strongly with studies showing that underrepresented students and faculty often encounter hostile campus climates and minority stress, making resilience practices both more necessary and more difficult to sustain. Evidence indicates that women of color and sexual minority faculty report higher rates of psychological distress, underscoring the transferability of these

findings to intersectionally marginalized populations in higher education (Galante et al., 2018; Meyer, 2003).

While the mind–body theme foregrounds practices of restoration and self-reconnection, participants also describe how these shifts reshape their relational orientations at work and in community. The following theme shows how these reconstructed orientations are named and legitimized through divine feminine discourse, translating internal change into interpersonal and leadership practices.

Divine Feminine Traits

Across the preceding themes, a coherent interpretive pattern becomes visible. Participants' accounts move from experiences of constrained authenticity and emotional regulation within masculinist organizational contexts, to narratives shaped by internalized gender norms and psychosocial consequences such as shame and fear, and finally toward practices aimed at restoring balance through relational, embodied, and spiritual engagement. The divine feminine emerges within this progression not as an isolated theme but as a meaning-making framework through which participants reinterpret earlier experiences and articulate alternative orientations to leadership, community, and professional identity. This theme consolidates how participants articulate authenticity, vulnerability, compassion, and relationality as culturally meaningful counter-repertoires to masculinist organizational norms. It also clarifies how these traits translate into leadership and community practices with transferable relevance to equity-oriented mentoring, inclusion work, and trauma-informed environments in higher education.

As mentioned, many of the feminine traits, such as: sensation, feeling, intuition, collaboration, community-building, nurturing, and vulnerability, which have been termed to be divine feminine traits (Kleven, 2011) emerged in the interview data. Throughout the episodes, the interviewees and the host spoke about the importance of connecting to the divine feminine characteristics not just in their personal lives, but also in the workplace. Many of the interviewees believed that the advantage that women have in the marketplace is their emotional intelligence and their ability to feel their emotions fully. They believed that this helps them to be compassionate for

themselves and others. They believed that these divine feminine characteristics are essential to solving business problems.

Vulnerable

Despite the challenges that many of the interviewees experienced about displaying their emotions, sharing their feelings, and being expected to override their feminine characteristics in preference for masculine characteristics, they remained willing to be vulnerable. Interviewee #1 spoke about not being afraid of being vulnerable. She was willing to share her intimate experiences. In this vein, the host of the podcast had a similar intention for starting this women's collective. She wanted to give women an opportunity to be vulnerable. She wanted to create a space for women to connect, share, and heal. As a result of this platform, women in this community showed a great willingness to share very intimate details of their personal lives. Despite the toxic masculinity norms that pervade society and the perception that those who display vulnerability are weak (Overall, 2021a), Interviewee #5 talked about how displaying vulnerability and one's emotions is actually a sign of strength. Similarly, she also suggested that just because one is perceived as strong does not mean that they cannot be vulnerable. Strength and vulnerability are not mutually exclusive.

Feeling

Feeling involves displaying and communicating one's emotions freely. Those who have the ability to feel the emotions of others have been described as having strong empathetic qualities. Individuals that have these abilities have been described as 'empaths' in the extant literature (Langdon, 2020). Because of their ability to feel and sense the emotions of others strongly, empaths often take on the energy of others or take on the energy of spaces.

As an empathic child, it was discussed in the first interview that, because children do not fully understand the complexity of adult emotions, when they feel the negative emotions of adult caregivers, they can often blame themselves for the mood of the adult. In other words, children often feel that they are responsible for the sadness, anger, or frustration experienced by adults. Although they may not be responsible for the emotions of the adult, the empath child is often unable to decipher the cause of the feelings of others. If there is erratic behavior in the household, which the host had experienced and described in the first interview, the empathic child can feel unsafe. As the host aged, she learned the importance of feeling her emotions and reacting to them. She suggested that individuals need to "... let the feelings go through

you and not in you as the emotions can manifest into physical symptoms", which is consistent with the narrative around physical health challenges and unexpressed emotions described earlier.

In the second episode, Interviewee #2 spoke about how she had been shamed by friends for her willingness to share her feelings and emotions. Rooted in toxic masculinity norms, Overall (2021) suggested that when individuals share their emotions with others, they are often met with anger, frustration, or dismissiveness. As a result of this, Interviewee #6 had struggles in expressing her emotions throughout her life, which contributed to her eating disorder. Overtime and through her healing, she learned that she needed to have honest conversations, first with herself and then with others, about her emotions and feelings. She learned that she needed to connect with her feelings so that they do not manifest in other ways, like physical health issues, overtime.

