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# Are female leadership styles culturally universal or specific? A comparative study between Italy and Japan

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**ABSTRACT**

The aim of the present research is to analyse to what extent female leadership styles vary across cultures – by digging more in depth on how the new “impostor phenomenon” affect successful women covering leadership position, since, nowadays, women still face either difficulty in entering the job market or they receive a lower salary compared to the male counterpart. This has been done through the analysis of the already existing literature upon the various leadership styles, gender differences and influences on leadership styles, and culture. After adopting the cultural definition and dimensions proposed by Hofstede, an experimental empirical section started. To explore the main research question, a sample of female managers and directors working in Italy and Japan filled out an online self-report survey. The quali-quantitative findings clearly reveal that leadership style varies according to the culture; while behaviours related to the Impostor Phenomenon seems to be universally felt. These results seem to take even more shape in the light of the social role theory and the Hofstede cultural dimensions of the two countries. Notwithstanding the obtained results, the research gives a lot of other suggestions, leaving space for further studies and consideration in the field of leadership studies, especially in relation with the female group.

La presente ricerca si propone di analizzare in che misura gli stili di leadership femminile varino tra le culture, scavando più in profondità su come il nuovo "fenomeno dell'impostore" influisca sulle donne di successo che ricoprono posizioni di leadership, dal momento che, al giorno d'oggi, le donne incontrano ancora difficoltà nell'entrare mercato del lavoro o percepiscono uno stipendio inferiore rispetto alla controparte maschile. Ciò è stato fatto attraverso l'analisi della letteratura già esistente sui vari stili di leadership, le differenze di genere e le influenze sugli stili di leadership e sulla cultura. Dopo aver adottato la definizione e le dimensioni culturali proposte da Hofstede, si sviluppa una sezione empirica sperimentale. Per esplorare la domanda principale della ricerca, un campione di donne manager e direttori che lavorano in Italia e in Giappone ha compilato un sondaggio online self-report. I risultati quali-quantitativi rivelano chiaramente che lo stile di leadership varia a seconda della cultura; mentre i comportamenti legati al “fenomeno dell'impostore” sembrano essere universal-

mente avvertiti. Questi risultati sembrano prendere ancora più forma alla luce della teoria del ruolo sociale e delle dimensioni culturali di Hofstede dei due paesi. Nonostante i risultati ottenuti, la ricerca fornisce molti altri spunti, lasciando spazio ad ulteriori approfondimenti e considerazioni nel campo degli studi sulla leadership, soprattutto in relazione al lotto femminile.

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**Keywords:** Female Leadership, Italy, Japan, Leadership Style, Impostor Phenomenon

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## 1 – Introduction

In today's modern economies, young women able to finish their academic studies by gaining a degree are more than men: in Italy, for example, they represent the 55% of the total of young graduated; but, despite this, 17% of them is inactive from a professional point of view, while those who work receive a salary 26% lower than men (OECD, 2018). This situation represents a drawback not only for women but also for countries worldwide as they are missing out on highly-skilled female (Gazzola *et al.*, 2016) and being subjected to the so-called brain drain phenomenon (Dumont *et al.*, 2007), which involves young graduated and, more generally, skilled people who prefer to emigrate where there are more job opportunities and higher salaries (Gibson & McKenzie, 2011; Docquier & Rapoport, 2012). Probably, if women will have an easier development of their career path in their own country, they would be more willing to maintain their professional aspirations there (Dumont *et al.*, 2007).

In this case, "equality" does not mean that women must be always in the same circumstances as men; but, rather, both should be in the condition to show their full potential and to receive full consideration of their interests and needs to the society they live in (Chao & Tian, 2011; Gazzola *et al.*, 2016); otherwise, if women will keep on facing obstacles and discrimination, they might decide to push aside or put on hold their professional aspiration remaining closed in the traditional familiar roles (Crampton & Mishra, 1999). And, despite some relatively recent improvements, women still face this kind of problems worldwide and the root for equality seems to be long (Chao & Tian, 2011).

For this purpose, the research question of this explorative cross-cultural study is: "Are female leadership styles culturally universal or specific?". Responses to this question will be obtained making a comparison between Italy and Japan.

While being completely different from a cultural point of view, these two countries share some similarities on socio-economical level: high public debt, low nativity rates and they are among the oldest countries of the world in terms of population's age. However, Japan is capable to maintain high employment level, while Italy is not: 78.45% versus 60.15% of Italy, and a 2.6% unemployment rate versus the 8.075% of Italy (OCSE, 2023a, b). Nonetheless, in Japan, female situation is not better since females are still less likely than males to engage on paid work or becoming entrepreneurs (OECD, 2017).

Therefore, the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 will offer a review of the already existing (female) leadership literature and its theories: after primary definitions of leader and leadership have been set, the relationship between gender and leadership, the advantages of female leaders, and the impostor phenomenon have been analysed. A further step in this section has been made by showing how Italian and Japanese cultures differ according to Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory. Later Section 3 will describe the methodology adopted for the empirical part of this study, while Section 4 will provide the factual analysis of the gathered

data. Section 5 and Section 6 will respectively present the discussion of the results and their implications in the Japanese and Italian female reality. Finally, Section 7 will conclude the paper by linking its findings to concrete applications, while still contemplating the limits and providing hints for future research (Section 8).

## 2 – Literature review

### 2.1 – *Who is a Leader?*

Despite having countless of different definitions of the term leader, it can be seen how a leader can be defined as someone who uses creativity and intuition to make his/her way through chaos; and in order to do this, he/she selects, equips, trains, and influences one or more follower(s) to achieve the vision and objectives by building trust and credibility through the interaction and feedback to and with the followers (Bolden, 2004; Winston & Patterson, 2006; Casalegno & Pellicelli, 2008). International research about leadership have displayed its potential and complexity, bringing academics to interrogate themselves on whether leaders are born or made (Goleman, 2004). Given the analysis of the extant literature, it has been seen that only some specific leadership aspects are teachable: in particular, traits cannot be learned, while skills can be taught (Germain, 2012).

Leaders' traits had been defined as personal characteristics that promote a pattern of leadership performance across groups and organizations; these traits are best expressed by a combination of attributes, namely: cognitive abilities, motivation, personality, expertise and tacit knowledge, and social appraisal and interpersonal skills (Zaccaro *et al.*, 2004).

On the other hand, leadership skills can be categorized in two main groups: hard and soft skills. The so-called "*hard side*" of skills comprehends activities like "*analyzing, planning, making decision and strategizing*" while, the "*soft side*", "*involves inspiring, motivating and persuading followers, building good working relationships, networking, rallying and cajoling [...], active listening, providing feedback effectively and dealing with conflicts*" (Riggio & Tan, 2014, p. 1, 53).

Further studies have found other skills that can be useful to leader's effectiveness, such as: optimism, proactivity, adaptability, locus of control, nurturance (Zaccaro *et al.*, 2004), energy, expertise, and integrity (Singh, 2008), but also, self-confidence, determination, sociability, and charisma (Germain, 2012).

In order to deepen the analysis, it could be worth of notice to report the study conducted by Riggio and Tan (2014), who categorized what are defined *soft skills* for effective leadership:

a) *communicational skills*: including encoding or expressiveness, decoding or sensitivity and regulation or control, which, in turn, operates in both the emotional/nonverbal domain and the social/verbal domain (DePaulo & Rosenthal, 1979; Barrett, 2006);

b) *social skills and emotional intelligence*: based on the concept of Emotional Intelligence (EI) and Emotional Competences (EC) (Goleman, 2004; Gooty *et al.*, 2010);

c) *ethical character and virtue*: anchored to the concept of *ethos*, which together with *pathos* and *logos* in the Aristotelian theories, represent the three modes of persuasive influence through speech (Halloran, 1982; Brown & Treviño, 2006; Schaubroeck *et al.*, 2012);

d) *political skills*: as the sum of four dimensions: social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, apparent sincerity (Ferris *et al.*, 2005; Ahearn *et al.*, 2004; Treadway v., 2004).

All these skills have been demonstrated to be useful to a leader's effectiveness, emergence, and advancement, which are fundamentals for ever-changing organizations that has to live in the modern hyper-competitive economic environment (Germain, 2012).

