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Competing against oneself and others? Competition as gendered technologies of the self

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Abstract

This paper contributes to debates on gender and competition by drawing on a Foucauldian understanding of neoliberalism to explore how competition operates as gendered technologies of the self. Our findings are based on interviews and observations with women who work in a bank and a network marketing company. We unfold different modalities of competition that are in operation: competition has either an outward focus where women compete with other women or an inward focus where women compete with oneself. The study expands the theoretical understanding of gender and competition by exploring how different modalities of competition operate as gendered technologies of the self under neoliberalism. We conclude that while different modalities exist, they fulfill the same purpose in that they individualise women while making structural inequalities invisible.

KEYWORDS
banking, competition, gender, neoliberalism, network marketing, technologies of the self

1 | INTRODUCTION

Research on gender and competition has suggested that women are more reluctant to compete than men, which is said to contribute to women's underrepresentation in leadership positions (Booth, 2009; Hanek et al., 2016; Niederle & Vesterlund, 2007). Yet such research focuses on how women relate to competition while neglecting the

gendered nature of organisations (Acker, 1990; Calás & Smircich, 1991; Kanter, 1977; Lewis, 2014). If organisations are seen as gendered, the idea of women as non-competitive must be understood within structural, social, and broader discourses (Mavin & Yusupova, 2021). This recognises that competition is socially constructed and that presenting oneself as competitive is often seen as undesirable for women (Mavin & Yusupova, 2023). Competition is constructed as masculine and therefore when women show competitive behaviors, this threatens expected norms of femininity. This places women in a 'double-bind' where a tension exists between societal and workplace behavioral expectations leaving women in a no-win situation (Brescoll et al., 2018; Kark et al., 2024). One way in which women deal with the fact that being competitive is seen as undesirable is to redefine competition as not centered on others but rather as a competition with oneself (Mavin & Yusupova, 2023; McRobbie, 2015; Scharff, 2016). Constructing oneself as competitive with oneself has been shown to be an active strategy for women to navigate the double standards where competitive women are stigmatised but women are simultaneously required to be competitive (Mavin & Yusupova, 2023).

However, so far little is known about how wider power dynamics might play a role in how women frame competition. The wider context in which gender and competition operate can be understood as neoliberal (Harvey, 2007). It has been highlighted that neoliberalism encourages individuals to frame their existence in economic terms and competition is a central tenet of neoliberalism (Brown, 2015; Dean, 2009; Foucault, 2008; Read, 2022). Through competition individuals are compelled to transform into the right type of subjects who can flourish under neoliberalism (Brown, 2015; Harvey, 2007; McNay, 2009; Munro, 2012). Competition under neoliberalism functions as a form of governance through which people are encouraged to work on themselves to become entrepreneurs of the self (Foucault, 1988). The techniques and practices through which individuals are called to turn within to develop the right skills, attitudes and human capital are referred to by Foucault (1988) as 'technologies of the self'. Scholars have previously shown that various technologies of the self can operate as a gendered form of control. Authenticity as one example of technologies of the self calls upon women to develop their 'authentic selves' albeit in line with organisations' interests and traditional notions of femininity (Zaeemdar, 2024). Furthermore, confidence (Gill & Orgad, 2017), resilience (Gill & Orgad, 2018), and positivity (Carr & Kelan, 2023), have been illustrated to be technologies of the self which encourage women to develop the right mindset to overcome adversity and the 'mounting insecurities of neoliberalism' (Gill & Orgad, 2018, p.480). Technologies of the self are therefore one way in which subjectivities are formed under neoliberalism through inviting people to transform themselves. Yet so far we have limited understanding of how competition functions as gendered technologies of the self in the workplace.

This article advances theorising by asking how competition functions as gendered technologies of the self. To do so, we draw on research conducted in two settings: women managers working in a corporate bank and as distributors in a network marketing organisation (NMO). Our article makes two contributions. First, the article shows *how* gendered technologies of the self operate through two different modalities of competition. In the NMO, a discourse of abundant opportunities focused competition inward to competing with one's self. In the bank, we observed how women's minority position created a discourse of scarce opportunities where competition was focused outward onto other women. Second, we contribute to our understanding of *what* these technologies of the self render invisible. We argue that even though the modalities through which competition operates as gendered technologies of the self differed, both constructions function to make gender inequalities invisible through individualising gender rather than seeing gender inequalities as a structural and collective issue. The article proceeds as follows. First, we develop an understanding of competition as gendered technologies of the self. We then discuss our methods and methodology. In the empirical section, we present two modalities of competition as either inward or outward focused. The article then offers a discussion and conclusion showing how competition as gendered technologies of the self may take different forms, but the underlying dynamic is the same: the gendered technologies of the self render structural forms of inequality opaque.

