Hello Graduates: An Examination of Women Leaders' Experiences of Delivering Commencement Addresses

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In the domain of public speaking, women have historically struggled to gain access, recognition, and respect (Baxter, 2006). Researchers and scholars have demonstrated the long shadow cast over women's exclusion from public speaking for more than two millennia (Beard, 2014; 2017). The historical exclusion of women's voices has generated deeply rooted gendered assumptions about public speaking spaces and practices, namely as masculine, and served to reinforce and reproduce men's identities (Beard, 2014). Yet, as more women's voices enter the public sphere, there is an opportunity to advance our understanding of women's experiences. Specifically, analysis of women leaders' language and audience members' perceptions of them as speakers may be a helpful lens through which we can view their lived experiences, beliefs, and feelings associated with navigating public speaking landscapes dominated by men.

In this paper, we explore women leaders' experiences within the highly influential yet understudied context of university commencement speeches. We delve into this context for several reasons. First, the university commencement is a legitimate, authoritative, and influential public space for communication. Every spring, hundreds of leaders from around the world are invited (and often generously financially compensated) by universities to deliver addresses to students, their families, faculty, staff, and donors. Such speeches can live on long after the ceremony and garner the attention of individuals far-beyond the host university (e.g., millions of YouTube views of J.K. Rowling's 2008 address at Harvard University). Second, exploration of women's commencement experiences may provide rich insight into their roles as leaders and, intentionally or unintentionally, can be telling about their past experiences including the social

constraints and workplace challenges they likely endured navigating their careers. Using a sociolinguistic lens to view commencement speeches, our research has the potential to reveal insight into women leaders' social, cognitive, and psychological processes (Berry, Pennebaker, Mueller, & Hiller, 1997). Third, women's commencement speeches may offer a meaningful lens through which we can view the management of their professional images (Roberts, 2005). Language and word use in public speaking are primary means by which leaders expose themselves to appraisals by others: "every time a leader speaks, they are making a linguistic choice about how to perform leadership, and indeed, every time they open their mouths, they are being judged" (Baxter, 2010, p.12). Leaders manage their desired professional image through various factors not the least of which includes their linguistic choices in their speech, verbal disclosures, information sharing about the self, and discussions of their experiences, to name a few (Roberts, 2005).

To advance our understanding of the above possibilities, we empirically explored the content of commencement addresses at "Top 100" U.S. business schools in the years 2017-2019 (U.S. News and World Report). We follow the example of Pennebaker et al. (2003) to inductively analyze women leaders' speeches and compare them to men leaders' speeches using Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) (Pennebaker, Francis, & Booth 2001; Pennebaker et al., 2015). Our initial results reveal that throughout their speeches, women leaders used significantly more words that have greater than *six letters*, language that reflects *negative emotions*, *anxiety*, and *female references*. In comparison, men leaders used significantly more words that connote *clout* and positive *emotional tone*. This initial analysis suggests that women commencement speakers have a need to "prove it again" to repeatedly establish and re-establish their credibility and

competence (Williams, 2015). Additionally, women may express anxiety words in recounting past learning experiences to the graduates, conveying empathy with the normal sense of uncertainty that most graduates feel. This anxiety may also be a function of stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995) as women are the minority of commencement speakers, especially in business schools.

This first inductive study piqued our interest to conduct additional empirical work to continue to examine women leaders' experiences in the commencement context. We are currently designing a second study to investigate audience members' perceptions of women's and men's positions as commencement speakers (e.g., credibility, trustworthiness, likability) as well as behavioral reactions to their speeches (e.g., desire to share speeches on social media). We plan to collect and analyze this data prior to the March 2022 conference. Our hope is that this will help provide a more robust understanding of how women leaders experience the commencement space, specifically, as well as public speaking spaces traditionally dominated by men, more broadly.