## **2.2 – Western and Eastern Leadership Styles**

Concerning the different leadership styles, a lot of existing literature has mainly considered the Occidental perspective (mainly American), as it is more comprehensive and extensive, in respect to the Oriental one (Chao & Tian, 2011).

In particular, western initial studies had distinguished between two types of leadership: task-oriented style, which involves the accomplishment of the assigned tasks through task-relevant activities, and relational-oriented style, which involves maintaining interpersonal relationships for the sake of other people's morale and welfare (Bales, 1950; Tabernero *et al.*, 2009). Following, additional leadership styles have been studied, such as transformational (Bass, 1985; 1998), transactional (Avolio, 1999), laissez-faire (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Bass, 1998), charismatic leadership (Yukl, 1999), authoritarian (Pizzolitto *et al.*, 2022) and benevolent (Karakas & Sarigollu, 2012), which can outline a broader frame on how leadership can be applied in both private and corporate life/level.

Regarding the eastern scenario, despite the various culture have partially assimilated the western leadership styles' theories (Chang, 2008; Chao & Tian, 2011), they present some specific differences. For example, in India a leader is considered to be someone who is strong, democratic, independent, encouraging and skillful while, in Japan, a leader is seen as someone who can solve problem and motivate for the achievement of group goals (Hui, 1990).

Additionally, literature regarding Chinese culture propose three main leader roles, namely director, parent, and mentor, which focus respectively on the observance of rules, the good relationship between leader and followers and on the teacher-student dynamic that can guide and inspire followers (Chang, 2008).

As a result of the analysis of the extant literature, it can be noted that Asian leaders value creativity and intuition more than Europeans do, and this could be explained by their digitally powered fast-evolving market that pushes leaders to take decisions that could make the difference between gaining ground as innovators or getting left behind by competitors (Lagerberg, 2014).

## **2.3 – Leadership styles and gender**

The relationship between leadership styles and gender has been a matter of study over the last couple of decades, as authors have tried to argue for the presence of differences in the application of leadership between men and women (Eagly & Johnson, 1990). Specifically, Eagly and Johnson (1990) had conducted a meta-analysis upon gender differences in leadership, discovering that women manifested more interpersonally oriented and democratic leadership styles while men were more task-oriented and autocratic. Moreover, it has been seen that women present more developed social skills, such as empathy, cooperation, friendliness, expressiveness, social sensitivity, likability that could be particularly advantageous for them to maintain good working relationships and help in their career advancement.

Then, another important meta-analysis had been run by Eagly and colleagues (2003), which discovered that female leaders tend to apply a more transformational style than men by actively interacting with employees, through mentorship and attention to their needs, inspiring them

through the emphasis on the organization's mission, encouraging them to take and to make decisions and involving them in the decision-making process, with the usage of a collaborative, less hierarchical, and more participative language (Chin, 2004; Krishnan & Park, 2005). Indeed, female supervisors tend to manifest a higher engagement in the application of contingent reward behaviours that are usually linked to a transactional leadership style, which is characterized by the tendency to give rewards for positive performances, managing subordinates' responsibility in order to achieve corporate objectives (Avolio *et al.*, 1999; Bass, 1997). In contrast, male leaders tend to manifest the transactional and laissez-faire one more, which is characterized by a tendency to exhibit absence and lack of involvement during critical moments (Eagly *et al.*, 2003).

In today society, people occupying a leadership position can be certainly evaluate for their leader role but also for their gender role (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The first one legitimates the leader to use his/her authority inside the organization or the group in which he/she belongs to; the latter can be defined as "consensual beliefs about the attributes of women and men" (Eagly *et al.*, 2003, p.572).

To better explain the existing relationship between these two roles, it is possible to consider the social role theory (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001) which argues that the leader role is a specific position in the hierarchy and it functions under the constraints of the gender roles: meaning that, if gender roles exercise some influence on leadership, then female and male leaders would behave differently, sustaining what the theories about different leadership styles underlined. This theory also demonstrates that people have internalized their gender role to some extent, and this is the reasons why individuals have different expectations for the behaviours (or roles) of male and female leaders. In fact, agentic qualities, described primarily as an "assertive, controlling and confident tendency" (i.e., self-confidence, domination, independence, ambition and competition), are associated more to men; while communal qualities, which are described as "primarily a concern with the welfare of other people" (i.e., friendliness, kindness, nurturing behaviours, care for others and expressiveness), are more strongly associated to women (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001, p.783).

Furthermore, the social role theory states the presence of an incongruence between the leader and the gender role (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Eagly *et al.*, 2003) fostering the idea of the "glass ceiling" – to be intended as "barrier of prejudice and discrimination that excludes women from higher level leadership positions" (Eagly & Karau, 2002, p. 573).

To be more precise, women are subjected to a double-sided prejudice (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007) because if they conform to their gender role they might fail to meet the requirements of their leader role; and, seemingly, if they conform to their leader role they might miss to meet the requirements of their gender role (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

This glass ceiling idea, together with the aforementioned incongruity, seems to create an advantage for men (Foschi, 2000), who can slow or stop women in both selection and promotion in organizational hierarchies, despite their potential for leadership. This phenomenon of men passing over women have been named "glass escalator" (Ryan & Haslam, 2007) and evidenced that women have lower access than men to leadership position, and consequently lower wages and promotion (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Moscarini *et al.*, 2014). Despite some improvement in recent years, female relative wages still remain lower than those of men (Kunze, 2018; Gazzola *et al.*, 2016).

Lastly, it is important also to underline that the prejudice upon women does not stop in the beginning phases of her leadership path but continues once they have attained the roles as well,

making explicit the common perception that women less effective than men in their position (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Therefore, in recent days, it has become more and more frequent that women executives choose to leave the corporate world to escape from the “glass ceiling” and funding their own firm, to be less limited to grow and become entrepreneurs (Mattis, 2004). Unfortunately, this strategy often fails because they will meet other forms of gender bias that creates boundaries to their performances, named “second glass ceiling”, which can be described as a gender-bias that prevents small firms owned by women to access the financial capital needed to start or grown their activity (Bosse & Taylor, 2012).

However, Eagly and Carli (2007) have underlined that the concept of glass ceiling could be wrong (or, better, imprecise) as this metaphor describes an absolute barrier at a specific high level in corporations, but, because times have changed, authors suggest describing this situation as a labyrinth – a more contemporary symbol that represent the idea of a complex trip with a final goal to reach – which requires not only high level of skills but also persistence, awareness, criticism, and careful analysis of all the available alternatives.

Alongside the aforementioned phenomena, there is a relatively new one called “glass cliff”, which argues that female leaders tend to be appointed more often during crisis due to the expectation of them being more willing to help people facing difficulties, more understanding, intuitive, creative, and equipped to deal with socioemotional challenges of crisis (Ryan & Haslam, 2007).

### 2.3.1 – Impostor Phenomenon

All the scenarios concerning the difficulties faced by women are extremely useful to explain what is recently called “Impostor Phenomenon” – i.e., “impostor self-concept” or “Impostorism” (Rohrmann *et al.*, 2016, p.1) – which afflict people who do not believe in themselves and in their competencies and is generally accompanied and predicted by high level of anxiety, low self-esteem, depression, doubts, apprehension, and lack of confidence that can lead to high fear of failure (Chrisman *et al.*, 1995; Thompson *et al.*, 1998) (the terms Impostor Phenomenon and Impostorism will be used as synonyms for the purpose of this paper). In order to balance and cope with their fears, individuals manifesting the Impostor Phenomenon tend to adopt two types of behaviours:

- firstly, they tend to be perfectionists, by over-preparing themselves with meticulous effort and setting high personal standards;

- secondly, they adopt self-handicapping behaviours, especially procrastination (Rohrmann *et al.*, 2016).

Many studies have tried to investigate the initial assumption of Clance and Imes (1978) that the Impostor Phenomenon is gender-typical, thus affecting women more frequently and intensively (King & Cooley, 1995). Evidence underline that women tend to give lower evaluation of themselves in respect to men and attribute success to external factors and not to themselves; nevertheless, subsequent investigations demonstrated that also men are subjected to this dysfunctional personality style, thus it is not gender typical (Rohrmann *et al.*, 2016).

Even if the Impostor Phenomenon is not a psychological disorder requiring treatment (Ross & Kurowski, 2003; Rohrmann *et al.*, 2016), it has a strong impact on people well-being, preventing them to enjoy the positive sensations and vibes associated to their merits in their personal and professional lives.

