

Barriers to personal career advancement of Black South African women within the banking industry

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DECLARATION

I, Nqobile Mavundla, declare that this research article is my own work except as indicated in the references and acknowledgements. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration in the Graduate School of Business Administration, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in this or any other university.



Signed at Roodepoort, on the 28 day of February 2025.

DEDICATION

To my daughters, Lubanzuthando and Hlelolwenkosi, you are my greatest motivation. Every challenge I have faced and every sacrifice I have made throughout this journey has been with you in mind. My hope is that this accomplishment serves as a reminder that you can achieve anything you set your hearts to. May you always pursue your dreams with courage and confidence, knowing that you are deeply loved and capable beyond measure.

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To my mother, I am thankful for your love, wisdom, and prayers. You have always been my biggest inspiration. Thank you for the unwavering support and encouragement even in moments of doubt. Thank you for making me love and believe in education. Your strength has been my foundation, and I am forever grateful.

To my husband, Mavundla, thank you for standing by me, making sacrifices, and cheering me on every step of the way. This achievement is as much yours as it is mine.

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ABSTRACT

The underrepresentation of Black South African women in senior leadership roles within the banking industry remains a significant challenge, despite existing diversity and inclusion policies. This study explores the structural, cultural, and psychological barriers that hinder their career advancement and examines how societal expectations and organizational practices influence their professional experiences. Through semi-structured interviews with 16 Black South African women working at various management levels in the banking industry, the study employs a thematic analysis to identify both the barriers and enablers in career advancement. The research revealed multiple barriers, including non-transparent recruitment and promotion processes, exclusion from leadership networks, workplace discrimination, and deeply rooted cultural biases. Additionally, personal challenges such as imposter syndrome and self-doubt further limit career progression. Digital transformation is creating both opportunities and challenges for Black South African women within the banking industry. While it has benefits such as enhanced efficiency and data-driven decision-making, others face job losses due to automation of roles and unequal access to digital skills training. This study emphasizes the need for greater transparency in recruitment and promotion processes, targeted mentorship and sponsorship programs, and inclusive leadership development initiatives. Creating a workplace culture that actively supports the advancement of Black South African women is essential for fostering diversity in senior leadership roles. By addressing these structural and psychological barriers, the banking industry can cultivate a more equitable and inclusive environment that enables Black women to thrive and contribute meaningfully at senior levels of leadership.

Keywords: Structural Barriers, Psychological Barriers, Gender and Racial Bias, Mentorship and Sponsorship, Digital Transformation, Career Advancement Strategies.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background & Context

The career advancement of Black South African women in the banking industry continues to be a persistent challenge, influenced by systemic, psychological, and technological barriers (Yende et al., 2024). Despite corporate commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion, structural barriers such as exclusion from leadership opportunities, discriminatory promotion practices within the organisations, and limited access to mentorship opportunities continue to hinder their career growth (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). These barriers are further exacerbated by workplace cultures that frequently marginalize the contributions of Black women, thereby restricting their access to leadership opportunities and promoting career stagnation at mid-management levels (Mayiya et al., 2019). This study will explore multifaceted challenges to personal career advancement of black South African women in three of the largest banks in South Africa. The study aims to gain a deeper insight into the impact of systemic and discriminatory practices within these organizations.

South Africa has experienced racial segregation, but discrimination against women persists, especially for women and women of colour (Matotoka & Odeku, 2018). Since the beginning of democracy in 1994, the government has made collective attempts to repeal discriminatory laws and introduce legislation that encourages workplace equality (Sinden, 2017). Despite attempts to repeal discriminatory laws and introduce legislation promoting workplace equality, such as the Labour Relations Act of 1995, the Employment Equity Act of 1998, and the Basic Conditions of Employment Act of 1997, women continue to face gender inequality in the workplace, including lower employment opportunities, lower pay, and limited managerial and executive positions (Mavhuthu et al., 2021). The Employment Equity Act requires the implementation of affirmative action measures to guarantee that persons from different subgroups are given opportunities to enhance equal representation at all occupational levels and categories within an

organization (Kobus-Olawale et al., 2021). Women have been included in the definition of designated groups, according to the EEA (Kobus-Olawale et al., 2021). Despite the passage of progressive laws, women continue to confront gender inequality in the workplace, primarily by being less likely to get employment, having lower pay than males, and being less likely to obtain managing and executive positions (Mavhuthu et al., 2021).

