Female business owners hiding in plain sight

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore what female business owners hide to better understand social norms and discourses that influence the decisions women make about how they structure their home and work lives.

Design/methodology/approach – The author used qualitative interviews to access the narratives of female business owners in public relations within the USA. This industry segment attracts primarily women and, unlike a retail store, offers women a variety of ways to structure their business hours and locations.

Findings – Women use hiding as a way to manage others’ impressions and as a way to gain legitimacy for themselves and their organizations. Specifically, the findings fall into three categories: hiding childcare obligations, obscuring their work locations and “fake it until you make it”. Hiding is used a strategy to deal with tensions that arise based on women’s interpretations of social norms and discourses.

Research limitations/implications – Based on the finite nature of any study, it is difficult to assess the long-term impact of hiding. Further, as with many studies, the geographic location, gender and industry segment provide a context for this research, which means the reader must determine the transferability.

Originality/value – Few studies explore hiding as a means to gain access to gendered discourses that can undermine identity construction and business growth. By uncovering what female business owners hide, it provides opportunities for self-awareness and agency.

Keywords Women’s entrepreneurship, Organizational legitimacy, Hiding, Home/work boundary

Introduction

Individuals, particularly business owners, play an important role in instituting and sustaining an organization. Perhaps for this reason, entrepreneurship research frequently focuses on the narratives of individuals (Agahan, 2010; Rubach et al., 2015; Warren, 2004) as they start and develop businesses.

Studies also examine the impact of individuals on the organizations they create. Scholars cite the need for individuals to use their personal identities to gain legitimacy for their fledging organizations (Abimbola and Vallaster, 2007; Rode and Vallaster, 2005; Zott and Huy, 2007). Previous research has shown that business owners incorporate their personal identities in a variety of ways, including placing their images on websites, incorporating their name within the organizational name or marketing themselves as industry experts (Weidhaas, 2016). These actions elevate the visibility of the individual business owner in the organization, but few, if any studies, explore times when a business owner might prefer to obscure or hide aspects of herself.

In the broader academic landscape, when organizational scholars study individuals who hide, they typically examine individuals with visible and invisible stigmatized characteristics (Clair et al., 2005; Heintz, 2012; Lopina et al., 2012; Mavin and Grandy, 2013; Ragins, 2008; Shih et al., 2013). The scholarly literature largely ignores the more
commonplace aspects of hiding, which may include the use of hiding as a way to manage the impressions of others within non-stigmatized work contexts. For example, while much has been written about the home/life dichotomy (Jain and Nair, 2013; Nippert-Eng, 1996; Park and Jex, 2011; Perlow, 1998; Sundaramurthy and Kreiner, 2008), few scholars explore how individuals use hiding, concealment and deception as a way to manage the shift between home and work or as a means of gaining legitimacy for a fledging organization. This paper will explore both aspects, as they relate to female business owners; individuals who must manage impressions related to not only their personal lives but also as a way to create legitimate organizational identities.

People often engage in hiding as a way to pursue “opportunistic intentions”, essentially actions that primarily or exclusively benefit the individual (Williams, 2007), as a way to control the impressions of people who can threaten their personal and organizational identities (Roberts, 2005; Williams, 2007). If one considers the organization and business owner as intimately linked in the early stages of business (Abimbola and Vallaster, 2007; Rode and Vallaster, 2005; Zott and Huy, 2007), the dynamic between the individual and her organization is vital to success. Hiding one’s identity or actions bears significant negative repercussions for both individuals and their organizations (Critcher and Ferguson, 2014; Madera, 2010; Meisenbach, 2010; Roberts, 2005; Shih et al., 2013), which means this research could provide not only a better theoretical understanding of business owners and hiding, but it also provides important practical insights that can further personal and organizational success.

In this paper, the author exposes what others might prefer to keep hidden by first exploring how this deceptive practice can negatively impact both individuals and organizations. Next, the author examines how hiding connects with identity and impression management. Finally, the author demonstrates how business owners hide aspects of their lives as they manage the impressions of others; struggle with home/work boundaries; and resist and conform to idealized notions of a “good worker”, “good mother” and an “ideal organization”. By exposing what organizational actors attempt to hide, the author intends to initiate a discussion about how social norms impact individuals’ lives as well as the organizations they create.

