

Through the Lens: Photographer and Subject Reflections on Gendered Narratives, the Impostor Phenomenon and Community Amidst COVID-19

Hanna Saltis & Chloe Clements

Boorloo (Perth), Australia

The SAR-COV 2 coronavirus (henceforth COVID-19) pandemic brought the globe to a standstill, giving ample time for reflection on many aspects of the human experience, including identity. During this time, the authors of this paper collaborated on a photographic artistic project to explore their experiences of gender and bodies. The process and the product created by impostor (the artist) and impostor (the subject) had a profound impact on the authors, generating opportunities for both to reflect on their journeys as a professional artist and a non-binary person, respectively. While this project did not intentionally set out to explore the impostor phenomenon, nor the impacts of COVID-19 on gender, hindsight and collaboration have given the authors the opportunity to reflect on how these factors permeated and influenced their experiences throughout the creative process. This article is a culmination of their reflections. Utilising pastiche, the authors reflect on this process and product, drawing together academic, creative, and reflective writing styles, and images to reveal and explore the systemic, contextual, and personal factors that contribute to gendered experiences of the impostor phenomenon. In doing so, the authors highlight that community and collaboration are essential remedies to the pandemic and impostor phenomenon.

Keywords: Impostor Syndrome, COVID-19, gender, art, community

Preamble

The authors wish to acknowledge that we are not community psychologists; we responded to the call out to the current special issue as members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Importantly, we do not speak for the whole LGBTQIA+ community, but rather offer nuanced and specific insights into our personal experiences of community as individuals in this group. Community psychology is inherently relational. It is in this spirit that we invite you to witness our journey in this article in the hopes that it might foster a deeper understanding of gendered experiences of impostor phenomenon and give you the tools to help empower the communities you work with.

What we offer in this piece is a non-prescriptive, narrative exploration and an insight into the process of becoming for two queer individuals in community, over time. This approach aligns with the values of community psychologists, who recognise the power of community in challenging societal structures. We outline a series of acts of connection and community that empowered two people on their identity journeys. These lived experiences, the themes we explore, and the methods we have chosen may provide powerful examples of how collaboration and creativity enable individuals to question and challenge dominant ontologies. We hope this resonates with community psychologists in research, practice or activism.

Art is a multifaceted form of expression that plays a pivotal role in society. It serves as a mode of communication, enabling individuals to convey complex ideas, emotions, and messages through various creative mediums. Through art, individuals can bridge language and cultural barriers, speaking to the core of human experience in ways that words often cannot. Furthermore, art acts as a platform for commentary. It provides individuals with the means to offer insights into the world, addressing societal issues, political themes, and personal narratives. Many artworks throughout history have been powerful social and political commentaries, shedding light on the challenges, injustices, and triumphs of the times in which they were created. Art also serves as a space for self-reflection, allowing artists and their subjects and spectators to explore their emotions, thoughts, and experiences.

Pastiche

A pastiche is a technique in art that imitates or borrows from a variety of styles and media (Green, 2017). Unlike parody, this technique aims to pay homage to the works that inspire it (Green, 2017). This work is inspired by a chapter in *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013). In this chapter, “Mishkos Kenomagwen: The teaching of grass”, Kimmerer mimics the traditional structure of an academic journal. However, the language is fluid, poetic, and antithetical to academic writing conventions. Her discussion of organic matter and plants’ refusal to be contained in such a rigid format or obey common botanical ‘knowledge’ subverts the rigidity of the purposely chosen format. Similarly, the rigid structure and compulsory coherence of academic writing often negate the fluidity and messiness that is identity formation and gendered experiences, forcing complex processes into neat categories, digestible theories, and consecutive steps.

The following is a pastiche that pays homage to Kimmerer’s subversion of academic writing. At times, we conform to academic writing, and at others, we break free of these rigid norms. We include photography and reflective journaling to explore our experiences. We include the original art piece and reflections made at the time, as well as reflections written since. We focus on the artistic process for both the artist and subject and how this unintentionally aided in reducing feelings of impostor and solidifying our identities as a queer, female artist and non-binary person, respectively. By using pastiche, the authors intentionally mimic Kimmerer’s approach to discussing complex, symbiotic, non-linear and ongoing nature of the organic.

In reflecting on and sharing these experiences, the authors hope to offer valuable insights into gendered dynamics of, and potential remedies to, the impostor phenomenon.

Background

In early 2021, following what was to become the first of several global lockdowns, co-writers Hanna Saltis and Chloe Clements collaborated on a photo-based creative enquiry of body, gender, and resistance. Chloe and Hanna approached the work informed by their project roles (respectively, the project initiator and subject), but equally from their lived experiences of gender and body. This formed a larger project by Chloe. Hanna was the subject and together the authors explored the intersection of non-binary gender and bodies. This photographic interrogation of gender binaries imposed on bodies revealed personal and societal assumptions about gender roles and norms, unearthed and challenged internalised gender stereotypes, and was the accidental site of personal and professional growth for the authors.