2 | COMPETITION AS GENDERED TECHNOLOGIES OF THE SELF

Competition is constructed as a central feature of modern workplaces but competition is also gendered. Within the workplace, women face role expectations to display behaviors associated with gendered societal norms of femininity such as being warm, caring and supportive, and those associated with leadership, which is denoted masculine through traits such as being competent, assertive, and dominant (Trzebiatowski et al., 2023). These conflicting demands form a double-bind which can have negative consequences for women's careers (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Competition illustrates this double-bind for women. For instance, research has shown how women negotiate rules of social acceptability when they display competition in the workplace (Mavin & Yusupova, 2021). This is expressed in the workplace for instance in relation to which subject positions are available: while men can inhabit the position of competition without problems, for women positioning themselves in regard to competition is a balancing act (Mavin & Yusupova, 2023). In competing to be successful within organisations, women risk associating with masculine norms of competition which sits in opposition to norms of 'respectable femininity' (Mavin & Grandy, 2014). If women choose to compete this competition often takes on different forms than when men compete. It has been shown that women competing with other women functions through creating distance, disassociating, or micro-violence which are subtle, everyday put-downs (Mavin et al., 2014a, 2014b; Mavin & Williams, 2013). Furthermore, Mavin and Yusupova (2021) have exposed the fallacies of research on gender and competition by showing how gender is used as an essentialist and demographic variable, as an evident concept often constructed as a zero-sum game, as static and easy-to measure, and without consideration of context or power relations. In summary, how women negotiate being competitive happens within a wider network of gender expectations that constructs competition as unfeminine while the workplace requires a display of competition which however is connoted masculine (Mavin & Yusupova, 2021).

While it has been shown how women negotiate the double-bind of being and not being competitive, competition can also be understood as an expression of neoliberalism. For Foucault (2008), competition is not a natural occurrence. Instead, competition needs to be supported and produced by neoliberal government. Competition is driven by inequality which is seen as legitimate and normative (Brown, 2015). From a Foucauldian understanding, competition is required for neoliberalism as a central function of how the market operates by extending the notion of enterprise to individual subjectivities (Foucault, 2008). As such, subjectivities formed under neoliberalism entail competition, and individuals are compelled to develop such subjectivities through surveillance and disciplinary power. In Foucault's early work (Foucault, 1979), he used the panopticon metaphor as an archetype of social control to propose that a range of disciplinary and surveillance devices influence the way individuals construct themselves. Within organisations, bureaucratic controls such as procedures, reporting lines, performance management practices and policies operate as surveillance measures to enable disciplinary control (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004; de Vaujany et al., 2021). In his later work, Foucault's perspective on control moves from the external panopticon logic to governance through mechanisms of biopower (Foucault, 2003, 2007, 2008); non-disciplinary forms of power which target all aspects of human existence, forming subjectivities that entail an enterprise logic (Foucault, 1984; Moisander, et al., 2018). This means that individuals are expected to frame their lives and subjectivities as a type of self-enterprise where working on the self is a form of human capital to become economically self-sufficient or marketable (McNay, 2009; Munro, 2012). Governmentality is then the processes through which behaviours are governed to produce subjects best suited to neoliberal rationalities. As Moisander et al. (2018, p.380) highlight, disciplinary power and biopower should be seen as an analytical distinction and in practice are likely to 'dovetail' with each other.

Neoliberal governmentality operates through 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 1988) which produce subjects within a market rationality under neoliberalism. Technologies of the self 'permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality' (Foucault, 1988, p.18). Therefore, technologies of the self mean individuals are controlled by being

encouraged to view their lives as a type of enterprise (Foucault, 1984). However, these technologies of the self are 'not something invented by the individual himself [sic]. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group [sic]' (Foucault, 1997, p.291). Competition can thus be understood as technologies of the self which encourage subject formation under neoliberalism.

To sum up thus far, the self as enterprise and discourses of competition are the bedrocks of neoliberalism which constitutes individuals as entrepreneurs of their own life. Inequalities are required to stimulate market competition but, to capitalise on inequalities, everyone must be included in the race to become an entrepreneur of the self, maximising their market value. As such, individuals are encouraged to form their subjectivities through technologies of the self in relation to competition.

Research has also shown that technologies of the self are gendered (Huppatz et al., 2019; Meade et al., 2023; Zaeemdar, 2024). McRobbie (2015, p.7), for instance, refers to the imperative for women to conform to 'the perfect' where 'female competition is inscribed within specific horizons of value relating to husbands, work partners and boyfriends, family and home, motherhood and maternity'; compartmentalised into a 'neoliberal spreadsheet'. This promotes an entrepreneurial mindset that is complicit rather than critical of capitalism, using psychologising discourses such as confidence (Adamson & Kelan, 2024; Gill & Orgad, 2015, 2017; McRobbie, 2015), positivity (Carr & Kelan, 2023; Rottenberg, 2014), resilience (Gill & Orgad, 2018), and self-esteem as solutions to gender inequalities (Gill, 2016). Women are neoliberal subjects *par excellence* as they become the focus of self-transforming and self-reinventing more than men (Elias et al., 2017; Gill & Scharff, 2011). Scharff's (2016) study of musicians as cultural workers, for example, found that competition under neoliberalism is turned inwards. This suggests that power dynamics work on a 'deeper level', where competition is directed at others and the self (Scharff, 2016). Similarly, Mavin and Yusupova (2023) found that women in their study constructed themselves as 'competitive with myself'. While this can be read as a way in which women position themselves in relation to competition to appear as women, competition with oneself is also specific technologies of the self through which feminine subjects are formed under neoliberalism.