Hiding

Hiding, which this author defines as intentionally obscuring one’s actions and/or identities, receives limited attention among scholars, particularly as it relates to organizational life (Linstead et al., 2014; Scott, 2013). When articles discuss hiding or concealment, they often relate the term to other nefarious activities, such as criminal wrongdoing or hiding an affair, not the more commonplace and legal aspects of hiding addressed in this paper. When gender or organizational scholars address hiding, it is typically not well defined because it is not the primary focus of the article. For example, Lewis (2006) wrote an article about entrepreneurship as a masculine form of organizing; she makes important contributions in exposing gender blindness, but while she uses synonyms, such as conceal and invisibility, she does not define key “hiding” terms because it’s not the main focus of the article. This author selected the term hiding based on its use by female business owners in the study and its limited use in the organizational literature (Madera, 2010; Weidhaas, 2017). Scholars (Linstead et al., 2014) suggest that research on hiding presents unique challenges for researchers because direct questioning may not readily access information individuals prefer to conceal. For this reason, few studies directly explore this concept.

From an individual perspective, when scholars studied hiding within organizations, they primarily explored the experiences of individuals who suffered from a visible stigma, such
as ethnicity or race (Shih et al., 2013); sexual orientation (Creed et al., 2010; Heintz, 2012); or those who mask invisible stigmas such as biracial identities, illnesses and religious affiliations that conflict with workplace norms (Ladge et al., 2012; Ragins, 2008), not necessarily the arguably more common interactions of non-stigmatized individuals who want to maintain the impression of an “ideal” individual in multiple roles or those who want to project the image of a legitimate organization. This is an important area of research because colloquial examples suggest that this type of hiding occurs more often than it is recorded in the academic literature.

Hiding bears significant repercussions on individuals. Shih et al. (2013, p. 150) cited studies that link identity subversion to increased levels of depression, greater likelihood of cancers and infectious diseases, lower abilities to perform highly cognitive tasks and a less “stable sense of self” than individuals who can freely express themselves. People who hide also experience trouble concentrating on tasks (Madera, 2010; Meisenbach, 2010), more difficulty forming close relationships, decreased job satisfaction (Roberts, 2005), isolation (Meisenbach, 2010), feelings of guilt (Stalp, 2006), lower creativity (Cerne et al., 2014), physical exhaustion and an inability to enact “self-control” (Critcher and Ferguson, 2014, p. 732). Conversely, Kira et al. (2012) indicated that an alignment between one’s environment and identity can provide individuals with higher levels of energy and positive emotions.

Research also indicated that organizations experience damaging consequences from hiding or deception, including fewer product innovations, lower customer service ratings, higher turnover (Roberts, 2005) and less productive work teams (Cerne et al., 2014). These findings are particularly troubling for small business owners who often need innovation and teamwork to grow their businesses.

Female business owners

In striving to grow a business, female business owners face a unique set of challenges as they develop their organizations in a society that follows a patriarchal value system (Lewis, 2014; Lewis et al., 2015; Lewis, 2006, 2013; Yohn, 2006). When employment moved from the farm to the factory, a system emerged that advanced masculine norms and values (Tronto, 1993); this system favors a clear demarcation between work and maternal duties (Turner and Norwood, 2013) and often creates tensions for female business owners as they attempt to navigate a system that privileges masculinity. While many scholars explored the tensions and rationales for the ways that women enacted and managed both a career and family (Alberts et al., 2011; Bateson, 1989; Crittenden, 2001; DeMartino et al., 2006; Edley, 2001; Flaig, 2010; Green and Cohen, 1995; Guerrero, 2010; Pfeffer, 2010; Shelton, 2006; Tracy and Trethewey, 2005; Tronto, 1993; Williams, 2007), the literature remains largely silent about women who manage the tensions of competing roles by attempting to appear attentive in one role while at the same time concealing their engagement elsewhere.

The move to business ownership may appear as an opportunity for people, particularly women, to structure their work and home lives with almost unlimited freedom. In fact, Adkins et al. (2013) indicated that female business owners often started businesses based on the belief that these new entities would offer them an ability to create a culture that aligned with their personal needs. This idea is consistent with Sharpiro et al. (2008) who advocated for women to start businesses as an opportunity to reframe the narrative of work and family as separate entities. Unfortunately, to suggest that women can easily start a business to alleviate work/life tensions oversimplifies a complex issue and neglects to consider the time and energy needed to run a business and engage in family life (Shelton, 2006). Scholars need to consider that these unresolved tensions can lead women to engage in hiding as an attempt to navigate the precarious terrain between what (Buzzanell and Liu, 2005) refer to as “good
worker” and “good mother” identities. One can extend this to include identities such as “good business owner”, “good family member” and a legitimate organization.