The project occurred in 2021, and the COVID-19 pandemic inevitably provided a backdrop to the project. At the time of its development, it was not the intention of this piece to address the impostor phenomenon. Rather, this was a serendipitous byproduct of a collaborative effort to understand the gender binary through self-reflection and discussions between the authors. Likewise, this project did not have a COVID-19 focus. It is, however, difficult to holistically reflect on the contextual influences of a work from the inside out. Hindsight has afforded us the ability to depart from and return to this work and draw these parallels with a deeper understanding of how the pandemic influenced these experiences at the time. This project thus provides a temporal snapshot of the authors' gendered experiences of the impostor phenomenon and how they addressed this uniquely through collaboration and community during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

The Impostor Phenomenon

First described in 1978, the impostor phenomenon is a cluster of feelings so commonly experienced that it has since captured the attention of researchers, organisational psychologists, and the public, globally. Defined as a feeling of fraudulent success despite objective evidence of personal accolades (Clance & Imes, 1978), the impostor phenomenon is often described as a 'syndrome' (Hewertson & Tissa, 2022). The phenomenon thrives in individualistic cultures (Bandali, 2022), and is often pathologised (Hernandez & Lacerenza, 2023; Tulshyan & Burey, 2021). Critics impel the interrogation of commonly labelling this phenomenon a syndrome, with a recognisable cluster of 'symptoms', and consider the societal and systemic factors that may contribute to people's individual experiences of feeling like an impostor phenomenon (Salib, 2022; Tulshyan & Burey, 2021). Indeed, contemporary discussions highlight that the impostor phenomenon disproportionately affects people who are typically excluded in society and in traditional workplace hierarchies (Friedman, 2023), and acknowledge that these feelings may be typical reactions to the systemic bias and microaggressions often experienced in the workplace (Salib, 2022; Tulshyan & Burey, 2021). Those who are usually more susceptible to the impostor phenomenon include women (Chrousos & Mentis, 2020; Clance & Imes, 1978; Feenstra et al., 2020; Hewertson & Tissa, 2022; Ling et al., 2020; Salib, 2022; Tulshyan & Burey, 2021), racialised people, and people of religious minorities in westernised spaces (Chrousos & Mentis, 2020; Feenstra et al., 2020; Hernandez & Lacerenza, 2023; Hewertson & Tissa, 2022; Tulshyan & Burey, 2021). Neglecting discussions of the systemic dimensions of the impostor phenomenon and how these intersect with individual contexts diffuses the onus for resolving impostor feelings.

The diffusion of antidotal responsibility is evident when exploring remedies to the impostor phenomenon. Traditionally, the onus was on individuals and workplaces to address multifaceted presentations of the phenomenon. Individuals are encouraged to seek psychological treatment, keep track of their achievements visually, and seek mentorship (Feenstra et al., 2020). To complement this, workplaces are encouraged to offer training, education and mentor programs to assist new employees in finding their place (Chrousos & Mentis, 2020; Feenstra et al., 2020; Martinez & Forrey, 2019). The unifying implication underpinning these remedies is that individuals should seek and be encouraged to strengthen their (professional) identity. However, considering these solutions in light of systemic factors highlights how fostering a sense of workplace community can remedy individualistic

professional tendencies and alleviate occupational isolation associated with the impostor phenomenon. Such a sense of community was fundamental for maintaining positive mental health and well-being during the pandemic in Australia (Green et al., 2022).

In a post-COVID-19 context, the links between the impostor phenomenon and the unique challenges brought about by the pandemic are clear. The pandemic highlighted and exacerbated the same, already existing identity-related marginalisation and inequities that increase the likelihood of experiencing impostor feelings (Bromwich, 2023; Hall et al., 2020; Lokot & Avakyan, 2020; Tulshyan & Burey, 2021; United Nations Women, 2020). Similarly, isolation, and disconnectedness, known factors that contribute to a sense of impostor (Chrousos & Mentis, 2020; Feenstra et al., 2020; Hernandez & Lacerenza, 2023; Martinez & Forrey, 2019; Salib, 2022) increased during the pandemic due to lockdown and shelter-in-place measures (Hwang et al., 2020; Saltzman et al., 2020). To alleviate these stressors, workplaces that were no longer able to operate out of a centralised location relied instead on online meetings and networking events to recreate this sense of professional identity and connection (Durakovic et al., 2022). Likewise, art was used to address mental health issues and assist marginalised populations to connect and experience a sense of community with low-to-no-contact (Amos et al., 2022; Hancox et al., 2022; Kiernan et al., 2021). Taken together, it is evident that both the causes of and solutions to the impostor syndrome can be addressed through community and connection, both of which were ameliorated in the context of addressing issues that surfaced in the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Gendered Dimensions of the Impostor Phenomenon

The impostor phenomenon overwhelmingly impacts women. The pandemic magnified existing gender inequalities and created new ones (Tulshyan & Burey, 2021). Lockdowns facilitated a new norm of working remotely, and many individuals found themselves juggling professional responsibilities alongside increased domestic duties, blurring the lines between work and personal life (Fisher & Ryan, 2021). In this altered landscape, women, who currently and historically shoulder a disproportionate amount of caregiving responsibilities, faced an exacerbated struggle to balance their careers with home life (Fisher & Ryan, 2021). This dichotomy may contribute to feelings of inadequacy and other hallmark experiences of the impostor phenomenon, as women might perceive themselves as falling short in both spheres due to unrealistic societal and personal expectations. While there has been extensive research into impostor phenomena in relation to women's experiences, research into transgender, gender diverse, and non-binary people's experiences of the impostor phenomenon is noticeably lacking.

In research, non-binary people are largely omitted, overlooked, or conflated into groups with binary trans people (Morrison et al., 2021) and impostor phenomenon literature is no exception. While research on the mental health of non-binary and trans people's experiences of the pandemic identifies that these individuals felt more isolated, experienced poorer mental health during the pandemic (Hawke et al., 2021), the authors found no empirical research exploring gender-diverse people's experiences of impostor syndrome. A quick Google search for "non-binary and trans impostor syndrome" generates numerous articles confirming that non-binary and trans folks experience feeling like impostors. Many express that they do not feel "trans" or "androgynous" enough and these sentiments are particularly common in the context of 'coming out', i.e., disclosing their gender identity to others. In contrast, the authors only located one publication that explicitly addresses this through one individual's experience

(Friedman, 2023). Due to societal conceptions and, indeed, misconceptions, non-binary identity is largely misunderstood, and those who identify as such lack concrete presentations or templates to understand their own experiences; their identities are often called into question, and they are asked for ‘proof’ (Friedman, 2023; Truszczyński et al., 2022). Additionally, non-binary people also experience discrimination and doubt from straight and LGBTQIA+ communities (Parmenter et al., 2021). These factors likely contribute to non-binary people’s experiences of feeling like an impostor; like they are not “trans enough”, “queer enough” or “androgynous enough”. The following personal reflections offer unique insights into the individual, contextual, and societal factors that might foster these feelings, and grant an opportunity to explore their origins and remedies.

