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"My Daughter Would Say I am a Superwoman": Performances of Women's Success in Slovenian Tourism and Hospitality

Abstract

The article examines media portrayals of prominent female managers in Slovenian tourism and hospitality to analyse their success narratives and the underlying ideas shaping their social positions. Using post-feminism (McRobbie, 2004; Banet-Weiser et al., 2020) as a theoretical framework, it explores how gender myths and neoliberal individualism combine to justify female achievement. The study employs the performativity approach (Goffman, 1959; Butler, 1988) to investigate how women navigate and reproduce existing gender and class narratives in their media performances. Media interviews with successful Slovenian female managers in the tourism and hospitality sector were analysed to reveal how gender and class discourses intersect in their self-presentations. The identified self-performing strategies include a) the myth of meritocracy, bolstered by the gendered discourse of greater renunciation, b) the dialectic between references to women's solidarity and the emphasis on individualism, and c) the portrayal of feminine care and empathy alongside a display of strict discipline and determination. Against the background of the intimate relationship among neoliberal ideology, postfeminism, and media culture, future policies fostering gender equality in the tourism industry should address practices aimed at bridging unequal opportunities and the materiality of language.

Keywords: performance, gender, myths, postfeminism, tourism, Slovenia

1. Introduction: Gender in tourism studies

With women comprising 70 per cent of the tourism workforce (Maelge, 2023), their underrepresentation in leadership positions has sparked ongoing discussions about gender inequality. The United Nations World Tourism Organization brings "gender issues to the forefront of the tourism sector, promoting gender equality and women's empowerment and encouraging member states to mainstream gender issues in their respective tourism policies" (UN Tourism, 2023). Achieving gender equality is also the 5th goal of the 2030 Agenda in Tourism because "if there is no gender equality and empowerment of women, there cannot be sustainable development" (Moreno Alarcón, 2017, p. 34). In response to these concerns, the organisation Equality in Tourism was established in 2012 to address gender segregation in the industry (UN Tourism, 2023), where women, despite comprising the majority of tourism employees, earn 14.7% less than men (UN Tourism, 2019).

Echoing these strategic goals and social concerns, gender issues have been widely discussed in tourism research. However, discussions of female leadership have been mainly confined to management studies, primarily focusing on gender equality regarding numerical representation, such as gender ratios and the share of women in senior leadership positions. Mooney (2020) emphasized that such traditional approaches to gender often fail to advance critical theoretical perspectives in the field, as reliance on conventional ideas hinders the development of more nuanced paradigms and methodologies. Therefore, when examining female leadership in tourism and hospitality, it is crucial to develop appropriate metrics and address various limitations – ranging

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from stereotypes and myths about female leadership to women's actual self-representations and formations of subjectivities. Additionally, it is essential to consider broader social and cultural conditions and investigate the discourses that either limit or promote women's efforts in the sector.

Therefore, this paper takes a different approach by focusing on female managers' media performances – how they stage their public self, articulate their success, and narrate their life choices in media interviews. Slovenia, with a gender equality index comparable to the EU average (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024), provides a relevant empirical context for studying media representations of female managers in tourism. This relevance stems not only from the prevalence of female employees in the sector (Šuligoj, 2022) or the sector's substantial role in the national economy but, more importantly, from the contested and culturally specific discourses on entrepreneurship, success, and the role of women in society. In post-socialist Slovenia, the legacy of radical egalitarianism and 'egalitarian syndrome' (Županov, 2011) coexist with the idea of meritocracy, significantly shaping the understanding of social differentiation in the country. Furthermore, while there is a growing trend toward the retraditionalisation of gender roles in Slovenian society (Antić Gaber, 2022), numerous celebratory narratives are mobilised and circulated in political rhetoric and popular culture to glorify female success in the workplace.