Research has rightly problematised how gender and competition has been framed in prior research and has focused on how individual women negotiate these discourses to appear as women while also appearing as competitive (Mavin & Yusupova, 2021, 2023). In this article we extend theorising on gender and competition by showing how competition functions as gendered technologies of the self. Such a framing allows us to move beyond how individuals balance competition with femininity, to theorise how competition as gendered technologies of the self functions to create subjectivities under neoliberalism. The paper thus advances our understanding of how competition functions as gendered technologies of the self and theorises which consequences this might have.

3 | METHODOLOGY

The article addresses the research question how competition functions as gendered technologies of the self. In the following section, we outline the research settings from which we draw our data, our methods and data analysis approach.

3.1 | Field settings

Since competition is a pervasive feature of modern workplaces, it is in a sense fairly straightforward to find settings where it is possible to analyze how competition functions as gendered technologies of the self because most workplaces can potentially function as examples of this dynamic. However, we decided to select two different settings to explore if gendered technologies of the self might operate similarly or differently in each setting. The first

organisation is a multinational corporate bank with its headquarters in the UK and primary listing on the London Stock Exchange. We chose this organisation as it typifies corporate structures and how women are vertically distributed within this type of organisation. Prior research has highlighted the gendered substructure within banking (Acker, 1992; Amis et al., 2018), recognised as inhospitable to women through a long hour's culture (Pascall et al., 2000), and exclusion from corporate social and business events (Granleese, 2004). Globally this bank reports that 28% of managing directors and directors and 35% of vice presidents and associate vice presidents are women with the numbers in the UK, where the study took place, being slightly higher. While banking has traditionally been male-dominated, diversity, equity and inclusion framed much of the discourse espoused by the bank. The bank is a member of the Women in Finance Charter among many others, has employee networks, a gender resource group, board-level commitment toward diversity and inclusion, and targets for representation at senior levels across a range of intersectional characteristics including gender, disability, race, sexuality and socio-economic status.

After completing the research in the bank, we looked for a second field setting where competition might be conceived similarly or differently. Through a contact, we gained access to a global American NMO selling beauty products and with over a million active distributors. Network marketing, sometimes referred to as direct sales or multi-level marketing, is a business where independent distributors sell goods and services and 'recruit' other distributors to their teams (Biggart, 1989; Moisander et al., 2018). To be successful, distributors need to be selling products but predominantly building large teams as they gain profits from the 'downline'. This is referred to as 'residual income', a practice that has attracted criticism of network marketing organisations as pyramid schemes (Koehn, 2001). To build teams, distributors need to be in a process of continually scouting for new distributors to sign up for an account. This has traditionally happened through recruiting friends and family; however, social media had a significant effect on the industry (Wrenn & Waller, 2021). On social media, distributors promote aspirational lifestyles which portray wealth, freedom and flexibility to attract others to join the business. In contrast to the bank, 75% of distributors at NMOs are women, and the highest earners and senior leadership are often dominated by women (Direct Sales Association, 2022). However, these high earners are a tiny minority of active distributors. Both field settings represent varieties of how competition might unfold under neoliberalism. Studying both field settings allows us to analyze how competition as gendered technologies of the self might have different modalities.

3.2 | Materials and methods

In this study we draw on 36 interviews (20 in the bank and 16 distributors) as well as observations in the NMO. In the bank, interviews were conducted by the first author with women managers who ranged from associate vice-president to managing director which is a strategic leadership post. The women were in middle or senior management positions. An initial list of names was provided by one of the Directors at the bank, then we used a snowball technique asking interviewees to provide contact details of other women managers. Whereas full access to the bank was limited given issues of confidentiality and bank security, the more open nature of the NMO allowed us to adopt a more ethnographically inspired approach to data collecting. The first author became a distributor for the company, went through the induction and training process, attended sales and team meetings over a 15-month period, and conducted over 40 h of observations of these events. The observations provided opportunities to contextualise the research and provide richer data with notes being written 'in the moment' and followed up in a reflective journal (Wolfinger, 2002). The primary source of data drawn upon for this article is in-depth interviews conducted with distributors who were approached at meetings and events or through introductions with a distributor who was a contact of the first author. All the distributors were based in the UK and similar in demographic background to the women at the bank. We reflected upon this in terms of our own subjectivities, how this influenced our understanding of the participant's stories, and how we represented and gave voice to them in the presentation of the data (Cunliffe, 2003). Table 1 summarises the data sources and interviewees' biographical data. Both the organisations and individuals interviewed have been assigned pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity.

The in-depth interviews with the women were recorded and transcribed verbatim. For both organisations, we used the same interview schedule. This covered a range of questions about their career paths, current role and expectations, organisational context, and views on competition. Further details of the topics and research questions are provided in Table 2. Following Mavin and Yusupova (2023), we did not provide definitions of terms such as competition to allow the women themselves to create their own meaning in relation to these terms and how they experienced them.

3.3 | Data analysis

Our theoretical framing draws on a Foucauldian understanding of power, discourse and subjectivity (Foucault, 1979, 1988, 2008), therefore in line with other research, we drew on discourse analytic techniques

TABLE 1 Summary of data sources.