According to the Quarterly Labour Force Survey for the second quarter of 2024, women's labour force participation was 52.38%, while male participation was 64.27%, (Statistics SA, 2023). This illustrates persistent gender differences in the labour market, underlining the critical need to increase women's total employment participation, offer them more options across all economic industries, and address job disparities beyond unemployment rates (Statistics SA, 2023). A significant aspect of economic empowerment is empowering women through employment because increasing women's labour-force participation improves not only gender equality but also assists individuals and the society in general (Statistics SA, 2023).

South African financial organisations signed the Financial Industry Charter in 2002, promising to follow inclusive cultural and gender norms and build a non-racial and non-sexist environment in the banking industry (Weeto, 2019). The South African banking industry has made significant strides toward incorporating employee transformation (Financial Sector Transformation Council, 2021). However, while there is significant growth at the junior and middle management levels, as well as in women's representation, advancement slows drastically as seniority increases (Financial Sector Transformation Council, 2021).

According to the Banking Association of South Africa (BASA) transformation report 2024, there is a decrease in the overall number of black women represented in top management positions (BASA Transformation Report, 2024). Table 1 below indicates that most of the top senior and middle management positions are held by white women within the banking industry in South Africa (BASA Transformation Report, 2024) . This

disparity becomes more apparent as one ascends the managerial hierarchy in South African organizations, where only 26.5% of top managerial positions are occupied by women (Department of Employment and Labour, 2023).

