

## Self-Leadership and Female Entrepreneurship: A Narrative Multi-Case Study

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### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this study was to explore ways in which self-leadership appeared among women entrepreneurs who were also caretakers for others, such as children and elderly parents. For this research, I utilized a narrative multi-case study approach, followed by thematic analysis, in which to explore the roles of the women. Aside from the interviews, I collected and analyzed two years' worth of digital information for each business, including marketing posts, YouTube videos, business website information, and podcasts. The findings of this study showed that self-leadership among women entrepreneurs looked slightly different from the original theory of self-leadership developed by Charles Manz in 1986. For the women participants, self-leadership was self-defined, multi-faceted, and incorporated overcoming obstacles personally and professionally due to gender roles. This study enhanced earlier research surrounding the notion of self-leadership by depicting the theory from a gendered point of view through the narratives of the participants as entrepreneurs and caretakers.*

**KEYWORDS:** Women entrepreneurs, self-leadership, narrative inquiry, case study, qualitative research

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Women entrepreneurs have been studied for decades; however, women owned businesses increased during the Coronavirus pandemic (Richardson, 2023a). Along with the expansion of entrepreneurs came women entre-employees: those who worked full-time or part-time jobs while and operated a business of their own. Scholars viewed entrepreneurship as a community of practice (Doering-White et al, 2021), influencing job creation and the economy. Social construction within society caused people to view issues from a gendered lens, which influenced the way in which they navigated life, roles, and formed or implemented policies and practices that affected others, such as entrepreneurs. One of the social constructions embedded within U.S. structures and systems was

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gender bias (Boddington, 2024). For women entrepreneurs, societal roles of gender influenced their decision-making as it related to ways of operating their businesses.

Along with business operation, women entrepreneurs and entre-employees navigated leadership differently than male business owners. Leadership theories such as self-leadership outlined the role of a leader in a specific way and aligned with traditional male characteristics. However, women entrepreneurs practiced self-leadership differently, as they viewed terms such as success, leader, and self-control in different ways based on their own experiences. For the multiple identities that women held, professional life and personal life tend intersected and influenced one another. Due to gender influenced categories of entrepreneurship and leadership (Richardson, 2023; Shen & Joseph, 2021), I examined what self-leadership looked like among women entrepreneurs' post-COVID. Therefore, my research question for this narrative multi-case study was:

RQ: What can be inferred about self-leadership via the narratives of female entrepreneurs and entre-employees?

This research question formed from a previous study that I conducted about women entrepreneurs and entre-employees (Richardson, 2023a), which occurred at the beginning of the coronavirus [COVID] pandemic, along with a lack of research on self-leadership among women and women entrepreneurs. Based on the previous participants who were still operating businesses post-pandemic, I developed this study. I interviewed three women entrepreneurs, and collected and analyzed digital business materials from them. Two of the participants considered themselves entre-employees as they operated their businesses while working for another employer (Richardson, 2023b). However, their businesses were more than side hustles or hobbies, as they required a vast amount of personal and financial investment, were legally established, generated regular revenue, and (for one of the entre-employees) employed others. The third participant moved from entre-employee to entrepreneur, as she retired from her full-time work shortly before the study began.

Through this research, the entrepreneurs showed that characteristics of self-leadership intertwined with their personal lives, which influenced their business practices. The women confirmed through their narratives that entrepreneurship and self-leadership were gendered phenomenon. Because of the dearth of literature related to self-leadership among women entrepreneurs, I explained the ways in which self-leadership emerged among women (with multiple identities such as caregiver) who operated their own businesses.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Gender and entrepreneurship***

“With different gender norms and expected identities, men and women often differ in the personal and business motivations, the specific paths to entrepreneurship, and measurement of business success” (Wang, 2019, p. 1769). Within entrepreneurship, society historically viewed business ownership as inherently male. Organizations demonstrated this via grant application requirements, funding assignments, and the ways in which organizations that supported businesses described successful and thriving ones. However, these views misaligned with the experiences of women entrepreneurs. Different from male entrepreneurs, the multiple roles held by women entrepreneurs (ex. community member, caregiver, wife, mother) influenced their business practices (Richardson, 2023a; Wang, 2019). These roles influenced how women entrepreneurs operated their

businesses. The businesses of women entrepreneurs usually served their own communities or filled a service gap within said community. For example, many women entrepreneurs started their businesses out of necessity instead of opportunity (Conroy & Low, 2022). A business may have begun because a woman lost her job, which occurred for many women during and after the COVID pandemic. Historically, women owned businesses have been service-led such as childcare agencies, bakeries, or consulting agencies. Other women started their businesses to satisfy a need to contribute more of their talents to a particular market, while staying in their jobs. These women became known as entre-employees. As a result, succeeding as business owners may have been difficult compared to male entrepreneurs who began their businesses out of opportunity, in non-service positions that easily attracted investors, and in areas that looked more attractive for business funding models.