	Bank	Network marketing organisation
Number of interviews	20	16
Hours of observation	N/A	40
Mean length of interviews	56 min	49 min
Age range	28–55 years old	22–57 years old
Marital status		
Married	13	11
Co-habiting	3	1
Divorced	0	3
Single	4	1
Children		
Parents	9	14
No children	11	2
Ethnicity	All white European	All white European

TABLE 2 Topics and example questions from the interview schedule.

Topic	Example questions
Context and role	Can you tell me about your current role?
	Do you manage a team, if so, what proportion are male/female?
	What is the gender balance of your department/organisation like?
Associating with or creating distance	Thinking of women you have worked with who you admire or identify with, can you describe them? How are they similar or different to you?
	Thinking of women you have worked with who you didn't admire or identify with, can you describe them? How are they similar or different to you?
Collaborating or competing	Can you think of a time when you have experienced women collaborating or supporting each other to help each other out at work? What happened?
	Can you think of a time when you have experienced women competing or not supporting each other to help each other out at work? What happened?

(Borgkvist et al., 2018; Fegitz, 2022; Smolovic-Jones, 2023; Rumens, 2012). While we draw on a Foucauldian understanding, we operationalised our wider framework by following principles and practices provided through the approach of discourse analysis in the version of Potter and Wetherell (1987). This version of discourse analysis is influenced by Foucault amongst others but entails a specific understanding of how empirical material should be analyzed. Here language provides a discursive means through which subjectivities are constructed within broader power relations. As is common for discourse analytic approaches, data was initially open coded (Adamson & Kelan, 2019). Observation notes and diary entries were also re-read to add a richer picture to the interview data alone and provide insights into the context. During the data analysis, we regularly discussed the process, reflecting on the interviews, observations, and often how the cultures of both settings varied to build a rich picture of the context. The first author then worked systematically through each transcript coding the data using an iterative process returning to old transcripts as new themes were added. We continued with this process until the final interviews were no longer providing new discursive formations and categories. After discussion, we felt that we had reached 'meaning saturation' where issues, nuances and insights became stable (Hennink et al., 2017), allowing us to theorise the modalities of competition. The software package NVivo was used to code data and manage the volume of data which eventually comprised a total of 1779 min of interview recordings and over 40 h of observations and reflective journal notes. At this point, we reflected on the initial themes that were developing and how competition was expressed. Our research question shaping the analysis is how does competition function as gendered neoliberal technologies of the self. To address this, we conducted a second round of coding where returning to the data, we looked at the discursive way in which competition was constructed. In reading the text, we approached this in two ways. First, we looked at the discursive construction underpinning modalities of competition within the data which were different in both settings. The first reading of the data was therefore a top-down approach which sees talk as occurring within contexts that frame social constructions (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). We then moved to a more linguistic bottom-up approach where we looked at the language used to consider how women take up these discourses. For example, we looked at affective responses through language employed such as 'threat', 'wariness', 'envious', and 'self-belief' which illustrate the way in which competition functions as technologies of the self (Glapka, 2019). Next, we returned to the literature to consider how the enterprising self is constituted through competition (Brown, 2015; Foucault, 1988) which led us to the findings we describe in the next section. While we structure the findings based on the more common discursive practices used, there was some degree of overlap and individual variation in these contexts. The findings should therefore not be understood as repeating a dichotomy but rather as more common patterns which we express as the modalities of competition. Our analysis shows similarity and coherence within the modalities of competition as technologies of the self which we illustrate through quotes from the material in the following section.

4 | FOCUSING INWARD AND OUTWARD: COMPETITION AS TECHNOLOGIES OF THE SELF

Our empirical material shows two modalities of how competition functions as gendered technologies of the self. One modality is directed inward and the other outward. In this section we present the data on the modalities of competition by first showing how competition in the network marketing company operates as gendered technologies of the self through an inward focused form of competition where women compete with their own self. We then show how in the bank competition operates as gendered technologies of the self through an outward focus where women were competing with each other. Thereby, this section shows different modalities through which competition functions as technologies of the self through an inward or outward focus. In Figure 1, we visually illustrate these two modalities.

