

Reading In-Between: How Women Engage with Messages of ‘Superstar’ Business Role Models

Maria Adamson ¹ and Elisabeth K. Kelan ²

¹School of Business and Management, Queen Mary University of London, Mile End Rd, Bethnal Green, London, E1 4NS, UK ²Essex Business School, University of Essex, Wivenhoe Park, Colchester, CO4 3SQ, UK
Corresponding author email: m.adamson@qmul.ac.uk

With role models being seen as central for developing women as leaders, recent research has been critical of messages that contemporary elite businesswomen role models promote. But how do women actually relate to female business ‘superstar’ role models’ messages? We argue that the implicit assumption that role models’ effects may be understood through exploring exclusively the kind of messages they send is problematic. Through introducing active audience theory, specifically de Certeau’s concepts of ‘tactics’ and ‘strategy’, to analyse interviews with women who read autobiographies of business celebrity role models, we identify three key tactics in which female role aspirants engage with role models’ messages: tactics of confirmation, namely a selective adoption of intended messages; tactics of challenge, namely a contestation of messages; and tactics of change, through which unscripted meanings of collective consciousness and support for other women emerge. In doing so, the paper offers a novel way of theorising the influence of distant role models – as emerging from a process of co-creation in the ‘in-between’ space. We argue that theorising the role of models’ influence as co-creation allows us to systematically incorporate role aspirants’ perceptions into the role-modelling process and to further understand the unscripted and unforeseen effects of role models.

Introduction

Research has long emphasised the importance of female role models for improving gender underrepresentation in management and leadership positions, through their positive effect on women’s career choices, self-perceptions and aspirations (Latu *et al.*, 2013, 2019; Lockwood, 2006; Sealy and Singh, 2010; Singh, Vinnicombe and James, 2006). Recently, a growing body of management research has highlighted the importance of exploring the so-called ‘distant’ role models such as ‘superstar’ female business executives such as Sheryl Sandberg, former Chief Operating Officer of Meta/Facebook, Karren Brady, Vice-Chairman of West Ham United and a star of the UK’s show *The Apprentice*, or Helena Morrissey, the founder of the 30% Club in the UK (Metz and Kumra,

2018). Interestingly, the positive influence of such role models has been questioned. Studies that have analysed interviews, autobiographies and business advice books published by elite businesswomen argue that they promote individualistic messages of success through self-change, downplay structural gendered workplace barriers, and dismiss the value of collective action; and therefore they are unlikely to be effective role models to inspire change in the gendered status quo or redress women’s underrepresentation in management (Adamson and Johansson, 2021; Bryne, Fattoum and Garcia, 2019; Chrobot-Mason, Hoobler and Burno, 2019; Lakämper, 2017).

While the critique of the female superstar role models’ rhetoric has been prolific, this paper questions the implicit assumption on which it seems to rest: that the influence of distant role models may

be understood by studying role models' messages alone. We argue that theorising the influence of distant role models without incorporating role aspirants' perceptions into the role-modelling process is problematic (Morgenroth, Ryan and Peters, 2015; Peters, Steffens and Morgenroth, 2018). To address this, this paper introduces active audience theory and, specifically, de Certeau's (1984) theorising of the process of reading to conceptualise the influence of distant role models in a novel way, namely as a process of co-creation that happens in the space 'in-between' the role model and a role aspirant. To illustrate some of the complex dynamics of such co-creation, we analyse qualitative interviews with professional women who read books published by superstar businesswomen to explore how they relate to and engage with key messages that superstar role models convey.

We contribute to the literature on role models in several ways. First, we complement previous text-based studies of role models' messages (Adamson and Johansson, 2021; Adamson and Kelan, 2019; Bryne, Fattoum and Garcia, 2019; Chrobot-Mason, Hoobler and Burno, 2019; Lakämper, 2017; Metz and Kumra, 2018) by analysing how professional women relate to and engage with these messages. We introduce active audience theory and de Certeau's (1984) conception of writing as a 'strategy' of communicating intended messages and reading as 'tactics' of interacting with such messages, and identify three tactics or ways of engagement: the *tactics of confirmation* or selective adoption of some messages, the *tactics of challenge*, which involves various contestations of the dominant messages, and the *tactics of change* or the emergence of unscripted new meanings of collective consciousness and support, which seem to result in limited gendered change. Incorporating role aspirants' perceptions into role-modelling processes allows us to advance the previous literature by challenging the assumption that female superstar business role models are unlikely to effectively inspire gendered change in organisations. Yet, we also argue that the unscripted emancipatory influence cannot be solely attributed to role models' messages. Thus, our main theoretical contribution is offering a novel way to theorise the influence of distant role models as co-created. We show that examining how role aspirants engage and interact with role models' messages in what we call the 'in-between' space – the space between the writing and the reading – allows us to

demonstrate how role models' influence emerges as/from the co-creation of meanings rather than representing a previously assumed sender–receiver relationship. We argue that theorising role models' influence as co-creation constitutes an important shift from the existing cause-and-effect models and opens up possibilities to capture unpredictable and unscripted outcomes that emerge in the role-modelling process, which existing role-modelling frameworks (Morgenroth, Ryan and Peters, 2015; Peters, Steffens and Morgenroth, 2018) have not been able to do so far.

The following two sections review how distant role models have been theorised to date and explain how our proposed active audience theory lens can extend this. The article then proceeds with analysing the material to theorise how the influence of role models is co-created. Finally, we discuss what this means for understanding role modelling in business and management.

Theorising distant female role models in business and management

Role models and their definitions are widely discussed in the literature (Ibarra, 1999; Morgenroth, Ryan and Peters, 2015). As this paper's interest is in a distinct group of role models – 'superstar' female business executives – we draw on Gibson's (2004: 144) distinction between 'close' role models (such as senior female managers within one's organisation) and 'distant' ones, defined as role models who are outside the individual's normal interaction and someone they do not know personally. Sealy and Singh (2010) suggest that owing to the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership, close female role models are scarce, and hence distant female role models are particularly important for women. The last decade has seen a proliferation of female superstar executives who gained significant visibility in the media, offering women inspiration and advice on how to achieve success (Metz and Kumra, 2018). Yet, the effect of such distant role models on women continues to be debated.

Many extant studies grounded in psychological theories show that exposure to prominent distant role models can increase women's reported self-efficacy and performance of certain leadership tasks (Dasgupta and Asgari, 2004; Hoyt and Simon, 2011; Latu *et al.*, 2013; 2019) as well as strengthening women's motivation to take on

management roles or helping professional identity formation for women in managerial roles (Byrne, Fattoum and Diaz Garcia, 2019; Dasgupta, 2011; Quimby and DeSantis, 2006; Singh, Vinnicombe and James, 2006). However, research also highlights that the increased or reduced positive effect can depend on various attributes and characteristics of role models. For instance, non-stereotypical female role models engender more positive change in women's attitudes and aspirations (Chhaochharia, Du and Niessen-Ruenzi, 2022). Levels of success also matter for effectiveness, with 'too much' success being unrelatable and thus reducing effectiveness (Asgari, Dasgupta and Stout, 2012; Lockwood and Kunda, 1997; Luong, Knobloch-Westerwick and Niewiesk, 2020; Peters, Steffens and Morgenroth, 2018). For female role models, gender role characteristics also come to matter; for instance, senior business leaders who are childless or seen as unable to balance work and family are often rejected by women as effective role models (Singh, Vinnicombe and James, 2006). Studies drawing on the psychological tradition have successfully identified a range of attributes and behaviours of role models that mediate their effectiveness. However, they tend to theorise the role-modelling process as a relatively straightforward cause-effect relationship, without systematically interrogating role aspirants' attributes and/or perceptions.