## 2.4 – Culture

With the aim to understand and analyse the similarities and differences between leadership styles in the two countries, Italy and Japan, it is essential to also consider their specific cultural scenarios that are able to influence societies and consequently organizations and individuals.

The scholars Connerley and Pederson (2005) have provided a particularly integrated definition of culture, which can be considered as a multidimensional, multilevel, and dynamic concept consisting of both visible and invisible characteristics able to influence individuals. The visible characteristics are the one detectable on the surface, such as country boundaries or physical characteristics (e.g., skin colour, hair texture or eye shape); while, the invisible one are the more deceptive and deeper differences among people, like their values and their personalities (Ayman & Korabik, 2010).

It is on this visibility-invisibility characteristics assumption that all the work of the Dutch scholar Geert Hofstede is based. According to Hofstede, “culture” is learned and it derives from the environment where individuals live and not from their genes, so it could be positioned in the middle between people’s personality and the human nature. Additionally, he has identified four levels within culture that consist in *symbols*, *heroes*, *rituals*, and *values*. While symbols, heroes and rituals together form practices, because they can be observed from an external point of view (although their cultural meaning can vary according to the culture of the observer), values are intended as instincts, drivers and motives that can determine social actions and shape behaviors (Hechter *et al.*, 1993). The main difference between *values* and *practices* is that the first are mainly stable as they are learned in the first year of life, while practices change and are continuously learned (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010).

Specifically, values can be named as cultural dimensions due to the fact that they can be used to define a particular national culture (Hofstede, 1980, 1991). On this stance, *six cultural dimensions* can be identified (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010):

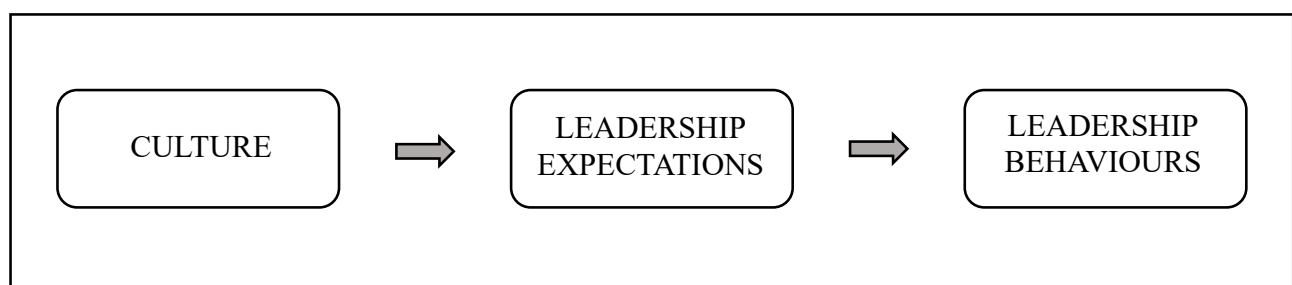
1. *Power Distance (PD)*: it can be defined as the level to which members with less power in an organization or in an institution accept that power is unequally distributed;
2. *Collectivism vs Individualism*: it measures the degree of interdependence a society maintains among its members; it is measured through the Index of Individualism (IDV);
3. *Masculinity vs Femininity*: it counterpoises an assertive behaviour and a more modest one – Masculine Societies (MAS) are driven by competition, achievement, and success. Feminine societies, instead, value caring for others and quality of life is the sign of success;
4. *Uncertainty Avoidance*: Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) can be defined as the extent to which members of a particular country or culture feel threatened by uncertain and ambiguous situations;
5. *Long-Term vs Short-Term Orientation*: societies with Long Term Orientation (LTO) look more at future values (to be intended as prudence, humility, and perseverance), while short-term societies (also called normative) are more concerned with past and present, focusing more on respecting traditions, saving “one’s face” (intended as honour) and the importance to fulfil social duties;
6. *Indulgence vs Restraint (IVR)*: indulgence means an innate tendency to satisfy needs in a natural way by acting as you want: spending money, having fun, and doing what you like alone



or with friends. Restraint means that pleasure has rigid social boundaries, so for example spending money and having fun are seen as socially incorrect.

These six dimensions will be deeply analyzed in the following Paragraph 2.5, in order to compare the two countries (Italy and Japan).

The importance of considering culture within a leadership context relies on the link and impact they have on one another (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010; Connerley & Pedersen, 2005), given that culture varies from country to country and can change the perception of gender roles and consequently leadership as well (Snaebjornsson *et al.*, 2015). On this stance, the GLOBE – Global Leadership and Organizational Behaviour Effectiveness Research Project (House *et al.*, 2004) studies have pointed out the following relationship between culture and leadership: cultural values influence leader’s expectations in a given society, which can predict actual leadership behaviours (Snaebjornsson *et al.*, 2015) (Figure 1).



**Fig. 1 – The relationship between culture and leadership**  
(adapted from Snaebjornsson *et al.*, 2015)

## 2.5 – Italy and Japan

In order to proceed with the specific matter of this research, namely the analysis between Italy and Japan leadership styles, this paragraph intends to explicit the “6 Dimension Model” of Hofstede (Figure 2), which can be applied to these two nations (for the explanation on the model, please refer to Paragraph 2.4) to emphasise any possible cross-cultural comparisons:

1. **POWER DISTANCE:** this is the variable in which Italy and Japan are much closed one to each other. Both nations recorded a average PDI: Japan’s PDI is in fact 54, while Italy score is 50 (0 means low PD, and 100 high PD). Japan’s score is explained by their hierarchical society and their consciousness of their social position, which sustained that the stability of a society is based on the relationship’s disparity between individuals; hence, in Japan, people accept and expect inequalities. But, reflecting its score of a not-so-high PD country, Japanese society presents itself as very meritocratic. Even in the corporate environment decision are taken by following a hierarchical process, every decision as to be approved by every layer – there is no “one top guy” who can take the decision. The Italian score perfectly reflect the Machiavellian way of thinking thought its economic and social differences between North and South: Northern Italy tends to prefer decentralization of power and decision-making, especially amongst the younger part of the population, who enjoy teamwork and open management style (fox style), while Southern Italy depicts quite the opposite feeling (lion style);

2. **COLLECTIVISM VS INDIVIDUALISM:** Japan’s score is 46, while Italian’s IDV is 76 (0 means collectivism, and 100 individualism). Japan’s score can be explained by the old role of the traditional Japanese family; however, today this is not the case as the country does not have the

extended family system anymore, by encouraging young adults to leave home, make their own living and inherit only family name and assets from their father. Thus, it can be said, that Japanese are experienced as collectivistic by Western standards and as individualistic by Asian ones. In individualistic countries like Italy, instead, parents are proud of the independence of their children, and this is also reflected on the working system: promotions increase not only the economic value of a person, but also the sense of self-esteem (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010). Two important concepts in collectivistic societies are the sense of shame and the concept of “face”: if a member of the group breaks a social norm, he/she will feel embarrassed and ashamed and will “lose his/her face”. In individualistic country instead, people talk about dignity and guilt, which is strictly an individual feeling. Finally, the role of the family is translated also in the working environment. In collectivistic countries it is more plausible that children will follow the roots of the parents, while in individualistic ones it is not often desired working with relatives (Hofstede *et al.*, 2010);