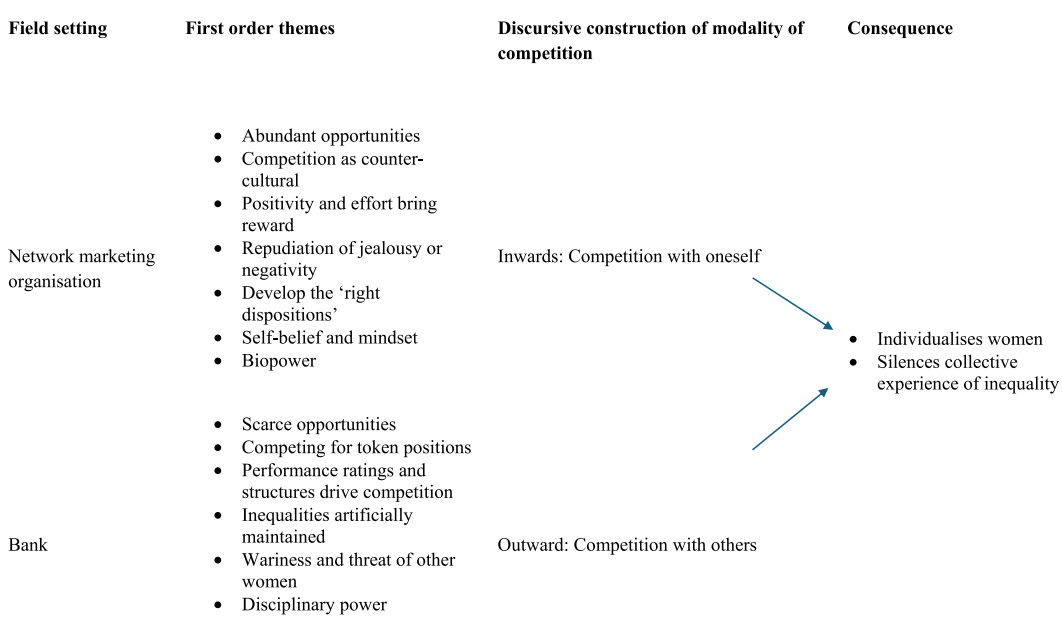

FIGURE 1 Modalities of competition.

4.1 | Focusing inwards: Competition with oneself

In the NMO, competition was constructed and operationalised in an organisational logic where opportunities and resources were readily available. A discourse of abundant opportunities prevailed and how the women took up this discourse was to constitute competition as counter cultural. We see this in the following example from Izzie who contrasts 'traditional' business with that of the NMO:

> ***Izzie***: I think traditional business, the way the women work together I think sometimes there is a lot of not necessarily bitchiness but talking, there is always some sort of negativity if there is a heavy female environment that you know that it's going to be, falling out and what not, bitchiness and whatever, and here I don't know why it's so different, but it is. I think because everyone can have the same level of success, nobody is standing in anybody's way, you can't. We physically can't do it because if they are putting the effort, they will reach wherever they want to.

Izzie demonstrates the discourse of abundant opportunities we found recurring within the NMO where, instead of a pyramid structure with limited senior positions, the NMO was portrayed as providing opportunities for all. Izzie contrasts the potential 'negativity' of a 'female-dominated environment' to that of the NMO, attributing this more positive environment to individual effort as 'nobody is standing in anybody's way'. The focus is directed inwards and people are constructed as responsible for their own success. We see this further evidenced in the quote from Zara:

> ***Zara***: With this business model it's […] I don't know any other where you really want everybody to do well; there's no backstabbing, you sing the praises of everybody […] so what is very lovely about this business model is that you get paid in accordance, it rewards you, with the effort that you put in.

Like Izzie, Zara links the positive environment at the NMO to individual effort and reward. She suggests that in the NMO individual success is related to the amount of effort one puts in. However, what we find here is that this competition focuses inward: women compete with themselves. Others are not regarded as competition but the competition lies within. This is supported by Daisy who contrasts the NMO to her previous role as a loss adjuster:

> ***Daisy***: When there was an opportunity for one of the girls to go for something, there wasn't a lot of support because everyone wanted the same job, but there was only room for one, whereas here there is room for everyone. […] So, it's there for the taking and if you put in the effort and you want it, it's there. But no one is sort of critical or jealous because it's there for you as well, so it's up to you if you have it or not. So, there is no need to be envious or anything.

Daisy talks about competition experienced in her previous role framing this, as we illustrate below, in similar terms to women interviewees at the bank: as limited roles available that women had to compete for. However, in the NMO she contrasts this saying 'there is room for everyone' and therefore no need for jealousy. The discourse of abundant opportunities constructs competition with others as unnecessary. Instead, it shifts this focus inwards. How subjects take up these discourses of abundance is through internalising the focus of competition, for example, Lexi states:

> ***Lexi***: Here you are not competing with anyone except yourself […], but sure in the corporate world, people going after bonuses or target driven incentives, things like that, yeah.

The focus of competition as gendered technologies of the self obscures the inherent barriers that exist within the NMO. Only a fraction of distributors earn income through network marketing and the women proving most successful within the NMO were maximising social media to promote an aspirational lifestyle. These social media active women were young, physically attractive, white, able-bodied and cis gender. Competition as technologies of the self through encouraging women to look inwards masked these inequalities. Francesca, for example, talks about social media savvy women and their success:

> ***Francesca***: How are these women doing this so quickly, so well, so fast, these younger women, and what is it, and I sit down and I think well I know it's more natural to them, doing this and that, being girly, but I'm not girly-girly. So, I'm thinking just leave them to it, it works really well for them. I've got to find my own way and not be envious. It will just take a little bit longer and I have to realise that.

Francesca acknowledges the younger 'girly' women's success, yet she then states that she should not 'be envious' but 'find her own way'. When competition as technologies of the self is focused inwards, the solution to success or failure is developing the right dispositions; for many in our interviews this was expressed as self-belief. This is demonstrated by Scarlett, who holds the pin title of blue diamond making her a senior figure within the business:

> ***Scarlett***: I say to people okay, look where you are in your business now, your business is a physical manifestation of the level of your belief. So if you've got a really, really strong business with a good income and it's growing, it means that your self-belief is in the same position […] so basically we say to people if you want your business to grow, you need to grow yourself, and the business is a physical manifestation of your level of self-belief.