Hiding: an attempt to manage impressions and home/work conflicts
In an attempt to align with ideal constructs of self, individuals may engage in hiding as they juggle the challenges of aligning two conflicting desired identities. Roberts (2005) distinguished between a perceived identity and a desired identity, and indicated that a gap typically exists between the two identities. It is managing this gap that creates challenges, especially when academics consider that identity is not merely a self-constructed process, but rather a reflexive self-evaluation that monitors and interprets the perceptions of others to develop a self-identity (Down, 2006; Gecas, 1982; Roberts, 2005).

Ladge et al. (2012, p. 1,450) defined identity as a self-defined and continually refined reference to oneself that appropriately answers the question “Who am I?” in a given context. Ladge et al.’s (2012) definition incorporated the concept of context, which indicated that identities form based on the context of interactions. For example, the workplace can cue a person to enact a professional identity, but a phone call from a child can disrupt the identity associated with this environment.

Often tensions emerge based on contradictions in our lives. People engage in many different roles so identity work can create emotional pressures as people struggle to discursively reposition themselves for changing environments (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Thus, business owners who work from home may need to quickly shift between personal and organizational identities, which can create unresolved conflicts. Scholars (Alexander and Lauderdale, 1977; Hoelter, 1985) acknowledged that we have different identities for different roles, which can be either based on the situation or group membership. These role identities can undergo challenges, also known as identity threats, which can restrict a person’s ability to perform the identity, cause a shift in the meaning(s) associated with the identity or even devalue the identity (Petriglieri, 2011). If female business owners experience identity threats, the threat cannot only undermine their personal identities as business owners, but it can also influence the confidence of others in the sustainability of the new organization.

Impression management
People want a stable identity, and if we consider identity as socially constructed (Down, 2006; Karp, 2006), then we must recognize the importance of the impressions of others on our identities, defined as impression management (Shih et al., 2013). Leary and Kowalski (1990, p. 34) explained, “Because the impressions people make on others have implications for how others perceive, evaluate, and treat them, as well as for their own views of themselves, people sometimes behave in ways that will create certain impressions in others’ eyes”. As part of impression management, individuals often attempt to align with their perception of how an ideal person in an identity role (i.e. business professional, wife, mother or whatever) should act. In this case, the “should” is based on the individual’s perception of social norms, which guide the person as she attempts to perform the desired role (Leary and Kowalski, 1990; Roberts, 2005). While there are many strategies to manage these impressions, some people decide to hide or conceal an identity as a means of influencing what others think (Roberts, 2005; Shih et al., 2013).

Work/life role transitions: another opportunity to hide
Impression management becomes complicated when scholars consider the pressures of competing roles. Much of the literature examines conflicts between identity roles,
particularly as these conflicts relate to the typically separate roles of work and home. Scholars often rely on a social constructionist boundary theory (Nippert-Eng, 1996; Trefalt, 2012), which proposed individuals create their own construction of work/non-work by erecting boundaries. Boundaries provide a way to delineate based on material space, time, and mental limits to determine what fits inside and what falls outside the bounds (Sundaramurthy and Kreiner, 2008, p. 416). Boundary theory explained that individuals desire ways to simplify and organize their lives (Nippert-Eng, 1996; Sundaramurthy and Kreiner, 2008), and boundaries allow for varying degrees of flexibility and permeability (Sundaramurthy and Kreiner, 2008). Today, boundaries may also experience increasing amounts of permeability based on technology, demands of modern work, and the increasing integration of our home and work lives.

While some scholars may suggest that we entirely eliminate home/work boundaries to experience more integrated identities (Ramarajan and Reid, 2013), individuals often find practical reasons to maintain separate identities (Charmaz, 2009; Nippert-Eng, 1996; Park and Jex, 2011), such as an ability to distinguish appropriate behaviors. Identities play an important role in simplifying our lives because “identities give behavior a frame through which the environment is perceived, understood and acted upon” (Sacharin et al., 2009). Yet, these roles are not necessarily fixed; individuals react to feedback from their environments and adjust these roles and identities accordingly. With that said, people yearn for “stable” identities because stable identities provide them psychological security in an uncertain world (Ragins, 2008, p. 198).

