‘If your voice isn't accepted, does it mean you stop talking?’: Exploring a woman leader’s reversal of postfeminist confidence discourses

Abstract

Purpose - This article offers a lens for exploring women leaders’ production of resistance through postfeminist discourses. Through the case study of Bozoma Saint John, a high-profile Black C-Suite executive, it examines micro-acts of subversion and considers the extent they can promote feminist thinking in the corporate world and the implications for feminist theorising about women in leadership.

Design/methodology/approach - Interviews with Saint John were collected from YouTube and examined using feminist critical discourse analysis informed by intersectionality, feminist poststructuralism and Foucault’s notion of ‘reverse discourse’.

Findings - Saint John reproduces elements of the postfeminist confidence discourse to defy stereotypes of Black women, while simultaneously reversing the individualistic conception of confidence in favour of corporate and collective action. This has the potential to facilitate positive change, albeit within the boundaries of the confidence culture.

Research implications - Combining reverse discourse, intersectionality and feminist poststructuralism with a micro-level analysis of women leaders’ language use can help to capture the ways postfeminist concepts are given new subversive meanings.

Originality - Whereas existing studies have focused on how elite women’s promotion of confidence sustains the status quo, this article shifts the research gaze to the resistance realised through rearticulations of confidence, illustrating how women-in-leadership research can advance feminist theorising without vilifying senior women even as they participate in postfeminist logics of success.

Keywords Postfeminism; Confidence culture; Women in leadership; Resistance; Reverse discourse; Intersectionality

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Women's increased participation and visibility in leadership have been linked to a plethora of positive social and organisational outcomes, including providing role models for women and girls to envisage what their own career pathways could look like. However, scholars have raised concerns about the messages that women leaders promote to other women (Rottenberg, 2018). These high-flyers have been critiqued for imputing the blame for gender workplace inequalities to women's psyches and pushing self-confidence and resilience as individualistic recipes for career advancement (Adamson and Kelan, 2019). Their prescriptions to women to be fearless agents of their own destiny have been criticised as part of a wider 'confidence culture' dedicated to inspiring and manufacturing self-belief in how women behave in the multitude of practices in their daily lives (Orgad and Gill, 2022). The issue is not confidence in and of itself, but the persistent call on women to turn inward towards cultivating the optimal mindset to overcome barriers, and away from collectively dismantling the structural conditions that create those obstacles. It has been frequently argued that by locating women's systemic disadvantage as a psychological deficit, the confidence culture and elite women's mantras of self-improvement shore up a postfeminist, postracial, postclass and postqueer facade of equality (Gill and Orgad, 2017).

Yet, women in leadership do push against the status quo, sometimes in ways that are small and subtle but significant enough to instigate change in their organisations (Cho *et al.*, 2021). These include micro-acts of resistance such as rearticulating dominant discourses with slightly different meanings to legitimise women's organisational demands and their role as leaders (Jamjoom and Mills, 2022), what Foucault (1990) speaks of as 'reversing' discourses. Reverse discourses draw on the language of disciplining rhetorics but do so to make a case for lower power groups (Kingfisher, 1996). They are practices of resignification that rely on polysemicity - "the ability of linguistic signs to develop more than one meaning" - to fashion opposed semantic interpretations of dominant discourses (Weaver, 2010, p.150). Such forms of resistance may seem negligible and conservative compared to radical critique, but by using the logic of dominant discourses and the familiar natural-order-of-things, they have an increased possibility of being accepted by the more powerful (Haugaard, 2022). When repeated and accumulate over time, they can give words new subversive meanings, undermine the force of normalisation, and suggest alternative ways of life (Butler, 1997; Lilja, 2018). Despite their name, reverse discourses are not a complete overturn of pre-existing discourses as they are parasitic on the latter and can never be fully detached from the original meaning. In deploying power-loaded

concepts in new ways, they remain fundamentally polysemic, with the potential to both subvert and rearticulate previously established meanings (Lilja, 2018, 2022; Weaver, 2010). In this sense, reverse discourses take shape *within* power relations, which indicates the problematic nature of compliance/defiance dualisms. What may appear as an accommodation to capitalism and male dominance by senior women can also contain micro-expressions of resistance which are able to spread and engender "a slow transformation of values" (Bleiker, 2000, p.276). This perspective underpins this article. In response to this Special Issue's call to consider the impact women leaders can have on gender equality and feminist theorising (Mavin, Elliott, Stead and Grandy, 2021), I take up the idea of the subversive potential of reverse discourses to explore a woman leader's use of postfeminist confidence discourses not only as an instrument of power but also as "a starting point for an opposing strategy" (Foucault, 1990, p.101) which can have a feminist effect, albeit within the boundaries of the confidence culture.

Following Mavin and Grandy (2018), this paper contemplates how elite women can provoke change in 'imperfect' places. Reverse discourses entail "strategic play with(in) dominant discourses, in the spaces created by contradiction" (Kingfisher, 1996, p.541). The paradox inherent in postfeminist confidence rhetoric that women, on the one hand, can have it all but, on the other, must harness their psychological resources to overcome disparity offers a discursive space within which women leaders may mobilise elements of the confidence imperative to challenge unjust conditions and "rock the boat without falling out of it" (Meyerson, 2001). Orgad and Gill (2022) have illustrated how in TV shows, social media, books and popular songs, confidence discourses are being rearticulated with political elements to form powerful alternatives to the mainstream individualistic paradigm. However, studies on women leaders' exhortations to confidence have concentrated more on their depoliticising tendencies rather than any active resistance working through these injunctions (Marks, 2021). This article aims to offer an alternative lens through which to view elite womens' promotion of confidence, one that distinguishes small subversive acts which are undertaken in 'imperfect' spaces but "through time, can 'wrench' the 'script' out of order and open up opportunities for other ways of being" (Lilja, 2021, p.144). It bears applicability beyond the confidence culture by elucidating how a close linguistic analysis can capture the ways senior women widen the use of postfeminist language to encompass more feminist agendas.