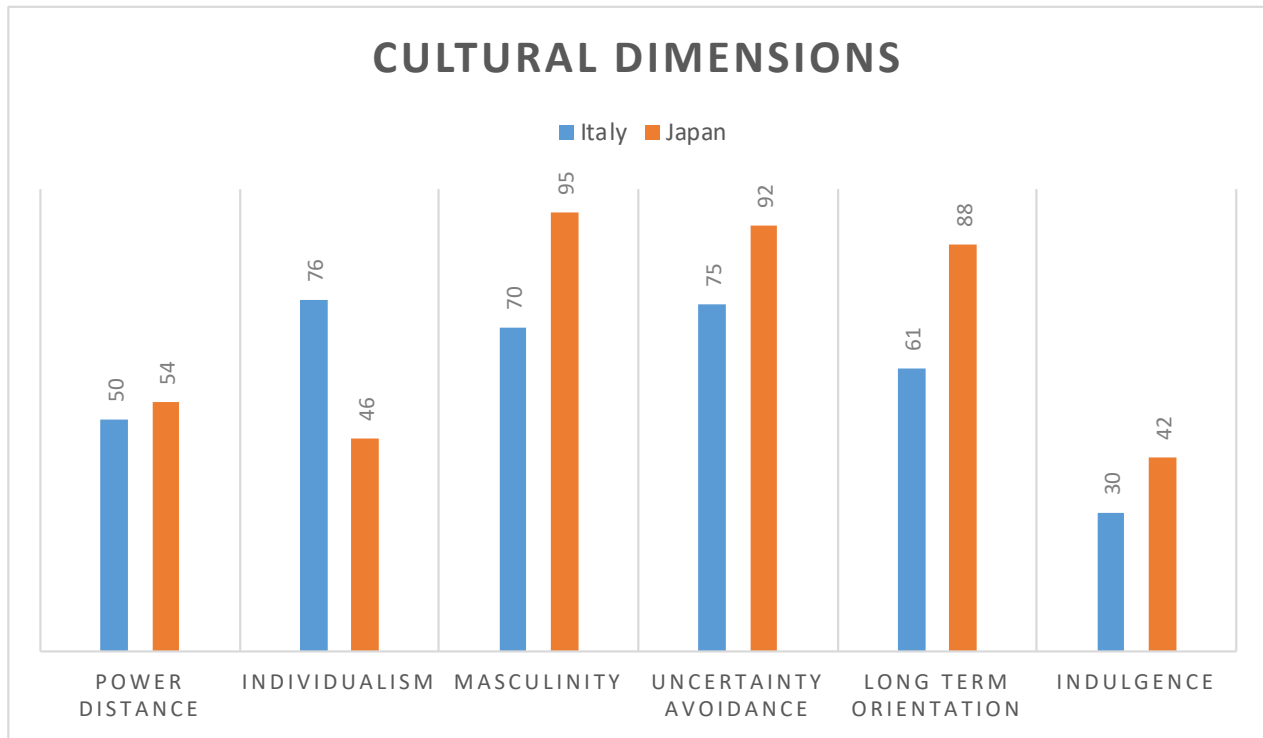
3. MASCULINITY VS FEMININITY: both Japan and Italy score a high masculinity index. At 95 (MAS=100 means highly masculine and MAS=0 highly feminine), Japan is one of the most masculine societies in the world. However, associated to its mild collectivism, competition is perceived as a severe rivalry between groups, having the importance to excel present also in the Japanese corporate world. On the other side, with a score of 70, Italy is a masculine society, too. Children are taught from early age that competition is fair, and it is important to win – and victory should be displayed through status symbols. And because the working environment is the place where Italian can reach success, competition among colleagues can be very strong;

4. UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE: in this dimension Japan records the very high of 92, while Italy scores 75 (0 means weak UAI and 100 means high UAI). This implies that Japan is one of the most uncertainty avoiding countries of the world. In corporations, a lot of time and effort is put in the realization of feasibility studies and risk factors estimation with changes that could be difficult to be realized. Another proof of high UAI in Japan is the legal system: there are many implicit rules which are not translated into law but remain eradicated in tradition. While Italians do not feel at ease in ambiguous situations and formality is quite important; in fact, this is represented by their long and complicated regulatory system, even if, at times they do not comply with them. In working environments, Italian citizens are used to make a lot of detailed planning, while flexibility in projects is perceived as very stressful;

5. LONG-TERM VS SHORT-TERM ORIENTATION: with a LTO of 88, Japan is one of the most long-term oriented countries in the world (0 means short term orientation and 100 long term orientation). By seeing their lives as a short moment in the history of mankind, the Japanese stance can be explained by the concept of *guanxi* (horizontal networking that puts together familiar and professional spheres) (Yeung & Tung, 1996). For these reasons, Japanese may use some strategies such as showing care, giving gifts, or offering some sort of favours (Chi & Seock-Jin, 2017). On the other side, with a score of 61, Italy shows the pragmatism of its own culture, as people believe that the truth depends on situation, context, and time. They show ability to adapt to transitions easily, a strong propensity to save, invest and quite perseverance to achieve results;

6. INDULGENCE VS RESTRAINT: in this dimension Japan scores 42, while Italy 30 (where 100 means indulgence and 0 means restraint). Both countries have a culture of restraint, with a tendency to cynicism and pessimism: this means that they do not put much consideration on

leisure time and tend to control the gratification of their desires, perceiving that their behaviors are restrained by the society.



**Fig. 2 – Comparison between Italy and Japan for each Hofstede’s cultural dimension**  
(adapted from Hofstede)

### 3 – Research methodology

Considering the outcome of the literature review, an explorative study has been carried out. Specifically, this study has tried to give an answer to two core questions:

*HYPOTHESIS 1: Are female leadership styles culturally universal or culturally specific?*

*HYPOTHESIS 2: Is the Impostor Phenomenon universally felt?*

In order to obtain responses to the research questions, the explorative study had been conducted in the labour market through a survey-research approach, aiming to have the study population being represented by female with either Italian or Japanese nationality. Data have been collected by running the questionnaire directly in the labour market; so that the sample of this analysis is composed by selected women who occupied leadership roles in different organizations, both in Italy and Japan. Specifically, they should have been assigned with the formal job role of “managers” or “director” to be considered as functionally equivalent within the two countries (the questionnaire from which the data for processing are taken is in the Appendix).

The usage of a survey had been chosen because it enables the responses collection in a short amount of time, and it can be considered a useful instrument for cross-cultural studies while guaranteeing anonymity.

In particular, the survey method chosen for this research is the questionnaire: a semi-structured, web-based questionnaire, sent by e-mail with a cover letter. The questionnaire is composed of both multiple-choice and open-ended questions to collect respectively quantitative

data (best for measuring, ranking, and categorizing) and qualitative data (useful to interpret, contextualize and gain in-depth insights on a specific concept).

E-mails have enabled a better explanation of the purpose of the questionnaire and to ensure the exclusive usage of the information collected for academic purposes. The link contained in the e-mail let the participants directly open the survey, which was previously created and saved on Google Forms.

The questionnaire was written in English to be equally understood by both countries and to avoid biases given by better comprehension or erroneous translation. The questionnaire contains forty-three (43) questions written in different formats: open question, multiple choices, and Likert-type scales. Then, it has been divided into four PARTS:

PART A – demographic information. Twelve questions to gather information about demographics and background, such as: nationality, age, education, qualification, working or studying transfers, positions covered in the actual company and in previous work experiences (if any).

PART B – leader and gender. Eleven questions to investigate their perception on being a leader, the possible contrast between their leader role and their gender role, their knowledge upon the glass ceiling phenomenon, and their level of job satisfaction.

PART C – leadership style. Six questions to enquire about their leadership style through the usage of twenty-one statements, extracted by the validated Multi-factor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) FORM 6S in its shortened form of Northouse (2001),

PART D – further investigation. Fourteen questions with different purposes. Most of them are built to assess if participants are subjected to the so-called impostor phenomenon, openness to emotions and problem-solving methods. Some of them are 5-point Likert-type scale, while others are multiple answer questions.

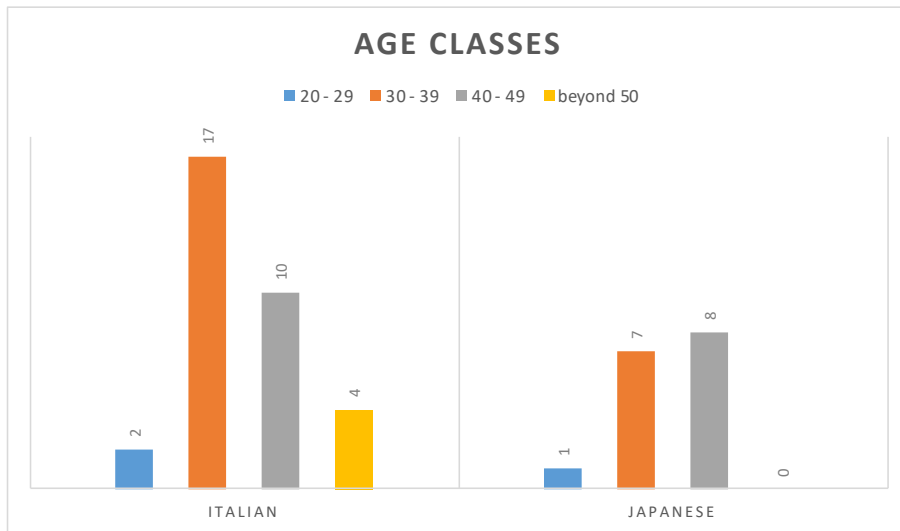
In PART C and PART D, through Likert-type questions, respondents had to indicate how much they agreed with each statement on a 5-point scale that goes from 0 (“Not at all”) to 4 (“Frequently, if not always”). Specifically, PART C had the aim to measure the perceived frequency of transformational, transactional, and laissez-fair leadership styles among respondents.