Women businesses also faced challenges due to profit, networking, and social constructs (Mustafa et al., 2021). Entrepreneurship, from concept to policy formation, historically favored male businesses (Grandy et al., 2020). Women business owners, in contrast, operated differently in business via the following ways:

1. They created more community oriented, needs-based businesses.
2. They had low profit or investment by stakeholders.
3. They used smaller networks.
4. They had fewer financial risks.
5. They lacked the ability to be seen as serious by others if they served as a caregiver or employee elsewhere (Conroy & Low, 2022; Richardson, 2023a).

Most grants for businesses required a certain threshold of profits that women owned businesses did not often see. If a grant application required an annual profit of \$1 million in revenue or even six figures in revenue, an entrepreneur who operated a service-oriented business had a harder time achieving this status. As with most women business owners, the challenge increased if the business was based out of the home (where many women entrepreneurs begin their companies) with little to no employees (Adikaram & Razik, 2023; Dy & Jayawarna, 2020; Fabeil et al., 2020). Due to gender biases, banks viewed providing a business loan to a woman as riskier than loaning to a man. In some parts of the world, women could not obtain funding to start their own businesses. Many small business funding models and entrepreneurship funding models required the following among applicants: 1) high profit margins, 2) a higher number of employees, and 3) high profit-goal requirements (Richardson, 2023a), which automatically eliminated many women entrepreneurs.

Additionally, because women historically served as primary caregivers, growing a business took longer for them due to their responsibilities (Richardson, 2023b; Pettigrew, 2021; Wang, 2019). Therefore, women owned businesses have been more solo owned, operated on a non-traditional schedule, and took longer to achieve recognition and financial success than male owned businesses. This not only altered the success viewed by funding agencies, but limited the time and resources that were needed for business growth. Nevertheless, this did not stop leadership development for women entrepreneurs, such as self-leadership.

### ***Self-leadership***

For this study, I defined self-leadership as one's ability to influence one's own feelings and actions to achieve goals in life, regardless of intrinsic or extrinsic motivations (Linfang et al., 2021; Manz, 1986; Reichard et al., 2025). In this case, the goals pertained to one's entrepreneurial business endeavors. Self-leadership required aspects such as self-awareness, persistence,

discipline, and risk taking. “Self-leadership acts as a self-influence process that can help entrepreneurs be self-directed and motivated to perform tasks that may be important to achieving their entrepreneurial goals” (Bendel et al., 2019, p. 111). This style of leadership helped individuals manage their behavior and thoughts by focusing on attributes such as “self-talk, mental images, thought patterns, beliefs and assumptions” (Ay et al., 2015, p. 30). Through self-leadership, individuals managed and self-motivated themselves to accomplish tasks. Self-leadership incorporated strategies such as 1) behavior focused strategies, 2) natural reward strategies, and 3) constructive thinking patterns (Goldsby et al., 2021; Neck & Houghton, 2006; Tenschert et al., 2025).

With behavior-focused strategies, individuals accomplished items necessary for positive outcomes. This included motivational tasks such as goal setting, self-rewards, and self-monitoring systems, which led individuals to complete milestones one at a time (Liu et al., 2023). Behavior focused strategies could be positive, as when an individual set a hard-to-reach goal and accomplished it. Taking notes on what it took to accomplish said task could help an individual adjust their behavior. Self-punishment strategies proved necessary, if they were not excessive. For example, self-punishment referred to an “individuals’ effort to be more effective at non-repetition of mistakes by assessing their negative behaviors or performance failures and correcting them” (Ay et al., 2015, p. 31). Within an entrepreneurial context, a person who exhibited self-punishment would change their marketing tactics if the prior strategies did not work.

With a natural rewards strategy, an individual would receive a reward for completing tasks that naturally brought about a positive outcome or feeling. This was different from a self-rewarding strategy. A natural reward could be a feeling of accomplishment or satisfaction after achieving a certain number of sales or hiring a new employee (Crammer et al., 2019; Goldsby et al., 2021). A natural reward could also be a positive feeling from performing an enjoyable job. A person who maintained positivity and critical thinking through constructive thought patterns would use self-talk or self-dialogue to assess their own thoughts (Bendell et al., 2019; Goldsby et al., 2021).

Self-leadership allowed an individual to control their work environment, their performance, and their accomplishment of tasks through different means (Castellano et al, 2021; Goldsby et al., 2021; Neck & Houghton, 2006). While one could not control everything (ex. customer complaints, shipping delays, costs of supplies), there could be other parts of business and life that could be led differently. This could improve one’s satisfaction with their work. Additional items included in self-leadership would be time management strategies, planning (i.e. goal setting, development, prioritizing, etc.) and monitoring activities (self-assessment, critical review) (Goldsby et al., 2021). Not performing these tasks in a busy environment would lead to a lack of self-leadership, which could impact one’s ability to focus properly, complete tasks, or positively navigate overwhelming moments.

Self-setting goals, natural rewards, and a self-reward system were all positive attributes of self-leadership for individuals, which led to intrinsic motivation and a higher sense of purpose (Crammer et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2023; Tenschert et al., 2025). Grounded in self-regulation, self-leadership allowed individuals to direct their own thoughts and behaviors, which led to positive outcomes, behaviors, and direction (Ay et al., 2015; Crammer et al., 2019; Neck & Houghton, 2006). The ability to hold autonomy and practice self-control allowed one to accomplish more tasks, engage in their work, and pursue more goals and complicated tasks with optimism.