The latter is particularly important, as research that explores how female role aspirants identify with and learn from role models indicates a significant complexity of role-modelling processes. For instance, women adopt role models' behaviours selectively, often creating mental constructs based on a variety of available female role models rather than emulating one (Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2008; Singh, Vinnicombe and James, 2006). Similarly, female role aspirants' identification processes are typically compartmentalised, with some characteristics of role models identified with but others seen as neutral or rejected (Kelan and Mah, 2014). As such, this literature points to the crucial role of aspirants' perceptions when it comes to understanding the role-modelling process. Morgenroth and co-authors (2015) have recently incorporated both role models' characteristics and role aspirants' attributes and perceptions into theorising role models' outcomes. This framework offers a more sophisticated theorising of the role-modelling process and role models' ef-

fects; however, like previous studies, it focuses on theorising the emergence of pre-determined and measurable effects of role models, for instance a reported change in role aspirants' intended behaviour or motivation, or a change in goals. Hence, the framework does not capture complex reactions or an unscripted influence of role models.

Alongside this body of research, recent studies grounded in the constructivist paradigm have also gone beyond the focus on characteristics and attributes to explore the kind of messages about behaviours, values and gendered ideals that contemporary distant role models disseminate to women (Adamson and Kelan, 2019; Bryne, Fattoum and Garcia, 2019; Chrobot-Mason, Hoobler and Burno, 2019; Lakämper, 2017). This research examines female superstar executives' rhetoric through analysing their autobiographies and business advice books. This genre has blossomed in the last decade, and such books are typically a combination of celebrity autobiography genre and career self-help advice. They appeal to readers as they offer advice on navigating gendered career obstacles based on personal experiences (Adamson, 2017; Gilmore, 1994).

To date, studies have been critical of the messages promoted by celebrity role models. Studies find that, while structural gender biases in organisations are sometimes acknowledged, success is presented in individualistic ways in superstar role models' accounts (Kelan and Wratil, 2021). The dominant message across the genre is that any barriers can be easily overcome through individual effort, and the central focus is on offering various suggestions about changing and improving the self, for instance through developing confidence and courage (Adamson and Kelan, 2019; Byrne, Fattoum and Diaz Garcia, 2019). Another common message found in this genre is about making 'the right choices' and improving control over one's work and life decisions, even when it comes to things such as choosing the 'right' life partner (Adamson, 2017; Adamson and Kelan, 2019). Research has argued that such a presentation of what shapes women's careers is simplistic and projects an unrealistic image of a perfect successful 'heroine' (Byrne, Fattoum and Diaz Garcia, 2019; Metz and Kumra, 2018). Such messages obscure structural and material gender, class and race inequalities, promote neoliberal values of individualism at the expense of collective solidarity, and encourage little systemic

change or even normalise certain discriminatory workplace treatments (Adamson and Johansson, 2021; Chrobot-Mason, Hoobler and Burno, 2019; Lakämper, 2017). Hence, studies concur that the kind of messages that superstar female executives promote about gender and work are unlikely to make them effective role models for women.

Yet, despite highlighting the significance of scrutinising role models' messages, the above studies appear to operate on an implicit assumption that conceptualising the influence of distant role models is possible by focusing only on the content of messages. Research to date has not considered – empirically or theoretically – how women who look up to such distant superstar role models perceive and relate to these messages. We argue that the current assumption of a relatively simple sender–receiver model and that celebrity role models' messages result in predictable outcomes is problematic because such analysis does not systematically incorporate the importance and complexity of role aspirants' perceptions into the role-modelling process (see Morgenroth, Ryan and Peters, 2015). Hence this paper builds on and seeks to move the current role-modelling literature forwards by developing such theorising. To do so, we introduce active audience theory to understand women's engagement with role models' messages.

'Reading' role models through active audience theory

Studies have so far focused on identifying the dominant messages that superstar role models promote by analysing the content of their books and interviews through various forms of critical textual analysis. To understand how female role aspirants relate to and engage with such texts, we suggest active audience theory as a useful framework. Active audience research emerged as a critique of the textual determinism of media texts, a stance that – similar to the current assessment of role models' messages – implies that 'audiences are simply passive dupes who uncritically absorbed the messages sent to them' (Gill, 2007: 24). Active audience theory challenges this assumption (Fiske, 1987; Jenkins, 2012; Livingstone, 2015; Morley, 1993; 2006; Skeggs and Wood, 2012). Rooted in the work of Stuart Hall (1991[1973]) on 'encoding/decoding', it suggests that messages can

have multiple meanings, and hence scrutinising the context and process of how readers or viewers decode them is key. Hall argued that audiences may absorb the intended meaning ('preferred reading'), but that there are also possibilities of manipulating the meanings through oppositional reading or rejection. Hence, the active audience approach does not focus on the specific content of cultural texts but scrutinises the process of their active (re)interpretation (Morley, 1993), revealing 'the everyday micro-tactics of appropriation that reshape and remediate media forms and goods' (Livingstone, 2015: 441). For instance, research has shown how women consume media such as romance novels or soap operas in complex and often subversive ways, finding pleasure, escape, feelings of hope and uplift, and thus using these media to satisfy their needs (Ang, 2013; Radway, 1984). Studies also show that audiences can create meanings that are unforeseen by the message makers and deliverers (Fiske, 1987) and may transform or even subvert the writing (see Fathallah, 2017; Hellekson and Busse, 2014; Jenkins, 2018).

Much audience research tends to focus on analysing the medium of television (e.g. Fiske, 1987; Jenkins, 2012; Skeggs and Wood, 2012). As our focus is on audiences' engagement with a particular genre of books, we draw on de Certeau's (1984) work, which specifically theorises the process of reading as an everyday practice and offers a framework for analysing readers' engagement with texts by distinguishing between 'strategy' and 'tactics'. Writing is a strategy: it sets the structure or the rules of the 'game' through which power unfolds, and it has a strategic function of delivering a certain message. Reading then is a tactic or a way in which consumers of texts can transform and re-appropriate them, looking out for opportunities and frictions to subvert the rules. Relating to the key audience theory debate about the degree of the audience's power to subvert or resist meanings (see Morley, 1993; 2006; Livingstone, 2015), de Certeau (1984) acknowledges the power of structures or 'writing' but argues that reading is an act of 'silent production', rather than passive consumption, and that every reading modifies its object. He likens reading to 'poaching' or an 'impertinent raid' that 'takes away only those things that are useful or pleasurable' to the reader (Jenkins, 2012: 24), or to the process of inhabiting a rented apartment, writing that:

the readers' world 'slips into the authors place', making the text 'habitable, like a rented apartment... [...]. It transforms another person's property into a space borrowed... Renters make comparable change in an apartment they furnish with their acts and memories. [...] the procedures of contemporary consumption appear to constitute a subtle art of 'renters' who know how to insinuate their countless differences into the dominant text' (de Certeau, 1984: xxi–xxii).

Hence, de Certeau suggests that the reader 'detaches' texts from 'their origins' and invents in them 'something different from what they "intended" [...] combines their fragments and creates something un-known in the space organized by [texts'] capacity for allowing plurality of meanings' (1984: 169). Yet, he acknowledges that 'tactics' are unstable, and can both enact and modify strategies.