Given the multifaceted role of gender and class in shaping identities, investigating how these scripts are played out in contemporary media culture is crucial. Building on previous research on the stagings or 'dramatic realisation' of female (political) elites in Slovenian popular media (Pušnik & Bulc, 2001; Luthar & Trdina, 2011, 2015), the paper focuses on gender and class performances in the tourism and hospitality sector. By applying postfeminism and performativity frameworks, it explores how successful women in the industry navigate and reinforce existing gender and class narratives. The performativity approach (Goffman, 1959; Butler, 1988) allows us to examine how gender and class are reproduced in daily practice. The empirical part analyses publicly available media interviews with successful female managers in Slovenian tourism and hospitality to understand how gender and class discourses intersect in their self-performances. We believe that by examining how gender and class are performed together and achieved in everyday performances, we can better understand the workings of power.

2. Media performances of gender and class: Female elites in the lure of postfeminism

Many scholars in gender and management studies have already critically invoked the notion of postfeminism (Meliou & Ozbilgin, 2023; Gill et al., 2016; Lewis, 2014) to discuss the implications of neoliberal values on the construction of gender at work and question the widespread assumption that gender equality is secured through choice and that women have an equal chance of success as men. By assuming that agency has a more significant impact on life decisions and outcomes than social structures, postfeminism as a cultural discourse has become a "central organising ethic of society" (Gill, 2017, p. 608).

Since its inception, postfeminism has been casting feminism into the shadow. It is a Foucauldian idea of shifting away from feminist interest in state, patriarchy, and law to more dispersed instances of power such as talk, discourse, and attention (McRobbie, 2004) while focusing on a society no longer bound by rigid gender roles. As feminism has been dismantled and communities have moved away from fixed gender roles, women have become "reluctant to define themselves with the feminist label, but they approve and indeed demand equal pay, economic independence, sexual freedom, and reproductive choice" (Ouellette, 1992, p. 119). In addition, postfeminism was constructed as a more neoliberal and inclusive ideology, emphasizing racial and class diversity while focusing on individualism, choice, and empowerment. Furthermore, Gill (2007) identifies relatively stable features that characterize postfeminist discourse, such as the shift from objectification to subjectification, the notion of femininity as a bodily property, the emphasis on self-surveillance, monitoring,

and discipline, the makeover paradigm, consumerism, and the commodification of difference. The author highlights the contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses, which often entangle feminist and anti-feminist themes (Gill, 2007). In this respect, McRobbie (2004) describes postfeminism as a "double entanglement" because it encompasses "the coexistence of neo-conservative values about gender, sexuality and family life /.../, with processes of liberalisation regarding choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations" (2004, p. 256).

While critiques of postfeminism offer valuable insights into the appeal and influence of the cultural discourses on gender equality in entrepreneurship, they offer little explanation of how these discourses are maintained and how gendered identities are formed (Meliou & Ozbilgin, 2023). Hence, we employ the performativity approach and the idea of using gender (Butler, 1988; Goffman, 1959) as an analytical lens to examine how gender is routinely enacted and reproduced in everyday life through people's actions and presentations. This given, Butler defines gender identity as "a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo" (Butler, 1988, p. 520). In performance theory, Butler (1988) perceives gender not as something inherent or tied to outward appearance but as a constructed identity created through actions that follow social norms. A strict binary of acceptable behaviour forces us to perform within acceptable societal structures. In reality, these performative acts do not reflect an innate gender; instead, they focus on constructing the idea of gender itself.

Similarly, West and Fenstermaker (1995) understand gender as an ongoing interactional accomplishment. For them, doing gender involves "a complex of perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of manly or womanly 'natures'" (West & Fenstermaker, 1995, p. 9). Instead of seeing gender as innate or an individual trait, they consider it an "emergent property of social situations" (p. 9), actively reproduced daily in human interactions. Goffman (1959) uses the term 'gender display' to conceptualise gender-appropriate behaviour, organised around societal activities and evaluated based on socially accepted conceptions of gender. Such situations can be addressed as 'scripts' written by society according to social standards, which individuals follow and act out precisely. Each performance is, therefore, an enactment and realignment with cultural assumptions, presenting a personalized self to the audience and convincing the public that certain behaviours meet the societal demands placed on the person exposed (Luthar & Trdina, 2015). To put it another way, "the society imposes on women to speak only in particular ways, or to remain silent," claims MacDonald (1995, p. 41).