Self-leadership proved important for entrepreneurs as they developed and grew their businesses without prescribed rules and tasks (Bendell et al., 2019). For women entrepreneurs, recommendations for success were usually based on male dominated perspectives, especially those

in high growth areas (Bendell et al., 2019; Grandy et al., 2020). From a gendered viewpoint, self-leadership focused on aspects that benefitted women owned businesses, especially small businesses or non-high growth fields. “Self-leadership, however, should generalize particularly well to entrepreneurs, as self-leading individuals tend to be opportunity thinkers who challenge prevailing assumptions and attitudes while devising innovative solutions to problems” (Bendell et al., 2019, p. 112). Due to constant problem solving and innovative strategies, entrepreneurs experienced business success because they implemented self-leadership strategies (ex. goal setting, self-cueing via to-do lists or prioritizing notes, positive internal dialogue, assessment, awareness, etc.). Rasdi et al., (2020) studied women entrepreneurs in Malaysia and defined self-leadership as “exercising responsibility that translates into self-directed initiatives to move forward and take control of one’s personal actions” (p. 190). Within the study, self-leadership emerged through self-esteem, persistence, self-aspiration for one’s business, support from others, and partaking in professional development. For leadership research, using a gendered awareness framework could help researchers understand ways in which self-leadership displayed itself from different gendered perspectives.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Gender awareness framework: self-leadership and entrepreneurship*

“Gender is critical to practice as it informs individual expectations, shapes social institutions, and influences social reality” (Boddington, 2024, p. 381). Scholars who used a gender awareness framework recognized that in leadership and entrepreneurship, theories, practices, and recommendations assumed a male perspective. Traditionally, scholars viewed leadership from a male centered lens. This included attributes such as logic, rational thought, authority, charisma, etc. (Acker, 2006). These attributes led to success in the workplace as a male leader, but that changed from a gendered view. Studies on women leaders showed that women faced different leadership challenges; mimicking male characteristics did not always prove successful. Obstacles such as the glass ceiling (Eagly & Carli, 2007), the concrete ceiling for Black women leaders (Dickens & Chavez, 2018), and invisibility and hypervisibility (Dickens et al., 2019; Iheduru-Anderson et al., 2024) influenced the success of women leaders in the workplace and within entrepreneurship. The tone for gender norms and expectations have historically been determined by society as the social impact of gender dynamics impacted careers, economic and domestic growth, and political realms” (Banton, Garza, and Jones, 2025, p. 334). Within the workplace, accounts of women navigating caregiving roles while leading an area within a company brought out a different component of leadership, such as emotional intelligence; this was not always seen as a necessary leadership aspect for men. However, some theories aligned positively to women centered characteristics of leadership such as authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), servant leadership, and even components of self-leadership (Manz, 1986; Neck & Houghton, 2006). The theories incorporated qualities of leadership development focused on individual experiences, as well as common traits that women possessed, historically.

For a more gendered framework, scholars added the role of motherhood to business and work models such as the 3M’s model: (market, money, and management). The addition of motherhood allowed scholars to consider the influential role that women assumed, such as caring and managing family life, along with its effect on work/entrepreneurial life (Bridges et al., 2023; Brush et al., 2009; Pettigrew, 2021). Motherhood showed the significance of the gendered woman

to the family and business. Added to the role of mother, invisible labor within the household affected the amount of work female entrepreneurs assumed, which influenced business profits and business growth (Richardson, 2023a). For women business owners, their gender role intersected with every aspect of personal life and business.

There remained a scarcity of literature about self-leadership among women, especially within entrepreneurship (Radsai et al., 2020; Yingjun et al., 2021). While some scholars studied self-leadership, they took on a gendered view and prioritized male aspects of self-leadership in traditional employment settings. Therefore, more research on self-leadership and entrepreneurship among women was needed for a holistic understanding of the concept.

## Methodology

For this study, I used a narrative multi-case study methodology, combining narrative inquiry with case study research. The multiple cases included three women entrepreneurs who shared their narratives related to the research question. I created Table I below to provide an overview of each participant. Each participant received a pseudonym.