No queries about culture were inserted since the last indexes’ values registered by Hofstede in 2010 for the six cultural dimensions has been taken for granted.

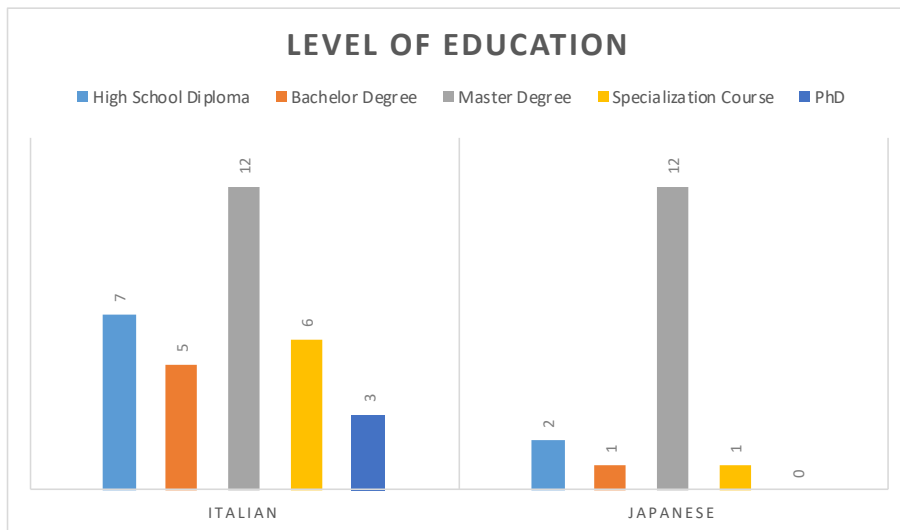
The collection of data took place in November 2019, and the analysis happened through Microsoft Excel™.

## 4 – Results

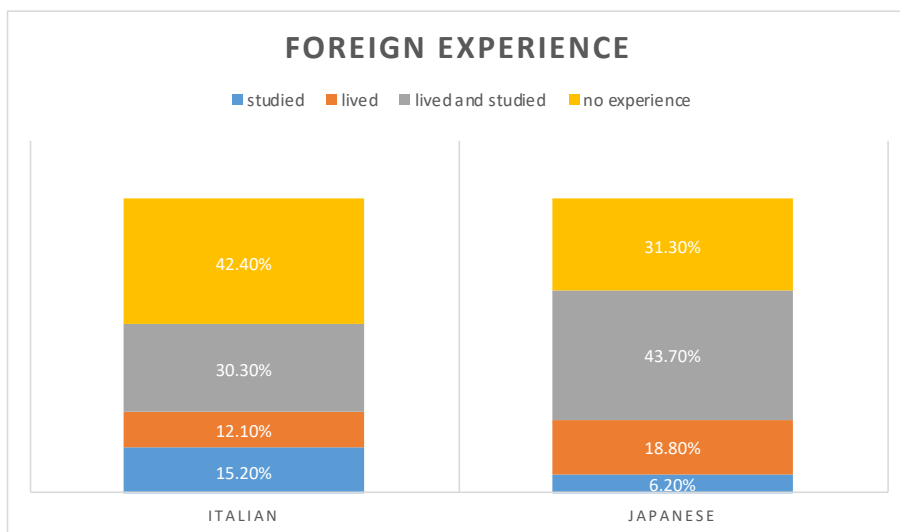
In the end, the responses collected are 49, out of the total: 67.3% comes from Italy, while the remaining 32.7% comes from Japan. To better compare the two nationalities, the sample was then divided in two distinct parts. For what it concerns the first part of the questionnaire the main results will be provided in the form of graphical representation, shown in Figure 3, Figure 4, Figure 5, Figure 6 and Figure 7):



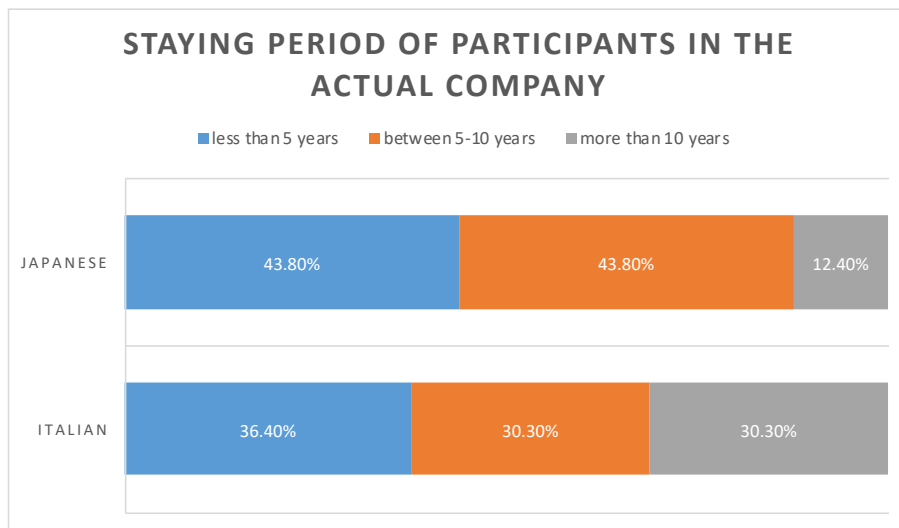
**Fig. 3 – Representation of respondents according to age and nationality**



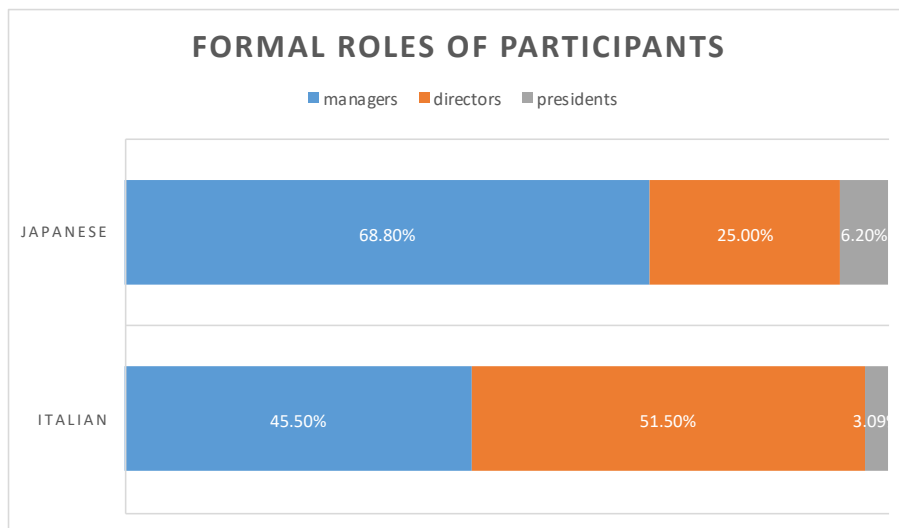
**Fig. 4 – Representation of respondents per level of education and nationality.**



**Fig. 5– Representation of respondents with or without foreign experience per nationalities**



**Fig. 6 – Representation of the period of staying in the actual company among participants, according to nationalities.**