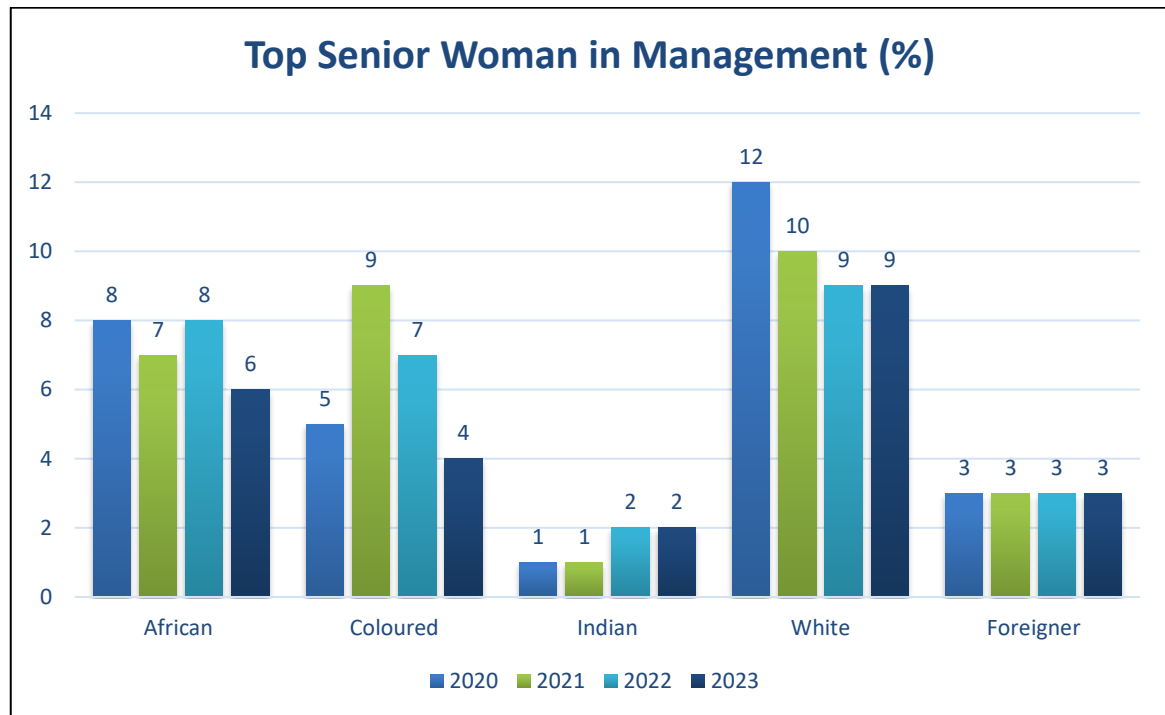


Table 1: Source: BASA Transformation Report 2024

The purpose of this study is to explore black women's under-representation in South Africa's banking industry, focusing on the three largest banks. It aims to identify barriers to women's career advancement and identify the contributing factors. The findings will benefit academics, policymakers, and organizations by addressing systemic barriers, improving career opportunities, and enhancing employee satisfaction.

1.2 Research problem.

Despite measures to eliminate systemic and discriminatory practices in South Africa's banking industry, black women continue to face significant barriers to personal professional progress (Matotoka & Odeku, 2022). This study seeks to investigate the

intersectionality of factors that contribute to these barriers. Intersectionality is the overlap of social inequalities such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and class (Veenstra, 2011). The idea of intersectionality is critical in recognizing that structured inequities and economic disparities occur on several levels (Segalo, 2015). Intersectionality highlights the impact of multiple identities and social institutions on an individual's career advancement (Atewologun, 2018). This research investigates the role of organizational practices and psychological challenges faced by black women in the banking industry, including imposter syndrome and self-confidence issues.

One area where research is limited is the effect of digital evolution on the underrepresentation of women, particularly black women, in digital employment in the South African banking industry (Matotoka & Odeku, 2021). Due to the perceived technical nature of these professions, males have historically dominated digital positions, excluding black women (Jenkin & Naude, 2018). Understanding how digital transformation affects access to digital roles and professional advancement for black South African women is critical for establishing comprehensive solutions to these discrepancies (Manda & Backhouse, 2018).

This study aims to find effective tactics, interventions, and policy recommendations for promoting inclusiveness, equality, and long-term diversity and inclusion in the banking industry by investigating the experiences and perspectives of black South African women as they navigate these challenges.

1.3 Research questions.

This study investigates how black South African women acquire employment opportunities and advance to top management positions; the following two sub-questions guide the analysis:

- Research Question 1: What are the primary structural barriers, cultural and societal factors, and personal challenges (e.g., confidence levels, ambition) that hinder the career advancement of black South African women in the banking industry?
- Research Question 2: How do these combined barriers impact the career progression and professional experiences of black South African women in the banking industry?

1.4 Significance of the study

This study addresses the fundamental structural impediments, cultural and socioeconomic concerns, and personal problems that black South African women encounter when furthering their professions. It contributes to the larger topic of workplace diversity and inclusion. Furthermore, the study identifies the unique barriers that hinder the advancement of underrepresented groups, calling for focused interventions and initiatives to achieve equitable opportunity.

The study's findings will inform organizational policies and practices within the banking industry, guiding the development of more inclusive human resources policies, recruitment practices, leadership development programs, coaching and mentorship initiatives. This will not only empower black South African women to pursue leadership roles but also foster a more diverse and equitable workplace. Ultimately, the research outcomes contribute to academic knowledge on gender and race dynamics in banking, providing actionable insights for practitioners, policymakers, and organizations to create

supportive environments that enable the career advancement of black South African women and other underrepresented groups.

1.5 Delimitations of the study

The research is confined to black South African women within the banking business in South Africa, concentrating on barriers to career advancement, particularly for those aspiring for higher-level roles. It excludes women from other racial or ethnic backgrounds, individuals in different industries, and historical or future trends. The research adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing interviews with junior, middle, and upper management levels. The participants are currently employed in the banking industry. Additionally, the study will only focus on three of the largest South African banks. These delimitations ensure a focused investigation into current challenges faced by black South African women in advancing their careers within the banking industry, providing insights from multiple management levels within a select group of banks.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Career advancement involves the execution of actions and initiatives that promote the career development and growth of individuals within an organization (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). It emphasizes the enhancement of prospects for advancement, improvement of skills, and positions of leadership, especially among underrepresented groups such as women (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). The career progression of Black South African women in the banking industry presents an important challenge, influenced by a multifaceted interaction of structural, societal, and psychological elements (Govender & Olivier, 2019). Research indicates that these barriers, along with the effects of digitization, have affected the chosen careers of this underrepresented group (Jenkin & Naude, 2018). This literature review will explore the challenges faced by black South African women in the banking industry, including structural barriers such as discrimination, limited leadership opportunities, cultural and societal factors, and personal factors like confidence and ambition. It will also examine the impact of digital evolution on the underrepresentation of women in digital employment.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Understanding the theoretical background informs the analytical approach to management problems. The theory provides a framework for understanding the interconnected concepts and structures of a problem, guiding decision-making (Mayo, 2020). This research will evaluate two theories namely feminist theory and complexity theory.