In this paper, I examine interviews with Bozoma Saint John, Netflix's first BlackC-Suite executive. Saint John gained popular visibility in 2016 when, as global head of consumer marketing for Apple Music, she was lauded for her exuberance onstage at Apple's highly covered Worldwide Developers Conference. In 2017, she was appointed Uber's Chief Brand Officer to rehabilitate its reputation following allegations of sexual harassment and discrimination. She joined Endeavor as its Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) the following year, before taking up the same role at Netflix in 2020. She left the company in March 2022 and as of June 2022, has not joined another organisation. Among her many

recognitions, she was named by Forbes as the world's most influential CMO in 2021 and inducted into the Marketing Hall of Fame in 2022.

Saint John was chosen as a case study firstly, because of her high-profile success and much-admired, well-cultivated persona of a 'badass', which affords her influence in reshaping contemporary understandings of confidence at work. She has launched *The Badass Workshop*, a series of online sessions to help professionals architect their "greatest self" (The Badass Workshop, 2021), and the *Badass Business Bootcamp* which teaches participants how to cultivate confidence and "become the badass [they] know [they] are" (Team Nas Academy, 2021). She was also invited by Harvard Business School to teach *Anatomy of a Badass*, a course about being "unapologetically bold and authentic at work" (Pazzanese, 2021). Further, her gender and racial equality advocacy likely confers her some authority to speak about female fortitude. An example of a social justice initiative that she co-spearheaded is #ShareTheMicNow which saw 52 Black women leaders taking over the Instagram feeds of 52 White women celebrities to amplify Black women's voices and their contributions to dismantling racist systems. Additionally, examining the practices of a Black business elite contributes to feminist theorising about how minority ethnic women executives enact postfeminism and espouse as well as reverse its vocabulary. Women-in-leadership research has often looked at White figurations of postfeminism, but as Butler (2013, p.48) points out, many non-White women "appear to be appropriating the language of postfeminism in unexpected, and thus potentially disruptive, ways". In line with this, this paper extends the current focus on White women to consider how the compounded discrimination that Saint John undergoes by virtue of her race and gender, as she navigates spaces dominated by White men, has shaped her mobilisation of confidence as a tool for resistance. This adds an intersectional perspective to scholarly conversations on women leaders and postfeminism which engages more directly with racialised experiences.

The article proceeds with a selective literature review on, firstly, elite women's confidence discourse and the issues raised by feminist scholars, and secondly, controlling images that harm Black women in their professional lives. I then explain my methodology and illustrate how Saint John reverses postfeminist notions of confidence to challenge the gender and racial prejudice women encounter at work. This paper concludes by deliberating the emancipatory potential and limitations of her discursive resistance and the implications for feminist theorising about women in leadership.

Women leaders and the call to confidence

The past decade has witnessed a growing research interest in the autobiographies and career self-help manuals by women CEOs and business elites such as Sheryl Sandberg. Adamson and Kelan (2019) argue that the scrutiny of distant women role models (Gibson,

2003) is needed as women look to these public figures for inspiration on how to advance to the upper echelons of management, especially given the paucity of close role models in many companies. Critically examining their widely read books can shed light on what gendered behaviours and identities as well as leadership styles are popularised amongst women readers (Adamson, 2017). The studies reveal a common thread, namely the relevance of confidence and personal agency as catalysts for success. The narratives present highly individualistic tropes of persistence and determination (Adamson and Johansson, 2021) with 'female heroes' underpinned by "confidence to jump over gendered barriers; control in managing these barriers; and courage to push through them" (Adamson and Kelan, 2019, p.982). The unquestioned efficacy of confidence and related dispositions in the texts is characteristic of the postfeminist confidence culture and has been reinforced by senior women beyond the elite autobiography genre or the Western world. In Fodor *et al.*'s (2018) interviews, women executives in Hungary spoke strongly of the need for women to equip themselves with the requisite confidence, competitiveness and ambition to succeed in the corporate world.

These incitements to confidence have been criticised for perpetuating the myth that the root cause of workplace gender inequality is a female confidence crisis that must be dealt with through individualised and psychologised solutions (Orgad and Gill, 2022). Metz and Kumra (2019) pondered on the extent individual action, proposed in books like Sandberg's *Lean In*, can stimulate change and career opportunities for women. Building on Ragins and Sundstrom's (1989) framework of gender and power in organisations, they contend that whilst women's individual agency can exert some influence on the interpersonal, organisational and societal factors that contribute to career advancement, individual-level efforts are the least effectual and, thus, a more holistic approach is needed to address issues beyond women's control. Emphasising personal strategies, they argue, exculpates colleagues, decision makers, organisations and societies of their shared responsibility to eliminate these barriers. Adamson and Kelan (2019) further assert that in promoting the confident ideal, women leaders contribute to an individualistic 'one-woman-at-a-time' logic rather than a collective uplifting of women. At the same time, feminist scholars acknowledge that the turn to confidence has been instrumental in placing work-related gender inequality on the agenda (Orgad and Gill, 2022) and despite the limited scope of women leaders' self-help literature, it can serve as a form of consciousness-raising that provides women with the vocabulary to name gendered work challenges and emboldens them to boost their careers through strategies within their capacity (Metz and Kumra, 2019).