The media has become central to the operations of ideologies, where structures of individualisation have produced the *self* as the primary subject of interest (Gill & Kanai, 2018). MacDonald (1995) highlights how dominant myths of femininity in popular media influence the interaction between the audience and the text as discourses of popular culture. The author argues that consumer discourses have adopted a new approach by introducing postfeminism into the debate (MacDonald, 1995). Gill et al. (2016) speak of 'postfeminist sensibility' as a term that can help understand the creation of postfeminism better as the emphasis is "upon individualism, the retreat from structural accounts of inequality, and the repudiation of sexism and (thus) of the need of feminism" (p. 3) concerning media. Gill (2017) argues that postfeminism should be considered and conceived as a sensibility, with media culture as the critical object. This perspective incorporates post-modernism and constructivist perspectives and explores distinctions within "contemporary articulations of gender in the media" (Gill, 2007, p. 149).

Gill and Kanai (2018) stress the need to critically examine neoliberalism within media and communication studies, mainly focusing on the affective aspects of neoliberal governance and its impact on female experiences. Hence, they integrated several features to understand how women navigate and perform success under neoliberal expectations. These include: (1) female confidence as a performance, exploring females displaying confidence in their personal and professional lives as a way of adapting to and succeeding within the

neoliberal framework, (2) feminine resilience in neoliberal capitalism, investigating women embodying pleasing, lighthearted readiness while simultaneously dealing with the challenges of neoliberalism, (3) performative shamelessness and success, exploring media narratives celebrating women who boldly defy societal norms and expectations, and assessing whether such performances help dismantle or reinforce existing inequalities, (4) media's role in shaping affective female labour, analysing how media influences women's emotional and psychological efforts to cope with neoliberal demands, (5) intersectionality in neoliberalism, considering neoliberalism intersecting with gender, race, class, ability and exploring the unique challenges faced by women from different backgrounds and how media contributes to shaping their performances of success within the neoliberal paradigm (Gill & Kanai, 2018).

Similarly, Banet-Weiser et al. (2020) focus not only on how gender is created, expressed, and articulated but also on how it is received and reproduced. The emphasis is put on the autonomy of choice, women's bodies as the source of value, and the idea of upgrading one's life to be more positive and confident (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). Postfeminist discourse primarily outlines female empowerment, choice, and individualism in this context.

Overall, theories on postfeminism and performativity influence this research by encouraging questions about whether women in the industry perceive their success as a result of personal choices and actions rather than recognising structural opportunities and barriers, thus bringing gender myths and the myth of meritocracy to the forefront. In this light, theories of performativity and doing gender provide a lens to examine how gender is enacted and reproduced through everyday actions, prompting the article to focus on the routines and performances of gender in the Slovenian tourism and hospitality sector. This topic has yet to be thoroughly explored.

As far as research is concerned, while Pušnik and Bulc (2001) and Luthar and Trdina (2011, 2015) have addressed the stagings or 'dramatic realisation' of female (political) elites in Slovenian popular media, no studies have explored women's representations in Slovenian tourism and hospitality sector. Pušnik and Bulc (2001) specifically examined members of parliament, state government, state administration, and other public offices "to analyse how female politicians express their identity and the manners in which they relate it to sociocultural perceptions of gender within their discursive practices" (p. 397). Their analysis combined concepts of identity, ideology, discourse, myth, and gender to deconstruct and understand the women's reasoning behind their success. The authors concluded that the self-representations of women politicians in the Slovenian press are deeply rooted in their socially expected roles and established myths of femininity. As a result, these women often conform to dominant discourses and perform roles that align with traditional gender expectations without challenging or questioning them.