2.2.1 Feminist Theory

Feminist theory serves as the study's essential lens, offering a critical viewpoint on disparities in gender and the systems that enable it. Feminist theory, which is based on the goal of equitable society, aims to question conventional patriarchal conventions and advocate for women's inclusion, equality, and empowerment in a variety of settings, including working environments (Biwa, 2021). It is predicated on the premise that women face systemic discrimination differently than males, and that non-feminist research frequently overlooks gender as a basic social difference (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). Feminist studies seek to empower women, challenge patriarchal ideas, and advance feminist principles (William, 2000). Liberal feminism is an essential component of feminist thought, emphasizing equal rights, democracy, and women's engagement in the job market (Enyew & Mihrete, 2018). This viewpoint supports for legal and legislative changes to remove systemic impediments to gender equality while also supporting policies that encourage diversity, justice, and women's rights (Biwa, 2021). Furthermore, the feminist perspective theory contends that women's lived experiences give vital insights into society systems, allowing them to resist oppression and better their conditions (Gurung, 2021).

Feminism in the workplace allows marginalized women to manage their identities while actively resisting discrimination and sexism (Nienaber & Nthabiseng, 2016). Leadership development is another important part of feminist theory since it encourages self-reflection and allows women to discover and accept their leadership beliefs (Smith & Suby-Long, 2019). Transformational leadership has been advocated as a way for women in South Africa to deal with and modify patriarchal workplace environments (Fish et al., 2021). Young women in South Africa are increasingly driving the feminist agenda, pushing for gender equality, and contesting gender-based discrimination (Gouws & Coetzee, 2019).

Given its positive aspects, feminist philosophy has been challenged for some shortcomings. Some researchers contend it focuses too narrowly on study participants

while ignoring more fundamental structural difficulties (Thomson, 2018). Furthermore, it has been criticized for not being strong enough in advocating for larger cultural reform (Thomson, 2018). However, feminist theory remains a powerful method of study for opposing gender stereotypes, revealing power inequities, and promoting equality for women (Marshall et al., 2021).

This research focuses on the issues that Black South African women experience in the banking business, where gender prejudices, power dynamics, and cultural expectations provide substantial impediments to career progression. Psychological problems such as imposter syndrome and self-confidence concerns exacerbate these challenges, emphasizing the importance of workplace policies that promote tenacity, self-worth, and independence (Bravata et al., 2019). Furthermore, this study uses feminist theory as a critical framework to examine organizational structures that either help or impede women's professional progression. It contributes to the identification of structural forces that classify, oppress, or exclude women, as well as methods that promote gender inclusion and leadership possibilities. This study intends to contribute to the larger discussion on gender parity in the workplace and women's empowerment in leadership roles by addressing both structural and psychological impediments.

2.2.2 Complexity Theory

In the current business environment, organizations must deal with technological advances and a dynamic competitive landscape, requiring suitable strategic solutions (Johnk et al., 2022). Thus, traditional organizations often participate in organization-wide digital evolution which is based on the application of digital technology to bring about changes in value-creation methods (Chanas et al., 2019). Digital banking involves integrating emerging technologies into the banking system or organization (Jenkin & Naude, 2018). Digitalization is transforming a company's model, operational methods, and services to become more digital (Jenkin & Naude, 2018). The fast pace of technological evolution affects human resources management, including career management processes and procedures (Stone et al., 2015). This means that organizations must consider their role in

managing employees' careers to meet their evolving requirements while maintaining an edge in the marketplace (Rožman et al., 2023).