In recent years, a seemingly contradictory move has emerged where confessions of self-doubt, burnout, depression and trauma are encouraged (Orgad and Gill, 2022). For example, Gill and Orgad (2018) found that compared with *Lean In*, Sandberg's second book, *Option B*, contains more disclosures of vulnerability and injury which are less quickly resolved. However, whilst the turn to vulnerability might appear to challenge the

confidence imperative and its emphasis on 'positive' feelings, it in fact shores up the confidence culture by authorising exhortations to look inward and work on the self (Orgad and Gill, 2022). In *Option B*, Sandberg expresses vulnerability but only in order to renounce it. Her exposed injuries are transformed into injunctions to grow and be more resilient (Gill and Orgad, 2018). Beneath such incitements is a parallel silence around interdependence, relationality and community. Equally, the structural causes of vulnerability and their systemic solutions are rarely acknowledged or discussed (Orgad and Gill, 2022). Following Corlett *et al.* (2019), such conceptions of vulnerability as problems to be overcome individually are unlikely to promote managerial learning. They argue that when vulnerability is reconceptualised as strength rather than weakness that must be masked – or in the case of the confidence culture, transmuted – and managers are able to share their vulnerability with trusted others without engaging in defensive identity work, then learning can flourish.

Confidence has also become intimately entangled with authenticity (Orgad and Gill, 2022). Kapasi *et al.* (2016) found that elite women used their autobiographies to craft an 'authentic' self that faced struggles in the rise to leadership on account of being a woman in a man's world, but overcame them by staying in control, taking risks despite her fears, and remaining true to herself. They also enact an authentically confident leadership style through their bodies, specifically their refusal to dress as others advise because it does not reflect their 'true self'. Like the embrace of vulnerability, this turn to authenticity has been critiqued as a paradox (Ford and Harding, 2011). Although the emphasis is seemingly on staying true to oneself, the authentic confidence favoured necessitates supplanting 'negative' feelings with an upbeat outlook (Orgad and Gill, 2022).

These studies show how women leaders promote a configuration of positive emotions, attitudes and behaviours while disavowing or reformulating negative ones. In muting critique of injurious structures, their injunctions to confidence are regarded as expressions of a postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2017). However, the social meanings surrounding the affective states and practices being advocated are unstable. Even as the call to confidence is repeated as before, these reiterations can repeat against their origin to become part of subversive discourses (Butler, 1997; Lilja, 2018). Thus, whereas past scholarship has concentrated on how elite women's confidence tropes sustain arrangements of power and circumscribe thinking about gender inequality, this article shifts the research gaze to the resistance produced from within this discursive power structure and the feminist possibilities that open up as political meanings are attached to confidence.

Confidence and Black women stereotypes in the workplace

It is well-documented that African American women contend with being embodied as 'angry Black women' who are overly aggressive (Rosette *et al.*, 2016). This stereotype poses distinct challenges for them in the workplace. Motro *et al.* (2022) showed that expressions of anger by Black women at work lead to poorer performance evaluations and assessment of leadership capabilities (cf. Livingston *et al.*, 2012). Because Black women are often assumed to speak from a place of anger, enacting confidence and dominance could have negative implications for them. In a study with Black women athletic directors, McDowell and Carter-Francique (2017) found that the women were very conscious of this and felt pressure to tone down their voices and regulate their behaviour to alleviate stereotype threat. Images of Black women are not consistently negative. Rosette *et al.* (2016) reported they are also seen as strong and hardworking, but these attributes are unlikely to enhance perceptions of their leadership potential in the face of negative stereotypes about Black people's intelligence and competence.

It is unsurprising, then, that many Black women believe that to attain leadership, they must deemphasise their racial identity while presenting themselves in ways consistent with a corporate identity based on White norms (McDowell and Carter-Francique, 2017). This is supported by Opie and Phillips's (2015) findings that Black women with Afrocentric hairstyles were rated as less professional than those with Eurocentric hairstyles. They posit that donning Afrocentric hair not only triggers damaging stereotypes of Black people, but may be negatively assessed as an act of dominance for going against White appearance standards of professionalism. While these studies discuss the negative outcomes of Black women's agentic behaviour, the present paper illustrates how confidence can be deployed to resist Black women stereotypes.

Data and analytical approach

This study examines eleven interviews with Saint John totaling almost six and a half hours. These interviews were conducted between 2016 and 2021 during conferences and for podcasts, television shows and online series. To construct this sample, videos were retrieved from YouTube using the search term 'Bozoma Saint John' and sorted by view count. I reviewed the twenty-two videos that had more than 10,000 views at the time (January 2022) and then narrowed these down to one-to-one interviews that centered on Saint John's professional experiences, achievements and challenges, resulting in the sample of eleven videos described in Table 1 below. The analysis focuses on the most viewed interviews because the discursive reversals in these have a greater likelihood to be repeated over time, grow more dispersed, and in the process, create a subversive effect (Lilja, 2022). Saint John by herself cannot transform the postfeminist confidence discourse "since her words must become a way of speaking that those constituted within the terms of [the] discourse take up as their own" (Davies, 2000, p.68). Following the

analysis described below, data saturation was reached. Hence, no further interviews were added to the sample.