Here, Scarlett directly equates running and growing a successful business to self-belief; disavowing any external factors which may impact on an individual's ability to be successful. Developing belief required individuals

to self-regulate so that negativity was controlled and suppressed, instead they must develop the right dispositions. As Megan states:

> ***Megan***: It is more a personal thing, it is something that I'm working on […] it is the comparison and, you know, so it doesn't come from other people, it's just an issue with, really with me, that I'm working on, is that I tend to compare myself to other people, you know, […] and I beat myself up. But that is a negative trait that is coming from me, that is not coming from anyone else.

Megan suggests that comparing herself to others is an internal flaw she must work on. In other words, rather than competition as technologies of the self being externally focused, how competition is constructed in this context as directed inwards holds Megan accountable. Networking marketing companies are precarious, but through turning the focus of competition inwards, responsibility for failure fell to individuals. Isabella expresses this:

> ***Isabella***: I think network marketing, in general, teaches you to discover about yourself, being self-aware, so you realise who you are exactly in there […] for most people, they're not responsible if anything, you know. If they lose their job, it's because of the economy, it's because of other people, it's because of their manager, it's because of this, it's because of that. So, there's a lot of blame […] whereas, you know, when you come into network marketing, the first thing that's said is that it's up to you. Everything is up to you. So, there's no point in saying, my mentor was crap, because that won't wash with anybody.

As Isabella states, 'everything is up to you'; individuals are solely responsible for their success thus competition turned inwards as technologies of the self means that external factors are repudiated and responsibility lies with the individual. Isabella confirms this in the proceeding quote suggesting that in developing self-awareness, individuals must internalise their own success or failure, thereby negating the influence of external factors. Scarlett supports this when discussing Daisy who had been successful very quickly rising to a high pin title:

> ***Scarlett***: This is why Daisy is so successful because she has absolute belief in herself, in the business, in the products, no matter what anybody says to her, she never ever be shaken, but these people have such low levels of self-belief, as soon as somebody says no, or they make a criticism, they are just completely thrown off course and they lose their power and they lose their attraction, people are just not attracted to want to work with them.

Scarlett attributes Daisy's success to her 'absolute self-belief' suggesting that Daisy has won the battle with herself and is no longer competing against her own negativity. Daisy is praised as she can 'never ever be shaken'; she has become an ideal neoliberal subject. Through a discourse in which the NMO perpetuates a notion that opportunities are abundant, subjectivities are constructed as empowered and entrepreneurial individuals are on a journey of self-improvement to overcome their own lack of self-belief. The focus of competition is thus the self, and the ultimate goal is to win this competition by overcoming perceived personal shortcomings and developing the right dispositions.

4.2 | Focusing outward: Competition with others

In the previous section, we demonstrate how competition functions as gendered technologies of the self by focusing inward which means that women feel they are competing with themselves. In the bank, competition directed outwards, which meant that the focus was on competing with other women. We only found traces of the

inward focused competition that we discussed earlier. An example is provided by Hannah when she talks about her lack of confidence:

> ***Hannah***: I know that if I am going to go to MD in the next few years I need to continue to grow and continue to understand these things [...], and I think, if female senior leaders are more open about it, I think people will go 'ah, right'.

In suggesting that 'if female senior leaders are more open about it', Hannah positions herself as unusual and our other interviews supported this. Hannah's quote was not typical of our bank interviews, it reflects elements of competition which was inward focused and more prevalent in the NMO.

While organisations such as the bank are, by their very nature, hierarchical with fewer positions as you rise through the ranks, the women we interviewed expressed scarcity in a double sense: scarcity not only related to generally having fewer jobs at the top but especially through having fewer jobs for *women* at the top. We observed how a discourse of scarcity drove competition so that women felt they were specifically competing against other women for the few slots earmarked for women. We see this below in the example from Anna, who linked quotas to increased competition between women:

> ***Anna***: I do think that there's probably more female competitiveness actually [...] I feel as though [...] they're all introducing quotas and you have to *x*, *y*, *z* females at different positions [...] females obviously recognise that, oh, do you know what, potentially there are some senior roles to be had and we'll compete with each other to see who gets it right, so I think that we've started to create that competitiveness.

The bank had not introduced quotas and Anna is potentially mis-referencing the UK Government's regulatory requirement for the FTSE100 to report board representation, yet the perception that the bank operates a quota system is a discursive idea that has become common-sense through its re-enactment and re-circulation (Lazar, 2005). Consequently, Anna suggests quotas are creating positions that previously were not perceptibly open to women or newly created token positions that women are competing against each other for. Competition is expressed through competing with others for the few women's slots. The focus of competition is outwardly focused and gendered: women are competing against other women. This is illustrated by Olivia (VP) who talks about competition between women being more 'serious than it is between men'. When prompted as to what she means by serious, she replies:

> ***Olivia***: In what way are they more serious? I think they're more determined because they want something whereas men I think are a bit more relaxed about it because there are probably more opportunities open for them and therefore, if you take the example of going for different roles, there's another role around the corner for them, whereas I think women don't feel that. The opportunities aren't as broad.