**Table 1**

*Participant Description for Self-Leadership Study*

| Participant | Age Range | Family Status                                      | Occupation                 | Entrepreneurial Status                                                      | Years in Business |
|-------------|-----------|----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Kristine    | 45-55     | Married; adult children                            | Art Studio Owner           | Entrepreneur; retired from full-time work a few months before our interview | 4                 |
| Vanessa     | 35-45     | Partnered; college aged child; caregiver to parent | Financial Coach            | Entre-employee                                                              | 5                 |
| Charlotte   | 35-45     | Married; school-aged children                      | Career and Grief Counselor | Entre-employee                                                              | 5                 |

*Note.* Author's own work

I chose case study methodology because it allowed me to study ways in which self-leadership emerged among women entrepreneurs from an in-depth perspective. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), case study involved holistically describing and analyzing a bounded system. "Case studies, in their true essence, explore and investigate contemporary real-life phenomenon through detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships" (Ebneyamini & Moghadam, 2018, p. 3). Case studies allowed researchers to fully explore a phenomenon in order to understand it, while remaining an outsider of it. Through a multi-case study approach, I was able to study a concept from multiple angles in order to learn more about it, but I did not have to become a part of the community as though I was conducting an ethnography. In this way, I utilized data such as interviews. Additional data sources included digital materials such as social media posts, information from business websites, YouTube business

videos, and podcasts from the participants. Combining narrative inquiry with case study research helped me provide an in-depth understanding of self-leadership (Sonday, et al., 2020; Verleye, 2019).

Through narrative research, scholars revealed new ideas through the stories and counter-stories of others (Andrews, 2021; Platt et al., 2022). I sought to make meaning of people's experiences, often from the position of the participants at the time of interviewing (Estefan et al., 2016). It was important to note that in methodologies such as narrative inquiry paired with case study research, there was no fixed sample size needed for the study. A participant size could be as small as one participant or more than fifteen participants (Ahmed, 2025). Within narrative inquiry, the goal, like other qualitative methodologies, was saturation. However, due to the amount of data that could be collected through the stories of participants, along with artifacts for a case study, a small sample size could produce rich data. Because I was already familiar with the participants from a previous study (Richardson, 2023a), I was able to tell their stories in an authentic, knowledgeable, and relational way (Platt et al., 2022). Collecting the participants' stories provided me with a holistic view of their lives and showed me ways in which self-leadership emerged in their lives.

### ***Ethical considerations***

This study was approved by the corresponding author's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and was assigned protocol number HS24-0051. All participants signed a standard consent form, following the guidelines of the corresponding author's university IRB. Participation in the study was voluntary.

### ***Reflexivity and Positionality***

Positionality has been described as the social, cultural, and/or political view a researcher takes within the study, based on their identity or position within the world (Goundar, 2025; Darwin Holmes, 2020). Within positionality, scholars who used reflexivity reflected on their positions to understand possible assumptions or bias within their research. Engaging in this practice helped researchers mitigate bias as much as possible and allowed for transparency and credibility of the research. One's positionality could be shaped by one's upbringing, experiences, and identities that influenced their area of research. A large part of my upbringing came from being around women entrepreneurs. My grandmother started her own business that she operated for over fifty years until her passing. My mother operated two businesses at separate times. The first business was a decorating company for fifteen years. I watched her brainstorm business ideas, decide on the one that she enjoyed more, and build her business from the family home to a store in the town where I was raised. Once that business ended, she began her jewelry business, which she operated for approximately twenty years. I watched her grow this entrepreneurial endeavor, attend market shows, and participate in craft fairs (which my family and I worked throughout the year).

With both my grandmother and mother, I saw what it took to operate and scale a business. The women were their own administrative assistants, salespeople, creators, designers, relationship builders, accountants, buyers, and more. As an adult, I entered the professional world with an entrepreneurial mindset. While that has served me well as an academic, I also started my own business with my family. While I understood what this would entail as someone who helped my family's businesses, operating my own business, especially through a pandemic, allowed me to

understand how it felt to be an entre-employee. In this way, I operated my own business while I worked in a separate field. I had a greater appreciation for the late nights, pivots in business strategies, challenges with shipping, and ways of marketing that came with business ownership. It also helped me view leadership differently and appreciate how self-leadership developed when operating a company as a woman who is also a caretaker.

As a caretaker (a mother and a daughter with older parents), I understood the daily challenges that came with building and operating a business, working full-time in a career, and providing care when needed. These were not separate functions but overlapping and often intertwining roles and responsibilities. These experiences shaped my research interests because they related to my own lived experiences, yet there was a question that remained, which gave me an insider-outsider perspective (Dodgson, 2019; Goundar, 2025; Yip, 2024). I wanted to find an answer to that question.

### ***Trustworthiness and Bias Mitigation***

Because the participants in this study came from a previous study of mine on entrepreneurship, I took certain precautions to mitigate bias within the research. Aside from engaging in reflexivity, I journaled or memoed (Birks et al., 2025) throughout the study as I interviewed participants, reviewed digital materials, coded, and then analyzed the data. Doing so helped acknowledge the assumptions that I held and view my research as objectively as possible. Memoing also allowed me to note any information that I missed during the rounds of coding. It was important to note that it was not possible to remove all subjectivity from qualitative research, but it was possible to reduce subjectivity that would cause bias (Ahmed et al., 2025).

I engaged in member checking (Lane & Bourdo, 2026; McKim, 2023) with the participants. Throughout interviewing, I read their words back to them to ensure that I captured their exact words as they intended. I also allowed the participants to review their own transcripts so that they could see that I captured the moment as it occurred. This greatly helped me when I thematically analyzed their transcripts, as I did not want to summarize the conversations, but use their words verbatim. This helped me with transparency and bias mitigation.