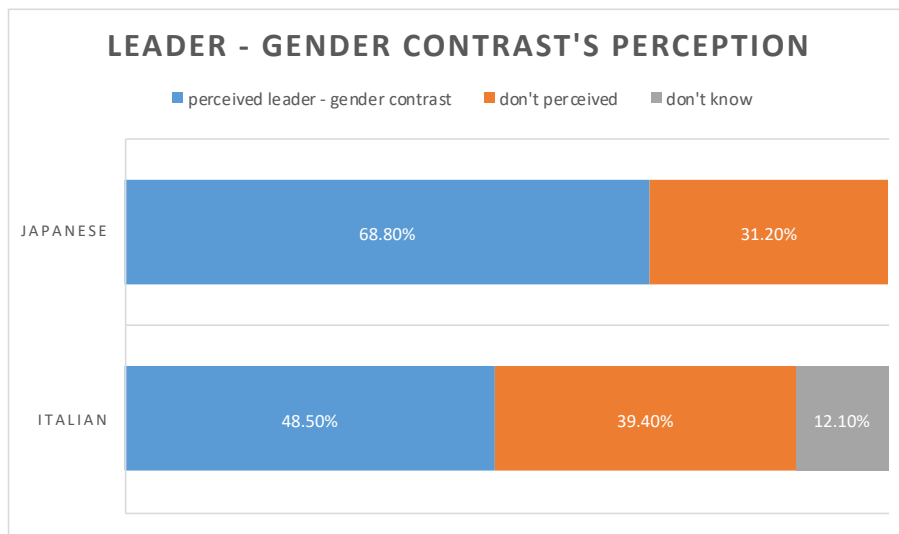


**Fig. 7 – Representation of formal roles of participants according to nationalities.**

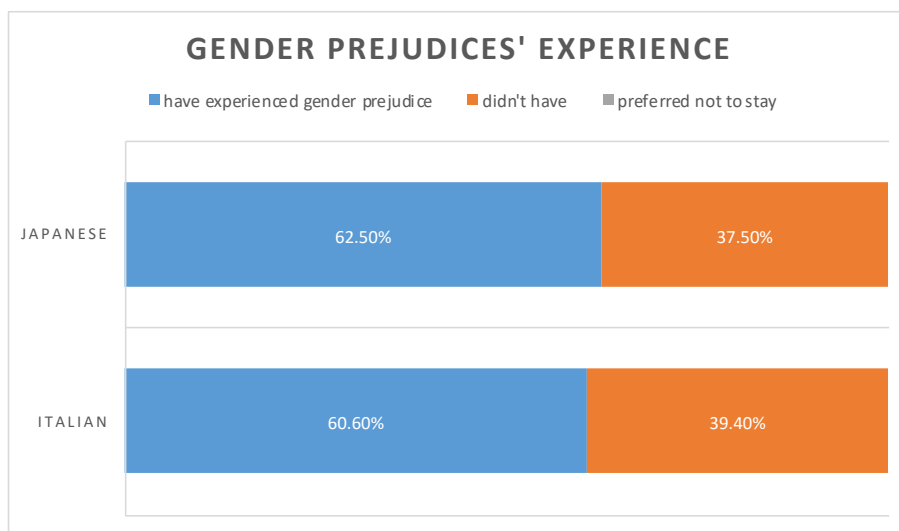
Regarding PART B – Leader and Gender, to the question: “Do you perceive yourself as a leader?”, 87.9% of the Italian respondents answered “yes” while 12.1% answered “no”; while Japanese women answered yes for 100%, providing very different reasoning when giving examples of situations that let them feel as a leader. On the one hand, Italian women named situations like relationships with followers and other stakeholders (i.e., active listening and guidance), continuous learning, goal reaching, decision-making, risk-taking and think to new ideas. While, on the other hand, the examples provided by Japanese women can be expressed in the terms of responsibility, control over subordinates, decision-making, teamwork and having an inclusive vision – also in the personal sphere.

Noteworthy, for this section, most of the respondents of both nationalities perceive that their leader role to be in contrast with their gender role: 48.5% for Italians and 68.8% for Japanese (Figure 8); most of them had revealed to have encountered some form of gender prejudices (i.e.,

stereotypes or sexual harassments) at least one time in their life, 60.6% for the Italian respondents and 62.5% for the Japanese counterpart (Figure 9).



**Fig. 8 – Representation of leader gender contrast's perception between Italian and Japanese respondents.**

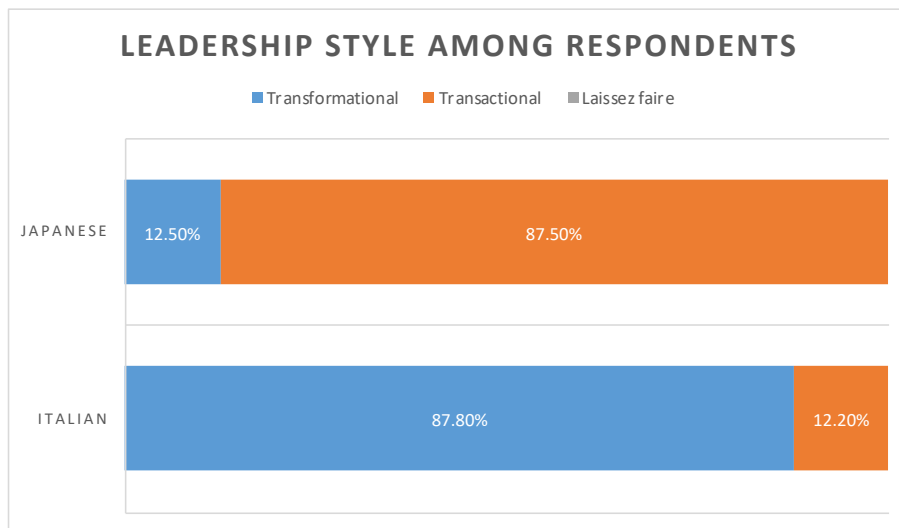


**Fig. 9 – Representation of gender prejudice's according to nationalities**

Regarding the third section of the questionnaire (Leadership style), among the 33 Italian participants there are: 87.8% of them displaying transformational leadership styles, according to Northouse MLQ-6S, and only 12.2% present a transactional leadership style. The most recurrent traits concerning respondents with Italian's nationality are inspirational motivation, individual consideration, idealized influence, and intellectual stimulation.

On the contrary, among the 16 Japanese participants, only 12.5% display transformational leadership style, while 87.5% show transactional leadership style; in this case, the most recurrent traits are contingent reward, management by exception, individual consideration, and idealized influence.

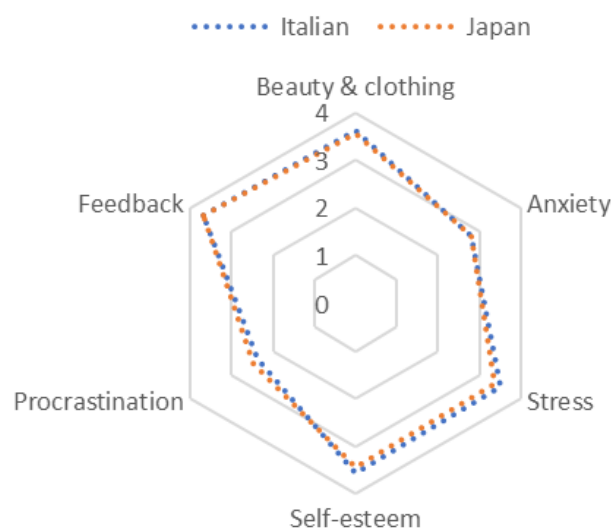
No answers were registered regarding the laissez-faire leadership style among both Japanese and Italian respondents. Data reported in Figure 10.



**Fig. 10 – Representation of registered leadership styles between Italian and Japanese participants**

In the last section, respondents had to indicate if they usually express their feelings and emotions candidly. The following group of questions reveals the Italian and Japanese opinions about female beauty and clothing at work, success attribution, stress, anxiety, self-esteem, reaction to mistakes, perfectionism, procrastination, and feedback predisposition – all traits connected to the Impostor Phenomenon. All the values contained in this section have been measured through a 5-point Likert scale (Figure 11). The results of the analysis show that the two countries are almost completely overlapping, underlining a very similar situation for the six traits foreseeing Impostor Phenomenon (named in the corners of the figure).

## 6 TRAITS OF THE IMPOSTOR PHENOMENON



**Fig. 11 – Representation of beauty and clothing importance, level of anxiety, level of stress, level of self-esteem, level of procrastination and feedback predisposition in Italian and Japanese counterpart.**



Finally, in the last set of questions, respondents were asked to express their level of satisfaction over their accomplishments: 66.7% of Italian and 68.8% of Japanese reveal an overall dissatisfaction; while, the remaining 33.3% of Italians and 31.2% of Japanese declared their satisfaction over what they have reached so far.

