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The Perception of the Existence of the Queen Bee Syndrome within the South African Banking Sector

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The Perception of the Existence of the Queen Bee Syndrome within the South African Banking Sector

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A research proposal submitted to the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management, Wits Business School, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Business Administration degree

Johannesburg, 2024

DECLARATION

I, Bontle Mogapi, declare that this Applied Research Project (ARP) is my original work, except sources provided in the list of references. This ARP is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Master of Business Administration with the Wits Business School of the University of the Witwatersrand. This research report has not been submitted for examination at any other university outside of the University of the Witwatersrand.

Bontle Mogapi

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

SA: South African

UN: United Nations

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose Statement

The study explores the perception of the existence of the Queen Bee Syndrome in the South African (SA) banking sector. Nelson (2016) commented that the ‘queen bee’ phrase was first created by Carol Tavris and other scholars in 1973. The term was proposed to define the negative behaviour of executive women towards female middle managers (Nelson, 2016). The negative behaviour that Staines and the company identified refers to the process of undermining or dismissing the efforts of other women through exclusion from and competitiveness for higher managerial promotions in the work environment (Nelson, 2016).

Queen bee behaviour describes women executives who alienate women in junior roles after they have advanced to top leadership roles (Johnson & Mathur-Helm, 2011). The existence of the Queen Bee Syndrome in its nature does not empower women in junior leadership roles, but it disempowers them from taking up senior leadership roles in business.

1.2 Background of the Study

Women empowerment in the workplace has become a crucial topic of discussion. For women to be empowered, the work environment needs to enable them to make decisions without any limitations or discrimination, and they and their male counterparts should be granted equal opportunities (Khan *et al*., 2024). In addition, it is reported that women want to be respected and afforded the same opportunities as men (Porter *et al*., 2019). Khwela *et al*. (2020) highlight that barriers that hinder women from progressing in organisations include the Queen Bee Syndrome, but also other factors, such as: women being undermined, mainly by their male equals; lack of mentoring support; gender discrimination and lack of support from women who are already in top management roles. These practices are more widespread in the private sector than in the public sector.

There is another school of thought that views advancing women as not the responsibility of other women. The findings of Khwela *et al*. (2020) demonstrated that top management roles are occupied by men who do not provide an environment for women to progress. This highlights that women's challenges with progressing in organisations are 'male rooted'.

The 2023 United Nations (UN) Sustainability Report states that the progress towards achieving gender equality is slow, and that should the current trajectory remain; the target of women being equally represented in positions of power and leadership will be realised in 140 years (UN, 2023). The increase in the percentage of women in leadership positions in the financial sector globally was projected at 31% from 2019 to 2030. Since the inception of Covid-19, that number has decreased to 30% (Rogish *et al.*, 2021). Although there has been a moderate rise in the proportion of women in leadership roles from 22% to 24%, the gap between senior leadership and executives is significantly larger (Rogish *et al*., 2021).

In the African context, most countries have had to transition from patriarchal societies to the new normal of gender equality. In Ghana, over 60% of women in formal organisations are not in management positions (Ofei-Aboagye, 2001). Doumbia and Meurs (2003) found that women held only 19.2% of management positions in Nigeria, with 16.4% in senior executive roles, 23.5% in junior executive positions, and 26.5% holding supervisory roles. Ramgutty-Wong (2000) found that only 3.4% of women in management in Mauritius were employed in the financial sector. Therefore, there is a need to explore further why women's potentially strong leadership capabilities have not translated into an improvement in their promotion to higher executive or directorship roles in the SA banking sector.

The next section discusses this study's context and justifies its selection.

1.3 Study Context

This study's context is the SA banking sector, which is characterised by male domination that created the "boys' club", which impedes women from progressing to positions of power and leadership (Olivier & Govender, 2019). This sector contributes 21% to the country's gross domestic product (GDP). Although it employs 60% females,

women representation in top management only accounts for 30% of all of the employed executives (Kobus-Olawale *et al*., 2021). The issues of female middle managers' exclusion, lack of support and women being undermined have led to slow transformation in the banking sector, which is still led predominantly by males.

Since the beginning of democracy, the SA Government has implemented laws that should address equality and ensure that the previously disadvantaged and most vulnerable, that is, women, are afforded the same opportunities. Although South Africa has laws that govern inequalities in the workplace, the number of women in senior management positions is still significantly low. The number increased from 29.8% in 2008 to only 32.0% in 2021, an increase of 3% over a period of 13 years (Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), 2023).

Rogish *et al*. (2021) found that the research conducted by Deloitte Insights outlined that much work should be done to advance gender equality, specifically within financial services, which include banking services. In 2021, a mere 21% of women sat on boards, 19% held executive roles, and only 5% held chief executive officer (CEO) positions in the Fortune 2021 Global 500 list (Shemluck *et al.,* 2022) published in South Africa. This indicates a vacuum for more women to hold executive and senior roles. Therefore, it calls for empirical studies, such as this one, to explore the existence of the Queen Bee Syndrome as a barrier that impedes female middle managers from advancing to executive roles in the SA banking sector.

The following section indicates the problem statement that guides the issues that will be explored and addressed in this study.

1.4 Problem Statement

McMahon *et al*. (2006) researched the existence of the Queen Bee Syndrome among women. Their findings indicated that women were underrepresented and experienced career growth constraints throughout their careers, like other studies had reported worldwide. Other reasons that impeded women's growth in organisations that were previously led by males related to cultural beliefs. It was believed that women were more nurturers than leaders, and this deterred women from advancing to top management roles (Kurgat & Omuya, 2011). Ambri *et al*. (2018) reported that because women

empowerment was not achieved in the era of stereotyping; this failure caused isolation and performance pressure, which led to the Queen Bee Syndrome that stands in the way of women's career advancement (Akpinar-Sposito, 2013).