Finally, using the reflexive thematic analysis [RTA] process allowed me to remove bias and ensure transparency and trustworthiness within this study. Through this process, I revised previous themes and subthemes that appeared in the data. Analyzing the data on separate occasions and then comparing the data against one another caused me to continuously reduce assumptions and arrive at the final themes and subthemes. Through RTA, researchers should recheck their codes, assumptions, and biases, leading to clearer and more concrete themes and subthemes (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

### ***Data Collection***

For data collection, I interviewed the participants over a three-month period. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, where I transcribed as the women spoke. I recorded each interview via Zoom, which allowed me to document and transcribe certain non-verbal moments such as pauses, silences, laughs, and other non-verbal cues. I then spent a year examining and analyzing two years' worth of digital data per participant. Each participant used multiple forms of media based on their business goals. Each digital platform showed the progression of the participant's businesses from 2021-2023. For each participant, I reviewed business content, videos, podcast

recordings, marketing posts, promotional items, sales timelines and promotions, and the frequency of their posts. The digital data collection allowed me to compare, code, and analyze information that the participants shared during their interviews with the types of postings that I noticed for their businesses. For example, if a participant shared that her confidence in sales increased after one year of business operation, I was able to match that answer with the ways in which the participant marketed her business after one year (ex. change in voice, posture in online commercials, frequency of sales promotions, etc.). Once I had all my data, I began the analysis process.

### ***Data Analysis***

I utilized the RTA process by Braun and Clarke (2019). Through this process, I coded and recoded my data multiple times and arrived at conclusive themes with each process. The RTA process suggested that researchers might not arrive at proper themes and subthemes with a one-time coding process. While there was not a set number of times to repeat this process, I found that I arrived at the appropriate descriptive themes by the fourth time that I coded. I then performed the RTA process a fifth time for confirmation. RTA allowed me to create new themes from the codes that emerged throughout my engagement with the data sources of interviews, as well as digital sources and social media, as I moved through the five points of the process: 1) Familiarization; 2) Generating initial codes; 3) Generating/searching for themes; 4) Reviewing themes; and 5) Defining and naming themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Schoch, 2020). I created Table 2 below showing the final themes and subthemes that emerged.

**Table 2**  
*Themes and Subthemes of Reflective Thematic Analysis*

| Themes                    | Subthemes           | Quotations                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|---------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Self-leadership</b>    | a. Self-confidence  | [At first] It was just friends and family, word of mouth, a little bit of Facebook and I was donating pieces to charities and auctions.<br>We learned that we needed to be. I think we were intentional about our branding, but we needed to be like get it, get it right, like be very intentional |
|                           | b. Self-persistence |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Redefining Success</b> |                     | Then I think about why I am doing it. It's to express myself and work with my hands and make something from nothing.<br>I cannot be too busy for my business. I need the time to pause, to be still, to ideate, to give room for the creative juices to flow.                                       |

*Note.* Author's own work

## ***Results***

I described the findings of this study in terms of the following themes and subthemes. When I began the RTA process, I had more than two themes and subthemes; however, I found myself collapsing the themes and subthemes each time that I recoded and analyzed. Therefore, I focused on depth within the findings due to saturation between the narratives and the digital data. The two main themes were 1) self-leadership and 2) redefining success. Under self-leadership, the subthemes were self-confidence and self-persistence, which reflected categories of self-leadership. The participants described these themes and subthemes throughout their narratives, which I matched with patterns in their social media posts, YouTube channels, and websites for clarity and confirmation.

## ***Participant Stories***

Before I asked the interview questions about self-leadership, I asked the participants to provide an update on their businesses.

Kristine:

When my business started, it was just through friends and family, word of mouth, a little bit of Facebook and I was donating pieces to charities and auctions. After COVID, I did go back to work for a period of time and then I was like, I can't do this anymore. Then I had time to branch out and do new things and try new items. I opened more social media accounts, which I just don't understand yet. I started on Etsy as well. I think, total, I've sold like a few hundred dollars on Etsy, but I've had repeat customers. And then just learning and growing and pushing myself and my art and then I realized that I needed to sell some stuff because I didn't have room [left in me at home studio]. Then I started selling at markets and I did well. My goal was to reimburse what I bought and my husband has been so supportive and generous with his time. He sets up the booth with me and sells with me. This has been good for us, since we've retired, to mingle with people and meet new people. I like seeing the other artisans (and purchasing from them). I've been doing really well at the markets (in selling my items). At my first market, I sold \$500 there and I was shocked. There are people who will make comments and give feedback, such as "I don't think your [items] are worth this much." I'll ask them why and I appreciate their feedback, but you've always got one of those. Things that I make that I think will sell like that (snaps fingers) won't sell at all, but artists are the most generous people I've met. They will share so much of what they've learned. Another big black hole is legal issues. The liabilities with making things are just scary. I overthink things just a little.