Olivia suggests a scarcity of opportunities for women that does not exist for men, because for them 'there is another role around the corner'. Again, we see here how discourses of scarcity drives competition, with a gendered focus on other women as competition. In the previous example from Olivia, scarcity of roles for women drives competition as gendered technologies of the self and, in doing so, constitutes women as 'serious' and 'determined' while men are 'relaxed'. This sits in contrast with the common socially constructed notion of competitive men and non-competitive women, highlighting the situated and contextual complexities of competition.

Quotas and scarce opportunities for women were discursively deployed to explain and justify why women compete against other women. For others in our interviews, processes within the bank operated as a form of

neoliberal surveillance as illustrated in the example below. Heidi links competition between women to the performance rating structures which impact on individual bonuses:

> ***Heidi***: I don't think it's the way we would naturally behave but I think sometimes there is competitiveness that is driven in organisations and anywhere you get performance development, you're instinctively bringing in competition because you've got ratings […] maybe it's a little stronger between women because the competition is greater.

As Heidi references, women would not 'naturally behave' in a competitive way, rather that this behavior is driven by the performance system. Thus, the performance management system has surveillance power (Manokha, 2020) stimulating competition as gendered technologies of the self so that, as Heidi suggests, competition is 'stronger between women'. When later probed by the interviewer as to why, she states:

> ***Heidi***: I do think it's harder for women, there's no doubt about it. It's much harder to progress and maybe that natural difficulty has kind of got us instinctively slightly more wary of other women because it's greater competition.

Limited opportunities intensify competition *between* women rather than men being the focus of this attention, thus women become the threat. While Heidi talks about competition between women generating a sense of wariness, other interviewees provided examples of the difficult relationships that this sense of competition created. Hilary, for example, describes her promotion to VP level and subsequent negative experiences with a female colleague:

> ***Hilary***: We were supposed to be 'a team' but actually, I was very new into my role as VP and very much looking to that person to help me develop […] but a lot of the time what I felt was that I would get half an answer to something, because it was almost like knowledge was power. There was almost this fear that you are coming up, you are rated really highly because you're the new […] you've just been promoted all this sort of stuff and are you a threat to me? […] I think there was almost this view from her of, well, I don't want to overly help you because are you a threat to my position and success?

Hilary suggests that her promotion threatened her colleague who was concerned she may consequently be displaced. Subsequently, the colleague withholds information by exclusionary tactics and suppression of opportunities. Competition operates as a form of governance, so the focus of attention becomes the threat of other women due to a scarcity of positions that are perceived to be available to women. This 'threat' of other women is further illustrated by Lizzie:

> ***Lizzie***: She actually started to belittle what I was doing to make herself look more important […] and I know that she really wants to be a Director […]. So, whereas I'd just become a VP and she'd been a VP for quite a long time before and is about 10 years older than me and was ready for that. So, probably saw me as a threat […] that I was kind of new on the block.

Here, gender and age intersect to compound the focus of competition. Lizzie describes being perceived as a threat to the older, more experienced woman colleague who reacts by 'belittling' Lizzie to 'make herself look more important'. In the bank, seniority presented a 'pinch point' where, as Sophia states:

> ***Sophia***: I think, you know, maybe at more senior levels within the organisation that there's some women that feel like, I don't know, potentially threatened by other women coming through.

The threat and obstruction that other women can cause at senior levels is further illustrated by Bridget who, as a Managing Director, is in a minority position. When telling the story of her promotion to this level, Bridget explains that another senior woman on the promotion panel gave written feedback that 'she [Bridget] needs to think about her posture in meetings'. In explaining this interaction, Bridget says that:

> ***Bridget***: I do think that sometimes, there is the element of threat, I think sometimes if you are of a certain, and this is, you know, shouldn't really say this, but of a certain age, or certain stage in their career, where they maybe, in the last 10/15 years of their career, and all of a sudden, they've got someone in front of them that maybe has a bit longer runway ahead of them you know, younger, and sometimes I do believe that they do see that as, initially, a bit of a, oh, wow, okay, who is this person, you know, so I suppose a little bit of a threat to some extent.

Bridget again references age and gender, although hinting this as something unacceptable to articulate. For Bridget and others we spoke with, women coming up present a threat to other senior women who have gained their 'women's slot' (Kanter, 1977). Thus, discourses of scarce positions and opportunities drives gendered technologies of competition which is outwardly focused on other women as a source of competition rather than the processes which maintain this competition.

Our empirical findings suggest that competition as gendered technologies of the self can express itself in two ways: as inward focused where women compete with themselves or outward focused when competition centers on competition with other women.

5 | DISCUSSION

The article set out to explore how competition functions as gendered technologies of the self. We build on research that analyses how competition is gendered and socially constructed (Mavin & Yusupova, 2021), how women compete with each other (Mavin et al., 2014a, 2014b; Mavin & Williams, 2013), and the individual strategies women employ to negotiate socially acceptable ways to navigate the masculine norms of competition (Mavin & Yusupova, 2023). We extend this research by employing a Foucauldian understanding to explain how competition functions as technologies of the self that operate on a deeper level than prior research has suggested. By seeing competition as gendered technologies of the self, we were able to show how women draw on competition as gendered technologies of the self to build subjectivities under neoliberalism. In specific, the paper illustrates how this process worked differently in the two settings we studied. While in the NMO it was focused inward, in the bank competition was focused outward.