Transferring de Certeau's (1984) distinction between 'strategy' and 'tactics' to the analysis of superstar role models' messaging, research has so far analysed their 'writing' – or 'strategy' – identifying some intended dominant messages present in this genre: these include hyper-individual responsibility to make the right choices, or calls for self-improvement through developing confidence and courage, while themes of collective action or structural concerns are omitted or rendered unimportant. Yet, to further understand the role models' influence it is necessary to explore the 'tactics' – or how women who look up to these superstar role models engage with and interpret these messages. In the words of de Certeau's metaphor: if superstar role models rent out their texts as apartments, how do female readers inhabit and furnish them? Inspired by de Certeau's theorising, this paper seeks to explore how the role aspirants engage with strategic messages in what we call the 'in-between' space – a metaphorical space where the reader encounters the writing and where the contestation and emergence of meanings happens. The nature of interaction in this in-between space is therefore at the centre of our analysis.

Methods

To analyse how women engage with superstar business role models' messages, we conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with professional women who read business advice books or autobiographies published by famous female CEOs

and entrepreneurs. The method is consistent with a constructionist way of viewing superstar business role models (see Adamson and Kelan, 2019), and, in contrast to experimental and survey-based studies, qualitative analysis allows a more open-ended discussion with women about their perceptions. To the best of our knowledge, it is the only qualitative study of this kind to date.

We sought women participants who have read at least one autobiography or business advice book by popular female celebrity executives such as Sheryl Sandberg, Helena Morrissey, Karren Brady, or others. We did not limit the focus to one book or author owing to several theoretical considerations. First, we followed previous critical studies of superstar role models' books (Adamson and Kelan, 2019; Lakämper, 2017; Metz and Kumra, 2018), which view these books as a distinct sub-genre and typically analyse several of them together, acknowledging the differences but clearly identifying the common messages found in all of them. Secondly, this choice is consistent with our theoretical grounding in audience research (de Certeau, 1984; Jenkins, 2012; Radway, 1984), where the key interest of researchers is not to elicit critical textual analysis of a particular book but to understand the patterns of consumption and practices of reading for a certain genre, looking for patterns of messages that readers draw out. Finally, as previously discussed, women typically create a composite construct of traits or learning points from multiple role models rather than emulating or idealising one (Eriksson-Zetterquist, 2008; Kelan and Mah, 2014). This was reflected in the fact that all but three of our interviewees had read multiple books. About 70% of interviewees read *Lean In* by Sheryl Sandberg (which is unsurprising given its world-wide popularity), and most of those who read Sandberg also read books by Anita Roddick, Karren Brady, Michele Mone, or Helena Morrissey, as well as other self-help books and autobiographies by celebrities such as Michelle Obama. About 40% also read male CEOs' autobiographies, such as that by Richard Branson.

As readers of this particular sub-genre are not straightforwardly identifiable, reaching them was an adaptive process of combining several strategies (Atkinson and Flint, 2001; Plakoyianaki and Budwar, 2021). Ten participants were recruited through a call on social media (LinkedIn and Twitter/X). Email invitations were sent to several professional businesswomen's networks

Table 1. Overview of interviewee background

Number of interviewees		28
Age range	25–29 years	2
	30–39 years	9
	40–49 years	13
	50–55 years	4
Current sector/occupation ^a	Public sector/Education	4
	Creative/Media	5
	Marketing/Communication	2
	Technology/Engineering	3
	Retail	2
	Transportation/Logistics	6
	Management consultancy	3
	Third Sector	3
Current position	Senior management	8
	Entrepreneur/Self-employed ^b	11
	Middle management	5
	No managerial responsibilities	4
Current relationship status	Single	3
	Partnered	6
	Married	17
	Divorced	2
Number of children	One child	5
	Two children	11
	Three children	1
	No children	11

^a At time of interview; individuals often had careers spanning multiple sectors.

^b Many of those who were self-employed previously had successful corporate careers.

and to moderators of ‘Lean In’ circles in the UK, resulting in nine participants. The remaining nine interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling. The characteristics of the final sample of 28 professional women are provided in Table 1. We do not have detailed information on race and ethnicity,¹ but we read all but four of the participants as white, which is discussed in the limitations.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author on Zoom or Microsoft Teams or in-person; they lasted between 50 and 80 min (55 min on average). Participants were not directly asked about any of the dominant messages or themes identified by existing research. Instead, consistent with our aim to have readers’ engagement as a

¹As our focus was on gender, pursuant to the UK’s General Data Protection Regulation requirement of data minimisation (only collecting data that is directly relevant), we requested no other demographic information about race, nationality, disability, sexuality, etc.

starting point, questions were formulated more broadly. The interviewees were asked about their career journeys and then questions focused on their views on celebrity businesswomen as role models, why they chose to read their books, what advice they found useful, what kind of messages resonated, and what they changed in their lives as a result. Given the potential practical constraints of our participants’ busy work schedules and consistent with active audience analysis’ aim to capture patterns of perceptions rather than a textual critique (de Certeau, 1984; Livingstone, 2015), we did not ask participants to re-read all books prior to the interview. However, about two-thirds of the sample mentioned that they refreshed their memory before the interview by looking through the books or their notes.

Because our research is underpinned by constructionist epistemology, we see interviews as sites where knowledge is constructed, and thus acknowledge and reflect on the role of our subjectivity in this process (Cunliffe, 2003). Reflexivity and positionality have traditionally been used in feminist research to make power relations between the researcher and the researched visible (Haraway, 1991; Mohanty, 1986; Rodriguez and Ridgeway, 2023). In our case, this dynamic was often complex. Some interactions felt more peer-like, as the interviewer’s identity as a mid-career professional academic woman helped create a sense of shared experiences and establish a rapport. Yet, when interviewing those who held senior business roles, the interviewer did not always occupy a more privileged position. Although we could not detect any specific instances where further aspects of the researcher’s identity, such as perceived whiteness, played a role in the interview, we acknowledge that any knowledge is situated (Haraway, 1991). We therefore do not consider our participants’ accounts as fully representative of the whole population, but rather as indicative in illustrating general patterns of how women engage with role models’ messages.

We used an open-source qualitative software tool – Taguette – to analyse the transcribed interviews. Our data analysis strategy was driven by our aim to understand the processes that take place in the in-between space, or how tactics of reading emerge vis-à-vis strategic meanings, that is, key themes identified in literature. It would have been possible to do the initial coding based on the key messages identified by prior literature.

However, this approach would run the risk of closing off the opportunity of seeing emergent meanings or ‘invention of still unsuspected mechanisms’ to resist the hegemonic meaning (de Certeau, 1984: 154). Therefore, our initial coding was open. Each author coded the data independently into first-order descriptive codes following Chamaz (2006). These were then combined into what van Maanen (1979) refers to as second-order themes, reflecting patterns of perceived messages (see Table 2). The analysis then proceeded iteratively (Plakoyiannaki and Budwar, 2021) by comparing the material with messages or ‘strategies’ (de Certeau, 1984) identified in prior literature. By doing this, our second-order themes were further ordered into what van Maanen (1979) calls aggregated dimensions that represented three relatively distinct patterns of reader engagement or ‘tactics’ (de Certeau, 1984). When no new patterns emerged from the data, the codes, themes and dimensions were regarded as theoretically saturated (Chamaz, 2006). Table 2 depicts the material structure and contains ‘proof quotes’ (Pratt, 2008) as examples of the first-order codes. In the main body of the text, we use ‘power quotes’ (Pratt, 2008), which are best illustrations. In the analysis below, we use italics when referring to the aggregated dimensions, second-order themes and first-order codes from the table.