Zandria *et al*. (2020) confirmed that challenges faced by women limit them from gaining recognition and promotion to top management roles, which are linked with the Queen Bee Syndrome. Women in executive roles refuse to promote women, as they fear competition, thus adopting queen bee behaviour by discriminating against other women and gatekeeping the recruitment processes (Mubango, 2021). In addition, Elsesser, (2020) reported that queen bee behaviour was prevalent within some universities, it was noted that some university professors were unlikely to rate female students highly, as they deemed them to be less diligent than their male counterparts.

Faniko *et al*. (2021) investigated the existence of the Queen Bee Syndrome in academia from when it was first reported 15 years ago. Their findings indicate that the Queen Bee Syndrome is still prevalent within academia and that often women are forced to adjust to masculine academia culture for them to progress.

The evidence obtained from the reviewed prior studies demonstrates that the Queen Bee Syndrome prevails across diverse industries, even though reports have indicated that the number of women in leadership is increasing steadily.

The following section provides the research objective and questions that guide this study.

1.5 Research Objective

This study aims to achieve the following objective:

- To explore the perception of the existence of the Queen Bee Syndrome among female middle managers in the SA banking sector

1.6 Research Question

This study aims at answering the following research question:

- What are the perceptions that relate to the existence of the Queen Bee Syndrome among female middle managers in the SA banking sector?

Proposition

The study makes the following proposition:

The perception of the existence of the Queen Bee Syndrome among female middle managers in the SA banking sector affects the relationship between women in the workplace, thus, influencing workplace dynamics and job satisfaction.

This study is underpinned by the following rationale.

1.7 Rationale of the Study

The rationale of this study is to contribute empirical findings to the domain of the Queen Bee Syndrome's existence in the SA banking sector. The study also aims to add new knowledge, from a local context, about the Queen Bee Syndrome. Its findings will guide policy-makers and bank sector executives in implementing corrective strategies that will address the Queen Bee Syndrome to enable the progression of female managers to higher leadership roles in the banking sector.

The following section provides this study’s delimitations.

1.8 Delimitations of the Study

This study focused on obtaining feedback from female middle managers in the banking sector, who are perceived to be affected by the Queen Bee Syndrome displayed by female executives. The study did not explore other levels of management in the SA banking sector. Moreover, this study was underpinned by the qualitative research approach.

1.9 Assumptions

The assumptions that guided this study were that all the participants would be truthful and ensure that they would not be biased. The researcher assumed that there would be no third-party influences during data collection to avoid researcher bias. All the

participants were expected to be truthful about being middle managers in the SA banking sector, as the researcher could not ascertain the validity of their claims without revealing their identification. Thus, the researcher ensured that all participants were anonymous in order to uphold ethical research standards.

1.10 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the crucial issues that guide the study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Empirical Literature Review

2.1.1 Queen Bee Syndrome Characteristics

The term, ‘Queen Bee Syndrome’, originates from the 1970s. It is used to describe women who are described as egotistical and not willing to promote other women because they ascend to executive positions in an organisation and do not advance other women (Raja & Riaz, 2022). Elsesser (2020) believes that the Queen Bee Syndrome results from a legacy of gender discrimination, when women were not afforded the same opportunities as men. It is further indicated that the Queen Bee Syndrome is a survival tactic for women who are forced to adapt to male-dominated organisations. Van Lieshout (2019) established that the ‘queen bee’ term applies to women leaders who show characteristics of distancing themselves from other female women in the workplace, and not providing them with support for them to advance to executive roles.

The queen bee behaviour of women in executive positions, not supporting other women's advancement, hinders middle female managers from advancing to top leadership positions. Research has found that women who experience queen bee behaviour from female senior managers are likely to be disengaged and have a negative attitude towards their work (Raja & Riaz, 2022). Queen bee behaviour leads to a toxic work environment, where women are competitive and jealous of other women who are progressing as leaders (Zandria *et al*., 2020). As reported by Baykal *et al*. (2020), females who are in executive roles in male-dominated workplaces distance themselves from other females in lower levels of management and tend to have a negative attitude towards them. This is the opposite of males in executive roles, as they tend to support other males on all the management levels.

Derks *et al*. (2011) assert that there is evidence that the Queen Bee Syndrome is evident in the male-dominated workplace, and that the behaviour limits opportunities for women in junior roles.

The literature assumes that women are one-dimensional, in that they all have the same view regarding gender stereotypes. Research that Derks *et al.* (2011) conducted with senior female police officers disputes that. The findings outline that there are two categories of women in senior roles: those who have low gender identification and those who have high identification. Those with low identification reported that they did not identify with women in the workplace, as they were more masculine. On the other hand, the women with high identification reported that they tried to advance and create opportunities for other women because they understood the challenges that women who work in a male-dominated industry face.

2.1.2 Why Does Queen Bee Behaviour Happen?

Elizabeth *et al*. (2023) commented that the results of a study conducted in Indonesia with women in politics, which is an enviroment dominated by males, demonstrated queen bee behaviour. The women in politics in Indonesia did not promote other women who aspired to enter politics. This was due to the patriarchal culture that those women had adopted (Elizabeth *et al*., 2023). The women in politics might be conforming to the culture, as they seek acceptance from the men in their organisations. This is a missed opportunity, as women supporting each other could result in the advancement of other women and ultimately influence and change the patriarchal culture.

Executive women have reported that they do not have time to mentor other female managers in lower-level roles because of challenges they also experience in their roles. Furthermore, Munyeka and Maharaj (2022) explored how women balanced work and life at a telecommunication organisation that was male-dominated. They uncovered that women struggle to balance their work and life activities, as they have numerous responsibilities at home, including caring for their close and extended families. As a result, women are unable to take on the opportunity to upgrade their qualifications and attend training. Middle female managers may perceive the unavailability of female executives to provide mentorship to lower-level managers as queen bee behaviour.