Method

The Artist’s Experience of Navigating Artistic Uncertainty in the Age of COVID-19

In February 2020, I returned to a place I once called home: an old white box studio for an artist residency. After two years abroad and a decision six months earlier to leave my full-time 9-to-5 job, this residency felt like a leap off a cliff—an act of trust that life would guide me to a space where I could express my creativity without confines. Yet, as I stepped into the studio, I was engulfed by a whirlwind of emotions. Excitement about the journey ahead mingled with a profound fear surrounding my new identity as an artist. While creative expression had always come naturally to me, the label “artist” felt both exhilarating and unsettling.

In those studio days, I immersed myself in gender studies and feminist texts, drawn to the powerful works of feminist artists such as bell hooks, Judy Chicago and Maisie Cousins. I realised that I wanted to dedicate my art to exploring the nuanced experiences of those socialised as female. My fascination turned to the body, examining its internal and external landscapes. I became consumed with the glittery microscopic cells associated with endometriosis, tirelessly sewing beads onto fabric to symbolise these hidden struggles. I began casting parts of my body in clay, displaying them on plinths to emphasise how societal standards often objectify us. I adorned ‘feminine’ objects—eyebrow tweezers, razors, mirrors, menstrual cups—with beads and sequins, transforming them into art. Eventually, I picked up a camera to document my creations. But no matter the medium, the nagging voices in my head grew louder, convincing me that I was merely posing as an artist, waiting for someone to reveal that I was not worthy of this identity.

On March 15th, the studio walls felt even more confining as a state emergency was declared. What was meant to be a month-long residency unexpectedly stretched into five months of isolation. I was forced to confront not just my fears about the world but also my uncertainties as an artist. Questions about my identity, my purpose, and how to make meaningful use of this unanticipated abundance of time began to surface. I felt naïve for believing I could create something significant amid a global crisis. While the world grappled with uncertainty, the confines of quarantine became both a sanctuary, shielding me from judgement, and a creative challenge—an abundance of time met with an overwhelming sense of inadequacy.

As I navigated these challenges, the gendered expectations and inequities within the art world became painfully evident. Like many female artists, I found myself bearing an unequal burden, grappling with societal pressures alongside the demands of my craft. It felt as if a

spotlight was shining on our struggles, amplifying the self-doubt and inadequacy I've heard echoed by many. Trapped with my own thoughts, I began comparing myself to others, feeling isolated in my artistic expression. The individualistic, competitive culture often left me yearning for community and connection, transforming what should have been a vibrant space into one of solitude.

Locked in a once-familiar place that now felt foreign, I lived out of a single suitcase, uncertain whether I could return to the life I had painstakingly built abroad. Throughout this ordeal, I learned patience and amid the turbulence of self-criticism, I turned once more to the camera. As restrictions eased, I invited a close friend to join me in a photographic experiment. We sat together, discussing our bodies and how impostor syndrome had woven itself through our lives.

Driven by a fascination with bodies, my visual research began to take shape. I observed how the lenses through which we view ourselves can zoom in, zoom out, warp, and shift focus, teaching us to believe that we are never enough. This photographic storytelling project aimed to capture our bodies in ways we had never dared to share. The photographs became mirrors, inviting us to examine parts of ourselves that we often felt ashamed of. I aimed to explore those aspects closely, to feel curiosity and, ultimately, love for them.

Through the lens of the camera, I discovered a newfound desire to share stories—stories of what I saw and of what others might not perceive. In this process of exploration, I began to reclaim my identity as an artist, understanding that my voice, shaped by both struggle and resilience, was indeed worthy of being heard. This realisation opened the door to a deeper examination of the gendered dimensions of impostor syndrome.

Theoretical Framework

The Artist: A Reflection on Gendered Perspectives in Power Spaces

Addressing gender inequities through therapeutic avenues, particularly 'Inner Critic Therapy', is thought-provoking. This approach recognises that societal gender disparities often find their way into our psyche, manifesting as self-doubt and a harsh inner dialogue that can hinder personal growth and well-being (Bleidorn et al., 2016). As individuals, we tend to intricately tie our identities to societal norms and expectations. These expectations not only influence how we perceive ourselves but also dictate how we present ourselves to the world. This can inadvertently lead to a perpetuation of gender roles and stereotypes, constraining our authenticity and potential.

A noteworthy aspect that emerges from this discourse is the dynamic of women grappling with their sense of self in spaces imbued with power. The intricate interplay of societal expectations, personal aspirations, and prevailing gender norms often creates a complex landscape where women may question their rightful place and worthiness. This phenomenon mirrors the broader gender imbalances prevalent in society. Expanding this discourse to the realm of artistic expression, we witness an additional layer of complexity. Women, especially artists, navigate a landscape where gender stereotypes often define artistic genres (Guerrilla Girls, 1998). These stereotypes can erode self-confidence and create self-doubt in their creative abilities. The prevailing patriarchal framework, which has historically dominated the art world, further compounds this issue. As women delve into their creative pursuits, they frequently grapple with uncertainties regarding the authenticity of their artistic voice, contending not only with external skepticism but also their own internal insecurities.