Complexity theory, as defined by Sapir (2019), emphasizes the interconnectedness of system components and their surroundings (Sapir, 2019). It helps organizations manage uncertainty and predictability in career management strategies, as organizations cannot offer life-long employment or rely on succession management due to changing employee requirements, labour market shifts, and events like COVID-19 (Rapuano & Valickas, 2021).

Adapting this theory to the banking industry can reveal a complex network of factors influencing career development, including corporate structures, cultural dynamics, leadership styles, and institutional biases. It can also help investigate how technological advancements in the banking industry affect the career progression of black South African women, particularly in digital occupations (Louw & Nieuwenhuizen, 2020).

2.3 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework presented in this study emphasizes the multidimensional influence of women overcoming barriers to career advancement within the banking industry. It recognizes that, while several layers of obstacles exist, the fundamental issue is frequently caused by conscious and unconscious societal preconceptions, and internal problems such as poor self-esteem or ambition that hinder job progress. These issues, together with cultural and socioeconomic pressures, emerge in discriminatory organizational culture and business policies, exacerbating the difficulties experienced by black South African women. The conceptual framework will be based on the feminist and complexity theory. The below propositions will be analysed.

2.3.1 Gender Bias and Discriminatory Practices

2.3.1.1 Gender bias in leadership selection and promotion processes

Gender bias in leadership selection and promotion within the banking industry indicates the systemic and unconscious biases which favour men over women in recruitment, career advancement, and executive appointments (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). These biases appear in several ways, including entrenched assumptions regarding leadership attributes, assumptions about work-life balance, and discriminatory workplace cultures that hinder advancement in their careers for women, especially Black women (Chanda & Ngulube, 2024). Consequently, women encounter heightened scrutiny and criticism when seeking executive roles, since their leadership styles are frequently perceived as less effective or dominant than those of their male colleagues (Chanda & Ngulube, 2024). Moreover, wage disparity increases this issue, since financial differences between men and women in leadership deter women from seeking top positions owing to limited economic mobility and acknowledgment (Matotoka & Odeku, 2022)

2.3.1.2 Discriminatory Workplace Cultures and Exclusion from Networks

Discriminatory workplace environments provide a major barrier to the career success of black South African women (Matotoka & Odeku, 2018). These environments are frequently marked by exclusion from informal professional networks, restricted access to mentoring and sponsorship possibilities, and the recurrent occurrence of microaggressions that diminish confidence and professional credibility (Canham, 2020). Research has also indicated that informal networking is an important factor in career advancement, since top executives frequently recognize prospective leaders through sponsorship and informal connections (Chanda & Ngulube, 2024). Nevertheless, Black women are often excluded from these environments, diminishing their visibility and access to leadership positions (Kobus-Olawale et al., 2021). The continuation of these discriminatory behaviours fosters an environment in which black South African women

find it challenging to reach leadership positions, irrespective of their professional qualifications and accomplishments (Bayaga & Mtose, 2021).

2.3.2 Imposter Syndrome and Self-Confidence

2.3.2.1 Self-Advocacy for leadership opportunities

Imposter syndrome is characterized by emotions of intellectual deceit and an enduring dread of failure, causing individuals to doubt their own abilities despite external affirmation (Huecker et al., 2023). Studies indicate that Black women who encounter imposter syndrome are less inclined to advocate for themselves in leadership positions, adversely impacting their career advancement (Chance, 2022). The internalized anxiety of being "seen" as insufficient discourages individuals from obtaining promotions or accepting leadership roles, consequently limiting their visibility and professional advancement (Gullifor et al., 2023). The banking business, characterized by male dominance at high levels, presents further difficulties for Black women who experience self-doubt in settings where they are already underrepresented (Latchanah & Singh, 2016). Research indicates that the phenomenon of imposter syndrome has a negative correlation with assertiveness, suggesting that Black women who experience these symptoms are less inclined to express themselves in professional environments (Masiya et al., 2017). Considering that assertiveness is a key management quality, a lack in self-confidence further limits their capacity to advance into leadership roles (Masiya et al., 2017).