Table I. The Interviews Examined

In cases where YouTube transcripts were available, these were retrieved. Otherwise, the videos were transcribed using Otter.ai, an online artificial intelligence-based transcription service. Both sets of transcripts were manually checked and corrected, and then examined using feminist critical discourse analysis (Lazar, 2005) as the overarching approach.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is an analytical perspective that interrogates how dominant discourses and ways of knowing, doing and being are legitimised, contested or changed through language use. This makes it an ideal approach for examining how Saint John gives voice to postfeminist discourse in ways that could work against sexism and racism. CDA practitioners draw on an interdisciplinary 'toolkit' of theories and methods. In the present analysis, feminist theories provide productive ways of characterising Saint John's exhortations to confidence. Through intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), this study considers the influence of her intersecting identities of race and gender on her professional experiences in White male-dominated workplaces and contextualises her reversals of postfeminist confidence against this backdrop. Another valuable lens is feminist poststructuralism which views subjectivity as constructed through discourses, which in turn are realised through language and other social practices. Although a woman cannot escape the discourses through which she constitutes herself and is constituted, she is capable of negotiating, refusing and reforming discourses and her positioning within these to achieve her desired subjectivity (Mackenzie, 2018), for example by rearticulating elements of discourses into new meanings. This study explores how Saint John takes up and resists various subject positions by reversing discourses that constitute the mainstream confidence culture at the same time that she participates in them. The layered analysis of her talk examines the micro-level use of language such as the discursive construction of social actors, actions and purpose (van Leeuwen, 2008) in light of the macro-level social order and the critique levelled against the confidence imperative in existing scholarship.

Findings

Saint John reproduces discursive elements that constitute the postfeminist confidence culture, but in so doing, simultaneously reverses its individualistic conception of confidence and counteracts controlling images of Black women. Confidence, courage and resilience are regularly presented as solutions to women's workplace disadvantages and, to an extent, women's push for progress is still framed as a personal endeavour. However, against the myth of a female confidence deficit, Saint John highlights the sexism and

racism in the corporate environment, reversing the positioning of women as held back by diffidence and doubt. Confidence, conceptualised elsewhere as a tool for self-advancement, is rearticulated as an instrument for organisational change, equality and collective action. Further, by giving precedence to positive affect and performing as a confident role model, Saint John defies longstanding stereotypes that Black women are ill-tempered and lack the intellect to lead. The following linguistic analysis of extracts from the interviews illustrates these findings.

Corporate and collective change

In the first excerpt, Saint John explains why she joined Uber as its chief brand executive at a time when it was beleaguered by the #DeleteUber movement and allegations of sexual harassment and discrimination:

> **Extract 1**
>
> Have we forgotten that **every** company in corporate America is exactly like this? … if Uber is going to be the poster child for having to fix all of the ills, you know, around representation and its treatment of of women and uh people of colour inside of the company, uh then yeah, I'm going to sign up for that because if Uber can change, then so can **everybody else**. (*View from the Top Podcast*, emphasis added)

Saint John adopts the subject position of a confident leader who accepts challenges and takes risks (*yeah, I'm going to sign up for that*). While 'leaning in' may enable her to maximise her potential (Sandberg, 2013), the stated purpose for her action *sign up* was to establish the public narrative for Uber as it *fixes its representation problem and treatment of women and people of colour* and, through this, catalyse change in corporate America (*if Uber can change, then so can everybody else*). This reverses confidence messages that women should cultivate courage and tenacity to fit and thrive in, rather than disrupt, existing corporate realities (Adamson and Kelan, 2019).

Saint John also reverses the individualisation and psychologisation of women's work-related difficulties by presenting them as a systemic problem through her use of the determiner *every* and pronoun *everybody else* (in bold). Moreover, it is corporations, not individual women, that are represented as agents of the problem and solution (*its treatment*, *Uber has to fix*, *Uber can change*, *everybody else can change*), thus placing blame and responsibility back onto institutions. Returning to Ragins and Sundstrom's (1989) framework of gender and power discussed earlier, this shifts the emphasis from individual factors for career success to organisational ones, which can achieve greater impact for women. Yet, there is a remnant of the postfeminist individualisation of change in the extract. The implicature arising is that Saint John's action alone can set in motion positive changes in corporate culture, which renders her a self-sufficient change agent. Similar self-positionings were identified across the interviews, but the analysis shows that

she also advocates interdependence and a collective response to structural issues, as exemplified by the next two excerpts. In Extract 2, she shares her views about the surprise others felt about the problems at Uber:

> **Extract 2**
>
> First of all, if you're going to ask me how I feel about this moment, then you haven't been paying attention cos do you think I became a Black woman yesterday in corporate America? Like did that just happen? You don't think I've been dealing with this for the entirety of my career? I'm pissed off. That does not make any sense to me. But **I am going to rise above it and use this moment to push us forward, you know, truly step on the gas and push us forward** … let's just gather the forces … I want everyone to step on the gas. (*Talks at GS*, emphasis added)