Our first contribution is understanding *how* gendered technologies of the self operate differently in the two settings. Women's minority position as managers within the bureaucratic structure of the bank created a discourse of scarce opportunities with fewer positions at the top combined with fewer opportunities open to women. This aligns with the enterprising self (Foucault, 1988) where neoliberal capitalism creates inequalities to artificially maintain a sense of scarcity and competition between women (Eisenstein, 2017; McNay, 2009). This was supported by 'disciplinary mechanisms' (McCabe, 2008, p.372) such as appraisals, performance ratings, and the rhetorical effect of quotas which acted as a form of surveillance or disciplinary power (Foucault, 1979). Performance ratings illustrate a form of bureaucratic control which operates as a surveillance measure to enable disciplinary control (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2004; de Vaujany et al., 2021). Performance ratings form part of the 'formal game of inequalities' (Foucault, 2008, p.241) in which neoliberalism utilises competition as a form of governance so that the bank systems and processes appear normative and fair yet preserve inequalities (Amis et al., 2018; Brown, 2015; McNay, 2009). Our analysis showed how a modality of competition created through a discourse of scarcity and disciplinary mechanisms individualised women and turned the focus of competition

outward toward other women. We therefore extend our current understanding of how women compete with each other by illustrating how competition as technologies of the self is one mechanism though which neoliberalism generates uncertainty and tenuous relationships to individualise people and discourage mutual support (Bröckling, 2005; Crowley & Hodson, 2014; Scharff, 2016). In the NMO, a modality of competition was conceptualised through an abundance of opportunities for all women who could cultivate the right human capital, such as confidence and self-belief. This echoes earlier research that has shown that under neoliberalism, women compete with their self to self-transform and reinvent to overcome internal barriers and lack of self-belief to become a better neoliberal subject (Gill & Orgad, 2017; Gill & Scharff, 2011; Mavin & Yusupova, 2023; McRobbie, 2015). The NMO is akin to gig work, distributors are independent freelancers working within precarity (Carr & Kelan, 2023; Sullivan & Delaney, 2017). Such gig work lacks the confines, structure, regulation and external surveillance of the bank and thus requires a new form of control (Moisander et al., 2018). We suggest that within this setting, which lacks formal mechanisms, competition as technologies of the self is focused inwards as control operating through biopower (Foucault, 2008). In the network marketing company, women do not compete with each other but instead competition is directed inwards as a form of control. We contribute to our understanding of how technologies of the self are gendered (Huppatz, et al., 2019; Meade et al., 2023; Zaeemdar, 2024) by unfolding how modalities of competition operate as technologies of the self.

Our second contribution lies in *what* these technologies of the self render invisible. While we found that the two settings lend themselves toward using competition as technologies of the self in different ways, it can be expected that both modalities of competition as technologies of the self co-exist and are used flexibly in constructing identities under neoliberalism. Others have discussed how technologies of the self can bring forth subjectivities which are 'capitalism, neoliberalism, and patriarchy-friendly' (Gill, 2017, p.618) while normalising inequalities (Brown, 2015; Gill, 2008; Zaeemdar, 2024). We suggest that the modalities of competition as technologies of the self fulfill a similar purpose. In both settings, competition as technologies of the self was used to make gender inequalities invisible (Gill, 2014, 2017), individualising women and their collective experience of inequality, albeit with a different focus. Where modalities of competition focused inwards, women were made self-responsible for their success. If they do not succeed, this is due to their own shortcomings in being able to develop the right dispositions. An alternative interpretation is that network marketing is precarious work, the system is unequal, and a tiny minority will be successful (Masi de Casanova, 2011; Moisander et al., 2018). However, by focusing competition inward, any structural inequalities are disavowed and rendered invisible. Where competition is outward the focus falls on other women, in effect pitching individual women against each other for the women's slot. The fact that women were only seen as possible contenders for the women's slot makes the wider structures of inequalities, where women have less success chances invisible. Instead of articulating and exposing this, outwardly focused competition as gendered technologies of the self individualises women. We thus argue that both modalities of competition as gendered technologies of the self have a shared consequence: through individualising women, any form of collective experience of inequality regarding gender is silenced. Competition as technologies of the self thus operates as a gendered form of control which normalises inequalities and makes them appear inevitable (Banet-Weiser, et al., 2020).

6 | CONCLUSION

This paper shows that different contexts provide rise to different forms in which competition functions as gendered technologies of the self. The formalised structure of the bank spoke more to a disciplinary power where competition as technologies of the self was focused outwards. However, in the more contingent gig work employment structure of the NMO, we saw governance operating as biopower where the focus of competition was inward. We stress that such dynamics for modalities of competition probably co-exist. Future research could thus explore in how far the modalities we have shown are drawn on simultaneously in other settings. It is also possible that other

modalities of how competition as gendered technologies of the self could be explored by future research. We have also not explored what compels individuals to adopt those discourses and which alternative discourses might be possible. Finally, competition as technologies of the self is one mechanism through which neoliberalism individualises people. Further research should analyze how structural inequalities can be made visible and speakable through collective agency. Overall, the article shows how competition as technologies of the self functions to make structural forms of inequalities invisible.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We can confirm that the authors have no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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