Vanessa:

I will say that as far as [my company] goes, I think we're doing well on that side too. Coming on to university, full time, has allowed me to put all of the revenues back into the business to try and grow it. So, we had some major projects. I think when you and I last spoke, I had one part time employee. She was doing social media stuff for us and through lots of

feedback we learned that we needed to be . . . I think we were intentional about our branding, but we needed to be like get it right, like be very intentional about our branding. I have brought on . . . I am now bringing on one of my former student's part times to do some bookkeeping work because we work with corporate clients and we keep their books. I do all that work, so I am bringing on somebody to do that bookkeeping stuff on a part time basis so that I can devote more time to clients and business development. So, right now for the past like two years, our revenues have been steady. We have not necessarily grown revenue wise, but you know steady, which is good.

Charlotte:

Since COVID I completely pivoted. I was doing career coaching and part of my story was that I lost [one of my parents] into the pandemic. Walking into the pandemic and experiencing the grieving period just changed everything. I wanted to lean into this empathic and compassionate need that was happening. My grief experience was producing a new version of me that I wanted to explore and lean into, where I wanted to create spaces where people could lean into their experiences. I shifted into this practice in 2021. As a lifelong learner, you always want to study things. I shifted everything, completely 180. I launched a series of research projects around grief in [my full-time work] and asked about how leaders are providing support. I wanted to know more about how people were navigating the pandemic, civil unrest, graduate education. I got a grant for it. I am still working and writing from that. We [she and colleagues] did research around grief experiences around international students. I threw myself into the realm of exploring grief and pivoted into grief coaching. What was interesting was organizations reaching out for speaking opportunities and workshops for exploring grief. There is an intersectional lens to grief especially for those who live on the margins because you are also grieving the state of the world (laws, policies, etc.). It's hard to process grief, especially grief in the world.

### *Self-leadership*

While the participants described characteristics of self-leadership and success within their narratives, there were moments where they discussed themselves as leaders and explained what that meant to them, within the components of self-leadership.

Kristine (Behavior-focused strategy):

There are days that I don't do anything because I had a bad day at work. A lot of things don't work out because things [art materials] stick to the counter or break or don't form well. There are days where I'm like "Why am I doing this?" Then I think about why I am doing it. It's to express myself and work with my hands and make something from nothing. Not just to sell stuff. And then selling is a blast and meeting people and hearing their responses to things you've made, good or bad.

Vanessa (Natural reward strategy):

I've always been a persistent person. So, like, I just push forward. Like, "we can do this push forward." I think actually this experience [as an entre-employee] you know caused me to step out of my comfort zone in both areas [work and business] I think. It's reinforced my belief and my persistence, but it's really increased my confidence. That's the part . . . like I'm ready to do new things.

Charlotte (Constructive thinking pattern/self-talk):

From a business owner point, I think I've had to evolve as an entrepreneurial leader over time. I have had to acknowledge my capacity. Doing a 9-5 and owning a business and raising kids, married, and caretaking for parents- they're always there. How do I still grow my business and show up in these other spaces? I want to live which makes it a challenge. I am dancing with it every day. What feels right in those moments? What do I need to pull back on in this moment? It's always a constant conversation in my head. I was also after my freedom so that if I choose to walk away [from full-time career], I will be okay because I've built something that is sustainable. Freedom is key.

### *Self-confidence*

As an aspect of self-leadership development, self-confidence was a pivotal part as one trusted one's own instincts and abilities (Radsí et al., 2020). Each participant expressed triumph, as well as frustration, around learning ways to market their businesses. For each participant, marketing was a new avenue. They learned how to sell their businesses to the public. Through taking risks, stepping outside of their comfort zones, making decisions, and reflecting on their visions for their businesses, the participants were able to build their confidence and business presence by delving into an unknown territory, such as marketing. Through each participants' marketing of their businesses, the self-confidence increased with each business poster, flyer, video posting, or webinar.

Kristine:

Now marketing and social media are so out of my wheelhouse. I can stand in front of 25 students and teach them how to make something, but learning how to photograph something or set up a booth is something that I'll either have to find someone else to do it or invest my time in. I've joined a crafts guild that helps me pick other's brains to learn things. That has been very helpful.

Vanessa:

I brought a marketing person on part time as well this last spring, we revamped our website, we got our branding cohesive, all our social media like you know, we're starting to see like the output of our social media. It is more cohesive and we have a presence, which is great.

Charlotte:

Right now, I have a system that is working right now as an entre-employee because I know my role and what I can and cannot do. I didn't want to seem like I was doing too much, but I had to overcome that and do my thing. I

have found that I have embraced a more fearless version of myself who is not afraid to ask or put myself out there or make connections [to market my business].

### *Self-persistence*

The participants described the types of challenges that they faced in managing their businesses and personal lives, as well as ways in which they persisted. Part of self-persistence involved them figuring out what they wanted for their businesses in the long term and short term. Their digital presence confirmed their interviews by the ebbs and flows in their social media posts and service offerings.

Kristine:

The other thing that has led to my success is keeping the business small. I haven't tried to expand too much to where I am pushed to produce. There are businesses that are rooted in handmade, beautiful, artistic [works]. Then they started having to mass produce and that breaks my heart. These people are making a lot of money, but I don't want to go down that road [of mass production].