The excerpt begins with Saint John's vulnerability confession. Through her explicit positioning as *a Black woman in corporate America*, she connects her vulnerability to its structural source. By committing to *rise above it*, she reconstructs the familiar narrative within postfeminist confidence culture that progresses from victimhood to self-determination to emerge as a 'bounce-backable' subject (Gill and Orgad, 2018) and 'female hero' who is in control of her career challenges and feelings (Adamson and Kelan, 2019). In contrast to the mainstream confidence discourse, her emotional transformation is not instrumentalised as an opportunity for personal growth, but harnessed for social progress, which she emphasises by repeating *push us forward*. In the clauses in bold, Saint John is the agent of her actions (*use this moment*, *step on the gas*) as well as her purpose (*push us forward*), which discursively empowers her as a self-reliant, confident woman "who can set a goal and then determine, autonomously, how to achieve it" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p.127). However, she subsequently speaks from a more communal subject position and entreats others through the suggestive *let's just gather the forces* and indirect command *I want everyone to step on the gas*. This call for the collective pursuit of change reverses the individualised interventions demanded by postfeminism as well as the assumption that vulnerability can be resolved by adjusting one's mindset. Instead, she seeks to share her experienced vulnerability with others and is receptive to the possibilities that this relational openness offers (Corlett *et al*., 2019).

Within the confidence culture, women are encouraged to assert themselves in order to be noticed (Orgad and Gill, 2022). Saint John reverses this by encouraging women to speak up in service of others, as illustrated below:

> **Extract 3**
>
> I'm always a fan of being proactive and even being proactive in um the way of of gathering friends to do your talking for you too … you've got to bring it in. So you've got to find ways to talk about them in ways in which obviously it's natural to the conversation, but you are consciously bringing in their achievements or the things they're working on so that they're

part of the conversation and they're doing that for me. (*Better Together with Maria Menounos Podcast*)

In the first clause, Saint John encourages a proactive postfeminist spirit. Being in control is part of presenting as a 'female hero' (Adamson and Kelan, 2019), but in this example, the strategy offered to manage gendered barriers is communal and other-focused rather than self-oriented and self-promoting. This reversal of the self-made woman ideal allows women to avoid the 'agency penalty'. According to role congruity theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002), agentic women leaders who are self-confident and ambitious risk being disapproved for displaying behaviours that are inconsistent with prescriptive stereotypes that women should be supportive and other-serving. Hence, conforming to gender norms in this regard constitutes a collective tactic for "surviving inequalities" (Calás *et al*., 2018, p.214).

Resisting stereotypes

Returning to Extract 2, I contend that by moving from anger to confidence, Saint John not only constructs an ideal organisational femininity but also avoids and disproves the negative stereotype of the 'angry Black woman'. She opposes this damaging characterisation explicitly in her following response to assumptions that she was a diversity hire at Uber:

Extract 4

I refuse to be angry about that … I don't carry it as a burden cos otherwise I can't do the work, you know … I would just be the angry Black woman and I'm not. I'm really good at my job, you know. I **can** do this job. It's not about me coming in as a Black woman to clean up the mess. It's about me, Boz, uh having the talent and ability to actually do this work. (*Code Commerce Conference*, emphasis added)

Saint John resoundingly rejects the angry Black woman stereotype through repeated negation (*refuse*, *don't*, *I'm not*). This is immediately followed by a series of clauses in which she confidently and defiantly asserts her professional capabilities. She uses adjuncts of intensity (*really*, *actually*) to indicate that her abilities exceed what is to be expected (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014). Through the modal verb *can* (in bold), she expresses conviction in succeeding in her role. Thus, by repressing negative feelings in favour of self-belief, Saint John resists the subject position of the hostile Black woman.

As discussed earlier, this intersectional stereotype has made it harder for Black women to enact critical leadership traits such as dominance (McDowell and Carter-Francique, 2017). In the interviews, Saint John rearticulates the postfeminist discourse that values audacity and assertiveness to challenge expectations for Black women to tone police themselves, as shown below:

Extract 5

> I don't think my voice is ever accepted in the tech world … I don't even know how to answer that question, you know, because uh if your voice isn't accepted, does it mean you stop talking? Hell no. You keep talking. (*Blueprint*)

In the first sentence, Saint John alludes to the discrimination she experiences in Silicon Valley. Consistent with patterns identified in the wider confidence culture, she follows her vulnerability confession with a motivational injunction (*You keep talking*) which centers on the individual and the need to be bold and assertive. Being a progressive postfeminist subject, however, means "being assertive in a 'nice way', with charm or a smile". The more argumentative behaviour that Saint John appears to endorse reverses this notion of confidence as a controlled performance that should not interfere with business goals (Adamson, 2017). This risks penalties for Black women, but the appropriation of the positive meanings attached to confidence could partially offset the stigma associated with Black women and dominance.

Besides the 'angry Black woman', Saint John also disconfirms the racial stereotype of Black people as unintelligent and lazy by self-assuredly identifying herself as a capable, effective professional, as we saw previously in Extract 4. This is further illustrated by Extract 6 where she once again explains her move to Uber:

Extract 6

> Again, it's about trying to be the representation for what I want to see. You know, I want change. I want things to be great for people of colour and for women. First, we have to show that work, do our best work, and be appreciated for that work. So if I can contribute to that. **And it's not going to be easy. There's going to be lots of challenges, you know. I'm sure there'll be frustrating days. I'm sure there'll be times I cry. I don't mind crying by the way.** Um but I'm hopeful. You know, I think that's really what's driving me, is that I'm hopeful. I see the larger picture. (*CBS This Morning*, emphasis added)

As mentioned earlier, within the confidence culture, the performance of self-belief is about being seen. Here, Saint John reinforces the postfeminist discourse by expressing her determination to *do her best work* and the self-confidence to *be appreciated for that work*. However, she simultaneously reverses the discourse as the purpose of increasing her visibility is to be a positive representation of Black women's leadership and bring about *change for people of colour and for women*. The relation between her actions and purpose is not made explicit, but in a cultural context where Black people are deemed as lacking leadership attributes such as intelligence and competence (Rosette *et al*., 2016), her resilience and ensuing success would publicly demonstrate that Black women have the skills and intellect to help their organisation attain its goals.