Compassion

Interviewee #4 discussed the importance of maintaining compassion for oneself and others, despite how difficult things might appear. To aid in this process, Interviewee #4 suggested that individuals should try to stay in their heart center as opposed to over-thinking their problems. She believed that if you are centred on the heart, you will always be able to find compassion.

Within her career as an advocate for social justice, Interviewee #4 spoke, at length, about maintaining compassion for those that need support and those who are less fortunate than her. In the conversation, the host had the following to say about the compassion that Interviewee #4 has displayed in her work: "You are a great teacher and a great guide. You are shepherding so many people. That comes with a lot of compassion."

Interconnectedness to Others, Community, and Nature

Each of the interviewees spoke about the importance of maintaining a connection to others through a sense of community, which as Interviewee #2 suggested, has been challenging for women functioning in the masculine-dominant labour force. Interviewee #2 mentioned the importance of creating a community of women where they can be vulnerable and authentic. She said that women need to be "... unapologetic about sharing. It is OK to ask for help when one needs it." She emphasized how important communities are and the need to maintain connections with other people to ultimately create a safe space. Interviewee #3 spoke about the importance of helping others in one's community. She said, "... the most important thing is what people do in

community. If we help others become successful, then we become successful, too."

At the close of the first interview, the host had this to say about this podcast community: "... this space always amazes me. This community gets deeper. I learn something every time. I have gratitude for people sharing their heart and soul on stage." At the conclusion of Interview #5, the host had this to say:

... one of the big themes around the idea of talking to strangers, of coming together, not in the echo chambers... That is what we are trying to do in this community. Bringing people together to have conversations that they would not have had, but need to have.

Several of the interviewees (i.e., #4 and #5) spoke about how humans have become disconnected from themselves and ultimately from each other. Interviewee #6 revealed that she encountered the most traumatic experiences in her life when she felt disconnected from herself and others. During these tumultuous times, she felt like an outcast, that she did not fit in, and that she was not good enough. This made her feel isolated whereby she did not have the ability to connect with others. She suggested that: "I was not connected enough in myself to even notice this. I just wanted to get far, far away from myself and others." This lack of connection drove her into one of the most challenging periods of her life - her eating disorder.

The interviewees spoke about the importance of staying connected to nature. Interviewee #1 highlighted that she needed to move from the city to nature. She had to live in the woods as, in the city, she felt anxious all the time. When Interviewee #1 is in the city, she said that she takes on the energy of the city – "... you take on the energy of the rat race." To her, "nature is everything." However, developing this connection with nature was not easy at first - she said that she needed to rework her relationship with nature. To her, "God is nature" and maintaining a connection to nature brings her closer to God. In this way, being connected to nature is a spiritual phenomenon. The host echoed these sentiments and spoke about nature in spiritual terms, but she remained fearful of nature. She suggested that although she has much appreciation for nature, she recognizes that humans are not the dominant force on this planet, but rather nature is.

Although framed in terms of feminine-coded practices, such as vulnerability and compassion, these relational strategies align with broader evidence that marginalized groups frequently rely on communal coping and collective agency to navigate exclusion. By linking divine feminine traits to community resilience, the findings resonate with how women of color and other underrepresented groups have historically mobilized relational

leadership and solidarity to counteract systemic inequities (Collins, 2000; Settles et al., 2020).

Taken together, the findings demonstrate how divine feminine discourse operates as an interpretive bridge linking institutional constraint, embodied experience, and relational leadership practice. The discussion section situates these patterns within feminist, organizational, and higher education scholarship.

DISCUSSION

This study advances scholarship on gender, identity, and organizational life by foregrounding two interconnected contributions. Interpreting these findings through the lens of the divine feminine clarifies how authenticity, vulnerability, compassion, and relational–communal leadership function as culturally meaningful counter-repertoires to masculinist organizational norms operating across intersectional contexts. First, it reconceptualizes authenticity as an embodied, trauma-linked dimension of professional identity that has direct implications for the design of higher education structures and practices, particularly for underrepresented groups navigating intersectional marginalization. Second, it theorizes relational–communal leadership, rooted in vulnerability, compassion, and mind–body practices, as a counter-paradigm to masculinist organizational logics with significant transferability to academic mentoring, faculty diversity initiatives, and trauma-informed pedagogy. These contributions enrich organizational and educational literatures by demonstrating how identity work, resilience, and leadership practices are experienced and enacted within communities of women and may be extended to broader populations in higher education and allied professional domains. Although this analysis is grounded in a Canadian professional collective, the findings resonate with global patterns in which women and other underrepresented groups navigate intersecting barriers across cultural and institutional contexts. Integrating comparative perspectives underscores that the dynamics of authenticity, trauma, and relational–communal leadership are not confined to North America but reflect broader structural challenges in higher education and organizational systems worldwide (Morley, 2013; Bhopal, 2016).