Yet, psychological security is not always available. Clark (2000) proposed the work/family border theory, which segmented our world into work and non-work domains with people acting as daily “border-crossers” between the two worlds (p. 748). In advancing this theory, Clark (2000) drew from Anzaldúa’s (1987) work on borderlands, which he explained as “[...] borderlands are places where border-crossers awkwardly juggle conflicting demands and conflict arises, they are the places where individuals easily slip into a schizophrenia about their identity and purpose” (Clark, 2000, p. 757). If one desires a “stable” identity (Ragins, 2008), then a female business owner may opt to subvert or conceal part of her identity and actions as a way to avoid the “schizophrenia” inherent in the borderlands of identity construction.

As a way to maintain stable identities, this paper questions the following:

**RQ1.** How do female business owners use hiding as an impression management strategy?

**RQ2.** How do female business owners use hiding as a means of creating organizational legitimacy?

**Data collection**

Qualitative interviewing has been used effectively as a means of gaining access to female business owners’ experiences (Bjursell and Melin, 2011), and Jännäri and Kovalainen (2015) found that qualitative interviewing was the most widely used method for “doing gender” research. Following this tradition, this study used semi-structured interviews to better understand women’s experiences as business owners.

Participants in this study were women in the USA who started a public relations business from the ground up and actively worked within the organization. One industry and gender were selected to establish a better comparison between people with shared experiences because different types of businesses enable and constrain their founders in
different ways. For example, a retail business versus a service-oriented business might differ in set hours, physical location of work, as well as the final product. Additionally, the author recognized gender plays a role in how people perceive and communicate about their work, which is why the sample included only female business owners.

These women were recruited by word-of-mouth as well as referrals from other participants, also known as snowball sampling. In qualitative research, researchers frequently rely on “purposeful” sampling rather than random selection because they don’t intend to generalize results (Krueger and Casey, 2008). The goal of this research was to provide informative descriptions of a small group of women from a specific population.

The demographics included women in their late 20s to early 50s who owned businesses that ranged in duration from approximately two years to more than 20 years in business. The businesses included brick-and-mortar agencies, virtual agencies and solo practitioners. The business owners chose a variety of work configurations, including buying and renting office space as well as home-based businesses. The physical location of their business often varied from day-to-day as the women indicated they could work virtually anywhere.

In total, 18 women were interviewed for a study that examined how women construct and communicate their identities. As part of this study, the women responded to questions about how they constructed their work lives and, in many cases, how their work lives impacted their personal endeavors. The study included married and unmarried women as well as women with children. The author conducted face-to-face interviews in a location selected by the participant.

The author drew upon her experiences as a public relations professional and as an active participant in multiple family businesses to construct questions that sought to better understand how these women constructed and communicated about their identities. Scholars (Bjursell and Melin, 2011) recognize narratives as an embedded process in which researcher and participant share in the experience. Drawing upon Jorgenson’s (1991) approach that situated research as a co-constructed experience in which shared personal experience enhanced the interview, in most cases, the author did not attempt to segment her personal experiences from the interview, but rather considered these shared experiences as opportunities to deepen understanding.

The interviews opened with a grand tour question, such as “What led you to this point?” with the intention of providing participants the liberty to respond as they saw fit. Follow-up questions frequently included probes, such as “Can you tell me how you blend work and family?” “How do you describe what you do to family and friends?” “What are some challenges for you?” The interviews continued until theoretical saturation, the point at which the interviewees reported similar experiences as previous participants. Interviewees started to share similar stories and rationales, such as similar reasons for starting a business and similar challenges.

Data analysis
Following the interviews, each recording was transcribed and analyzed. Using a grounded theory approach, the author looked for common themes among the participants’ responses. After reading the interviews several times, six dominant themes emerged: gender, organization, word choice, control/choice, home/life integration and mentor/advisors. In reviewing the interviews for instances that indicated some type of sneaking or hiding, interviewees’ responses were often coded as home/life integration or organization. For example, two participants discussed how they hid their work from their children, and this was coded as home/life integration.
Qualitative interviewing, referred to as a conversation that “encourages others to freely articulate their interests and experiences,” often follows a loose conversational format (Lindolf and Taylor, 2002). Based on the fluid nature of conversation, ideas emerged that were not part of the original focus of the study, including hiding. As is often the case with open-ended questions, the interviewee had the latitude to share aspects of her life that would not have emerged in other contexts.

Results

RQ1: Childrearing on the sly

All of the women in this study worked in organizations prior to starting their own businesses and often they referenced their prior organizational experiences as comparisons. This was illuminating, particularly as it related to hiding, because it suggested how traditional employees might obscure childrearing and served as a comparison for business owners. It also revealed that regardless of whether one works for an organization or her own business, women across multiple work configurations struggle with competing discourses about how to fulfill their career and maternal roles.