From strategies to tactics: Understanding interactions in the in-between space

This section presents the three tactics (the *tactics of confirmation*, the *tactics of challenge*, and the *tactics of change*) that emerged from our analysis, which illustrate the contestation and emergence of meanings happening in the in-between space that spans authors’ written text and readers’ active engagement with it (de Certeau, 1984).

The tactics of confirmation: The uses of the intended meanings

Although they were not asked about intended ‘strategic’ meanings directly, participants did reiterate some of them, for instance a focus on self-change to succeed and taking control of personal choices at home and at work. We term this way of reading the *tactics of confirmation*, because it involves confirming some key messages or mean-

ings about *changing the self at work* and *taking charge of one’s private life* intended by the authors and selectively incorporating this advice. In de Certeau’s (1984) words, this tactic buys into and enacts the strategy, albeit selectively, by only ‘poaching’ things that are useful to the reader.

First, many women (re)cited the messages about the importance of *changing the self at work*, such as *putting themselves forward* or *sitting at the table* – an example that Sandberg used in her book *Lean In*, both literally, in terms of being visible in meetings, and also metaphorically, as stepping up to take women’s rightful place in business. Our interviewees often noticed these dynamics in their environment and spoke about how this resonated:

There’s an example of the table... that a lot of women who sit in the second row... And this has happened even to me the other day, you know, one of my team members... sits and says ‘Oh no, I don’t mind, I can sit in the second row’ and I say, ‘no you cannot!’ [I think] it’s a lot about responsibility from women, you know, that we really need to get out of our comfort zone a lot sometimes... to make this step. (Lauren)

As Lauren’s quote indicates, these ‘take away’ messages are underpinned by the acceptance of individual responsibility for self-change highlighted by researchers (Adamson, 2017; Byrne, Fattoum and Diaz Garcia, 2019). The quote above is also an example of a relatively limited number of instances where participants could name a concrete way in which they translated role models’ advice into their lives by changing behaviours at work. Other examples included applying for a challenging job, asking for a promotion, or approaching a mentor (see Table 2). However, these changes seemed circumstantial and typically ‘one offs’, rather than something that was systematically integrated into their everyday lives. When talking about self-change at work, participants also brought up the messages of *developing confidence*:

I think the overwhelming thing for me is what self-belief she had. You know, for me, and that’s what I lack, I lack the self-belief... and I was like, wow, if I can... If I can read this book and kind of pick some of that up by osmosis that will be really helpful... I seem to remember it gave me some wherewithal to sort of ask for what I needed and wanted a bit more. (Ida)

The message about cultivating confidence and self-belief, which academic studies highlight as key

Table 2. *Material structure*

Aggregated dimensions	Second-order themes	First-order codes	Illustrative examples
The tactics of confirmation	Changing self at work	Sitting at the table	I think the piece about, um, kind of making... Having your seat at the table and making yourself heard is not small. I mean, for me, that's huge and I use it every day. For me, that's really big. And so the fact that you kind of need to put your head above parapets and you have to be heard. That's probably, you know, one of the major things that give me confidence. (Kirsty)
		Putting yourself forward	That a lot of women who sit in the second row... And this is happening even to me the other day, you know, one of my team members... sits and says oh no I don't mind I can sit in the second row and I say – no you cannot! [I think] it's a lot about responsibility from women, you know, that we really need to get out of our comfort zone a lot sometimes, you know, to make this step. (Lauren)
Developing confidence			So just apply for it [the job you want] because the men would. Or also ask for a pay rise because the men would. So there were definite things where it's like yes why am I holding back? Why am I not saying I deserve this? And I definitely did that with my old boss [applied for a job that wasn't offered]... I have lots of transferable skills that I could bring in my experience to say I could do that because I'd done this sort of thing but I wouldn't have had the guts to apply for a job like that without being that kind of I did it, you can too kind of mentality from reading this book. So yes definitely. (Kelly)
			I was quite interested with the mentor thing from the book, because I've been thinking. Again, it's not something I'd come across two years ago, but in the last year, there's all this chat about mentoring, and I thought, yes, I could probably do with that, and I have had that conversation with a couple of people. (Victoria)
			You will have to, you know, fight your internal fight, and you will have to be the one who will go and apply for jobs when you don't necessarily tick all the boxes, just tick some of them. (Alina)
			There was one thing about overcoming the things that I struggle with internally. So that may be criticism or self-doubt or you know imposter syndrome, the stuff that I know holds me back a little bit from doing what I want to do, communicating effectively, stuff like that. So, I can read and pick up pointers. (Emily)
			I think if anything, more recently all of this reading has just given me more confidence to do or to follow what I feel is right, if that makes sense? So there's been no one book or article I've read that's convinced me to change the way in which I do things but it's given me reassurance that I have the right to do things in certain ways. (Ruth)
			I think what they do for me is they give me more confidence... it's the view from the inside that doesn't always tally with what you see from the outside, so from a confidence perspective I don't always feel like the person that you see. (Louise)

Table 2. (Continued)

Aggregated dimensions	Second-order themes	First-order codes	Illustrative examples
	Taking charge of one's private life	Looking for the right partner	<p>[I think] she's absolutely right about that [...] choosing a long-term relationship that you then blend your family, living quarters, money, career goals, career locations.... You know, that is an informed decision as much as anything else. As much as where to go to college. Which job to take. When to leave the job you're unhappy with. (Alex)</p> <p>This was quite original when it came out because she said the secret to a successful career is having a fantastic partner. You need to choose the right partner, and I did actually know that instinctively because my parents divorced, and my dad wasn't all that supportive of my mum's career [...]. So...my fiancé, boyfriend, at the time, he was in banking, and I knew for a fact that he wanted three children. And I knew for a fact that there was a kind of unsaid expectation that I would stay home. And I knew because he was in banking, he would always be earning more than me, and I knew that it would make sense rationally for me to give up my job and stay at home with the kids. And I made a conscious decision therefore not to be with him because I knew for the sake of my dream, it wouldn't come true... It's just the way it is through these decisions that we make. (Jess)</p> <p>The other thing that really resonated and had a huge impact on my life is... She [Sandberg] talked about her husband. She talked about equality also at home. How it's very important to pick the right husband because if he still lives in the old way, where the woman is supposed to do everything, raise the kids etc., it couldn't work. Just to have that in my mind... At the time, I was single. Obviously, I was hoping to meet someone I loved and to build a family. (Samantha)</p>
		Making your partner a real partner	<p>Just books that give you a perspective shift away from this is maybe how you're feeling but just for a minute think about what it's like to be your husband. And then from that then you can construct a conversation that says, this is how I feel and what can we do? Maybe meet up for dinner so you get some adult conversation. He gets to get vomit over his work shirt instead of you, and he gets to see the kids. The other thing that I've only really addressed very recently is the whole workload, the workload in the house in terms of the laundry and the washing up and the meal planning and stuff. (Michelle)</p> <p>I remembered the stuff that Sheryl Sandberg was saying you know [about a partner] and I just had to set my husband down and I went: this isn't working. This isn't working, it's not fair, you know I've been there for you all these years and, you know, supported you and done everything and I'm still doing everything, and I can't. So we sat down and we actually started getting [name of meal-kit company] meals in... and he started cooking three times a week. (Sophie)</p> <p>Yes, absolutely I think until there's equality in home responsibilities there will not be equality... I mean, so absolutely I expect equality. And for me that... And so I'm married but that was an essential part of me deciding who my future partner would be somebody who absolutely subscribes to that. That's really important to me. (Kirsty)</p>