Although the literature indicates that women's slow advancement to senior roles is due to a lack of support from executive women, it is evident that other factors are at play. Men are still in control of the type of women who are promoted to positions of power. As noted by Mwashita *et al*. (2020), men avoid advancing women who have feminist ideologies, or those that are politically aligned, as they are likely to challenge organisational inconsistency relating to women empowerment. This is further exacerbated by the prevalence of the "old boys' club", which Kohler (2021) describes as a club only for males that promotes the advancement of males in business, work and society. Mwashita *et al*. (2020) state that the "old boys' club" further excludes women from leveraging connections, mentorship and potential referrals that are often beneficial to males.

The literature demonstrates that women continue to be excluded in organisations. Nkomo (2011) commented that efforts to uplift women by diversifying organisations, which would result in equal representation of genders in top management positions, are often hampered by organisational cultures, as some organisations are still rooted in the white male domination that was prevalent during apartheid. This could be the possible reason for the slow transformation of the SA banking sector, and not the Queen Bee Syndrome, as reported by some scholars.

Mwashita *et al*. (2020) suggest that the decisions within the organisations are made by the 'Men on Top', as they tend to favour men by continuing to exclude women from positions of power. This further exacerbates the efforts to advance women. Smith and Nkomo (2022) argue that gender discrimination is extended to race for black women, whose rate of promotion is much lower than that of their white counterparts. This creates an added burden for these women, as the gender-based exclusions extend to race. Race is not the focus of this study, but it gives perspective to the complex problems that women are faced with in organisations.

For women to progress to top positions, there is a need for structured mentorship that could essentially prepare them for promotions. Khwela *et al*. (2020) note that mentoring from women executives will provide junior female managers with guidance and structure on how to make decisions and ensure that they are ready for top management roles. However, women in executive roles are not willing to mentor other women, as they believe that they must navigate the challenges of ascending to the top position. They

expect junior managers to figure it out on their own, as they also had to work hard to achieve the higher positions (Andrew, 2020). The literature is not explicit about whether queen bees are willing or not willing to mentor men in their network.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Social identity theory was founded by Henri Tajfel in the 1970s. It states that individuals are concerned about how they are viewed in social groups, and that they tend to identify themselves with existing groups (Islam, 2015). The theory is used to further understand the Queen Bee Syndrome and what propels women to display this behaviour. It is relevant to the current study as it proposes that people gravitate towards positive social identity and want to associate with the in-group rather than the out-group. In this context, the in-group is the women executives who entered the male circle with the aim to infiltrate it, and the out-group is considered to be the other women who desire to be promoted to leadership roles, but do not have the executive women's support (Brown, 2000). The social identity theory has been used in the psychological discipline to understand social and behavioural science in several fields of knowledge (Islam, 2015).

In support of the social identity theory, which is this study's theoretical framework; Andrews (2019) reports that female executives who display queen bee behaviour tend to adopt a leader-member exchange (LMX) leadership style, which is characterised by in-groups and out-groups. Members of the in-group tend to be on the receiving end of the queen bee behaviour, as they are not closely related to the leader. The in-group is allowed to network and build relationships with leaders. This puts them at an advantage for promotion considerations over those in the out-group. Such traits further disadvantage junior female managers and disempower them, instead of empowering them for higher leadership roles. This is how the "boys' club" remains dominant in an organisation.

2.3 Conclusion

The reviewed literature proposes the themes that guide this study and align with the study's research questions. This chapter has provided a better understanding of the Queen Bee Syndrome. Thereafter, men's behaviour and the "boys' club", which seem to

be prevalent in the SA banking sector to date, have been discussed. The exclusion of women has been explained, and the social identity theory, which underpins this study, has been elaborated.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Approach

Kumar (2020) mentions that research methodology can be defined as the structured procedures that researchers utilise to achieve a research goal. The qualitative research approach was adopted for this study. Qualitative research studies involve things in their natural form and seek to make sense of different concepts and people's behaviour. This style of research is characterised by gathering information from primary sources, but mostly gathering insights in the form of interviews, focus groups, observations and other interactive methods (Aspers & Corte, 2019)

An interpretivism philosophy has guided this study's methodology as it involves asking open-ended questions in the form of an interview. This also includes interpreting sample participants' experiences and arranging their responses systematically to derive meaning (Elliott & Timulak, 2021).

3.2 Research Design

According to Flick (2018) and Gobo (2018), research design refers to the structure of a study and the overall strategy employed to integrate and execute components of the study. The exploratory research design was adopted by this study for it to correlate with the research aim, as the identified 'problem' requires comprehension and interpretation of a given phenomenon (Tracy, 2020), particularly the perceptions of female middle managers in the SA banking sector. Moreover, the data collected and analysed was best suited for a qualitative study, as in-depth opinions and experiences of the sample were best captured to understand the participants' common beliefs.

3.3 Data Collection Method

The sample was selected through recommendations and the researcher's personal contacts, as the researcher currently works in the banking sector. Screening questions (refer to Appendix A) were asked to potential interviewees to assess their suitability for

the study. Once initial contacts were made through convenience, sixteen female middle managers were sent an informed consent form via email to invite them to participate in the study. The informed consent form provided details relating to the study's objective. Through this process, only the participants who willingly volunteered to participate in the study were interviewed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted through Microsoft Teams. The online systems allowed for easier transcription of the interview for data analysis-related procedures. No face-to-face interviews were requested by the participants.