One mother of five children remembered how she used to “sneak” out when she worked in a corporate setting to attend to her children’s needs:

I mean I could get away and sneak things, but it was always sneaky and was always because people kind of feared me […] I just kind of, but I didn’t like sneaking. I was very productive. I had a track record of success. I didn’t feel like I had to justify where I was every single second. But, I did understand the corporate need to have a manager in place, but I didn’t feel like I was neglecting that by going to my kids’ school thing or picking them up because they were sick or whatever.

In the excerpt mentioned above, the woman did not want to “justify” her responsibility for her children to her superiors, so instead, she decided to “sneak things”. In her previous organization, this does not appear to be a singular occurrence; in fact, she related how other women in lower organizational positions often needed to slip out to attend to the needs of their children often risking their jobs in the process:

But I saw a lot of younger women underneath me just in pain over trying to get their children taken care of. And they didn’t have the same resources I did. And so it became a huge bone of contention because I was always advocating for working women who you know couldn’t do what I was doing and you know probably had a greater need to. They didn’t have the money. They couldn’t walk. They could sneak. If they were caught, they would be fired.

In both instances, regardless of organizational status, the women felt the need to hide their childcare responsibilities during the workday, which suggests that organizational norms prohibited them from asking for accommodations. Instead of asking to leave, the woman rationalized their unauthorized departure by saying “the guys took off every Thursday and Friday to play golf and nobody blinked an eye.”

This narrative serves three important purposes: first, it aligns with previous research indicating women struggle in the workplace to balance work and mothering, which often serves as a catalyst for business ownership; two, it shows how hiding can be used to navigate the precarious home/work boundary; and three, it gives readers an opportunity to reflect on sneaking. If sneaking out suggests that an individual is “stealing time” from her employer, one must question if a self-employed individual is stealing or cheating herself in some way, such as deluding herself about her role identity or her availability for important people in her life.
As business owners and hiding their childcare duties from clients and customers in an attempt to manage the home/work boundary. As their work lives became more intense and often more integrated based on technology, they referenced “stealing those hours” when their children slept or working on the sly as their children were engaged in other activities. Several women attempted to integrate work and home life, as indicated by descriptions of home offices that also incorporated children’s toys, arranging their workday around their children’s school schedules or planning family vacations that included a cell phone and laptop for work. While women discussed their attempts to integrate work and childcare, there were still times when women concealed their actions to manage the impressions of individuals in conflicting domains. For example, one mother of two responded to a question about integrating work and life by stating:

She was into competitive fast-pitch travel softball, and um [...] [laughs] thank God for technology. That – I um, these softball fields where they would have their competitions are in the middle of nowhere, and so my husband just said, “You know what, just go get a wireless card and you can just work in-between games.”

In this instance, the woman was also hiding her work location from her clients. As she explained, “They [clients] didn’t know. They just saw me responding to email, sending in work.” Another woman with young children said she asked her kids to be quiet so she could talk to clients in the car without the client realizing that she was simultaneously picking up her kids from school. Technology both enabled women to blur the work/life boundary and simultaneously caused tension. The women in this study also used hiding to manage their clients’ impressions and, at times, this hiding also involved the participation of children. For example, kids might be instructed to be quiet while their mother was on the phone, but kids were not always willing accomplices. At least one woman described her kids’ meltdown during a client call:

And thankfully, one of my clients is very understanding because the other day they – they lost their minds. And they haven’t done it, they’re just at that age where they’re starting to bicker a little bit, and, um, they just couldn’t keep it together for anything and I had to excuse myself and call them back. That’s rare though. They’re usually respectful of the phone and know that that’s my job and [woman pauses here].

While women largely expressed more freedom in designing their workdays than they had in previous organizations, the mothers in this study still ascribed to ideals about being a “good mother,” which not only created tensions as they tried to balance the two competing roles but also intensified the need to hide as the excerpt below indicates:

I think I busted my butt for 25 hard years to get here. That meant taking calls when I didn’t feel like it. That meant sneaking into closets so my children couldn’t see I was at work so they didn’t feel like I was neglecting them and sneaking and hiding and trying to compartmentalize and trying to be the best Mom you could be and run the best business you could run. And it was very, very hard at times.

This excerpt shows the difficulty of managing these competing roles and the personal stress involved in being the “best”. In words, like “compartmentalize”, she verbalizes the struggle of managing separate spheres while drawing attention to the social discourse of being an ideal mother, which based on participants’ responses involved being available to attend to their children’s needs.