Table 2. (Continued)

Aggregated dimensions	Second-order themes	First-order codes	Illustrative examples
Tactics of challenge	Unveiling power structures	Spotting privilege	<p>I found it quite inspiring on one level... But at the same time, you know, it's not very nuanced in the, right, you just need to get sat at the table, you know, the reality of that is completely different. It's incredibly challenging to put yourself in that position, you know, when you're... I often find myself to be the only female in a room full of men who are, you know, in their fifties and sixties, and actually it's difficult to stick your elbows out and to make space for yourself... it's all very easy for, you know, a white, highly-educated, heterosexual, attractive woman, you know, who's unbelievably successful, to say, well, you just need to sit at the table, you know, that doesn't feel very realistic to me. (Julie)</p> <p>They're also both very well-educated women ... and that's good, great, and good for them, but again, that's not everyone's experience in life.... For me, personally, yes. I think it takes more of the pinch of salt understanding their backgrounds and the privileged lives that they have. (Ashley)</p> <p>And I just don't find it believable, unless you've got a nanny and all these other, your entourage, that makes it possible... You can't possibly be working twelve hour days or fourteen hour days that she works and also be doing what most working mothers are doing, which is also arranging for immunization jabs at the doctors, picking that kid up who had banged their head at two o'clock in the afternoon and making sure that the family has got some food for dinner. You literally can't do it. (Rebecca)</p>
		Social and organisational realities stacked against women	<p>[what if] somebody doesn't necessarily want to be a leader but they're still ambitious so how do you challenge the concept of what success is if you don't want to be at the top of the industry, but you do want to do well in your chosen area within the industry... I really feel that we need some sort of societal shift. Whether it's to go more Scandinavian and just make working practice so much easier for any matter of lifestyle, I think that's something we really do have to look at. (Ruth)</p> <p>I really bought into it [when I first read it], a lot of the messages, which was saying about the whole leaning in thing, and trying to get women to be less risk averse. Sort of, I guess more, taking the boys on at their own game sort of thing... Then, I read it a couple of years ago again, just because it was on my bookshelf and I had a very different reaction to it... I think maybe that was because of where I was working at the time [very male-dominated industry]... it felt very much about women needing to be, sort of, shape themselves in the workplace to be a bit like men. As opposed to women being more like, this is what we're good at, this is what I bring to the table, and getting men to understand that. (Lauren)</p>

Table 2. (Continued)

Aggregated dimensions	Second-order themes	First-order codes	Illustrative examples
	Challenging the onus of change	Calling out the 'blame game'	<p>It makes me very angry that there seem to be some women out there who A, haven't had to go through such a shitty experience and B, have no appreciation that most women go through a pretty shitty experience okay, and who pretend that it has nothing to do with the system we're operating in but that's down to individual women that they've done something wrong that can be improved upon and they should just look at their own selves and check what else they could do to help themselves and reflect upon their own wrongdoings. And yes, take it all as their own responsibility. (Hannah)</p> <p>It felt like Sheryl Sandberg was blaming us, was blaming women for, you know being our own worst enemies in a way and, you know that part I wasn't so sure of because it is a patriarchy and they make the rules, you know. And that's not absolving myself of responsibility for trying to change things because I'm clearly not doing that but it did feel a little bit like well you've only got yourself to blame, you know and you bought into it and your foot off the pedal because you've already had your wedding and your children. (Sophie)</p> <p>You know, you can't tell someone working as a housekeeper in New York who has a two-hour bus ride each way and has one job then picks up their child, drops them at an afterschool programme to go to a second job. To then come home and pick them up from a community day care. To then put them to bed. To then do piece work at home and then do it all again the next day. You know, you can't tell them if you don't like your job change it... I think the problem with the book is it puts the onus on the individual woman to shake up her life and her work if she's unhappy with it. And I think that's the wrong impression. (Alex)</p> <p>Because that will also be interesting to read for men. Because sometimes I think Lean In, for example, I don't know many men that read it. I like in... This is not helping us, you know. It should be also interesting for men because with all this I think it's a lot about co-responsibility and we will not change anything if they don't start to take the responsibility from their side also. (Lauren)</p> <p>I mean, I got my husband and my father to read [the book] because I think it's very important that men see the way women are feeling because they don't. And they both found it really, really enlightening. Because, for me, I was reading things and saying yes I've felt like that. I understand that but they haven't even thought about it. And particularly for my husband. It's actually helped him think about it in his workplace as well and be kind of more supportive towards women. (Kirsty)</p> <p>I can use that [advice from the book] now in what I'm trying to do to convince the men in our business that equality isn't there... Because quite often, they think there isn't a problem, so it's trying to make sure that they understand where the problems lie. (Victoria)</p>
		Men's role in change	

Table 2. (Continued)

Aggregated dimensions	Second-order themes	First-order codes	Illustrative examples
Tactics of change	Creating a sense of collective consciousness	Awareness of collective struggle	<p>I think it's the confidence kind of particularly for books like <i>Lean In</i> that are written by women. It is that kind of there are other people who feel like you. There's other people that these things that are happening to. And I suspect that's why the various groups have started because people... It's giving people something to share that we've got in common.[...] I think that's quite empowering and it's a reminder that you might be the only woman in the room but you're not the only woman who's doing these things every day and trying to push the agenda forward.... So yes, for me it gives me confidence that other people are doing similar things in other businesses. (Kirsty)</p> <p>So for me those books were very much about me searching out people who are like me, in as much as they've taken a risk, they've set their own business up, they're raising a family, they're trying to look after themselves at the same time, they're dealing with all of this stuff around being a woman in business, around the whole equal opportunities piece, around the <i>Me Too</i> thing. We're all dealing with similar challenges and I find that quite inspiring as well as comforting to know that other people have done that, and there they are, still a whole person. (Louise)</p> <p>I think it's really important there are more [books like this] and important that women do share their stories. Because, number one, it will help to inspire people, show people maybe different things they could do. And number two, is show the reality to companies as well as struggles that women perhaps have that companies don't think about. (Amanda)</p> <p>I just thought, why aren't we hearing more about how women in the workplace and the policies aren't designed to cater to women? Women's life trajectory is different, and yet it's almost like our concerns and our interests and our preferences are invisible. And so from that point of view I thought it was incredibly important and empowering and then she talked about how she did it. (Jess)</p>
		Highlighting women's issues	

Table 2. (Continued)