The affective textures that participants described—fear of sanction, vigilance around voice, and the labor of appearing ‘composed’—resonate with research on emotional labor and minority stress in organizational and academic settings, where suppression is linked to strain and reduced belonging (Grandey et al., 2012; Meyer, 2003). These dynamics are intensified for multiply marginalized groups through intersectional invisibility and cultural taxation, where individuals are simultaneously tasked

with visible service work and erased in recognition and advancement (Padilla, 1994; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2021; Settles et al., 2020). In this light, participants' emphasis on vulnerability, compassion, and communal practices can be read not as 'soft skills' but as counter-logics that enable psychological safety, inclusion, and learning—particularly salient in higher education contexts (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Boyatzis et al., 2012; Kezar & Holcombe, 2017).

Authenticity as Embodied, Trauma-Linked Professional Identity

Authenticity is widely associated with well-being, ethical conduct, and effective leadership (Erickson, 1995; Roberts, 2005). Yet women and minority professionals frequently confront institutionalized pressures to mute or reconfigure identity expressions in order to conform to dominant cultural norms, resulting in heightened emotional labor, burnout, and compromised health (Hochschild, 1983; Grandey et al., 2012; Settles et al., 2020). Within higher education, these dynamics are evident in "cultural taxation," whereby women and faculty of color are expected to suppress authentic expressions while simultaneously absorbing disproportionate mentoring and service burdens (Padilla, 1994; Turner et al., 2008). Intersectional analyses demonstrate that women of color, queer faculty, and those from working-class backgrounds experience compounded pressures to manage identity and voice, often with material consequences for promotion, tenure, and belonging (Crenshaw, 1991; Settles et al., 2020). Recent work on intersectional invisibility further shows how multiply marginalized individuals can be simultaneously hypervisible in expectations of labor yet invisible in recognition and advancement, sharpening the inequities outlined here (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2021).

The findings extend this body of work by demonstrating that authenticity is not solely a matter of strategic role performance but is often shaped by embodied histories of trauma and systemic silencing. Participants described childhood experiences of shame and suppression that resurfaced in professional settings, constraining their ability to advocate for themselves and producing somatic manifestations such as illness and burnout (Impett et al., 2012; Peterson et al., 2017; Böge et al., 2020). By highlighting trauma as a structuring condition of authenticity, the study reframes identity regulation as a long-term, embodied process rather than a purely situational strategy. This insight is transferable to higher education in several ways: trauma-informed pedagogies can create classroom environments where students from underrepresented backgrounds feel safe to articulate experiences without fear of reprisal; mentoring structures can validate authenticity as a professional

asset rather than a liability; and faculty development programs can train leaders to recognize the embodied costs of suppression in academic workplaces (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017; Boyatzis et al., 2012). The contribution lies in shifting authenticity research from a focus on individual choice to an acknowledgment of structural, historical, and embodied constraints, thereby offering a framework more responsive to the realities of intersectionally marginalized groups in higher education.

Relational–Communal Leadership: Vulnerability, Compassion, and Mind–Body Practices

Dominant leadership paradigms in organizations and higher education valorize assertiveness, rationality, and competitiveness, producing role incongruity for women and non-dominant identity groups (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Feminist scholarship has long critiqued these masculinist frameworks for devaluing relational, emotional, and community-based practices (Calás & Smircich, 2006; Binns, 2008). At the same time, growing evidence suggests that compassion, vulnerability, and collaboration can improve learning outcomes, innovation, and collective resilience in diverse and educational environments (Boyatzis et al., 2012; Bryant, 2007; Walker & Dixon, 2002). Together, this work and the present findings specify how intersectionally aware, compassion-centered leadership can expand access to opportunity while countering masculinist prototypes of competence (Roberts et al., 2019; Ely & Meyerson, 2000).

This study contributes by empirically demonstrating how professional women articulate divine feminine traits—vulnerability, compassion, and interconnectedness—as leadership resources rather than deficits. In creating peer spaces for open dialogue, participants challenged the stigma of vulnerability and reframed emotional expression as a practice of accountability, inclusion, and creativity. These findings enrich leadership theory by grounding abstract calls for relational leadership in lived practices that are transferable to academic settings. This aligns with contemporary scholarship documenting how race and intersectionality shape leadership opportunities, showing that women of color in particular must navigate the paradox of demonstrating competence within masculinist systems while simultaneously cultivating relational strategies that sustain inclusion and belonging (Roberts et al., 2019). For example, mentoring programs that normalize vulnerability between mentors and mentees may foster trust and psychological safety for first-generation and minority students; diversity initiatives that center compassion as an evaluative criterion for leadership can shift hiring and promotion away from purely instrumental metrics; and shared

leadership models in universities can incorporate community-building practices that enhance equity and belonging (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017).