While women wanted to tout their mothering experience as a “luxury”, a term used by several women to describe their ability to be there for their children, some of their hidden experiences expose the often unspoken difficulties of raising a child(ren) and owning a
business. Women, especially mothers, tend to oversee the majority of care and household chores. The women in this study spoke of picking kids up from school, making sure the homework was completed and attending school functions. Interestingly though, while previous studies may indicate that these chores unfairly burden women, the mothers in this study, with one exception, celebrated their ability to enact their mother role as an indulgence they perceived as unavailable to the majority of working mothers. They suggested business ownership provided them with a freedom to mother in a way that contradicted narratives of mothering as shouldering an unequal burden of care, even as they took on the lion’s share of responsibility.

RQ2: Obscuring the location

Raising children is not the only experience these women wanted to hide. In several instances, the women discussed working in remote locations and attempting to obscure this from their clients. In the previous excerpt, the woman doesn’t want her client to know that she is working from a softball field, even though she is still responding to her clients’ needs.

To manage impressions, often what they wanted was to hide the background noises that could indicate they were not in an office setting; women mentioned the need to obscure or mask noises, including animal noises, children crying, home repairmen and even human needs, such as the toilet. Two women shared stories about dysfunctional mute buttons that were supposed to mask toilet noises. At times, these were moments of embarrassment as the private sphere collided with the public sphere:

Anne[1]: And my toilet was running, and it’s right – you know, like, my desk is here, then there’s the bathroom right there and so it was kind of loud and it kept running and running and running, so, you know, I put it on mute, and I walked in there and I jiggled the thing and water came gushing up—

Interviewer: –Oh!

Anne: –all over my face. Just all over the bathroom. And I had to like get down on the floor and turn the toilet water off and I’m soaking wet, and they’re going, “Anne?” And I’m like, “Oh shit, what?”

As home and work become more fluid, there are more opportunities for these two once separate worlds to literally and figuratively overflow into one another. Some women indicated that their work lives also entered into spaces normally associated with private time, such as time spent with family, vacation time or weekends. The woman describes the potential for clients to require her assistance at odd hours:

And so it doesn’t really matter where I am or what I’m doing, I have to be equipped to do jobs. So clients call, you know, there’s – we’re not doing any issues right now, but it’s not uncommon to have somebody call on, you know, a Saturday night, a Sunday afternoon, and they know that they can always get me, but if I decided not to be here, then I’m not here. And so I have to be equipped wherever I am to make sure I can either take care of what’s needed, or ensure that I can direct somebody else to take care of what’s needed. But it’s a lifestyle; it’s not a job.

In her comment, she blurs the boundary between work and life by suggesting this needs to be a lifestyle choice, and one that required being “equipped to do jobs”. When the once distinct boundaries between work and home life merge, women can find themselves in situations, similar to the bathroom or childcare examples, where they hide as means to address both professional and personal obligations at the same time.
**Fake it until you make it**

Another form of hiding emerged when women reflected on their organization’s size. Some individuals were very open about their small organizational size, but others wanted to give clients the impression that they were more established. In one instance, a woman invited the author into a tight conference room in a large corporate high rise. She rented a small space in which she could store client brochures and provide her clients with the perception of a prestigious address. Yet, she confided that she would never invite her clients to her office and instead always suggested they met at the clients’ locations.

Another woman when asked about whether people had trouble understanding the services and support her business offered, admitted that she initially suggested contractors were employees to bolster the perception of her firm as a legitimate business. She opted to conceal her organization’s size based on her perception of social norms and discourses about contractors and organizational size. By hiding her small company size, she believed that she gained her clients’ trust:

> Well, I think the hardest part at that point was explaining to people that it wasn’t just me that was doing it. And I guess the trust factor. Especially then, that was, what, 6, 7 years ago that, you know, the outsourcing and bringing in freelancers and using contractors is okay, and now everyone uses them, but back then, it was like, “Oh, well, if you don’t have a real staff you’re not legitimate.” And so, you know, overcoming that a little bit and making it seem like we were larger than we were, and maybe not telling the whole truth when - you know, in client meetings, like, well, yeah, “How many people do you have?” Well, I would still be using five people on a regular basis and so I’m like “oh we’re five people.”

One woman confessed that she used an outside contractor’s portfolio as an example for her firm’s work when her firm had never designed any of the material in the portfolio. In a move, she described as “fake it till you make it”, she attempted to elevate the impression of her fledging business.