Saint John embraces her vulnerability via the clauses in bold before instrumentalising this to construct herself as a resilient woman "who defies adversity by springing back from any crisis or challenge that she is forced to confront" (Orgad and Gill, 2022, p.56) through her expressions of hope. Vulnerability, in the confidence culture, acts to authorise women's personal achievements (ibid.) but Saint John reverses this as the reason for her willingness to be vulnerable is her optimism in and desire for a more equitable society (*I'm hopeful*, *I see the larger picture*).

Nonetheless, change efforts are once again framed in individualistic terms through the frequent use of the singular first-person pronoun. Although the plural pronouns *we* and *our* are used, they are involved in actions that are performed independently. Further, Saint John presents these actions in a three-part list (*show that work, do our best work, and be appreciated for that work*) which can give the impression of completeness (Jeffries, 2010), thus undercutting the possibility of imagining more collective and structural approaches to tackling racism and sexism.

Lastly, Saint John is well-known for her personal style which includes brightly coloured clothes, bold nail art and Afrocentric hairstyles. Such subversion of White appearance standards of professionalism can incur penalties for Black women (Opie and Phillips, 2015). In the interviews, Saint John contests Eurocentric appearance standards by taking up the identity of a confident, authentic woman leader who refuses to present herself in ways that do not reflect her preferred embodiment. This is exemplified by her response to an interviewer's question regarding her self-presentation choices in the workplace:

> **Extract 7**
>
> **It so pisses me off when people are like, oh but that's so superficial. For who? Who was it superficial for? I'm like, do you see that the Crown Act just got passed, and not everywhere by the way, so I can wear my hair in its natural textures at work and not be afraid of being fired for it. Like, for who, who was it superficial for? Yes, for those who've always had it, that's who.** And so yes, I do make the choice. I'm very intentional in showing up very black, very fem all the time because that's who I am. And my hope is that in doing so it actually allows other people to show up in the way they are. (*View from the Top Podcast*, emphasis added)

To a certain extent, Saint John reinforces postfeminist ideas. Her performance of Black aesthetics is emphasised as a personal choice (*I do make the choice*, *I'm very intentional*) and an expression of her 'true self' (*that's who I am*). Through this, she not only positions herself as an authentic woman leader who is in control, but also reinforces postfeminist messages that feeling confident about one's body and presentation is entirely a matter of will (Orgad and Gill, 2022). At the same time, this choice is contextualised within structural inequalities. She confronts race-based hair discrimination in the clauses in bold. Moreover, by observing that the Crown Act was only recently passed and *not everywhere*, she reverses the postracial tenor of the confidence culture. Through the

conjunctions *And so* as well as the final sentence, she connects her actions to a wider social purpose. Certainly, this is still an individualised approach to addressing prejudice, but it nonetheless reverses the authentic confidence promoted within postfeminism which requires women to replace negative feelings with an upbeat, depoliticised outlook (ibid.) as well as postfeminist ideals of femininity that conform to corporate environments and conserve organisational hierarchies (Adamson, 2017). This illustrates how compliance and defiance are not mutually exclusive, but can exist symbiotically within the discourse of elite women.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study brings together intersectionality, feminist poststructuralism and the concept of reverse discourse to offer a lens for exploring women leaders' production of dissent through postfeminist discourses. In line with Foucault's (1990) theorisation of discourse and resistance, the analysis shows that postfeminist discourses are not irretrievably subservient to power, but discontinuous segments which can be operationalised in strategies that can work 'for' or 'against' postfeminist ideals and discrimination. On that account, Saint John's rearticulations of confidence and related constructs may seem fragmented and conflicting, but her discursive resistance becomes more clearly illuminated when contextualised within the power relations in her given context and understood as purposeful responses to her experiences as a minority ethnic woman executive. Her deployment of the language of postfeminism can be regarded as resistance practices in the form of 'techniques of the self' (ibid.) in that she utilises postfeminist technologies of confidence to construct herself in ways that counter dominant norms upholding White male privilege. Using elements of the confidence discourse, she enacts herself as bold, resilient and highly agentic, which aligns with expectations of leaders in male-dominated roles (Eagly and Karau, 2002) and helps to legitimise her authority in a predominantly White male environment. In a similar vein, her embrace of positive affect and displays of confidence in her competence can be interpreted as self-reflexive attempts to resist low-status racial subjectivities imposed by power systems and lay claim to a culturally valued subjectivity for herself and other Black women. But even as Saint John repeats the vocabulary of the confidence culture, she gives them new meanings and engages in resistance in the shape of reverse discourses that thwart discursive truths blaming women for their inequality and engender values that support the collaborative uplifting of women. She reverses the individualistic gaze of the confidence discourses through which women have often been depicted as lacking, whether by highlighting the continuing systems holding women back or by presenting confidence as a psychological resource for bringing about collective action and organisational change.