Similarly, Luthar and Trdina (2011, 2015) analysed photo interviews with some of the most successful female politicians featured in widely circulated Slovenian women's magazines. They found that media representations of female politicians in Slovenia emphasise a 'woman's way' of doing things and adhere to specific traditional notions of femininity. These representations are shaped by the interplay between popular culture and politics, which helps legitimise the political roles of female politicians. The analysis showed that political performance is often personalised, with personal characteristics and motivations becoming the main framework within which political and social issues are thematised and represented. They conclude that for a politician to build a public persona, they must establish a reputation with qualities valued in popular culture, where different criteria apply than professional politics. For female politicians, this often means being seen as women with a personal story and a particular skill in handling issues the 'woman's way'.

Considering all this, this paper analyses mediated gender performances in tourism and hospitality, where emotional labour is even more strongly emphasised due to the sector's demands. The focus will be on identifying the distinct characteristics of female elite performances in popular media in recent years. The empirical

findings are expected to validate and extend the theoretical background by demonstrating how postfeminist and neoliberal ideologies manifest in the professional lives of women in senior management positions in the Slovenian tourism and hospitality sector. These findings will illustrate the practical implications of theoretical concepts, such as performativity and the myth of meritocracy, in shaping gender performances and perpetuating existing inequalities.

3. Methodology and empirical material

In the empirical part, we analysed a convenience sample of 10 interviews published online in digital media outlets in the last five years (2017–2022) with women in senior management positions in Slovenian tourism, including chefs, sommeliers, hotel managers, and leaders of tourist organisations. Our analysis was guided by MacDonald's (1995) concept of how certain myths are perpetuated, focusing on how these women present and discuss themselves. We selected these interviews not only for the women's management roles in the industry but also for themes related to their biographical narratives and personal disclosures, as guided by the theoretical framework (MacDonald, 1995; Pušnik & Bulc, 2001; Luthar & Trdina, 2015; Gill & Kanai, 2018; Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; and others). After an initial reading, we systematically coded the material, identified recurring themes in how female managers represent themselves, and organised these into three main clusters representing dominant self-performing strategies (see Section 4).

We understand an interview as a micro-social interaction (Goffman, 1959, p. 15) and a performative act that offers female professionals an opportunity for self-performance within genre boundaries (Luthar & Trdina, 2015) while adhering to perceived popular values (see Goffman, 1959; Gill & Kanai, 2018). Media interviews with elite women construct a 'third space' between the public and private spheres, offering the audience an illusion of disclosure (Luthar & Trdina, 2015) and positioning these women as 'subjects of interest' (Gill & Kanai, 2018). According to Goffman (1959, p. 15), a performance may be defined as "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any other participants," in our case, media audiences. As performative acts, interviews serve as rituals of self-enactment, offering opportunities for biographical reconstruction. However, this simulated disclosure is often only partially managed by the individual. Thus, our analysis must consider the discursive context of self-performance (including media genre, journalistic questions, and standard photographic representation) and the female leaders' responses. The latter are not entirely in control of their speech, as they are constrained by the genre's predetermined discursive context (Luthar & Trdina, 2015).

4. Self-performing strategies of biographical reconstruction

Analysing the empirical material, we identified repetitive frames within which female managers perform and ritually construct their public personas, thereby articulating and legitimising their success stories. These frameworks, or self-performing strategies, operate subtly overlapping but remain analytically distinct.

4.1. Myth of meritocracy strengthened by the gendered discourse of sacrifice

The most frequently exposed idea is that of hard work and merit, which supports the belief that talent combined with effort is the key to 'rise to the top' (Littler, 2017). This notion reduces the understanding of social mobility to individual worth, overlooking the differing structural conditions women face. For instance, women often describe how they leverage their skills and hard work to succeed in a meritocratic system without questioning the structurally unequal distribution of resources that significantly define and structure one's life opportunities. Since narratives of hard work are crucial in justifying and legitimising women's privileged positions, such testimonials demonstrate how women contribute to perpetuating the myth of meritocracy.