Jane: The portfolio we had walking into our first client was really the graphic designer that we were using for our branding; it was his portfolio. So, he’s part of the company—

Interviewer: – Mmhmmm—

Jane: – it was his work, but walking in saying, “This is what we’ve done,” when granted, I had nothing to do with his portfolio at that point in time, so it is that kind of – you go in there with that confidence of, “We know this is going to work” and we knew it was going to work. […] You know, it’s – yeah, I guess it is just kind of fake it till you make it, pretend that you have done this a million times and don’t let them see the fact that you’re like, “Okay, well I hope this is going to work.”

**Discussion**

The excerpts shared in this study were not meant to suggest businesswomen are conniving or deviant. Instead what this paper intends to bring forth is a candid picture of instances in which female business owners hide an aspect of their identities or their organization’s identity in an attempt to manage impressions. By exposing what may otherwise be obscured, we can begin to unpack the social norms and discourses that cause female business owners to assume they need to conceal their work/life integration, company size and experience to conform and gain legitimacy.
Home/work integration

Women bear a considerable burden when it comes to domestic life. Stalp (2006, p. 108) argued that men have “crisp boundaries” between their careers and personal lives, but women by virtue of their more demanding domestic roles had less “control” and an increased need to hide aspects of their lives that took time away from family life. While Stalp (2006) explored hiding a hobby, women in this study also felt obligated to hide work in an effort to maintain an idealized identity as a mother, which suggests that patriarchal notions of women as caregivers still exist, even when women can construct their own work/family boundaries. What is particularly interesting is that while one might expect women to downplay or hide their childcare responsibilities from their customers/clients, women also hide their work from their children because they want to appear continuously available, which is potentially in keeping with idealized notions of stay-at-home mothers. These business owners expressed a strong desire to maintain the traditional role of mother and, at the same time, they struggled, at times, with how to integrate the competing roles of mother and business owner. While women have different ways of managing their various identities, they still align with gendered discourses as they construct their authentic versions of self (Lewis, 2013). For example, US work culture often portrays an ideal worker as embodying availability, which is enacted by constantly being plugged into technology and accessible for work needs. At the same time, women experience mothering as an intensive obligation, one that society teaches women to both desire and, as a working mother, as a responsibility that must be managed with one’s work obligations. In a society that still segments maternal duties and work, women receive conflicting messages about the social norms and importance associated with being an “ideal mother” and “ideal worker” (Bateson, 1972; Buzzanell and Liu, 2005; Nippert-Eng, 1996; Pfeffer, 2010; Turner and Norwood, 2013), which results in an unresolved tension. To temporarily relieve the stress of competing roles and identity threats, women respond by using concealment strategies. The issue with using concealment as a strategy is not only that research shows negative consequences for individuals and organizations but hiding also perpetuates ideals that do not provide agency or opportunities for change. By concealing actions, it conveys acceptance of norms that constrain female business owners from opportunities and perpetuates the guilt that robs them of their time and energy. While this study does not address the experiences of male business owners, colloquial examples suggest that men would not experience guilt over working in front of their children or concerns about whether customers will question their abilities to manage both family and business. In examining these interactions, scholars can begin to tease out the gendered assumptions that place childrearing squarely on women’s shoulders, so much so that women experience great anxiety about how to manage two time-intensive pursuits.

Social norms and expectations continue to make work/life boundaries difficult terrain for women. One of the difficulties is that technology and the demands of modern work no longer provide clear demarcations between work and home time (Park and Jex, 2011; Ramarajan and Reid, 2013), particularly for small business owners. At one point, professionals could separate work obligations from home activities because technology did not exist that could push these responsibilities into backyard barbecues, children’s sporting events and school trips. In a society that expects people to quickly respond to phone calls, emails and client demands, women experience pressure as they attempt to navigate these tensions.

Another potential challenge for female business owners is that the canonical narrative of a business owner touts an unlimited freedom in constructing one’s workday. Media images
often show business owners working from exotic beaches, pools or even slouching in their PJs as they answer emails; these images tie into some of the narratives of entrepreneurship, including masculine aspects of the rags to riches fairy tale. While several women shared examples of integrating work and their personal lives, this did not work well for all participants, which caused several to use hiding as an impression management strategy to maintain the desired image of either a consummate business owner or an ideal mother. We recognize that individual workers vary to the degree that they desire work/life integration (Nippert-Eng, 1996), but our canonical narrative of a business owner may provide us with a misguided myth that all business owners prefer integration. When individuals perceive a discrepancy between their ideal and perceived versions of self, this can create an identity threat, which can destabilize one’s identity within a role (Petriglieri, 2011). Thus, business owners may decide to align with the perceived norm of a business owner with an integrated life to substantiate their identity in this role. Female business owners enacted this by attempting to integrate home and work, but when conflict emerged, they resorted to concealment as a means of alleviating the tension. In some cases, this consisted of physically erecting boundaries, such as a woman who hid in a closet. The idea of a physical boundary ties into notions of separation, which permeates the work/life literature, and largely relies on outdated models of work, including the 9-5 office routine.