The objective of the study was described to the interviewees in the informed consent form and explained at the beginning of the interview. The participants were also assured of confidentiality regarding their identity. They were asked to allow the conversations to be recorded; all of them granted permission for the interviews to be recorded. The participants provided the researcher with appropriate times for interviews. The interviews were conducted in English; their durations ranged between 30 to 45 minutes. Although some interviewees added their vernacular language when responding to questions, the words were translated into English.

3.3.1 Population and Sample

Skinner *et al*. (2020) established that a target population is the totality of cases that meet the parameters that a researcher has set. Due to the limitations in resources and time constraints, the researcher could not collect data from the total population. The population of interest would be all female middle managers from commercial banks operating in South Africa who have experienced the Queen Bee Syndrome in their workplace.

The sixteen female middle managers from the following South African commercial banks were interviewed: Standard Bank, First National Bank, Nedbank, Capitec, ABSA Bank and African Bank. The female middle managers had the qualifications and relevant experience that would enable them to progress to the next level of management. Subedi (2021) asserts that small sample sizes are appropriate for qualitative research as they allow for an in-depth understanding of the social context, which may not be achieved when a larger sample is considered.

The research focused on female middle managers' perspectives on queen bee behaviour, so no male middle managers were interviewed as their perspective was not this study's focus. Interviewing the males could invalidate the views of the female middle managers.

3.3.2 Sampling Method

Kothari (2020) stipulates that convenience sampling is a derivative of non-probability sampling, whereupon the researcher collects data that is readily available. Resultantly, non-probability convenience sampling was adopted as this study's sampling technique, as it is considered to be a sampling method that enables a researcher to select a sample within his or her convenience. In addition, it is used when the researcher does not have an already available sample frame (Wegner, 2016).

As indicated by Golzar and Tajik (2022), the use of convenience sampling is beneficial as it is cost-effective and time-saving because the sample is readily available to the researcher. In consideration of this study's time limitations, the chosen sampling method is appropriate. The characteristics of convenience sampling also include selecting participates convincingly based on their proximity to the researcher and willingness to participate in a study (Lopez & Whitehead, 2013), which is the case with this study.

3.4 Research Instrument

Interviews were the selected research instrument to be used to gather the information that would provide insights into this study. An interview guide was used to collect data from the sample of interest (see Appendix A). The research instrument was divided into two main sections: Section A asked questions about the sample's demographics and Section B contained questions that aligned with the research questions that were to be addressed in this study.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, as supported by Lopez and Whitehead (2013). They had a guide with structured questions derived from this study's theoretical framework and they provided the researcher with the flexibility to ask clarity-seeking questions that would provide the researcher with more perspective on the research problem. Boswell (2024) proposed that semi-structured interviews enable the

researcher to solicit detailed and rich responses that establish a connection and trust that further enable the researcher to ask clarity or follow-up questions.

To avoid priming, the researcher tested the questions before the initial interview, as suggested by McGrath *et al*. (2019). The process of testing the questions afforded the researcher the opportunity to practise active listening and test whether the language was appropriate. It also enabled the researcher to reflect on how he or she could potentially contribute to priming unconsciously. Additionally, the questions were formulated to enquire about the experiences of female middle managers in the workplace, and not to pose direct questions about the Queen Bee Syndrome.

3.4.1 Data Analysis Strategies and Interpretations

Data was analysed using the latest version of ATLAS.ti, which is a data analysis tool that enabled the researcher to conduct thematic analysis, to further address this empirical study's research question. NYU Libraries (2024) describe ATLAS.ti as a tool that is used in qualitative research, primarily for coding data and analysing interview transcripts, including field notes. The thematic analysis included analysing qualitative data by understanding the meaning of the collected data and categorising it according to themes. This method was ideal for the study as interviews would be conducted (Sundler *et al*., 2019).

3.5 Limitations

Like any other study, all research has caveats. Therefore, this study has its own drawbacks. First, a sample size of sixteen participants is not sufficient for one to generalise the study's findings to the whole population. Second, this study was conducted in Gauteng, South Africa, leaving out other regions from being considered in the study.

3.6 Quality Assurance

3.6.1 Validity, Reliability and Trustworthiness

Validity and reliability are both concerned with the issue of trustworthiness. Validity relates to how accurate or credible a study's description, conclusion, explanation or interpretation is, whereas reliability refers to the integrity of the conclusions, as well as the application and suitability of the methods used (Coleman, 2022). The validity of an interview is raised by using the appropriate size of the sample that will be asked the same questions at different intervals.

The reliability of this study was guaranteed with each participant receiving entirely identical interview questions. To accomplish trustworthiness, the study applied key strategies such as transferability, credibility, confirmability and dependability to make the data collection process unique to a certain time and place. This study ensured that explanations were consistent throughout the data collection process (Lemon & Hayes, 2020). The study applied these strategies and, by doing so, enhanced the study's trustworthiness.

To guard against biases in the collection and interpretation of the data as the sample was known to the researcher and recommended by the researcher's contacts; the researcher used the interview guide to conduct the interviews and asked the same questions to the interviewees. During the analysis process names were removed and only pseudonyms, for example Participant 1, Participant 2, were used so that the focus was on the data.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Water (2018) proposed that ethics in research outline the principles by which authors must abide. These include those of the current study. Informed consent was upheld throughout the entire process to ensure that the participants' involvement in this study was consensual, and that they willingly accepted to participate in this study. Thus, the researcher ensured that none of the participants felt obligated to take part in this study, as the study was not mandatory or compulsory.

An informed consent form was shared with all the participants, for them to agree to take part in this study by signing the form voluntarily. In addition, the participants were informed of their right to refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any point in time, before or during the research process. Confidentiality was assured because the participants' responses to the research questions will remain entirely confidential. This provides the participants with enough confidence to answer truthfully without judgement or bias. Additionally, the participants cannot be easily identified, as each of them was assigned a pseudonym, such as Participant 1 or Participant 2, to guarantee their confidentiality.