However, this very process of questioning can lead to profound breakthroughs, as it pushes women artists to confront and deconstruct conventional notions of creativity. It prompts them to unearth their unique narratives and perspectives, infusing their work with a depth that arises from the struggle to assert their place within a historically male-dominated domain. Through this ongoing journey of self-assessment, women artists not only redefine their roles but also reshape the broader artistic landscape, inspiring generations to come.

In this context, the 'Inner Critic Therapy' becomes a beacon of empowerment. By addressing the deep-seated negative self-talk that stems from societal gender norms, individuals - particularly women - can embark on a journey towards self-discovery and self-acceptance. This approach not only aids in dismantling self-imposed limitations but also holds the potential to inspire broader societal change. The narrative of questioning and redefining one's identity and role in spaces of power is integral to the ongoing dialogue about gender equality. As more women challenge traditional norms and expectations, they contribute to a more inclusive and diverse landscape that benefits everyone. This shift paves the way for exploring how the artist's creative struggles transcend gender boundaries, revealing common threads in our experiences.

Participant

No one gives you a guide to being non-binary. There are so many ways to be. It is often seen as a third gender, one that combines the 'best traits' of both masculinity and femininity or a complete eschewing of gender roles altogether. These expectations, along with the label 'non-binary' do not exactly facilitate a coming to terms with a non-binary identity, as it positions the label somewhere between or within the gender binary, which may or may not be an accurate representation of how individuals experience their non-binary gender. However, I do not believe in letting labels define people's identity, but rather, in letting people define what a label means to them.

I was unsure what it would mean to come out as non-binary. The eerie quiet of my bedroom, on a once-busy main road, that was now lucky to hear a car go by, provided an ample sanctuary to ponder this: I was perfectly comfortable being non-binary but coming out was riddled with questions, confusion, and a sense of impostor. It was not about whether the label fit; that was the easy part. Rather, my struggle was with how I would be perceived. As a nuisance? A phony? And almost the worst - a woman? As I sat in the quiet, I knew that I was non-binary, but what you feel and how you are seen can differ drastically once you are walking busy streets and university corridors full of strangers who automatically perceive you.

I want to be clear that I cherish many of my experiences growing up as a girl and knowing myself (falsely) as a woman. These are times, rituals, and rites of passage that I treasure and that have shaped my experience and worldviews. Don't get me wrong, being a woman in the world has its pitfalls, and I certainly don't want to romanticise it. But, while the label 'woman' always felt wrong to me, I had spent a lot of time convincing myself that I was a woman and accepting myself as one, albeit a 'non-conventional' one. I grew to appreciate so many parts of my experience as a woman. How, when I was finally able to come out to others, would I be judged for not wanting to lose those parts of myself that I had worked hard to appreciate – namely my connection with my body?

Having an androgynous body, I thought (naively), was a condition of having a 'genuine' non-binary experience. Would I have to get my breasts cut off to be credible? Grow out the facial hair that I had religiously been removing since puberty? Luckily, I had already stopped

shaving many years prior because that brand of femininity is accepted in queer, leftist-feminist circles that I was moving in. Perhaps I would stop removing my moustache that I had been relentlessly teased for in high school. Surely, this would help to be credible as a non-binary person.

June 2020 saw the lifting of the heaviest restrictions in Boorloo (Perth) where I lived. Coincidentally, it was my 30th birthday and I had organised a party, and one of my friends who attended was selling pronoun badges. I had not fully resolved how I would be perceived, but I plucked up a small semblance of courage and bought myself a *They/Them* badge, just as a little test (and a little gift). As I was about to realise, putting a pin on your jacket does not do anything to alleviate feeling like an impostor. In fact, before it had felt like a secret and now, having announced it in big green letters on my lapel, my feelings of being a non-binary impostor were bolstered. Despite the all-revealing pin announcing to the world my deepest most personal identity, I still “looked like a woman”.

Being perceived as a woman was not just a fear, it was, and is, a reality. As anticipated, despite my shiny new badge, people continued, and continue to this day, to misgender me. I often walk into shops with friends only to be greeted with “Hi ladies”; and ignoring my bright badge on my lanyard and the pronouns in my email signature, I am still misgendered daily at work. I have come to accept this as an inconvenient reality that is inextricable from my features, which I refuse to change.

Results

In the single photoshoot, over 100 shots were taken. Eight were selected to share, with the following excerpt from the artist’s statement accompanying the work at an exhibition opening. This is followed by an excerpt from a reflective statement the subject wrote immediately following the photoshoot, which was also shared alongside the work.



Contrasting Lens

In our lives, our bodies are incessantly subjected to criticism and expectations. From the moment we enter this world, there are predefined notions of how our bodies should exist and move within it. As we navigate through life, we often find ourselves being questioned if we diverge too much from the rigid binary norms. However, when it comes to leaving this world, we must remember that our bodies should not be perceived as definitive entities, but rather as mediums of expression. They should not dictate how we understand individuality or serve as the sole visual blueprint for our uniqueness. Our body's expression should never be constrained by whether we are "born this way" or not.

Our bodies serve as vessels for experiencing the world, holding memories and emotions within them. Self-reflection creates space for unlearning and relearning, challenging the cultural narratives we have learned and internalised about our bodies. It shifts the narrative away from being primarily image-centric to one that focuses on nurturing and caring for our bodies. From simple actions like moving our arms to our mouths to feed, releasing sighs, or smiling with our eyes, our bodies compose an unmatched symphony that envisions a post-capitalist future. This process treats the body as a vehicle for liberation and restoration, breaking free from the societal norms rooted in white-supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist culture.