Further, it is not simply mothers who recognized the distinction between personal and professional worlds. For 200 years, people recognized work as a public space and home as a private world in which people engaged in activities that were not meant for public display (Nippert-Eng, 1996). In keeping with ideas of public and private worlds, some women also referenced notions of a professional as someone with a completely unconnected private life. This disconnect between work and life is particularly troubling when we consider how much more invasive the work has become, as technology permits one to be accessible at any time of the day and the demands of work within the USA continue to push individuals to work longer hours; thus, we must question whether social norms of separating the public and private spheres are still appropriate, particularly for small business owners. When women voiced concerns about clients hearing household noises, these concerns suggested that women were still hindered by pre-existing discourses that render a consummate professional as someone whose work takes place outside of the home. Even while they attempt to reconstruct social norms, as Turner and Norwood (2013) indicated in their study of working mothers, social norms shift in incremental ways and thus people tested the boundaries of their roles by allowing some integration, such as working with children present, but female business owners still felt conflicted about where and how far to push this boundary.

Fake it until you make it
Individuals assess their environment to determine the desired professional norms and then attempt to conform to these standards (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). As women tried to manage their organization’s professional reputations, they also endeavored to conform to their perceptions of legitimacy based on both physical space and employees. While some women openly discussed virtual agencies, several preferred to downplay their lack of a physical office building. This helped them to manage the impression of their organizations as legitimate entities based on perceived norms of business activities occurring in a brick-and-mortar location outside the home. Additionally, as scholars unpack the social norms and gendered assumptions, individuals can explore other nuances, such as the need to address both home and work obligations in the confines of one’s house. Women talked about how they balanced caregiving and
domestic duties along with their business obligations, which may have influenced their perceptions of home-based work because society does not place great importance on caregiving as evidenced by the recognition and monetary value attributed to domestic life. When women talked about throwing in a load of wash while working from home, it communicated the practical nature of this arrangement, but it might not convey the professional image that business owners desired. Interestingly, in examining the visual mimes of business ownership, pictures often show leisure activities, such as beaches and pools, which equate to success, but one could question why balancing work with responsibilities of care, does not equate to a strong work ethic, if not success.

Women also talked about managing impressions by employing “fake it until you make it”. By hiding their lack of experience or organizational size, these women attempted to enhance the impressions of potential clients as a means of growing their new businesses. In so doing, the women didn’t frame this as deceptive, but rather as an acceptable practice to project confidence and win accounts in the important initial stages of business.

In “faking it”, women not only attempted to improve the legitimacy of their new entity, but, if successful, this reinforced their personal identities as business owners. Cooren (2012) used the metaphor of puppet master and puppet to explain that at times an individual can appear to pull the metaphorical strings for an organization, but the individual also responds and takes action based on her interpretation of the puppet, which in his analogy represents the organization. Thus, if the business’ identity is reified in this interaction, it also has important implications for her confidence as a business owner, which, in turn, impacts the organization in this reciprocal exchange process.

The findings discussed here reveal what the female business owners in this study communicated about what they hide, but as one reviewer noted, there are many opportunities and reasons for hiding, including a lack of confidence, avoiding sharing photos based on issues with body image and hiding personal information to maintain privacy. My participants did not address these issues, but they do offer opportunities for future scholars.

**Conclusion**

Often what people hide is just as revealing as what they choose to publically display. This study exposed unspoken discourses related to how women view their roles within society as well as how they believe society views the legitimacy of an organization. In exploring the tension between what actually occurs (i.e. what they hide) and the rationale for this deception, we can begin to piece together the hidden discourses about an “ideal organization” or “best Mom” or “best business owner”. As women navigate the minefield of managing impressions among influential others, including family, clients and business associates, they tap into their perceptions of what “normal” looks like. For this reason, it is important to uncover what is hidden so individuals can begin to openly discuss how to allow for new configurations of businesses and new prototypes for individual roles in both personal and professional contexts.

**Note**

1. Names were changed to protect individuals’ identities.
References


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