There are no foreseeable risks associated with taking part in this research. This research did not compensate the participants with any form of monetary gain or incentive in order to avoid response bias.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a detailed and motivational standpoint on the research design and methodology selected for this study. The literature was used to justify this study's selected research design and chosen methodological direction.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the qualitative data analysis. The results are presented in three main sections: results from the data analysis procedure conducted by the researcher, demographic results and the emerging themes that address this study's research question. The study's aim was to better understand female middle managers' perceptions of the existence of the Queen Bee Syndrome in the overall SA banking sector. Additionally, the results could be essential to better inform executives in the SA banking sector on how to effectively address or prevent the occurrence of the Queen Bee Syndrome.

4.2 Data Analysis and Presentation

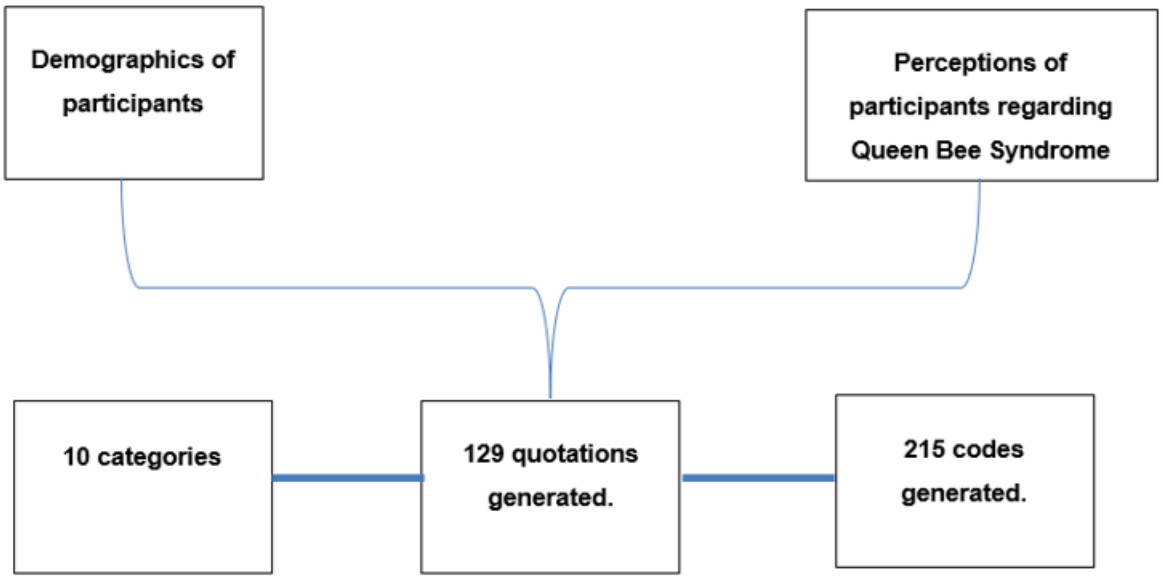
The researcher collected data using semi-structured interviews that commenced with screening questions. The screening or qualifying questions determined the participants' worthiness to participate in this study. The key inclusion criteria were that the participants had to be female, hold a middle management position in the South African banking sector and report to a senior female manager within a bank to ascertain the prevalence of the Queen Bee Syndrome within the bank where the participant worked. The participants were given pseudonyms, that is, Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3 to uphold their confidentiality. A five-step process was then applied for data analysis to be accomplished. This included the uploading of the sixteen interview transcripts (step 1) and then indicating the quotations (step 2), which were transformed into codes (step 3). Then, from the codes, the themes were generated through code groups (step 4). Finally, the networks were presented (step 5).

Based on thematic analysis, qualitative data was derived from key themes within the text, quotes and interview extracts. This analysis method was systematically employed, involving all sixteen interview transcripts that were coded using the widely used and latest ATLAS.ti version 24. Subsequently, the codes were classified as subjects based

on their demographics and the participants' perceptions on each open-ended question. The codes addressing the participants' demographics were first grouped by each demographic question in the interview guide. The rest of the codes addressed the participants' perceptions with probing questions in cases where the researcher aimed to obtain more meaningful data. The figure below visually presents the coding process that generated 215 codes and 10 categories from 129 quotations in the transcripts.

Figure 4.1

Coding process and theme generation.



The next section presents the participants' demographic results.

4.3 Participants' Demographics

This study's participants were from four of South Africa's main banks: ABSA, African Bank, Standard Bank and Capitec Bank. From these four banks, the demographic results were grouped into the total for the banks for each demographic result of the study, starting with the participants' ages.

4.3.1 Participants' Age

Table 4.1

Results of participants' ages

Age of Participants	31–40 years	≥41 years
Total Per Age Group	8	8

Source: Author's own (2024)

Table 4.1 indicates the age of the participants of this study. There were no participants below the age of 31. Accordingly, Table 4.1 further indicates that there were eight participants in each age group: eight within the 31–40 years group and another eight within the ≥41 group.

The researcher can conclude that the participants, who were female middle managers, were mainly aged 31 years and above. One can assume that no female middle managers were younger than 31 years across all the banks considered in this study.

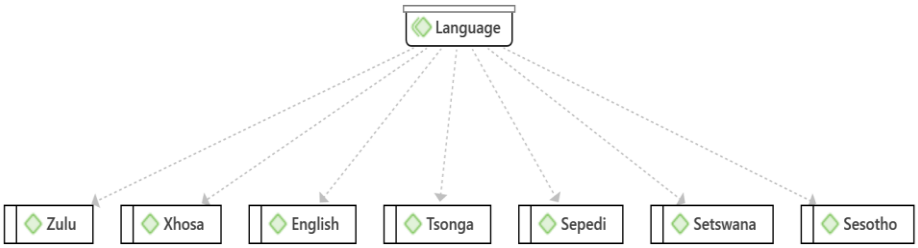
The next subsection presents the home languages spoken by this study's participants.