Aggregated dimensions	Second-order themes	First-order codes	Illustrative examples
	Supporting change for other women	The limits of agency	<p>When you're in a company, it's not about changing the system, it's about you fitting into the company and your own career, and pushing for your own career and pushing for other women around you... She was criticised a lot for, yes, [...] you're pushing women to do something very individual whereas the real solution, in inverted commas, the real solution is in changing the system, in changing the institution. (Olivia)</p> <p>I think, for me, part of that criticism of, um, you know, women shouldn't have to change, um, everything else has to change, that's being a victim. I just don't subscribe to that theory at all. [...] So I think would it be good if society changed? Absolutely. Would it be good if men did equal share of parenting duties and all of the big things that we need to change? Yes. I will do my bit to make that happen but what the book is saying is that if you want to take power into your own hands here are some things you can do, which I think is very... there's clearly things in society that it would be really good for women if they changed. But it's very difficult for one person to... I don't want to sit around and wait for that to happen. I'm really happy to contribute to that change and try and make it happen. (Kirsty)</p> <p>First of all it's a bit arrogant to say I'm going to fix the world because we're all equal and we're in this together. And secondly, if you put it as a mission to fix the world, then you are in for a disappointment when things don't go the way that you want them to go. But the world, the energy is flowing and I want to be part of that flow where I'm able to express myself and change people's minds along the way if I can. (Leyla)</p> <p>Personally, for me to get these subtle things in their behaviours, no. When exactly in a meeting you realise that it's men always the ones that talk. You know, how we as women can realise it and say okay now I will ask that woman to talk. You know, and I will ask for support from other women. You know, so this kind of a small things that, err... That can change the day-to-day. The book helped me also a lot to give maybe some advice to them... some of the things was just about communication, simple things.... And then, of course... as an organisation, they are... We are doing a lot of analysis about equal pay and take-ups [of managerial positions] ... They already started to do a lot of things for women also [...] But that [initiative] was especially more supporting with childcare... so we opened [childcare facilities]. (Nora)</p> <p>With the influence that I do have, professionally, I want to make sure that I encourage more women into the workplace and create as inclusive a workplace as I can [...] I guess getting to an age now where I feel like I'm in a position to be able to help with that. [...] You know, at the age of 24 there wasn't very much I could do. Whereas now, because I'm in the position [...] I can. (Rebecca)</p> <p>I think leading teams you have a lot of opportunity to make life considerably better for all of the people in the team. You know you have an opportunity to do that and responsibility I think to do that... I found certainly giving very bright young women [...] giving them quite big areas of responsibility has never failed. (Charlotte)</p>
		Using power to support women	

Table 2. (Continued)

Aggregated dimensions	Second-order themes	First-order codes	Illustrative examples
		Becoming a mentor	<p>I think, the first time I read Sandberg, I do remember telling quite a few of my team to read it... I think, um... Actually, yes, when I read Sandberg, it was about the time that I then became a mentor for the [girls'] network [helping women to get into business]. I have mentored quite a few girls. (Ashley)</p> <p>[Sandberg talks about mentoring she says] you can't go and ask somebody to be your mentor [...]. And I think that also for me has sparked a change in the way I look now at more junior women. [...] it has changed the way I act towards them. And it has changed the way that I won't wait for them to come and ask me to be their mentor, or whatever, but that I'll already start with that, offering myself, you know. If you ever need anything, I'm here. (Olivia)</p>
		Sharing the books	<p>I do recommend it a lot. This book, for example. Even I when we were doing [campaign for women in our company] I gave them that book, you know, to all of them. [...] So because I really think sometimes you don't realise. I mean, you see things but you don't realise small things that are a little bit damaging yourself, you know. So as an eye-opener, as you say, for younger woman that are starting. That they don't really know what is going on that maybe they feel a little bit more insecure. I think it's a perfect book. (Lauren)</p> <p>I have gifted those books myself... I've gifted Sheryl Sandberg's 'Lean In' to two girls. Yes, and I've gifted 'Fight Like a Girl' to another two. (Alina)</p> <p>[I gave the book to a friend quite high up in an international company] ... she said... women just had no confidence in themselves and that's why she set up the lean-in circles... And she's started mentoring women. And so she started certainly making a change in her company. (Olivia)</p>

strategic or intended message in these texts, did appear in at least half of the interviewees' accounts. However, this mention typically did not entail any clear discussion of implementation, compared with behavioural changes.

Alongside self-change at work, our participants' accounts also echoed the messages of making the 'right' choices in one's life and *taking charge of one's private life*. Particularly resonant were ideas about the importance of *looking for the right partner* and *making your partner a real partner*:

I remember it said in her [Karren Brady's] book... that when her career had been really intense and demanding and she had been developing, her husband was then able to take a back foot in his career. [...] I think the main thing for me, that stuck with me, is just that... You know, you can't just make a career business plan. You also need to think about your personal life and how the two link together. (Amanda)

Other interviewees also picked up on this message of thinking pragmatically about partner choices or 'improving' existing ones. For instance, several women explained how at the time of reading they reflected on their relationships and decided to have 'difficult conversations' with their partners about re-balancing the sharing of childcare and household responsibilities, while some even decided to end relationships if partners were not supportive of their careers (see Table 2).

Overall, our analysis indicates that some 'strategic' or intended meanings about self-change, self-responsibility and making 'the right' choices were confirmed and adopted by the readers, albeit in a very selective manner. The adopted messages were typically about simple and/or distinct behavioural changes and possibly appeared as 'doable' to the women. They were picked up selectively; for instance, when and if women encountered a relevant situation or if the message was encountered at the 'right time' when it made sense in the context of one's life stage or family circumstances. For example, some may have already been thinking about 'putting oneself forward' but were looking for a confirmation that this behaviour is productive. Yet, there was no one message that completely resonated with all the participants, neither were there any women who endorsed or absorbed all of the role models' ideas. Interestingly, some previously identified messages related to improving work-life management, time efficiency or balancing childcare (Adamson, 2017) did not appear to

resonate. In fact, as we explain below, they generated friction and resistance. Hence, women, in de Certeau's (1984) words, were actively 'choosing from a menu' of messages. This already indicates an exercise of limited operational agency in the in-between space, albeit within the bounds of pre-determined strategic meanings. The self-changes that women made seemed to work within the constraints of their context, and often did result in tangible outcomes, albeit very personal ones.

The tactics of challenge: Unveiling the contours of strategy

Alongside the tactics of confirmation, another, possibly the most common pattern of engaging with superstar role models' writing involved critically questioning their messages and advice. We term this way of reading the *tactics of challenge*, which involves *unveiling the power structures* and *challenging the onus of change*. In de Certeau's (1984) terms, these tactics involve the readers' recognition of the contours of the grid of strategy through realisation of the power imbalance embedded in the dominant messages.

Participants' active *unveiling of power structures* manifested through the critique of individualist rhetoric and emphasis on issues with organisational systems. The typical criticism was *spotting privilege*, which is the recognition that superstar role models occupied privileged positions:

I thought, you know, she doesn't realise how privileged she [Sandberg] is. I haven't had the sponsors that she's had, okay, because she was picked out by, I don't know who ran the treasury at the time and he made her chief of staff and then she was picked up by the next powerful male who thought she was amazing and gave her a big job. And my problem is nobody's just given me big jobs. So that's 'my problem'. (Hannah)

Hannah clearly implies that the lack of such luck in her own career is not really a problem of her own making. Others also exposed the role of external circumstances in celebrity CEOs' successes, suggesting that much advice was not easily replicable by 'ordinary women' (Julie). Interestingly, one of the main friction points that exposed 'the grid of strategy' was the challenge of work-life balance advice, which most perceived as 'preachy' (Emily) and unconvincing:

I just don't find it believable, unless you've got a nanny and all these other, your entourage, that makes it possible... You can't possibly be working twelve-hour days or fourteen-hour days that she worked and also be doing what most working mothers are doing. (Michelle)

Many participants who had families, and even those who did not, noted how much superstar role models' advice was 'too far away from what was achievable' (Nadia). This partly resonates with earlier research that suggests that the scale of role models' success matters (Asgari, Dasgupta and Stout, 2012; Hoyt and Simon, 2011), but also shows that the main issue was not the scale of success but the unacknowledged privileged position from which they gave advice. In addition to *spotting privilege*, our interviewees highlighted that another fact that was glossed over in superstars' accounts was that *social and organisational realities are stacked against women*:

Women think that there's something wrong with them... And then as you get older you realise, no, no, it's not you, the system is dysfunctional. Everything is pretty much skewed towards men. Men still hold the majority of leadership decisions, and we view everything from a male perspective. (Jess)

Jess, who owns her own business, suggests that the realisation that the system is stacked against women comes with experience. Other interviewees also emphasised organisational issues they experienced, suggesting that the system does not accommodate different lifestyles (see Table 2).