2.3.2.2 Representation and Leadership Progression

Black women are underrepresented in executive leadership roles, which makes imposter syndrome worse by increasing self-doubt and lowering confidence in pursuing senior roles (Chanda & Ngulube, 2024). Research indicates that individuals are more likely to pursue positions of leadership when they observe role models that reflect their identity and culture (Morgenroth et al., 2015). However, the ongoing underrepresentation of Black women in senior leadership banking positions results in a shortage of role models

for younger professionals, causing them to doubt their own potential for success in these professions (Masiya et al., 2017).

2.3.3 Digital Evolution and Role Transformation

Digital transformation has become known as a major catalyst for change in the banking industry, requiring individuals to acquire new skills and adjust to changing job responsibilities (Lapiņa & Robertsons, 2023). Digital transformation refers the application of digital technology and competencies to modify business models, enhance operational processes, and develop new services inside financial institutions (Naude & Jenkin, 2019). The increasing demand for digital skills creates both possibilities and challenges, since Black women have significant challenges to gaining essential training and upskilling programs. (Naude & Jenkin, 2019).

2.3.3.1 Digital evolution and career progression

Complexity Theory is a multidisciplinary framework that discusses the interconnected and dynamic components of systems, including those in nature, organizations, and economies, which adapt and evolve over time (Sammut-Bonnici, 2015). The banking industry, like numerous other industries, is currently experiencing a rapid digital transformation that necessitates industry professionals to adjust to new leadership models, skill sets, and technologies (AlNuaimi et al., 2022). The analysis of how Black women navigate these changes in leadership roles is facilitated by Complexity Theory.

Traditional employment positions have been altered by the banking industry's increasing digitalization, which calls for a move toward digital competency and data-driven decision-making (Le Quoc, 2024). This study indicates that Black women in banking are disproportionately affected by these changes owing to institutional obstacles, including restricted access to digital training and diminished possibilities for skill enhancement (Jenkin & Naude, 2018). Despite the emergence of new opportunities in fintech, data analytics, and cybersecurity, Black women continue to be underrepresented in these fields

due to inadequate digital literacy and insufficient support systems for professional advancement (Naude & Jenkin, 2019).

To provide a clear representation of all the above dynamics as discussed, Figure 1 below is developed, which outlines the key components of the conceptual framework which guides the literature review.