Nonetheless, these reversals are not a full-scale challenge to postfeminism and its confidence injunction given that they still invoke confidence and its associated

dispositions in calling for change. In reproducing confidence as essential for women's progress, they validate it as a normative ideal and further the imperative to work on the self. When the purpose of cultivating confidence, courage and resilience connotes moral values, as in the extracts above, it functions as a 'strategic-utilitarian morality' (Habermas, 1976) that further legitimises the confidence culture (van Leeuwen, 2008). Taking up a postfeminist form of confident subjectivity can weaken stereotypical views of Black women and strengthen their professional reputation, but insecurity and lack of confidence remain abhorrent (Orgad and Gill, 2022) and this can produce hierarchies between Black women who live up to the confident professional woman ideal and those who do not, especially since the reversals do not confront the underlying premises of the confidence culture. In this sense, Saint John's reverse discourses simultaneously challenge and provoke power while creatively changing its appearance (Lilja, 2022), and remain inherently polysemic.

Although appropriating postfeminist discourses imposes limits on how feminist change can be thought about and made to happen, it is still an effective subversive strategy as it reproduces "the familiar natural-order-of-things", which "lessen[s] the possibility of rejection through infelicity" (Haugaard, 2022, p.14), making it a pragmatic choice when the existing discourse has "egalitarian elements that are normatively desirable" (ibid., p.16) (as with confidence discourses) and in contexts where resistance to radically different feminist ideas is high (such as the overwhelmingly White and male corporate culture across Silicon Valley). Discursive resistance that is more likely to be regarded as felicitous is also more likely to be spread as individuals reiterate the reverse discourses over time. Following poststructuralist thought, through repetition, reverse discourses can gradually establish feminist values in the corporate world by producing particular constructions of reality, even though these are confined within the boundaries of postfeminism. Taking Saint John's reversals as examples, in discursively constituting career women as marginalised rather than lacking self-regulation, they produce a social reality in which the women are deserving of structural change and support from those in power. Additionally, the reiterations of confidence with more political elements can stabilise them into relative permanences (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999), thereby redefining confidence from an affective quality necessary for individual success to a more outward-looking attribute for advancing the greater good of equality in the workplace.

Empirically, this paper illustrates how women-in-leadership research can advance feminist theorising without vilifying senior women even as they participate in postfeminist logics of success. Certainly, the form of resistance examined is a conservative one that "nurtures, challenges and profits on power" (Lilja, 2022, p.16), but we should not dismiss the possibilities for feminist thinking and change that it opens up simply because they emerge in 'imperfect' places (Mavin and Grandy, 2018). More research is warranted on the ways women leaders reverse postfeminist discourses to contest prevailing societal forces, organisational norms and the unique intersectional challenges they face within

their particular work contexts. We must also interrogate the potential for these reversals to spread and the factors that promote or hinder repetitions across time and space.

References

Adamson, M. (2017), "Postfeminism, neoliberalism and a 'successfully' balanced femininity in celebrity CEO autobiographies", *Gender, Work and Organization*, Vol. 24 No. 3, pp.314-327.

Adamson, M. and Kelan, E.K. (2019), "'Female heroes': celebrity executives as postfeminist role models", *British Journal of Management*, Vol. 30 No. 4, pp.981–996.

Adamson, M. and Johansson, M. (2021), "Writing class in and out: constructions of class in elite businesswomen's autobiographies", *Sociology*, Vol. 55 No. 3, pp.487-594.

Bleiker, R. (2000), *Popular Dissent, Human Agency and Global Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Butler, J. (1997), *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.

Butler, J. (2013), "For White girls only? postfeminism and the politics of inclusion", *Feminist Formations*, Vol. 25 No. 1, pp.35–58.

Calás, M.B., Smircich, L. and Ergene, S. (2018), "Postfeminism as new materialisms: a future unlike the present?", Lewis, P., Benschop, Y. and Simpson R. (Ed.s), *Postfeminism and Organization*, Routledge, Oxford, pp.197-228.

Cho, Y., Kim, S., You, J., Han, H., Kim, M. and Yoon, S. (2021), "How South Korean women leaders respond to their token status: assimilation and resistance", *Human Resource Development International*, Vol. 24 No. 4, pp.377-400.

Chouliaraki L. and Fairclough N. (1999), *Discourse in Late Modernity: Rethinking Critical Discourse Analysis*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.

Crenshaw, K. (1989), "Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics", *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, Vol. 140, pp.139–167.

Corlett, S., Mavin, S. and Beech, N. (2019), "Reconceptualising vulnerability and its value for managerial identity and learning", *Management Learning*, Vol. 50 No. 5, pp.556-575.

Davies, B. (2000), *A Body of Writing, 1990-1999*, AltaMira, Walnut Creek, CA.

Eagly, A.H. and Karau, S.J. (2002), "Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders", *Psychological Review*, Vol. 109 No. 3, pp.573–598.

Fodor, E., Glass, C. and Nagy, B. (2018), "Transnational business feminism: exporting feminism in the global economy", *Gender, Work and Organization*, Vol. 26, p.1117-1137.

Ford, J. and Harding, N. (2011), "The impossibility of the 'true self' of authentic leadership", *Leadership*, Vol. 7 No. 4, pp.463-479.

Foucault, M. (1990), *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*. Vintage, New York.

Gibson, D. (2003), "Developing the professional self-Concept: role model construals in early, middle, and late career stages", *Organization Science*, Vol. 14 No. 5, pp.591-610.

Gill, R. (2017), "The affective, cultural and psychic life of postfeminism", *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 20 No. 6, pp.606-626.