In the context of mental health and well-being, it is easy to consider our bodies as separate entities from our experiences. Especially for those who have navigated the world being socialised female, our bodies might unconsciously be perceived as objects, monitored, censored, critiqued, and judged by oppressive systems ingrained in society. These expectations can lead us to create ideas of how our bodies should appear, seeking acceptance from others instead of embracing ourselves. Yet, we must remember that our bodies are ours to decide what is best for them.

The challenge lies in breaking free from the unconscious restrictions and systems that have shaped these norms. Whether we have begun our unlearning/relearning journey or are just at the beginning, it will be an ongoing process throughout our lives. The more people become conscious of these realities, the greater the chance of dismantling these norms. This is not about creating new standards but rather understanding and appreciating the intricate layers that make up humanness. Celebrating individual uniqueness without the need for conforming to societal expectations.

Let us embrace fluidity and liberate ourselves from societal pressures that attempt to confine us to fixed identities. Instead, let us focus on a dynamic journey, recognising the inherent complexities that cannot be confined to a single identity category. As we move through time and space, let us not be bound by static definitions. Instead, let language transcend the mere description of our physical forms and delve into the profound depths of our souls—the true essence of who we are, beyond the vessel that contains us.

Bodily Functions: The Subject's Reflections on the Photoshoot

As I lie in the bath, I can't help but notice my belly and boobs protruding from the water, more than I'm used to. Unlike many people I know and have read about who have been socialised as female, this doesn't bother me much. Nevertheless, my pubescent and post-pubescent years have been filled with silent, and sometimes not so silent, battles with my body. At times, I find deep affection for my body. I appreciate its softness, its curves, and the gentle shape it holds. I am grateful for the power it gives me to perform physical tasks, transporting me through life like a trusty vehicle. Yet, more often than not, I feel a sense of indifferent

resignation. I acknowledge my body's presence, but it elicits no overwhelming emotions. I don't feel particularly empowered or divinely feminine because of my shape, nor do I feel immensely strong and masculine from the physical abilities I possess. Instead, I seem to have developed a desensitised indifference, akin to knowing a subject too well after exhaustive study, where it becomes ordinary and unremarkable.

This is not a narrative about love for my body or my feelings toward it. It's a story about functions and emotions. Recently, as a non-binary person with a uterus, I experienced pregnancy, which brought to the forefront my complex relationship with gender and my body. Throughout my life, I've despised my period, relying on birth control pills since I was 16, often to stop the bleeding. However, after coming off the pill, I've realised that the side effects are not worth suppressing my body's natural processes for. Interestingly, I've observed the feminising effects of the pill on my body—how it redistributes body fat, softens facial, belly, and leg hair, and increases the size of my breasts. While these changes are acceptable to me, they serve as a noteworthy trade-off of femininity for someone like myself, a non-binary femme. The concept of womanhood and femininity is multi-faceted and enigmatic. What defines a woman's experiences? These are profound questions, deserving of continuous exploration. Countless hours and eloquent words have been devoted to understanding these aspects of identity, but for me the journey of self-discovery remains ongoing.

Discussion

Corporeality: Artist's Reflection on Gender & the body

Gender is intricately intertwined with our perceptions of the human body and the various anatomical features that we associate with different genders (Butler, 1990). When contemplating gender, certain body parts often come to mind, acting as symbolic representations of masculinity, femininity, and identity. For instance, facial hair and a deeper voice are frequently associated with masculinity, while features such as breasts and curvier forms are often linked to femininity. These physical attributes, however, only scratch the surface of the complex interplay between biology, culture, and self-identification that shapes our understanding of gender.

Defining womanhood and femininity goes beyond mere anatomical distinctions. They encompass a vast spectrum of experiences, identities, and expressions that are deeply personal and often culturally influenced (hooks, 2000). Womanhood is not confined to a single set of body parts; it's a dynamic concept that encompasses an array of emotions, roles, and societal expectations. It's about embracing qualities that are traditionally seen as feminine, but also challenging and redefining those qualities in ways that resonate with individual experiences and aspirations (Wolf, 1990). Femininity, likewise, extends far beyond the physical realm. It encapsulates a range of behaviors, characteristics, and attributes that are often associated with being female. However, these associations are not fixed or universal; they are shaped by cultural norms, historical contexts, and personal perspectives (Butler, 1990, de Beauvoir, 1949). For example, some might view femininity as gentle, nurturing, or empathetic, while others might emphasise strength, independence, and resilience.

Amidst growth, self-acceptance emerges as a guiding principle. Creative expression becomes a mirror that reflects our true essence, allowing us to embrace the entirety of who we are – strengths, flaws, and all (Brown, 2010). Through the act of creation, we find a sanctuary where self-judgement gives way to self-love. As we externalise our thoughts and emotions, we

often find that the very aspects we deem unworthy or inadequate become integral parts of our unique narrative.

Semiotic Study of Subjectivity and Femininity

I was totally comfortable in the banal setting of my friend's bathroom. Chloe and I had recently met at a party and hit it off but were only just learning about each other. My new friend had an easy way about her as she filled the bath, picked the petals off the flowers, and tossed them into the water. I picked out some outfits that I felt comfortable in and got into the bath. I picked an outfit to best present the gender-blend I felt: masculinely feminine...or was it femininely masculine?

Chloe and I chatted about our fears and anxieties around the project and COVID, and the joys of settling into our new lives at the time, interspersed with directions about poses and costume changes. I forget how I ended up naked. It felt like the natural progression of the shoot as I shed my fears and my clothes to reveal my body and myself. I felt completely seen and at home. It was art, but more than that, it was the glue in our new friendship.