"Women have to work hard to make it to the top." (Ana Roš, chef for siol.net)

"I bet on courage, perseverance, consistency, hard work, and sacrifice. I often think ahead, anticipate and get ahead of business trends. I am grateful to my parents for instilling such work habits in me." (Helena Cvikl, former director of VSGT Maribor and former acting director of the Tourism directorate for maribor24.si)

The reference to 'sacrifice' reappears in our material on many occasions. The meritocratic discourse is considerably reinforced by a gender narrative that portrays women's career challenges as more burdensome compared to men's. This is often illustrated through discussions of work-family life balance and the corresponding superwoman metaphor identified in the empirical material. Women depict their sacrifices for success as more significant than men's, perpetuating the myth of women as martyrs (MacDonald, 1995). Such displays of martyrdom normalise patriarchal scripts and the belief that women must work harder and excel more to be considered equal and maintain their positions in the otherwise male-dominated elites.

"But I am aware that sometimes the path is more difficult for a woman." (Maja Pak, manager of the Slovenian tourist board for svet24.si)

"It was not easy for me with the children, but I succeeded despite all the obstacles because I was extremely dedicated to the project." (Tatjana Puklavec, manager of Puklavec Family Wines for ovinu.si)

"A woman goes through a big conflict if she wants to be successful in business: when she is in the kitchen, she suffers because she is not with her family; when she is with her family, she suffers because she is not in the kitchen. This conflict women carry within is common to all career women." (Ana Roš, chef for siol.net)

"My daughter would say I am a superwoman." (Mojca Trnovec, manager, chef, sommelier for zadovoljna.si)

In these accounts of hardship and the complex reconciliation of work and home life, women highlight the established gendered power hierarchies. Simultaneously, they express postfeminist ideas that glorify entrepreneurial success as a path to individual fulfilment and pursuing power/freedom beyond structural constraints. Additionally, occasional references to exceptionalism, even indirectly ("*My daughter would say I am a superwoman*"), reflect the workings of the postfeminist cost-care calculus (Rottenberg, 2018), where women are expected to simultaneously take full responsibility for both home and work commitments unquestioningly.

4.2. The dialectic between a reference to a women's group solidarity and the high promises of individualisation and self-optimizing

Additionally, female managers' performances often emphasise the importance of the female community and the support it provides, at least in their statements. They usually speak of women as a homogenous group, regardless of their diverse backgrounds and experiences. This focus on mutual support among women helps maintain an implicit antagonism between women and men. However, it is essential to note that these stagings of group solidarity among women are often framed within a neoliberal, individualised context, emphasising women's resilience as individuals rather than addressing the complex interdependencies that could genuinely support and affirm mutual care among women.

"I would tell women at the beginning of their entrepreneurial journey that they must be brave, self-confident, respectful, and have much faith in themselves. All women are beautiful smart and do not need to be timid because life is a game. Follow your heart and be brave." (Natalija Kovač, Bled Rose Hotel manager for extravagant.com.hr)

"We are two poles, each different in its way, but women complement each other, and that makes us noble." (Mojca Trnovec, manager, chef, sommelier for zadovoljna.si)

In contrast to the earlier emphasis on collective stance, there is also a strong emphasis on self-optimisation. This is evident in the frequent focus on personal skill development, appearance, and the explicit use of one's body for business purposes. These efforts at self-realisation are seen as essential for staying competitive and align with the neoliberal logic of self-branding. This logic suggests that individuals must market themselves effectively to succeed, reinforcing the idea of people as isolated entities (Littler, 2017). In postfeminist culture, there is an intense focus on the body. As Gill (2007) noted, the body is seen as a power source for women and, due to its perceived unpredictability, requires constant monitoring and remodelling, often through consumer spending.