Further, participants emphasized mind–body practices such as mindfulness, yoga, and restorative engagement with nature as means of regulating emotion and sustaining resilience. These practices align with evidence that mindfulness-based interventions reduce stress and improve academic outcomes, particularly for underrepresented students facing hostile climates (Shapiro et al., 2008; Galante et al., 2018). The study's contribution lies in positioning such practices not as individualized coping mechanisms but as collective strategies that, when integrated into organizational and educational structures, can redistribute resilience from the individual to the institution. This reframing advances leadership scholarship by showing how embodied practices intersect with community-building to challenge masculinist norms and promote equity.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how millennial women participating in a professional podcast collective articulated challenges and strategies related to authenticity, work–life balance, gendered expectations, and the cultivation of divine feminine traits. Analysis of six podcast episodes revealed four interconnected categories: (1) work–life challenges, (2) traditional gender norms, (3) mind–body connection, and (4) divine feminine traits. While the dataset was modest in scope, the findings highlight how participants made sense of their professional and personal lives within masculinist organizational cultures, and how they articulated alternative models of leadership and resilience.

Rather than interpreting these experiences as representative of all women, the findings illustrate how a specific group of professional women narrated their struggles and aspirations in a collective context designed to foreground marginalized voices. Participants described authenticity as both vital and difficult to sustain in workplaces shaped by conformity pressures, and they linked suppression of identity and emotion to long-term costs for health and well-being. They also drew on community, spirituality, and mind–body practices as resources for resilience, articulating forms of relational–communal leadership that contrast with dominant masculinist paradigms. Taken together, these insights illuminate how women are engaging with broader cultural discourses such as #MeToo and the "divine feminine" in ways that reshape identity, leadership, and workplace participation.

The significance of these findings lies not in their generalizability, but in the depth of understanding they provide about how women—many

from underrepresented communities—navigate professional life. The study demonstrates that divine feminine traits such as vulnerability, compassion, and interconnectedness are not abstract ideals but lived strategies of coping and leadership that address the inequities of masculinist organizational cultures. This contribution adds nuance to feminist and organizational literatures by showing how women actively reinterpret cultural archetypes to make sense of systemic challenges in professional and educational contexts.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The dataset was small and derived from a single Canadian collective, which limits the transferability of findings. Because the podcast transcripts were secondary data, demographic details could not be systematically collected, though the collective explicitly centered BIPOC and other underrepresented women. Future research could extend these insights by examining similar collectives in other cultural or national contexts, employing comparative designs that illuminate both commonalities and differences across settings. Quantitative studies may also help to assess the broader prevalence of these themes.

Implications for Practice

Although exploratory in scope, the findings carry several implications for higher education and organizational practice. First, the challenges participants described underscore the need for trauma-informed approaches in workplaces and academic institutions. When women linked inauthenticity to earlier experiences of silencing and shame, they highlighted how organizational contexts can reactivate embodied histories of marginalization. Institutions can respond by fostering environments where disclosure, restorative feedback, and emotional expression are supported as integral to equity and well-being.

Second, the articulation of relational–communal leadership suggests that qualities often devalued in masculinist contexts—vulnerability, compassion, collaboration—are in fact resources for effective leadership. Universities and organizations can strengthen equity initiatives by recognizing these traits as markers of leadership potential and by embedding them into mentoring programs, faculty development, and diversity strategies. This is particularly relevant for women of colour, first-generation professionals, and LGBTQ+ employees, who often shoulder disproportionate service and mentoring obligations while navigating systemic bias.

Finally, the participants' emphasis on spirituality and mind–body practices signals the importance of expanding wellness frameworks in

educational and professional domains. Rather than treating mindfulness, yoga, or restorative practices as optional self-care, institutions might consider how these practices can be structurally integrated into organizational life as collective resources that sustain resilience, reduce stress, and promote creativity. Such integration is especially critical in contexts where underrepresented groups experience hostile climates or minority stress, and where resilience cannot be left solely to individual coping.

In sum, this study contributes by showing how a group of professional women narrated authenticity, resilience, and leadership in the wake of #MeToo, and by articulating implications for equity and inclusion in higher education and professional workplaces. While modest in scope, the findings underscore that the divine feminine traits participants emphasized are not ancillary or symbolic, but practical resources that can help reconfigure organizational cultures toward greater inclusivity, well-being, and justice.

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