Gill, R. and Orgad, S. (2017), "Confidence culture and the remaking of feminism", *New Formations*, Vol. 91, pp.16-34.

Gill, R. and Orgad, S. (2018), "The amazing bounce-backable woman: resilience and the psychological turn in neoliberalism", *Sociological Research Online*, Vol. 23 No. 2, pp.477-495.

Habermas, J. (1976), *Legitimation Crisis*, Heinemann, London.

Halliday, M.A.K. and Matthiessen, C.M.I.M. (2014), *Halliday's Introduction to Functional Grammar*, Routledge, Oxon.

Haugaard, M. (2022), "Reverse versus radical discourse: a qualified critique of Butler and Foucault, with an alternative interactive theorisation", *Global Society,* doi:10.1080/13600826.2022.2052024.

Jamjoom, L.A. and Mills, A.J. (2022), "Narratives of workplace resistance: reframing Saudi Women in leadership", *Human Relations*, doi:10.1177/00187267221087593.

Jeffries, L. (2010), *Critical Stylistics*, Palgrave, Basingstoke.

Kapasi, I., Sang, K.J.C. and Sitko, R. (2016), "Gender, authentic leadership and identity: analysis of women leaders' autobiographies", *Gender in Management*, Vol. 31 No. 5/6, pp.339-358.

Kingfisher, C.P. (1996), "Women on welfare: conversational sites of acquiescence and dissent", *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 7 No. 4, pp.531-557.

Lazar, M.M. (Ed.) (2005), *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis: Gender, Power and Ideology in Discourse*, Palgrave, Basingstoke.

Lilja, M. (2018), "The politics of time and temporality in Foucault's theorisation of resistance: ruptures, time-lags and decelerations", *Journal of Political Power*, Vol. 11 No. 3, pp.419-432.

Lilja, M. (2021), *Constructive Resistance: Repetitions, Emotions, and Time*, Rowman & Littlefield, London.

Lilja, M. (2022), "Theorising resistance formations: reverse discourses, spatial resistance and networked dissent", *Global Society*, doi:10.1080/13600826.2022.2052020.

Livingston, R.W., Rosette, A.S. and Washington, E.F. (2012), "Can an agentic Black woman get ahead? the impact of race and interpersonal dominance on perceptions of female leaders", *Psychological Science*, Vol. 23 No. 4, pp.354-358.

MacKenzie, J. (2018), "'Good mums don't, apparently, wear make-up': negotiating discourses of gendered parenthood in Mumsnet Talk", *Gender and Language*, Vol. 12 No. 1, pp.114-135.

McDowell, J. and Carter-Francique, A. (2017), "An intersectional analysis of the workplace experiences of African American female athletic directors", *Sex Roles*, Vol. 77, pp.393–408.

Marks, S. (2021), "Performing and unperforming entrepreneurial success: confessions of a female role model", *Journal of Small Business Management*, Vol. 59 No. 5, pp.946-975.

Mavin, S. and Grandy, G. (2018), "Women leaders, self-body-care and corporate moderate feminism: an (im)perfect place for feminism", *Gender, Work and Organization*, Vol. 26, pp.1546-1561.

Mavin, S., Elliott, C., Stead, V. and Grandy, G. (2021), "Women-in-leadership research and feminist futures: new agendas for feminist research and impact on gender equality", Special Issue Call for Gender in Management: An International Journal.

Metz, I. and Kumra, S. (2019), "Why are self-help books with career advice for women popular?", *Academy of Management Perspectives*, Vol. 33 No. 1, pp.82-93.

Meyerson, D. (2001), "Radical change, the quiet way", *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 79 No.9, pp.92-100.

Motro, D., Evans, J.B., Ellis, A.P.J. and Benson, L. (2022), "Race and reactions to women's expressions of anger at work: examining the effects of the 'Angry Black Woman' stereotype", *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 107 No. 1, pp.142–152.

Opie, T.R. and Phillips, K.W. (2015), "Hair penalties: the negative influence of Afrocentric hair on ratings of Black women's dominance and professionalism", *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol. 6 No. 1311.

Orgad, S. and Gill, R. (2022), *Confidence Culture*, Durham and London, Duke University Press.

Pazzanese, C. (2021), 'Key to doing your best at work? be yourself', available at: https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/key-to-doing-your-best-at-work-be-yourself (accessed 30 January 2022)

Ragins, B. R. and Sundstrom, E. (1989), "Gender and power in organizations: a longitudinal perspective", *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 105 No. 1, pp.51–88.

Rosette, A.S., Zhou Koval, C., Ma, A. and Livingston, R. (2016), "Race matters for women leaders: intersectional effects on agentic deficiencies and penalties", *The Leadership Quarterly*, Vol. 27, pp.429-445.

Rottenberg, C. (2018), *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Sandberg, S. (2013), *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*, WH Allen, London.

Team Nas Academy (2021), 'Become a badass at work with Bozoma Saint John Academy', available at: https://nasacademy.com/blog/article/become-a-badass-at-work-with-bozoma-saint-john-academy (accessed 30 January 2022)

The Badass Workshop (2021), 'The Badass Workshop: curated by Bozoma Saint John', available at: https://www.thebadassworkshop.com/ (accessed 30 January 2022)

van Leeuwen, T. (2008), *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Weaver, S. (2010), "The reverse discourse and resistance of Asian comedians in the West", *Comedy Studies*, Vol. 1 No. 2, pp.149-157.