## 5 – Discussion

From the comparison of the results obtained from the two groups is possible to make some considerations. Starting from the demographical point of view, the Italian respondents appear to be slightly older than the Japanese ones, with an average age of 39.9 versus 38.5; however, Japanese displayed a higher level of qualification through specialization courses, while the master's degree is the one that most commonly has its Italian counterpart.

Then, regarding foreign professional or educational experiences, data reveal that they are more common in Japan – this is supported by the higher percentage of women with more than one experience among Japanese respondents – while Italians seem to be more attached to their origins, and most of their foreign experiences happened within Europe. However, 100% of Japanese and almost 95% of Italians believe that this kind of experience has influenced their personal skills. About the continuity period in the current company, there are no Japanese respondents that have worked there for more than 5 years, while a consistent part of Italians (36.4%) has. This once again confirms the different culture between the two countries: one more open to changes, also on the professional side, while the other more closed and with a sort of diffused mindset that gives a big value to permanent contracts.

The second part of the questionnaire inquired the representative sample about the balance between their leader role and their female gender. Considering the perception of themselves as leaders, Japanese participants outperform the Italians: both parties feel that their role of leader emerges more when they enter in contact with other people – i.e., the relationship with their followers; however, Italian women considered themselves as a leader from actively supporting their followers, while Japanese from the direct relation of control on their subordinates (congruent with the cultural dimension of Power Distance). The main consideration for the leader-gender relation is that women of both nationalities realize that sometimes their leader role can be in contrast with their gender role, confirming the existence of an incongruence between them, like other theories have suggested (e.g., Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). Its existence is confirmed by the encounter of more male managers in the workplace from most of the respondents, validating the “think managers, think male” mentality (Schein, 2001, p. 676), which seems to be as diffused as gender prejudice itself. However, satisfaction among respondents is quite high and comes mainly from two factors: feeling empowered/gratified and being in a challenging/dynamic environment. Hence, facing challenges could represent an element of gratification in sustaining their “glass ceiling” escalation. According to leadership style measurements, Italian women display a more transformational leadership style, while Japanese respondents a more transactional one.

The last part of the questionnaire was developed to assess open-mindedness, problem-solving skills, and the Impostor Phenomenon among respondents. Considering open-mindedness and problem-solving, Italians appears to be more prone to express feelings and emotions which is reflected in problem-solving situations as they prefer to fix problems immediately with the person involved. On the other hand, Japanese are more reserved, as they do not like to show their emotions in public and prefer to fix problems after having reflected on

them and only if needed. This supports previous studies (e.g., Matsumoto, 1991; Matsumoto, 2006), which claim that people from individualistic cultures, like Italy, tend to be more expressive in non-verbal behaviour – especially from an emotional side – than those from collectivistic cultures, like Japan. Data about the Impostor Phenomenon's traits are very similar between the two countries. First, both Italian and Japanese women believe beauty and clothing are quite important for female leaders, supporting the common idea that external appearances could be an advantage for women who want to climb the corporate ladder (Eagly & Karau, 2002), and to the idea that women subjected to impostor feelings do not attribute their personal success to their own intelligence, but rather to external factors (Clance & Imes, 1978). For what concerns other predictors of the Impostor Phenomenon, like anxiety level, stress level and self-esteem, both countries registered the same score when compared to one another. Specifically, when considering a 5-point Likert-type scale, they registered 2.8 for anxiety, 3.5 for stress, and even self-esteem reached an average value (which can be explained by the respondents' experience). Still, it seems that respondents are not scared from receiving feedbacks or evaluations (as it happens in people with "impostorism"), because both Italians and Japanese value them 3.7 which can be considered a medium-high value. Finally, the majority of Italians and Japanese respondents show that, even if they register quite high levels of – at least – partial satisfaction for their job, they are not completely satisfied of their overall life's accomplishments and of what they have achieved.

## 6 – Implications

It is important to stress that according to the leadership style measurements, Italian female leaders display more frequently a transformational leadership style while Japanese a more transactional one. The transactional leadership style among Japanese respondents can receive further support if going in depth into the answers given to the open question provided in the questionnaire. The answers are more focused on a vertical and hierarchical role of the leader, empowered by the control they gain on their follower – which is consistent with Hofstede's validation of the index PDI. Thus, all these data and their analysis are sufficient to say that female leadership style is culturally specific. Furthermore, if this observation is associated to the theoretical findings that transformational leadership is typically feminine, while transactional is typically displayed by males (Eagly *et al.*, 2003), it can also be proved that this is true if connected to the Masculinity measurement made by Hofstede. Indeed, Hofstede Japanese Masculinity index measures 95, which implies a much more prevalent masculine society – hence transactional leadership is stronger; on the other hand, with a Masculinity Index of 70 Italy has a slightly more feminine society, indicating higher possibilities to have a transformational leadership style. This means that it can be expected that leadership style deeply changes according to the level of masculinity and femininity in each society, so that it varies according to the different cultures. So, it can be stated that female leadership style is culturally specific and not culturally universal.

However, both nationalities value foreign experiences in the background of candidates, even if they are more common in Japan rather than in Italy. Then, evidence shows that Asian leaders value creativity more than Europeans do as Japanese score an average of 4.25 (on a 5-point Likert-type scale) while Italians 3.94. Besides that, data revealed that both nationalities are aware that sometimes their gender role can result in contrast with their leader role (48.5% of Italians and 68.8% of Japanese). So, women are aware about the existence of prejudices against

them still in modern societies – which has been proved by the reception of only a minimal amount of people answering “no” to the questions “Do you believe that because you are a woman, you can give the impression you are less competent than you really are?”. Nevertheless, Japanese participants seem to be more conscious about this incongruence in respect to Italy. Despite this, the most part of the respondents, 57.6% of Italians and 62.5% of Japanese, have never heard about the “glass ceiling” phenomenon.

Lastly, both Italian and Japanese leaders exhibit indicators predicting Impostor Phenomenon, displaying high level of stress, anxiety, self-esteem, procrastination, feedback’s value and importance for beauty and clothing. Thus, the Impostor Phenomenon seems to be an incident diffused worldwide. Registering high level of partial or complete perfectionism for both groups of respondents could explain the high level of anxiety and stress in the participants. Consistently, in Japan – due to the higher level of perfectionism – when making a mistake, women are more worried about not reaching other’s people standard; while, on the other hand, Italian female managers and directors’ fear is not reaching their personal standard. The second handicapping behaviour typically used by women who display impostorism is procrastination (Rohrman *et al.*, 2016), which seems to be less recurrent than perfectionism, because both countries record an average value (around 2.4 Italy and 2.5 for Japan). High level of anxiety and stress, external success attribution, average level of self-esteem, feeling to not have reached personal and other people’s standards, perfectionism and procrastination are all traits that reveal a diffused Impostor Phenomenon in highly successful women worldwide (Rohrman *et al.*, 2016). Henceforth, all the data suggest that impostorism is not culturally linked.

## 7 – Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been the one of increasing the acknowledgment about female leadership – in relation to the western and eastern culture – not exclusively in the business and corporate world but also in personal one. In both Italian and Japanese culture, women, especially on the workplace, still face some form of discrimination which is manly linked to the presence of the glass ceiling phenomenon.

At first, different leadership styles have been underlined, illustrating different ways to perceive the role of the leader, especially the female one, and their respective skills. Additionally, theories that identify an incongruence between female gender role and leader role have been described, supplying basement for existing barriers that women have faced and are still facing nowadays.

However, according to some authors (e.g.: Eagly, 2007; Krishnan & Park, 2005; Ryan & Haslam, 2007) women have a lot of advantages in respect to men when covering leadership positions worldwide, even if they may not be able to realize their accomplishments due to the gender role they have learned to comply with and the so-called “Impostor Phenomenon” (Rohrman *et al.*, 2016; Clance & Imes, 1978).

So, starting from the assumption that Italian and Japanese cultures display different characteristics, through the usage of a semi-structured questionnaire the empirical section of this research examines and compares the leadership styles and characteristics of 49 female managers and directors between Italy and Japan, with the aim to understand if female leadership is culturally universal or culturally specific.