"Dress and a holistic appearance are good weapons because being neat can give you an advantage in many places, and at the same time, you can increase your self-confidence, which is very important at work." (Natalija Kovač, Bled Rose Hotel manager for extravagant.com.hr)

The accounts above imply that women value the notion of sisterhood (MacDonald, 1995) as a precious resource. Still, these enactments of sistership are often based on a perceived antagonism between men and women. Despite promoting group solidarity, these performances fail to address the structural causes of inequality. Women's language frequently emphasises individual achievements and the promises of makeover culture (Gill, 2017), which extends beyond physical appearance to include enhancing one's lifestyle and self as a competitive asset. The focus on continuous self-improvement becomes a means through which social expectations of success are enforced (Gill & Orgad, 2017). Such an approach reinforces postfeminist discourse's individualistic and agentic nature, portraying the hospitality and tourism industry as merit-based. As Gill (2017) notes, the postfeminist sensibility demands constant vigilance and self-scrutiny. Women's narratives often align with this dominant cultural discourse, emphasising agentic choice, self-monitoring and self-optimisation and reflecting current entrepreneurship trends (Ahl & Marlow, 2021). This alignment tends to obscure the structural inequalities that underlie women's career success stories.

4.3. Staging the feminine care while at once articulating an uncompromising discipline and fortitude

In their performances, women repeatedly draw on dominant gender myths that portray femininity as inherently nurturing and caring. They refer to the 'feminine way' of handling situations with empathy and inclusivity, using these traits to their advantage. For instance, Zapalska and McCutcheon (2024) discovered in their study of female entrepreneurial strategies in the Polish tourism and hospitality industry that traits like understanding employees, compassion, and caring leadership are crucial for female leaders' success. Additionally, references to a so-called 'sixth sense' – a supposed natural ability to intuitively understand and manage people – further mystify structural social inequalities. By presenting these traits as innate and natural, such portrayals divert attention from the social and structural factors influencing success. Instead of viewing success as a result of varying opportunities, it is framed as an inherent quality in women rather than a consequence of external factors.

"... where there is undoubtedly an advantage of female management in the service industry with an indispensable sixth sense and willingness to work for development." (Jerneja Kamnikar, manager of Vivo Catering for svetkapitala.delo.si)

"With their way of thinking, feeling, acting, creating, and with special empathy, women contribute to the balance of human development." (Maja Pak, manager of the Slovenian tourist board for svet24.si)

"I am convinced that women have a greater spectrum of spiritual and rational in our consciousness, and we create a different view with emotionality." (Helena Cvikl, former director of VSGT Maribor and former acting director of the Tourism directorate for maribor24.si)

"Women have such good senses, better than men - proven." (Mira Šemić, wine academic and sommelier for rtvslo.si)

"I think it (tourism) is a good profession for women because tourism is about working with people, and women have more feelings for working with people than men. We are hospitable and friendly, and this is our advantage." (Nataša Mikelj, Managing Director at Radovljica Tourist Board for ona.slovenskenovice.si)

Women are often perceived as naturally suited for success in the hospitality business. Some women explicitly compare the emotional burden of balancing family with business, likening their business challenges to raising children: *"Sometimes I take a comment a little too personally, and I am also offended if someone insults my child - my travel agency." (Nina Knez, Tourism Manager of Travel Agency Kareta for kareta.si)*. Such comparisons frame fragility and gentleness as core feminine qualities that shape and justify their career paths. However, these traits contrast with the often-expressed need for unconditional discipline and uncompromising fortitude. While women are socially expected to exhibit empathy and care for others, they are also likely to be rigorous and relentless regarding their work ethics, continually striving for higher goals through discipline and persistence. According to the 'confidence cult' (Gill & Orgad, 2017), women must perform their individualised selves with shrewdness and perseverance, showing no sympathy for obstacles. Their experiences are continuously reframed through notions of personal choice and self-determination, portraying women as typical postfeminist subjects no longer constrained by power imbalances.

"I admit I like to work because that's how I am by nature; I'm always on the go and doing 100 things simultaneously. I'm used to this from my youth, work, school, education, sports." (Natalija Kovač, Bled Rose Hotel manager for extravagant.com.hr)

"I am stubborn, persistent, punctual, honest, and respectful /.../ I am a positive workaholic." (Tatjana Puklavec, manager of Puklavec Family Wines for ovinu.si)

A distinct combination of fragility and strength – balancing emotionality and kindness with a strong and resilient character – is essential for female heroism, as maintained by Luthar and Trdina (2015). This creates a double bind of affective neoliberalism, as Gill and Kanai (2018) argued, where traditional gender expectations persist while women are also required to meet new emotional demands. They must appear 'relatable' through pleasing and caring femininity, yet simultaneously be confident and self-assured, all in the right balance. This expectation forces women to frame their struggles regarding personal resilience rather than systemic issues (ibid.).