Vanessa:

Discipline, right? I've told my two part time people that I have no working hours. I tell them to work when you want. Like we have deadlines that we all try to meet, but when they do their job? I really don't care. We have meetings, team meetings twice a month. So those are scheduled. But other than that, I try not to bother them on the weekends. I've been really trying to instill this in my team as well. Like, we don't need to push to get things out. We need to give ourselves the time to do it right. And if that means we're not going to do this event in May that we wanted to do in May, we're going to do it in September. There are ways to simplify life; I just don't know that I can do that right now. And so, it's like these moments when things are so, so intense. I've just had to create some quiet space, you know?

Charlotte:

I learned that I cannot be too busy for my business. I need the time to pause, to be still, to ideate, to give room for the creative juices to flow. Sometimes, I am too busy. There is a level of a slower pace required. Time is a challenge and obtaining work life balance. The state of the world: I am sad, depressed, and overcome with grief at times when I think of all the things going on in the world.

### *Success Redefined*

When it came to ways in which marketing and learning the entrepreneurship atmosphere contributed to one's self-leadership, each participant had a slightly different perspective. However, all of them discussed their own version of success and the ways it related to their personal and professional lives.

Kristine:

My definition of success is making pieces that make people happy and make me happy. The first thing that sold was [a product] that my daughter pushed me to make and I charged what I wanted to [instead of underselling myself].

Vanessa:

[Success] has reinforced my belief and my persistence, but it's really increased my confidence. That's the part, like I'm ready to do new things. Self-awareness . . . I have had to really like. . . there were moments. My dad was diagnosed with a terminal illness so I've been going to see them and that's just an emotional toll and physical- like the time and the energy it takes to . . . it's been hard. There were moments where I'm kind of like, sliding down a little bit. There are moments where like life is so overwhelming, so I'm more aware of those moments and what it means [for my life and business].

Charlotte:

I have built my business to where it replaces my salary. I am trying to sustain it, but there is a level of mental peace knowing that the goal has been reached, so I am not trying to scale the business. I had to lead with heart and love and compassion and empathy and care because I had to remember that the people reaching out [for coaching] were the ones who wanted my work. I bring my full self into this space and meet with people authentically. Doing a 9-5 and owning a business and raising kids, married, and caretaking for parents- they're always there. How do I still grow my business and show up in these other spaces? I think I've had to evolve as an entrepreneurial leader over time. I have had to acknowledge my [entrepreneurial] capacity.

## Discussion

The findings from this study aligned with some of the literature on women entrepreneurs and self-leadership, as well as provided new perspectives on this subject. Findings from this study confirmed that self-leadership among women entrepreneurs looked different from male entrepreneurs. For the women, self-leadership was self-defined, multi-faceted, and incorporated overcoming obstacles within their businesses, as well as obstacles within their lives from a gendered perspective. As women, the entrepreneurs held multiple life roles, which influenced their display of self-leadership. They were business owners, caregivers of either children and/or parents, and employees or former employees. They had little to no prior experience in entrepreneurship, yet ventured into it for various reasons. The lack of experience caused them to juggle their multiple identities while learning the world of business ownership, which caused them to complete a myriad of tasks by themselves. This allowed them to exercise aspects such as self-confidence, persistence, and awareness as they navigated uncomfortable and lesser-known parts of entrepreneurship.

At the same time, the participants exhibited well-known parts of self-leadership such as behavior-focused strategies, natural reward strategies, and constructive thinking patterns (Goldsby et al., 2021; Woods et al., 2023). All of the participants exhibited one or all characteristics of self-leadership. The participants talked more about learning all aspects of operating their businesses,

including the parts that they would rather have someone else handle. For them, it was a learning opportunity that helped them plan their next steps. While incorporating natural reward strategies and developing constructive thoughts were a part of the participants' methods of self-leadership, these components served more as an everyday part of life. For example, Kristine mentioned feeling shocked and excited when she sold her products at a market fair, but that was discussed one time in her one-hour interview. Most of her enthusiasm came from seeing her business expand, knowing that she was able to perform well as an entrepreneur when she had spent much of her life as an employee in a different field.

Self-leadership incorporated maintaining persistence, facing business challenges creatively, being willing to pivot in business, and staying true to one's idea of success, even when it meant not meeting profit goals. For the participants, while they did not fully see themselves as leaders, they displayed their own traits of self-leadership before becoming entrepreneurs. As Charlotte explained, her leadership skills for her business emerged from dealing with her own grief. Being able to do so helped her develop coaching guidelines that worked for others, which led to her business framework. Vanessa's self-leadership skills emerged from juggling her role as a caretaker of a parent, as well as a college-age child. She moved from caring for her child to caring for her aging parent, while building a business and working a separate job. Though she admitted that juggling multiple roles was overwhelming and caused her to reflect on her priorities, it also gave her the confidence to persevere in her business and focus on scaling her company strategically. Kristine's understanding of self-leadership came by her gaining new customers yet keeping her company small. The participants' description of self-leadership aligned more with literature by Radszi et al. (2020) where self-leadership paralleled persistence, self-awareness, and confidence.