I have always resonated with the idea that when art, writing, or any creative pursuit is out in public, the interpretation belongs to the audience. It seems that while the artist can assert their intentions behind the art, ultimately its meaning becomes public domain, no longer belonging to the artist (and typically, the narrative does not belong to the subject). It may seem counterintuitive then, that someone who is determined not to be perceived as a woman would put themselves in a milky bath full of flowers, and plants, with breasts visible among all the other omnipresent bathroom symbols associated with femininity - bath oils, shampoos, scented candles - that are not perceptible post-production. The gendered associations with these symbols are so deeply ingrained in the societal psyche that it would take a circus to perform the mental gymnastics required to undo them in the brief instant of looking at a picture. How would anyone ever see anything other than a woman in the bath?

Subjectivity and Dysphoria

In my circles, and seemingly more broadly, gender dysphoria has become synonymous with the trans experience. What I rarely see discussed is the fact that gender dysphoria is rooted in a cisnormative, heteronormative, patriarchal worldview. If we did not have such strong, tangible symbols, traits, and actions that are strongly societally agreed upon as belonging to certain genders, perhaps people would not feel so dysphoric. This sentiment echoes criticisms of systemic factors contributing to the impostor phenomenon; if there were more systems and societal structures to support people in their workplace, perhaps people would not feel so inadequate in the workplace. This is, of course, an oversimplification of all the complex factors that contribute to gender dysphoria and the impostor phenomenon. However, as a person who is, by definition, trans (i.e., my sex assigned at birth does not align with my gender), having not experienced gender dysphoria makes me feel like an impostor. Am I trans enough if I am not bothered by my breasts? If I do not need androgyny to feel comfortable in my skin? By the same token, I do not feel comfortable in my skin if I am perceived as a woman. I do not want to change my body, but it simultaneously betrays me, lying through its voluptuous associations to the beholders. This is the liminality of non-binary existence – not trans enough to be trans, not cis enough to be cis. Moreover, with a dearth of cultural touchstones and representation (especially if you are not looking for them) and with inadequate inclusion in the trans and cis communities, the likelihood of feeling like an impostor increases.

The Artist's Creative Struggles Transcend Gender Boundaries

The moment I embarked on the photo project with Hanna marked a pivotal juncture in my artistic journey. Leading up to our collaboration, I had navigated a path of self-discovery, gradually cultivating a stronger voice and a more assertive creative expression. I liberated myself from the limiting belief that any single project could confine or define my identity as an artist. I realised that my identity is multifaceted; being an artist is just one piece of the puzzle. This newfound self-confidence blossomed through dedicated study and various creative ventures, allowing me to explore diverse mediums and styles while uncovering my authentic voice through community art.

As we collaborated, I was struck by Hanna's vulnerability as they navigated their own feelings of impostor syndrome surrounding their non-binary identity. It served as a poignant reminder that creative struggles are not confined to a singular gender experience. Observing Hanna's journey felt like looking into a mirror; their challenges echoed familiar voices from my own not-so-distant past. While Hanna's experience of coming out as non-binary was unique, their experience of impostor resonated deeply with me.

During our photoshoot, which I envisioned as a space for participants to unravel what lay beneath the surface, I decided to photograph Hanna in a bath, immersed in a traditionally 'feminine' setting filled with nature, flowers, and leaves. The juxtaposition of them, a non-binary person, within this context told a powerful story of rebirth and transformation. When I shared the final images with Hanna, their honest feedback reflected my own evolution as an artist. In many artistic endeavours, subjects often play the role of muse, typically without a say in the outcome. However, this project was grounded in collaboration, rejecting the notion of the artist's sole ownership over the piece. When Hanna expressed discomfort with the images, revealing insecurities about their body and gender, I received their comments with grace, admiring their vulnerability and honesty. In that moment, I realised that the grip of impostor syndrome had loosened; their candid feedback highlighted the power of artistic connection, transcending boundaries and labels.

Revisiting these photos several years later, I witnessed the growth in Hanna's relationship with the images. The experience of the photoshoot had been transformative for both of us. Through this lens, I not only captured Hanna's essence but also embarked on a broader storytelling journey that extended beyond a single photograph. Each shot became a testament to our shared vulnerabilities and strengths, challenging conventional representations. The process of selecting, editing, and curating the photographs wove together a narrative that was both personal and universal. This project celebrated our individual identities and our collective journey of breaking free from impostor syndrome, embracing authenticity, and using art to tell stories that resonate far beyond the confines of a single frame.

Embracing Fluidity: The Subject's Timeline

When I got the photos back, my stomach turned. This was not me. Not the me I knew, anyway. The feelings of being an impostor reared. My worst fears were apparently founded as I saw myself in the bath, a piece of curvy meat in a soup of femininity. The product was so different from and so foreign to the gender affirmation I experienced in the process of shooting. This spiralled me into a place of doubt. Would anyone ever believe I was non-binary? These thoughts were inevitably accompanied by tears and the dread of telling Chloe what no artist wants to hear, "I don't like this representation of me". The grace with which Chloe took this feedback was phenomenal. I had never felt so heard and seen, and it reminded me of that day

in the bathroom. The trust I had in Chloe grew and while I desperately wanted to bury the photos and never see them again, I felt at least that I was truly seen, and the feeling of impostor started to retreat.

In late 2022, Chloe asked if she could exhibit the photos. I looked back on the ones she had selected and agreed. I felt neutral about them and thought that perhaps I had been too harsh on them.

When we saw the invitation to submit articles about our experiences of gender during the pandemic, we instantaneously knew we wanted to use our experiences of this photoshoot. This meant that I would have to pull out the photos again. With fear in my heart, I was surprised to find myself feeling delighted, even elated when Chloe pulled them up on her laptop. I felt a sense of euphoria. The juxtaposition I had never seen was so obvious, now. My hairy legs, my boyish face, my short hair. I felt whole. I felt seen. I felt myself. On reflection, I understand that I was projecting my internalised societal understanding of womanhood onto myself. I could have never accepted myself when seeing myself as a fractured individual: corporeally a woman, internally a non-binary person. Since the original shoot, where parts of myself felt fractured and polarised, I have come to understand myself and my gender as unified and fluid. I can finally relax and sink into the bath.