The second key element of the tactics of challenge was *challenging the onus of change*. This involved, first, *calling out the 'blame game'*. Many role models' messages that implied that career success is purely down to women's personal effort, or lack thereof, generated negative emotions and were challenged:

I was pretty confident anyhow, I didn't need messages about being your own champion and taking risks, because that was my fourth leadership role by that point, and it was in a different place. But also, I think, women are not appreciated in terms of the workforce, in terms of the different skills they bring compared to men. (Ashley)

Like Ashley, other interviewees discussed how structural circumstances shaped and constrained what actually lies within personal control, sug-

gesting that women's behaviour is a product of gendered socialisation or socioeconomic status. As Alex put it: 'telling someone on a minimum wage to work multiple jobs is just not right or realistic'. Finally, another pattern of *challenging the onus of change* was highlighting *men's role in change* through understanding women more, but also through changing their own attitudes and practices (see Table 2).

Hence, our analysis shows that many messages that are critiqued by scholars were also critiqued by female readers. Some may have experienced falling short of the ideal of the 'postfeminist hero' (Adamson and Kelan, 2019; Byrne, Fattoum and Diaz Garcia, 2019), and spotting the privilege and highlighting that they did not have the same structural and material resources possessed by celebrities was their way to explain why their hard work did not bring the same success. This meant that the readers recognised the flawed premises of many intended meanings, thus unveiling the hidden contours of strategies. Such a challenge in de Certeau's theorising constitutes a type of resistance as it has some transformative potential. In our case, such reading tactics typically entailed the message being rejected or substantially reworked.

The tactics of change: Reshaping the contours of strategy

Finally, the most unexpected way of reading that emerged in participants' engagement with the role models' messages was what we term the *tactics of change*. This sub-genre of books largely focuses on individual change and has been critiqued for missing messages of collective struggle and solidarity. However, we saw unscripted meanings emerging in the in-between space of active reading, which were about *creating a sense of collective consciousness* and *supporting change for other women*.

One such unscripted meaning was about an increased understanding of shared and collective commonalities among women:

[Y]ou see that this is happening to every woman, [it] is not you. You know, because sometimes you take it personally like you maybe you are a little bit more introvert or you are not sure of so much and it's not good... So [the books are] more to also read about other women in the same situation. (Lauren)

While the books (in)tended to convey individualised strategies of overcoming barriers, it seemed

that the very practice of reading took women beyond simple self-awareness, making them consider how their experiences were, in fact, not individualised but common. It was not the message *per se* then that was absorbed, but it seemed that reading about difficult experiences made women contemplate the shared nature of the issues, and hence a feeling of community and *awareness of collective struggle* emerged in the in-between space. As Alina says: 'I think it brings to light how many of us are struggling with some things, and how we can support each other to go about them'. Even when the gist of messages did not resonate, their role was interpreted as a way of *highlighting women's issues*:

I've read many of the books that are written by men, they don't talk about parenthood at all. Like it doesn't even emerge. It's just not there. It's, this is about your business and your career. Whereas all of the female books tend to focus on the balance and the conflicting challenges and how to navigate those. (Emily)

Hence what we observed was that some of the meanings seemed to escape the individualist nature of the strategic narrative or got significantly 'refurbished'; we saw unscripted meanings, which referenced a sense of the collective challenges of women as a group, emerge.

Other messages, for instance of individual responsibility, were also re-shaped in the in-between space as a collective responsibility, and another key component of the *tactics of change* was the emergence of messages about *supporting change for other women*:

I think when you're a senior woman in an organisation you have an obligation to think about all of the people in the business, men and women but particularly to think about how to challenge ... If the status quo needs challenging ... and I think having read about other people's experience of standing up for other women, it kind of gives you an extra bit of confidence to say this is the right thing to do ... You know, I kind of put my head above the parapet and say this is what we need to do. So yes, for me it gives me confidence that other people are doing similar things in other businesses. (Kirsty)

In the quote, individual effort is linked to the network of actions by other women, which transforms and reframes the individualistic nature of the intended meanings of self-responsibility. This chimes with Yoong's (2023) findings that women

can reverse individualistic rhetoric of confidence in favour of collective action.

Almost all of our interviewees discussed the importance of enacting and *supporting change for other women*, not just self-change. Interestingly, women were aware of the *limits of agency* and that 'fixing the world', as Leyla puts it, is too lofty a goal. In fact, they reinterpreted the critical messages of the 'big change' as static and unhelpful in limiting any agency that women may have, while creating a message of the value of small, everyday actions. As Olivia said:

That may take a while, but I have these problems in my company where I have to lead and where I have to stick up for what's happening with women.

Altering social policy or politics was seen as far-fetched; however, women talked about doing what they can within the scope of their position and influence. Those who were early or mid-career spoke about gifting these books to other women and men to help them navigate workplace issues (Table 2), while those who held senior positions talked about *using the power to support other women* in their organisations and generate change:

When it comes to my custodianship, I hire women to work for me. And I'm trying to invest in their skills, I'm trying to invest in their development. So this is my way to empower women. (Nadia)

Women also talked about setting up networks, pushing women's issues on a range of committees, and in some cases, where power positions allowed it, creating tangible policies. Stepping forwards and *becoming a mentor* to other women was another key trope that in most cases replaced the individualist message of self-responsibility to seek mentorship (see Table 2).

Hence, the *tactics of change* was an unforeseen way of reading that emerged in women's accounts. The books' messages are largely individualistic, but readers' interaction with these messages in the in-between space appeared to generate new meanings of collective consciousness and a desire to support others. Returning to Certeau's (1984) metaphor, the inhabitants of the rented apartment retained the structure of the building but demolished internal walls of meaning and built new ones, making the apartment almost unrecognisable. It may be that the readers who pick up these books already have a propensity for collective change. It may also be the function of this sub-genre: while

it does not offer a feminist collective impulse, the very act of celebrity women sharing experiences and calling on other women to read about them may already signal the expectation of a community. What is clear is that new meanings emerging in the in-between space cannot be attributed to role models' messages directly, but neither did readers invent them completely from scratch. The 'writing' encountered by readers left both traces and spaces, which were filled with or re-worked into something different – an effect that can only be understood as relational and co-created, as we discuss below.