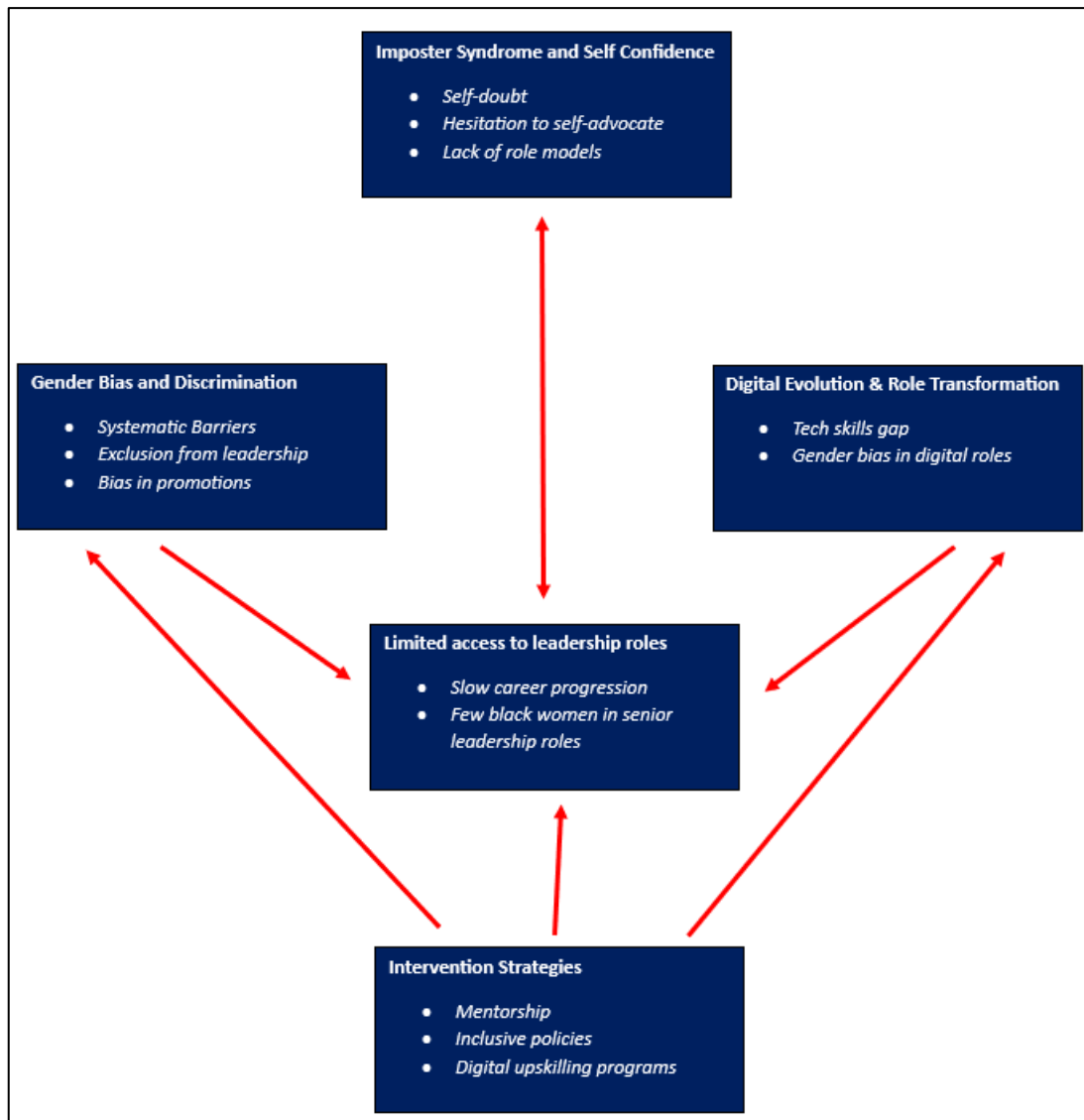


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework: Barriers to Career Advancement for Black South African women in the banking industry.

2.4 Barriers to Black women's career progression

Career advancement is crucial for professional success, but Black South African women in the banking industry face significant challenges due to structural, societal, and personal barriers (Kobus-Olawale et al., 2021). Structural barriers include discriminatory practices, wage disparities, and limited access to mentorship and sponsorship (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). These barriers often lead to exclusion from executive leadership pipelines and reinforce workplace inequalities (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). Cultural and societal factors also shape career trajectories, with traditional gender roles and expectations putting additional pressure on Black women (Matotoka & Odeku, 2021). Workplace stereotypes question their leadership abilities and competence, making it difficult for them to prove their value (Potgieter & Snyman, 2018). Personal challenges include low confidence levels, self-doubt, and limited access to professional networks (Potgieter & Snyman, 2018). The presence of imposter syndrome and a lack of visible role models can stifle ambition and career aspirations (Fisher, 2019). These barriers hinder individual career progression and have broader implications for diversity and inclusion in the financial industry (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). Understanding these challenges is essential for developing effective strategies to foster an inclusive and equitable career landscape in the banking industry (Garrick et al., 2024),

This section analyses the primary institutionalized, cultural, and individual barriers experienced by Black South African women in their career advancement, as well as how these obstacles influence their professional experiences. This analysis seeks to identify critical areas for action and changes in policy to promote an equitable and fair career landscape within the banking industry.

2.4.1 Structural and Institutional Barriers

2.4.1.1 Gender Stereotypes

While many gender-related challenges and discrimination have reduced over time, stereotypes about gender still cause issues in women's job advancement (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). Jaga et al (2017) investigate the impact of gender stereotypes on the professional experiences of Black women. The authors argue that the career advancement of Black women is still substantially restricted by deeply ingrained stereotypes, despite the legal and policy frameworks in South Africa that are designed to promote gender and racial equity (Jaga et al., 2017). One of the most significant discoveries is that racist and gender assumptions frequently result in the misidentification of Black women professionals in their workplaces (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). For instance, they are frequently misidentified as administrative personnel or caregivers, rather than specialists or leaders, despite their high-ranking professional positions. This is indicative of more general societal stereotypes that undermine the professional identity and expertise of Black women (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021).