The Subject's Reflection on the Vital Role of Collaboration from Conception to Reflection

There is a tendency to look back at photographs from our past with kinder eyes. We have all seen awkward childhood and teen photos that were previously embarrassing, but in hindsight represent the progress of time and self-development. Perhaps my experience with the woman in the bath is not so far from that experience. When we look back on photos from our past, we look back with additional knowledge, experience, and if we are lucky, with wisdom. I look back on those photos with the knowledge that Chloe has held space for me over the past two years while I have accepted myself as non-binary. We have fostered a strong sense of community and collaboration in both our friendship, and in our professional lives. I have seen and experienced people's acceptance of me as a non-binary person, with nothing but a pronoun pin and my word as evidence. I am seen as my authentic self by so many, and through this art project, probably so many more than I ever thought possible. I certainly no longer feel like an impostor.

Of course, it is problematic, or at least, overly simplistic to suggest external or internal validation of one's own experiences suffices to overcome the impostor phenomenon. There are myriad factors that enable this, including time, and demographic factors (e.g., socioeconomic status, level of education, race, etc). Importantly, it takes a village. Chloe and I did not rely solely on ourselves, each other, or this project to overcome our feelings of 'impostor'. While this piece functions as a touchpoint for our individual and collaborative progress, we each have a vast network of people in our lives to support us, including family, friends, therapists, and colleagues. In fact, the role of this project in addressing our impostor experiences was quite unintended. However, it demonstrates that collaboration was foundational from its conception to completion (and now on reflection) to assist in unravelling our experiences of the impostor phenomenon.

Conclusion

The impostor phenomenon pervades gendered experiences in the workplace, and while less spoken about, also impacts those coming out as gender-diverse. Through a close study of the context, process, and reflections on Chloe and Hanna's collaborative piece, this article provides a dynamic temporal example of how the impostor phenomenon presents and can be remedied against the backdrop of the pandemic. Chloe used her art project to explore corporeal experiences of to draw attention to and buck unspoken societal gender norms and expectations.

Community psychologists are encouraged to reflect on these insights, and their personal reactions to them, and thoughtfully apply them, particularly when working with marginalised groups like LGBTQIA+ people. While the art piece was never intended to explore the impostor phenomenon, it provoked both authors to reflect on the way this theme subtly, and not so subtly, permeated the process and product. While doing this project, the unfolding pandemic afforded both collaborators time and space to reflect on their unique gendered experiences of 'being the impostor'. Using this project to vocalise and reflect on the experience of feeling like an impostor invites the critique of the societal, gendered, and internalised discourse that contributes to such feelings. It highlights that, like the most potent remedies for the pandemic, collaboration and community are essential in tackling the impostor phenomenon.

References

- Amos, A., Macioti, P. G., Hill, A. O., Bourne, A. (2022). *Pride and pandemic: Mental health experiences and coping strategies among LGBTQ+ adults during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia. National report.* Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University. <https://doi.org/10.26181/20176010>
- Bandali, M. (2022). Imposter syndrome. *Journal of Paramedic Practice*, 14(4), 172. <https://doi.org/10.12968/jpar.2022.14.4.172>
- Bleidorn, W., Arslan, R. C., Denissen, J. J. A., Rentfrow, P. J., Gebauer, J. E., Potter, J., & Gosling, S. D. (2016). Age and gender differences in self-esteem—A cross-cultural window. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 111(3), 396–410. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000078>
- Bromwich, R. J. (2023). *The pandemic exposed gender inequality: Let's seize the opportunity to remedy it.* The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/the-pandemic-exposed-gender-inequality-lets-seize-the-opportunity-to-remedy-it-200799>
- Brown, B. (2010). *The gifts of imperfection: Let go of who you think you're supposed to be and embrace who you are.* Hazelden Publishing.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity.* Routledge.
- Chrousos, G. P., & Mentis, A.-F. (2020). Imposter syndrome threatens diversity. *Science*, 367(6479), 749-750. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aba8039>
- Clance, P. R., & Imes, S. A. (1978). The impostor phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*, 15(3), 241-247. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0086006>
- de Beauvoir, S. (1949). *The second sex* (H. M. Parshley, Trans.). Vintage Books. (Original work published 1949)
- Durakovic, I., Aznavoorian, L., & Candido, C. (2022). Togetherness and (work) Place: Insights from workers and managers during Australian COVID-Induced lockdowns. *Sustainability*, 15(1), 94. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15010094>