4.3.2 Participants' Home Languages

The following figure illustrates the home languages that the participants spoke.

Figure 4.2

Home languages spoken by the participants



Source: Author's own (2024)

This study's sixteen participants spoke a variety of home languages per participant, namely: Zulu, Xhosa, English, Tsonga, Sepedi, Setswana and Sesotho. Given that South Africa has linguistic diversity, with many South Africans being multilingual, among the more than ten languages spoken, only seven languages were spoken by this study's

participants. Table 4.2 presents the distribution of the home languages spoken by the participants in the banks in terms of the numbers of participants who speak them.

Table 4.2

Results of home languages spoken by the participants per bank

Participants Home Language	English	Sepedi	Sesotho	Setswana	Tsonga	Xhosa	Zulu
Total	**1**	**3**	**3**	**2**	**2**	**2**	**3**

Source: Author's own (2024)

Based on the results in Table 4.2, Sepedi, Sesotho, and Zulu were the most dominant home languages spoken by the participants in this study.

4.3.3 Participants' Highest Levels of Education

All the participants possessed valuable insights gained from their level of qualification needed to work in the four South African banks under study. Table 4.3 shows the distribution of qualifications possessed by the participants per bank.

Table 4.3

Highest qualification results of participants per bank

Participants' Highest Qualifications	Certificate	Diploma	First Degree	Honours Degree	Master's Degree
Total	**1**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**3**

Source: Author's own (2024)

The results presented in Table 4.3 indicate that the most common level of qualification among all the participants was a second degree (Honours), with a total of five participants, followed by four participants with a First (Bachelor's) Degree and then three participants each with a Diploma and Master's degree. Only one participant had a Certificate as her highest qualification. The researcher concluded that all the participants had academic qualifications and held middle manager positions in the respective banks.

4.3.4 The Duration of Current Employment

Table 4.4

Duration of current employment at the bank

Participants' Duration of Employment	Less than 1 year	1 year	2 years	4 years	8 years	10 years
Total	**2**	**4**	**2**	**4**	**2**	**2**

Source: Author's own (2024)

The duration of the participants' current employment ranged from months to ten years at their respective banks. Two participants reported that they had been working at the current bank for less than a year, but they had a history of working for banks. Four participants had held their middle manager positions for one year and four years, respectively. By contrast, two participants held their positions for two years and eight years, respectively. In addition, two other participants had held their positions for ten years. The positions held for ten and eight years are concerning, as they are very lengthy and without evidence of promotion. This brings light to the issues identified in this study regarding the Queen Bee Syndrome.

4.3.5 Marital Status

Table 4.5

Participants' Marital Statuses

Participant's Marital Status	Divorced	Married	Single
Total	**1**	**6**	**9**

Source: Author's own (2024)

Most (nine) participants were single, six were married, and only one was divorced.

The section which follows provides detailed results that address this study's research objective.

4.4 Results Addressing This Study's Research Objective

This study's research objective was to explore the perception of the existence of the Queen Bee Syndrome within the SA banking sector. The results are based on the categories generated from the extracted data to inform the key themes and are further explained based on the responses from the respective participants. (See Appendix C as evidence of ATLAS.ti visual results.) The dominant themes from the extracted data include adversity, behaviour and relationships, career development, gender dynamics, inequality and workplace dynamics. The minority themes include diverse experiences, limited opportunities, organisational dynamics and work pressure.

This study sought to answer the following question:

What are the perceptions that are related to the existence of the Queen Bee Syndrome among female middle managers within the SA banking sector?

The responses from the interviews conducted are explored as follows.

Queen Bee Syndrome Characterises

Interview Question 1: Are there female middle managers within your organisation? How many?

Table 4.6

Number of female executives at the bank

Number of Female Executives at the Banks	Fewer than 3 Executives	3 Executives	4 Executives	More than 5 Executives
Total	**1**	**3**	**3**	**9**

Source: Author's own (2024)

According to the participants' responses, ABSA and Capitec Bank have the highest number of female executives. Only one participant reported that there are fewer than three executives at Standard Bank.

Interview Question 2: Do you aspire to progress into a senior or executive position within the banking sector?

Most of the female middle managers indicated that they aspired to progress to senior or executive positions within the SA banking sector, whereas a few were not interested in progressing within the banking sector. Some were content in their roles, and did not aspire to lead at a senior level. Seventy-five per cent of the participants had acquired degrees, fifty per cent of which were postgraduate degrees. This is an indication that female middle managers are ambitious and enthusiastic about their growth and development and aspire to progress to more senior roles.

Why Does Queen Bee Behaviour Happen?

Interview Question 3: In instances where you had female managers, were any of them supportive or promoted you in your career?

The majority of the participants indicated that they had been supported and promoted by other females at some point in their careers. Participant 5 was requested by her manager to submit her curriculum vitae for a vacant role; this resulted in her being appointed for the role.

"When I moved from frontline support to a business analyst, my female manager was supportive and keen to upskill me." Participant 4

Most of the participants had never received support from female managers. They were developed and mentored by senior and executive male managers. Gender dynamics and inequality were at play within the banking sector, as some participants were overlooked for promotional opportunities. The perception from the participants was that they were overlooked because they were pregnant. This claim was not confirmed.

Interview Question 4: How are projects allocated by female executives to other females?

The objective of this question was to establish whether female middle managers had opportunities to showcase their knowledge and skills, to be noticed by seniors or executives. Most of the participants commented that projects were split equally among all the managers, and that projects were allocated according to knowledge, skills and area of speciality.