The survey has proved that Italian female leaders principally display a transformational leadership style, while Japanese leaders perform mainly a transactional leadership style. These

findings have been associated to the theoretical idea that transformational leadership is typically feminine, while transactional is typically masculine. This means that the adoption of a specific leadership style varies according to the level of masculinity and femininity in a given society, making leadership styles vary according to the culture – thus, providing evidence that there are valid reasons to sustain that female leadership is culturally specific and not culturally universal.

Lastly, considering the outcome of the literature review and of the empirical study, the present research had the aim to underline how, today, the concepts of female leadership and culture cannot be separated. Otherwise, there will be an incomplete analysis of leadership which could lead to answer improperly upon some important and fundamental matters and issues on the theme.

## 8 – Limitation and recommendation for future research

Nevertheless, this study may have some possible limitations and biases. The first one might be the low number of people willing to participate to the study, which can sometimes limit the generalizability of the empirical findings. In our specific case, this could be explained by the involvement in this study of only women who cover a precise role inside organizations (i.e., formal role of managers or directors).

Another possible limitation could be the high number of participants coming from the pharmaceutical field. Additionally, for the purpose of the analysis, the population has been divided in two groups and, even if the industry sectors participants come from are not many, they are almost functionally equivalent among the two countries, which is of primary importance.

The last limitation could be found in the number of Italian respondents (33) doubling the Japanese one (16), leading to an overrepresentation of the Italian population. Most probably, this is due to the nationality of the researcher (Italian), and the subsequent difficulty faced to reach female managers on the other side of the world available to answer to the questionnaire.

Notwithstanding these limitations, it should be noted that – according to the author's knowledge – when this study had been run there were not any published studies making comparison on leadership between Italy and Japan, especially within female branches. Thus, the lack of gender-culture leadership research together with these primary collected data enhance the relevance of this paper.

Moreover, the findings of this article have many practical implications in training and, more in general, in Human Resource Management of what today is called “diversity leadership”, integrating the existing literature in both the field of culture and gender. Future studies upon the topic of leadership and its styles might consider the inclusion of more variables like political systems, organizational culture, company type, language, and other factors to provide a more exhaustive explanation about the subject.

Conclusively, the fact that most of the respondents have never heard about the “glass ceiling” phenomenon indicates that, even if they feel shared prejudices and inequalities, they are not completely aware and trained about the actual female perception in their society; so, this point leaves space to further investigations to solve this lack of awareness.

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## APPENDIX 1 – Female leadership questionnaire

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### PART A – DEMOGRAPHIC INFO

Now you will answer some question about yourself. In particular, this is useful to track information about your educational and professional background:

1. Which is your nationality?
2. How old are you?
3. What is your highest qualification? (Mark only one)
  - High-school diploma
  - Bachelor's degree
  - Master's degree
  - Specialization course (post-academic course)
  - PhD
  - Other: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Have you ever studied/lived abroad? (Mark one only)
  - Yes, I've studied abroad
  - Yes, I've lived abroad
  - Yes, I have both studied and lived abroad
  - No
5. If you have lived/studied abroad, where and for how many months/years have you been there?
6. Do you believe that this experience had influence your personal skills? (Mark one only)



- Yes
  - No
  - I don't know
7. If yes, in which way?
8. For which company do you actually work for?
9. How many years are you working there for?
- Less than 5
  - Between 5-10
  - More than 10
10. What job title do you have in the company?
11. How long have you been covering this role?
12. Tell me briefly about your previous experience (if any)

## PART B – LEADER & GENDER

Now you will answer some questions about your leader role and gender role. Feel free to answer liberally.

13. Do you perceive yourself as a leader? (Mark only one)
- Yes
  - No
14. Why? Give me an example in which your leader role has emerged.
15. Which characteristics and skills do you think a leader needs to possess?
16. Have you ever perceived that your leader role is in contrast with your gender role? (Mark only one)
- Yes
  - No
  - I don't know
17. In your experience, have you encountered: (Mark only one)
- More male managers
  - More female managers
  - The same quantity of male and female managers
18. Have you ever encountered any form of gender prejudice in your working career (like stereotypes or sexual harassment)? (Mark only one)
- Yes
  - No
  - I prefer not to say
19. Have you ever heard about a phenomenon called “glass ceiling”? (Mark only one)
- Yes
  - No
20. Do you have children? (Mark only one)
- Yes
  - No
21. Would you be willing (now or in the future) to accept a job with lower working hours, and consequently a lower wage, in order to reach a sort of work-family balance? (Mark only one)
- Yes
  - No
  - I don't know
22. Are you satisfied with your actual job? (Mark only one)
- Yes
  - No
  - So and so
23. Why?

## PART C – LEADERSHIP STYLE

Now you will be asked some question about your leadership style:

24. Judge how frequently each of the following 21 statement in the row fits you, according to the scale in the column. Remember that the word OTHERS may mean your group members or followers (like subordinates, but also friends, familiar or clients). (Mark only one per row).

	Not at all	Once in a while	Sometimes	Fairly often	Frequently if not always
I make others feel good to be around me					
I express with a few simple words what we could and should do					
I enable others to think about old problems in new ways					
I help others to develop themselves					
I tell other what to do to be rewarder in their work					
I am satisfied when others meet common standards					
I am content to let others continue working in the same ways as always					
Others have complete trust in me					
I provide appealing images about what we can do					
I provide others with new ways of looking at puzzling things					
I let others know how I think they are doing					
I provide recognition/rewards when others reach their goals					
As long as things are working, I do not try to change anything.					
Whatever others want to do is OK with me					
Others are proud to be associated with me					
I help others find meaning in their work					
I get others to rethink ideas that they had never questioned before					
I give personal attention to others who seem rejected					
I call attention to what others can get for what they accomplish					
I tell others the standards they have to know to carry their work					
I ask no more from others that what is absolutely essential					

25. Do you prefer to work with people of your same sex? (Mark only one)

- Yes, I prefer to work with women
- No, on the contrary I prefer to work with man
- I don't have any preference about it

26. Do you prefer to say that: (Mark only one)

- You like your job
- You love your job

27. How much are you willing to take risk at work? (Mark only one)

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all						Very much

28. According to you, which of the following statements is more important to describe the relationship between a boss and their subordinates: (Mark only one)

- A boss should authorize and direct their follower in order to prevent mistakes
- A boss should respect and considerate their followers
- A boss should guide and inspire their followers

29. How much do you value creativity between subordinates? (Mark only one)

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all						Very much

#### PART D – FURTHER INVESTIGATIONS

Now you will be asked the last list of questions. Please ask them bearing in mind your daily temperaments.

30. Do you like to express your feelings and emotions openly? (Mark only one)

- Yes, I perceive myself as an "open" person and I don't have problem to expose my feelings to other people
- No, I prefer not to expose my sentiments in front of other people

31. When you have a problem to solve, do you prefer to: (Mark only one)

- To fix it immediately with the person involved
- To internalize the problem, think carefully, and then, if needed, to solve it

32. How much do you believe that clothing and beauty are important for a female manager? (Mark only one)

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all						Very much

33. What do you attribute your own success to? (Mark only one)

- Your intelligence
- Ability to work hard
- Luck: being in the right place at the right time
- All of them

34. How often do you feel anxious? (Mark only one)

	1	2	3	4	5	
Never						Always

35. And stressed? (Mark only one)

	1	2	3	4	5	
Never						Always

36. How much is your self-esteem? (Mark only one)

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very low						Very high

37. Do you believe that because you are a woman, you can give the impression you are less competent than you really are? (Mark only one)

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

38. Do the level of anxiety and stress change during your working life? (Mark only one)

- Yes, it increased
- Yes, it improved
- No

39. When you make a mistake, you are more worried to have not reached... (Mark only one)

- Your personal standard
- Other people's standards

40. Do you define yourself as a perfectionist? (Mark only one)

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

41. How often do you procrastinate projects/jobs? (Mark only one)

	1	2	3	4	5	
Never						Very often

42. How much do you like to receive feedbacks/evaluations? (Mark only one)

	1	2	3	4	5	
Not at all						Very much

43. Actually, are you satisfied of your present accomplishments? (Mark only one)

- Yes, I think I have reached very objective I had in mind
- No, I think I should have accomplished something more