- Feenstra, S., Begeny, C. T., Ryan, M. K., Rink, F. A., Stoker, J. I., & Jordan, J. (2020). Contextualizing the impostor “syndrome”. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*, 575024-575024. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.575024>
- Fisher, A. N., & Ryan, M. K. (2021). Gender inequalities during COVID-19. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations, 24*(2), 237-245. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430220984248>
- Friedman, J. (2023). The ways I'm a fraud: Essays on imposter syndrome in identity [Pitzer Senior Thesis]. Claremont Colleges Scholarship. https://scholarship.claremont.edu/pitzer_theses/142/
- Green, H., Fernandez, R., Moxham, L., & MacPhail, C. (2022). Social capital and wellbeing among Australian adults' during the COVID-19 pandemic: A qualitative study. *BMC Public Health, 22*(1), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-14896-x>
- Green, R. (2017). *The Princeton encyclopedia of poetry and poetics* (4th ed.). Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400841424>
- Guerrilla Girls. (1998). *The guerrilla girls' bedside companion to the history of western art*. Penguin Books.
- Hall, K. S., Samari, G., Garbers, S., Casey, S. E., Diallo, D. D., Orcutt, M., Moresky, R. T., Martinez, M. E., & McGovern, T. (2020). Centring sexual and reproductive health and justice in the global COVID-19 response. *The Lancet (British Edition), 395*(10231), 1175-1177. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30801-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30801-1)
- Hancox, D., Gattenhof, S., Mackay, S., & Klæbe, H. (2022). Pivots, arts practice and potentialities: Creative engagement, community well-being and arts-led research during COVID-19 in Australia. *Journal of Applied Arts & Health, 13*(1), 61-75. https://doi.org/10.1386/jaah_00088_1
- Hawke, L. D., Hayes, E., Darnay, K., & Henderson, J. (2021). Mental health among transgender and gender diverse youth: An exploration of effects during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity, 8*(2), 180-187. <https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000467>
- Hernandez, M., & Lacerenza, C. (2023). How to help high achievers overcome imposter syndrome. *MIT Sloan Management Review, 64*(2), 1-5.
- Hewertson, H., & Tissa, F. (2022). Intersectional Imposter Syndrome: How imposterism affects marginalised groups. In M. Addison, M. Breeze & Y. Taylor (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of imposter syndrome in higher education* (pp. 19-35). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-86570-2_2
- Hooks, B. (2000). *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics*. South End Press.
- Hwang, T., Rabheru, K., Peisah, C., Reichman, W., & Ikeda, M. (2020). Loneliness and social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Psychogeriatrics, 32*(10), 1217-1220. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1041610220000988>
- Kiernan, F., Chmiel, A., Garrido, S., Hickey, M., & Davidson, J. W. (2021). The role of artistic creative activities in navigating the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*, 696202. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.696202>
- Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Penguin Random House.
- Ling, F. Y. Y., Zhang, Z., & Tay, S. Y. L. (2020). Imposter syndrome and gender stereotypes: Female facility managers' work outcomes and job situations. *Journal of*

- Management in Engineering*, 36(5). [https://doi.org/10.1061/\(asce\)me.1943-5479.0000831](https://doi.org/10.1061/(asce)me.1943-5479.0000831)
- Lokot, M., & Avakyan, Y. (2020). Intersectionality as a lens to the COVID-19 pandemic: Implications for sexual and reproductive health in development and humanitarian contexts. *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, 28(1), 1764748. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26410397.2020.1764748>
- Martinez, J., & Forrey, M. (2019). Overcoming imposter syndrome: The adventures of two new instruction librarians. *Reference Services Review*, 47(3), 331-342. <https://doi.org/10.1108/RSR-03-2019-0021>
- Morrison, T., Dinno, A., & Salmon, T. (2021). The erasure of intersex, transgender, nonbinary, and agender experiences through misuse of sex and gender in health research. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 190(12), 2712-2717. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kwab221>
- Parmenter, J. G., Galliher, R. V., & Maughan, A. D. A. (2021). LGBTQ+ emerging adults perceptions of discrimination and exclusion within the LGBTQ+ community. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 12(4), 289-304. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2020.1716056>
- Salib, S. (2022). On gender bias and the imposter syndrome. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 37(4), 974-974. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-021-07318-y>
- Saltzman, L., Hansel, T., & Bordnick, P. (2020). Loneliness, isolation, and social support factors in post-COVID-19 mental health. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 12(S1), S55-S57. <https://doi.org/10.1037/tra0000703>
- Truszczyński, N., Singh, A. A., & Hansen, N. (2022). The discrimination experiences and coping responses of non-binary and trans people. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 69(4), 741-755. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2020.1855028>
- Tulshyan, R., & Burey, J.-A. (2021). *Stop telling women they have imposter syndrome*. Harvard Business Review. Retrieved 10/08/2023, <https://hbr.org/2021/02/stop-telling-women-they-have-imposter-syndrome>
- United Nations (2020). Policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women. <https://doi.org/10.18356/2de8d75a-en>
- Wolf, N. (1990). *The beauty myth: How images of beauty are used against women*. HarperCollins.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge Luke Hartley, Mayma Awaida, Belinda D'Costa and Anthony Saltis for their generous assistance and expert contributions when putting together this manuscript.

Address for Correspondence

Hanna Saltis: johanna.saltis@postgrad.curtin.edu.au

Author Biographies

Hanna Saltis (they/them) is undertaking a PhD in Public Health at Curtin University's School of Population Health. Their thesis *A mixed-methods exploration of gender within Women's Australian Rules community football clubs in Western Australia* aims to investigate

how gender and gender norms are embedded, understood, explored, and challenged, within the context of Women's Australian Rules Football at the community level.

Hanna is passionate about relationships and sexuality education, with a particular interest in the diversity and inclusion space. They are committed to ensuring all young people are equipped with the essential knowledge and skills needed to navigate relationships of all kinds throughout their lives. They are currently the President of the WA branch of the [Society of Australian Sexologists](#), and a member of [Bloom-ED](#).

Chloe Clements (she/her) is the Project and Policy Manager at the [Youth Pride Network](#) (YPN), Western Australia's peak body for LGBTIQA+ young people.

She is an advocate, artist, and community leader with a Bachelor of Arts in Community Development and Sociology, and a professional background spanning Community Arts, Gender Studies, and Policy. For over a decade, Chloe has worked on intersectional issues impacting LGBTIQA+ communities, with a strong focus on queer rights and youth empowerment.

Through her community arts practice, she uses creative expression as a tool for systemic advocacy and social change. At YPN, Chloe leads participatory and policy-driven initiatives, including research across Western Australia into the barriers faced by LGBTIQA+ young people. In all her work, she is committed to ensuring that diverse youth voices are heard and reflected in government decision-making.