“Allocation is based on the section that one is responsible for. We are allocated projects based on our area of responsibility.” Participant 10

In addition, a small number of the participants reported that projects were not allocated fairly; thereby demonstrating favouritism. Some stated that they were not involved with projects, they only oversaw operations.

Interview Question 5: When senior positions are advertised, do female executives encourage female middle managers to apply?

A limited number of the participants asserted that they were encouraged to apply for senior roles, whereas some were not encouraged, and one reported that she was not aware whether the female executives encouraged managers to apply. Participant 16 noted that at her organisation, female middle managers were not encouraged to apply for advertised senior roles, as their seniors were afraid of losing their best managers because they did not have time to upskill other managers. The theme identified in this study was career development and suppression of female middle managers by female executives. One participant indicated that her application to study for a master’s degree was declined, and another mentioned that she was blocked from attending conferences that would expose her to opportunities.

“There were no fair opportunities for growth, and those that progress is those that suck up to the leaders and those that have a good command of the English language.” Participant 2

Interview Question 6: What is your experience of female executives’ gatekeeping female middle managers from moving up the career ladder?

The majority of the participants reported that they had not experienced gatekeeping from female executives that had negatively affected them moving up the career ladder. Some participants confirmed that female executives gatekeep female middle managers, thus, deterring the latter from moving up the career ladder. One participant stated that female executives gatekeep female middle managers out of fear as some of them do not have the postgraduate qualifications that female middle managers have. There is evidence that there are behavioural issues and a lack of a relationship between the female middle managers and female executives. This is interpreted as the Queen Bee

Syndrome. Participant 15 stated that her manager insisted that she work for an additional three years before she could pursue other career opportunities.

"I was not sure if she said that because she valued me or was it for selfish reasons." Participant 15

This demonstrates the lack of a relationship between the female middle managers and those to whom they report.

Interview Question 7: How are work-related networking initiatives structured in terms of gender and is there an opportunity for female middle managers to interact with female executives?

Most of the participants' organisations organised networking initiatives, but not all female managers could attend as the initiatives were held after working hours. This is not convenient for managers who have children and are married. A small number of participants noted that their organisations used to have networking initiatives before Covid-19, but they had been cancelled as most of the employees worked from home.

"Networking initiatives are organised. It is difficult for female middle managers to interact with female executives as they are often condescending towards them." Participant 10

Participant 7 alluded that she was unable to attend the networking initiatives because in her department, meetings were booked at the same time as the networking initiatives. Upon querying, she would be informed that networking sessions were not a priority. This highlights organisational and workplace dynamics, where there is no alignment between those who plan the initiatives and the departments. This further exacerbates queen bee behaviour.

4.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided an overview of the results derived from the interviews that the researcher conducted. The results were obtained by using the latest ATLAS.ti package. The demographic results were presented first, and results from the research questions were then outlined. The results indicate that the majority of female middle managers had not experienced the gatekeeping behaviour aligned to the Queen Bee Syndrome,

and most of the female middle managers had been supported by female managers throughout their careers. However, there were a few female middle managers who had experienced gatekeeping by female executives. The next chapter (Chapter 5) provides a discussion of the results.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the current study's results in relation to the research question and literature review, followed by a conclusion of the results.

5.2 Queen Bee Syndrome Behaviour

The perception of the existence of the Queen Bee Syndrome within the SA banking sector was not confirmed, as most female middle managers reported that they had been supported and promoted by other women. The Queen Bee Syndrome behaviour was described by Van Lieshout (2019) as behaviour where women leaders distance themselves from other women in the workplace and do not provide them with support for them to advance to executive roles. There seems to be misalignment between the subjects under study as some female middle managers believe that they go through adversity and pressure to prove themselves. It is evident that there is a trust deficit and no psychological safety that enables open communication among the women for them to address their concerns. Edmondson and Lei (2014) outlined that if there is no psychological safety in an organisation, employees are not likely to communicate openly with their managers.

5.3 Why Does Queen Bee Behaviour Happen?

Female middle managers reported that they had been overlooked for promotion because they were pregnant and would thus be away from work. This confirms the findings of Elsesser (2020), that the Queen Bee Syndrome results from a legacy of gender discrimination, when women were not afforded the same opportunities as men. In addition, senior roles were reserved for males. This aligns with the study conducted by Raja and Riaz (2022), which discovered that women are not willing to advance other women. The results of the study either dispel or confirm the claim; there seems to be an assumption made by female middle managers without confirmation.

Musetsho *et al*. (2021) highlighted that even after the implementation of policies, there is still underrepresentation of women in executive and senior management roles. This calls for a review of gender equality and legislation against unfair discrimination. This could demonstrate that women's reluctance to support one another is not an individual choice, but a systematic issue that extends beyond interpersonal animosity among women. Faniko *et al*. (2021) argue that the tendency of women in organizational settings to distance themselves from other women is not an inherent disposition; it rather reflects a behavioural strategy shaped by organisational norms and defines success through predominantly masculine criteria. This phenomenon is referred to as self-group distancing which is a term that has increasingly replaced Queen Bee Syndrome.

The findings of Mwashita *et al*. (2020), that men do not want to promote other women, especially those with female ideologies, was not confirmed in this study. This study's findings have demonstrated that women have been supporting other women, but the pace of women development is slow. In addition, the findings have indicated that not only women but also men, who are the majority in executive roles, are responsible for advancing women.

Elizabeth *et al*. (2023) commented that women do not support each other because of the patriarchal culture and them having to conform to organisational culture, as they want to be accepted by their male counterparts. This claim was not confirmed, as the participants stated that they had had female senior managers who had supported and promoted them at some point in their careers. The participants gave the impression that although Queen Bee Syndrome behaviours were displayed by the females; some advanced other women.