Overall, our findings indicate that women perform themselves and achieve success through the lens of dominant postfeminist ideas. Their performances are deeply rooted in established neoconservative gender myths, where displays of feminine care evoke traditional values. Additionally, these portrayals align with the meritocracy myth, suggesting that persistence, effort, and hard work are the essential qualities for advancement. Our analysis supports the argument that the intersection of neoliberal ideologies, postfeminism, and media culture creates a contradictory framework for women. This framework regulates their emotional lives and self-perceptions by promoting personal choice and self-improvement while enforcing surveillance and discipline. This duality reinforces existing inequalities. Consequently, the construction of contemporary gender relations is shown to be both complex and contradictory.

5. Conclusion

Although the number of women in management positions in Slovenia has increased slightly over the years (Eurostat, 2023), and positive media narratives about successful businesswomen encourage women to pursue entrepreneurship, these celebratory stories overlook a critical issue. They fail to acknowledge that labour-market positions are not merely the result of personal choices and neglect the need to address underlying structural inequalities related to gender and class. To fully understand how social power operates and how inequalities are perpetuated, we aimed to deconstruct and analyse how gender and class intersect to obscure these issues. While acknowledging that examining additional social factors, such as ethnicity, could provide a more nuanced intersectional analysis, we focused specifically on gender and class in this study.

Our findings show that women's performances are discursively rooted in established femininity myths and myths of meritocracy. Female leaders in tourism and hospitality in Slovenia are expected to conform to societal norms that blend their private and public selves without deviating from expected norms. The successful women interviewed in Slovenian tourism and hospitality enact their achievements through the lens of dominant postfeminist ideology, foregrounding individual empowerment within a largely depoliticised framework. By employing specific self-performing strategies for biographical reconstruction, they tend to downplay or overlook the impact of class and gender inequalities on their career successes.

Our study reveals that the performances analysed rarely challenge dominant gender and class discourses; instead, they tend to reinforce and reproduce them. This results in highly formulaic and standardised performances that reflect cultural assumptions rather than individual characteristics. As Goffman (1959, p. 77) noted, "Performance serves merely to express the characteristics of the task that is performed and not the characteristics of the performer." In this regard, we must consider the interaction order within which female managers' performances occur, shaped by tabloid culture and the conventional nature of interviews. Responses often align with 'national-popular' and collective expectations framed by journalistic questions, as noted by Luthar and Trdina (2015). Our research highlights the crucial role of media and mediated practices in shaping affective subjectivities and performative rules within neoliberal capitalism and their link to persistent inequalities. However, exploring interactions beyond media performances is essential. In different settings, women may challenge dominant discourses and neoliberal 'feeling rules' (Gill & Kanai, 2018) by contesting, devaluing, or disrupting them. Such encounters could foster heterodox reflexivity (Meliou & Ozbilgin, 2023), potentially revealing and challenging entrenched social inequalities. Future research should investigate how gender and class myths are constructed, maintained, or challenged in various social contexts within the sector. Additionally, considering the multicultural nature of the industry, examining factors such as race and ethnicity could provide further insights. Given the current personnel crisis, researchers should also explore how media representations of successful women in tourism influence public perceptions of work in the sector and the prestige of hospitality occupations.

Finally, the study results indicate that future policies to foster gender equality in the tourism industry should address practices to bridge unequal opportunities and the impact of language. Specifically, the material effects of the words we use to describe and understand the world play a crucial role in shaping our realities. In addition to supporting female leadership and amplifying women's voices in the industry, it is vital to consider how broader cultural discourses influence these efforts. To challenge existing gender and class narratives, we must develop new vocabularies that disrupt these entrenched ideas. Being more reflective about the relationships and power dynamics we reinforce in our daily performances and social interactions can help us take greater responsibility for shaping our collective reality.

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