This study also aligned with literature where scholars suggested that due to gendered norms, women were more risk averse in their entrepreneurial pursuits (Boddington, 2024; Gimenez-Jimenez et al., 2022). For the three participants, while all were doing well in terms of profits, they remained careful in how they scaled their businesses. They did not mind taking time to reach a financial status (although one participant surpassed her salary by the time of her interview). They also had other family members to consider, as well as employees or the desire to have employees. Each participant had either children to consider, themselves or spouses nearing retirement, and/or elderly parents or family members that they were responsible for. As a result, they had to remain careful in business pursuits to increase profits. This aligned more with the model where gender and the category of mother (as caregiver) influenced other aspects of one's business. The participants could not view their businesses from a purely entrepreneurial standpoint but had to consider it within the scope of personal life roles. This strategy differed from opportunity-based businesses and some male entrepreneurial models who embarked on risky business endeavors (Coffman et al., 2021; Conroy & Low, 2022). In this case, being an entre-employee provided a level of safety for the participants as they: 1) worked for an employer and in a career that they still enjoyed and 2) generated regular income, with benefits, while scaling their own businesses (Richardson, 2023b). Charlotte enjoyed being an entre-employee, even though her business provided her with a larger income than her full-time, salaried work. Kristine, being newly retired, was not focused as much on profit, but on learning more about growing her business while also achieving happiness. From a gendered perspective in which multiple roles and identities were intertwined, the participants based self-leadership and success on their own terms, which still aligned with self-leadership theory such as determination, self-control/regulation, and goal setting (Woods et al., 2023).

Where this study differed from the literature was in understanding the context of self-leadership. Many studies on self-leadership focused on training employees in the theory and

practice of leadership. In those cases, self-leadership served as a motivating factor to help employees avoid job detachment and enhance performance, whether individually or as a team (Botke et al., 2022; Krampitz et al., 2021). While self-leadership incorporated the same aspects both for employees in a work setting and entrepreneurs, the way in which self-leadership was conducted (i.e. taught through trainings versus negotiated independently when needed) affected the way in which it worked. Self-leadership trainings for employees were developed, given, and then assessed by consultants or organizational leaders to see if the trainings helped employees perform better on the job (Krampitz et al., 2021). However, for the women entrepreneurs, aspects of self-leadership occurred naturally, not through forced or semi-forced trainings. In addition, the participants were not aware that practicing self-awareness, engaging in self-talk, setting goals, and incorporating rewards such as self-care were a part of a self-leadership framework (Davis & Zolnikov, 2026). The women were doing those things as an authentic way to motivate themselves and build their businesses. They also used self-leadership skills to enhance their confidence and coping mechanisms with navigating multiple life roles.

## **Conclusion and Implications**

Women entrepreneurs and entre-employees faced obstacles when starting and scaling businesses. They had a difficult time securing funding through grants and small business development initiatives if they did not meet the revenue or employee requirements. It has proved difficult for entrepreneurs to earn a large profit in the first few years, especially when women entrepreneurs worked by themselves, funded their businesses out of their own means, worked a full-time or part-time job for security, and/or operated businesses that provided a service. That difficulty enhanced when women held identities such as caregiver. However, there was hope as these entrepreneurs reclaimed their own definitions of success and self-leadership since it influenced multiple areas of their lives. Self-leadership, as one participant explained, looked like increasing one's confidence and self-awareness to avoid burnout or detachment.

The implications for this research varied, but could influence leadership development for women entrepreneurs in the following ways:

1. Networking/collaboration: Leadership development programs could provide more opportunities for women to network with one another and collaborate on entrepreneurial activities to build a supportive community.
2. Inclusion of entre-employees: Funding organizations could consider entre-employees who might be more financially risk averse. This could affect company profits because it would take these businesspersons longer to generate sustainable revenue.
3. Mentoring services: Small business centers that offered coaching and mentoring services to women entrepreneurs, could offer workshops on self-leadership development. As women might hold aspects of self-leadership, the centers could help them understand it deeply in relation to their roles as businesswomen.

When researching self-leadership among women entrepreneurs, researchers could consider the multiple roles of women such as caretaker and mother, along with gender discrimination in relation to entrepreneurship/start up policies and practices. While the participants discussed their caregiving roles, this was not necessarily negative, but it was a significant feature of their lives that intersected with their businesses and abilities to self-lead. When women are expected (culturally

and socially) to provide care for others, it changes the dynamic of their lives (Ozasir-Kacar & Essers, 2021). Therefore, researchers might want to consider a gendered awareness framework within leadership.

### **Funding**

This research was not funded by any organization.

### **Institutional Review Board Statement**

The study protocol, HS24-0051, was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at North Carolina A&T State University and verified as exempt.

### **Informed Consent Form**

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

### **Data Availability Statement**

Due to the confidential nature of the qualitative interviews collected for the study, the data is not publicly available.

### **Acknowledgement**

The author would like to thank all participants who shared their time and experience for this study.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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