The banks seem not to provide an open policy to include both introverted and extroverted colleagues, although there is a good balance of gender representation at networking sessions. Interaction between executives and female middle managers is limited. This may lead to low morale, and the staff not being inspired to collaborate, thus further limiting promotion opportunities. Women often have to worker harder to prove themselves, so that they can be noticed by the female executives. They also believe that they need to acquire postgraduate degrees as a way of progressing in the banking

sector. This does not give assurance that they will progress, as some of the female executives do not necessarily have postgraduate degrees

Tedesco (2023) indicated that networking empowers women to thrive in an organisation, as they gain insight and guidance. Furthermore, networking provides them with opportunities within the organisation and potentially helps them to secure referrals from other women. This indicates that it is not sufficient for female middle managers to focus on acquiring academic qualifications; they also need to network and connect with other women within an organisation. Munyeka and Maharaj (2022) uncovered that female executives do not have time to balance work and life responsibilities, and that their unavailability may be interpreted as them not being willing to mentor other women. The banks should provide platforms for constructive interaction and engagement that will foster improved relations for employees of all genders and races.

5.4 Conclusion

The perception of the existence of the Queen Bee Syndrome within the SA banking sector was not confirmed, as most female middle managers reported that they had been supported and promoted by other women. The minority of the participants reported that they had not been supported and experienced gatekeeping. However, it could be beneficial for them to establish a relationship with female executives to gain a deeper understanding of the unique challenges they encounter in professional settings. Through these engagements, female middle managers could gain more knowledge of the systematic barriers that block their career progression, gender biases and leadership dynamics that prevail within organisations. Their relationship building will enhance clarity and present opportunities for them to develop strategies for fostering inclusive leadership and equitable organisational practices.

CHAPTER 6: FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, ACTION PLAN, LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research findings on the perception of sixteen female middle managers regarding the existence of the Queen Bee Syndrome within the SA banking sector. This is followed by this study's limitations and suggestions for future research. The chapter concludes with research findings and presents recommendations based on the findings. Thereafter, it provides this study's action plan and limitations. Finally, the chapter presents suggestions for future research.

6.2 Research Findings

This study's findings highlight that some female middle managers perceive that there is the existence of the Queen Bee Syndrome within the SA banking sector.

6.3 Recommendations

For the Queen Bee Syndrome to be addressed effectively; there should be a platform for all women to be afforded equal opportunities to share their experiences within organisations. This can be achieved by external facilitators' interventions. In that process, the organisations must ensure that there is trust, and that the environment promotes open communication. More interventions are highlighted in the action plan which follows.

6.4 Action Plan

The action plan provides female middle managers who are blocked by practical tools to enable their career progression and provides the organisations with measures to consider in supporting and progressing female middle managers. In addition, it provides actions that the banking sector can consider in supporting women leadership.

The detailed action plan is presented in the following table.

Table 6.1

Action plan for Female Managers, Banks and Banking Sector

Measure	Actions	Who is Responsible
Provide solutions for females who are blocked.	1. Approach the female executives to seek their feedback and advice on career progression.	Female Middle Manager
	2. Request mentorship opportunities and try to participate authentically.	
	3. Engage with other females to form a network that will offer support for women at all levels.	
Prevent Queen Bee Syndrome by the banks.	1. Initiate diversity and inclusion programmes that seek to support employees.	Banks
	2. Implement measures to create psychological safety and reduce the trust deficiency.	
	3. Prioritise mentorship programmes that seek to support women in the workplace.	
Prevent Queen Bee Syndrome by the Banking sector.	1. Embrace and support women leadership.	Banking Sector
	2. Promote women to significant structures of the banking sector.	

Source: Author's own (2025)

6.5 Study Limitations

Due to this study's time limitations, a longitudinal study that would have followed the journey of the female middle managers over time could not be conducted. A sample of sixteen female middle managers was used to determine their experience within the South African banking sector. In this instance, we cannot generalise and report that most managers have similar experiences. Additionally, the study was conducted in the Gauteng Province of South Africa, while other provinces were not considered. Female middle managers in other provinces might have different experiences.

6.6 Future Research

Future studies should consider women who work in other cities within South Africa, such as Durban, Cape Town and Qheberha, and in small towns. In addition, there is an opportunity for other studies to be conducted in other previously or currently male-dominated business sectors, including the mining sector, to establish women's experiences of the Queen Bee Syndrome in those sectors. Further studies could be conducted in other Southern African Development Community countries.

6.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided the current study's findings, recommendations, action plans relating to the female middle managers that are blocked from career progression and actions for organisations and the banking sector. The study's limitations and considerations for future research have been outlined.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Research Instrument

Screening questions

1. Do you identify your gender as female?
2. Do you currently hold a middle management position in any of the South African banking entities?
3. Have you reported to two or more female managers?

Section A: Demographic questions

1. What is your age? _____
2. What is your home language? _____
3. What is your highest level of qualification? _____
4. For how long have you been in your current employment? _____
5. What is your marital status? _____

Section B: Questions addressing the research objective

Research questions

What are the perceptions relating to the existence of the Queen Bee Syndrome among female middle managers in the SA banking sector?

Queen bee behaviour

IQ 1: Are there female middle managers within your organisation? How many?

IQ 2: Do you aspire to progress into a senior or executive position within the banking sector?

Why does queen bee behaviour happen?

IQ 3: In instances where you had female managers, were any of them supportive or promoted you in your career?

IQ 4: How are projects allocated by female executives to other females?

IQ 5: When senior positions are advertised, do female executives encourage female middle managers to apply?

IQ 6: What is your experience of female executives gatekeeping female middle managers from moving up the career ladder?

IQ 7: How are work-related networking initiatives structured in terms of gender and is there an opportunity for female middle managers to interact with female executives?

Appendix B: Categories and Codes Generated from ATLAS.ti