Discussion and Conclusions: The In-Between Space as Space for Co-Creation

This paper has questioned the implicit assumption of recent research that the influence of distant role models may be understood through analysing messages alone (Adamson and Kelan, 2019; Adamson and Johansson, 2021; Bryne, Fattoum and Garcia, 2019; Chrobot-Mason, Hoobler and Burno, 2019; Kelan and Wratil, 2021; Lakämper, 2017). To offer a more nuanced understanding of the role-modelling process, we evidence how women relate to and engage with the messages promoted by superstar business role models. Drawing on the first of its kind empirical analysis of in-depth interviews with professional women through audience theory, we have identified three patterns of their engagement with role models' messages. The *tactics of confirmation* involved dominant messages being recognised and often incorporated, albeit in a selective fashion. The *tactics of challenge* entailed revealing the flaws, contesting, and rejecting intended meanings. The *tactics of change* involved the construction of unscripted new meanings of a sense of collective consciousness and change for other women, which translated into, albeit limited, forms of collective change. Moving beyond a text-based analysis of messages allows us to show that the underlying assumptions of prior research, namely that individualised messages offered by distant role models hold no potential for disrupting the gendered status quo in organisations, is not fully borne out once readers of such texts are considered. This constitutes our first contribution. We do not suggest that tactics of challenge and change are akin to organised resistance. Such challenge is, indeed, fragmented, as tactics have no 'stable

place' (de Certeau, 1984: xxi); in other words, readers do not have a similar platform of power or authority to offer a systematic critique of these messages publicly or collectively. Yet, we argue that this challenge cannot be completely dismissed. Some erasure of dominant meanings that 'operates in isolated actions, blow by blow' (de Certeau, 1984: 37) still takes place, and some agency to support limited gendered change was generated through creating new unscripted messages of community and collective support. Therefore, we add to calls to highlight women's agency when theorising potential for gendered transformations in organisations, even though it may be limited (Cooper *et al.*, 2021; Hersby *et al.*, 2009; Kirsch, 2022; Villesèche, Meliou and Jha, 2022).

However, our analysis also shows that the emancipatory meanings that pave the way for change cannot be directly attributed to role models' messages; rather, the unscripted effects emerge in the active process of women's engagement with the messages in what we call the in-between space. Hence, our main theoretical contribution is offering a novel way of theorising the influence of distant role models – as a co-creation. As previously explained, studies of distant role models' messages and much of the distant role-modelling literature in general (e.g. Asgari, Dasgupta and Stout, 2012; Chhaochharia, Du and Niessen-Ruenzi, 2022; Hoyt and Simon, 2011; Luong, Knobloch-Westerwick and Niewiesk, 2020; Quimby and DeSantis, 2006) do not systematically incorporate role aspirants' perceptions into theorising distant role models' influence. While some recent frameworks have attempted to address this, they still mainly focus on measuring set or pre-determined effects (Morgenroth, Ryan and Peters, 2015). This paper extends existing research by moving away from a unidirectional cause-and-effect or a sender–receiver approach to theorising distant role models' influence and focusing on the interaction between the role model and role aspirant.

De Certeau's (1984) distinction between writing as strategy that delivers particular intended meanings and reading as tactics that may subvert these allows us to think about 'the relationship between reader and writer as an ongoing struggle for possession of the text and for control over its meaning' (Jenkins, 2012: 24). Hence, we imagine that our role aspirants/readers 'meet' the role model and her messages in the metaphorical in-between space where the interaction, struggle and negotiation of

meanings happen. Importantly, this space is not fully controlled by and does not belong to either the role model or the role aspirant, as both bring something to this interaction. Hence, rather than a single filter determining an outcome, different encounters result in various kinds of influence, some that were more expected, such as absorbing certain meanings, and others that were unforeseen. We argue that such an approach of examining role aspirants' engagement with distant role models' messages in the in-between space allows us to think differently about their influence – not as a cause–effect, but as emerging from a complex and relational process of co-creation, allowing us to unveil unscripted influences in the role-modelling process. The co-creation view we propose foregrounds the importance of role aspirants and, in contrast to the current assumption that distant role models are only observed from afar (Gibson, 2004), highlights the role of relationality in theorising the influence of distant role models. This approach, we argue, is not confined to studying the consumption of messages. In fact, we advocate for a shift in the broader literature conceptualising distant role models' effects as causal or attributable to either role models' or role aspirants' characteristics, to understanding it as a process of co-creation to help capture the wider unscripted influence of role models.

Our empirical analysis has illustrated some of the mechanisms through which engagement and co-creation happen in the in-between space, by outlining the tactics of confirmation, challenge and change. The tactic of change was particularly illustrative of how new meanings of collectivity were neither role models' nor role aspirants' independent creation but were co-created in their encounter. Our analysis indicates that the messages were contextualised and processed in and through the readers' own lived experiences. However, the limitation of our relatively small qualitative sample is that it does not allow us to draw further conclusions about contextual and/or demographic patterns that condition what tactics different categories of women are likely to use. We have highlighted that participants' personal life experience, seniority, and access to resources were important for this and that women may hold contradictory viewpoints about these role models. However, the nuances of this dynamic in the in-between space require further analysis. We suggest that larger-scale, purposefully designed quantitative studies might provide further evidence for a more granu-

lar understanding of such patterns. Alternatively, it could be possible to ask women to read one book or/and keep a diary and then compare their engagement with key messages. Further exploring how the themes of leadership in the books are read and may shape women's interpretation and enactment of leadership can also be useful. Research could use in-depth case studies to unveil deeper psychodynamic processes that may be affecting how different women co-construct leadership meanings.

More analysis is also needed on how other experiences such as race, class or sexuality (or their intersection) shape engagement with these (mostly) white, Western UK- and US-based role models, as our sample did not offer such an opportunity. Equally interesting would be to see how messages conveyed by non-white role models from contexts other than the Global North might be perceived, or messages by alternative role models such as social media influencers on YouTube and TikTok that may be appealing to younger cohorts.

Finally, it would be useful to explore women's engagement beyond reading. For instance, studies show that readers' co-production, as in fan fiction, provides further ground for the subversion of media texts and the formation of alternative readings (e.g. Bowring, 2004; Busse and Alexis, 2018; Hellekson and Busse, 2014). It could be interesting to study women's engagement in Lean In circles or to analyse books that challenge the concept of 'lean in' by talking about 'lean out' (Foster, 2016; Orr, 2019; Shevinksy, 2015) in order to interrogate other emerging tactics or/and whether they can translate into more tangible strategies.

This paper illustrates that focusing on the aspirants' interaction with role models' productions is key to understanding their influence as co-created. In terms of practical significance, we echo studies which suggest that various literary genres can serve to develop gender-aware leaders (Martin, Edwards and Sayers, 2018; McCurdy, 2006) and also suggest that there is potential value in using role models' autobiographies as rich pedagogical resources for educating management learners about women's leadership and the gendered status quo (see Stead and Elliott, 2019). Such discussion should scrutinise distant role models' self-presentation to create critical leadership pedagogies. Those can stress alternative ways in which role models can be built, paving the way for changing the gendered status quo in the practice of management.

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Maria Adamson is an Associate Professor of Organisation Studies and a co-director of the Centre for Research in Equality and Diversity at the School of Business and Management, Queen Mary University of London, UK. Her research explores gender inclusion and equality in professional work, work–life interface, and discourses of/at work.

Elisabeth K. Kelan is a Professor of Leadership and Organisation and a Leverhulme Trust Major Research Fellow (MRF-2019-069) at Essex Business School, University of Essex, UK. She currently researches the future of work, digitalisation and gender. Her other research interests include organisational change, inclusive leadership, and gender at work.