The underrepresentation of women in managerial positions continues to be a pervasive global issue, fundamentally entrenched in gender stereotypes that influence judgments of management competence (Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015). A prevalent misconception in corporate leadership is the belief that good management is intrinsically masculine (Tremmel & Wahl, 2023). Galsanjigmed & Sekigushi's (2023) foundational research demonstrated a clear correlation between gender role preconceptions and the characteristics linked to effective leadership (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). The psychological link between masculinity and management is a significant barrier hindering women's advancement to executive roles (Barkhuizen et al., 2022). Booysen and Nkomo (2010) examined these interactions, highlighting that both genders view effective leaders as possessing attributes often linked to masculinity, such as aggressiveness and decisiveness (Booyesen & Nkomo, 2010). This misconception affects recruiting and

promotion choices and cultivates corporate cultures that perpetuate male-dominated leadership hierarchies (Kela et al., 2024).

Gender stereotypes serve as mental filters that shape workplace assessments and expectations (Zamarro & Prados, 2021). Tremmel and Wahl (2023) argue that stereotyping entails linking characteristics such as emotionality, inactivity, and dependency to women (Tremmel & Wahl, 2023). Although these traits are not intrinsically detrimental, their utilization in workplace evaluations frequently leads to women being regarded as less capable in leadership positions. This fosters role segregation, restricting women's access to high-impact roles (Barkhuizen et al., 2022).

Employers, misled by these biases, often allocate women to positions with limited prospects for promotion, less autonomy, and lower compensation (Doubell, 2011). Conventional leadership attributes, sometimes characterized as "order and command" features, are typically associated with men, whereas women's leadership approaches are classified as "facilitative and collaborative" (De Paola et al., 2022). This limiting structure positions women in a dual predicament: they must navigate assertiveness without being regarded as too aggressive or, alternatively, too passive.

There are significant psychological and occupational ramifications for the belief that women lack the dedication or resilience required for management positions. According to Bilan, Mishchuk, Samoliuk, and Mishchuk (2020), stereotype threat lowers performance and raises stress, anxiety, and reduces working memory capacity (Samoliuk et al., 2020). Many women try to offset these prejudices by acting in ways that try to negate preconceptions; nonetheless, they can come under more criticism when their methods of leadership differ from conventional expectations. Zhang (2020) draws attention to the persistence of the belief, especially in top management, that a manager is fundamentally male (Zhang, 2020). This traditional view of a "lack of fit" when women take executive positions keeps the impression that their abilities are more often questioned than those of their male colleagues (Zhang, 2020). Similarly, Petrongolo and Ronchi (2020) point out that women in management are sometimes presumed to be more sensitive

to family-related disturbances, therefore supporting prejudices that restrict their professional development (Ronchi & Petrongolo, 2020).

The studied literature confirms that gender stereotypes remain a significant barrier to women's career progression, especially in leadership positions. The literature collectively illustrates that entrenched prejudices connect good management with male characteristics, resulting in a systemic disadvantage for women in professional environments. The current literature offers significant insights into the impact of gender stereotypes on recruiting practices, leadership evaluations, and career advancement prospects for women. Antali and Izraeli (1993), Booysen and Nkomo (2010), and Eagly and Carli (2009) elucidate how women are disadvantaged by biases in leadership assessment. The literature indicates that gendered expectations impose a double burden on women, necessitating the demonstration of authority while simultaneously evading adverse judgments linked to assertiveness.

Furthermore, investigations on stereotype threat enhance our comprehension of the psychological burden faced by women pursuing leadership roles (Ayyildiz et al., 2024). These studies demonstrate that preconceptions influence not just external professional obstacles but also self-perception, confidence, and performance (Herbst, 2020). This viewpoint is essential since it redirects the discourse from outward prejudice to the inner consequences of gender stereotyping. The evidence indicates that gender stereotypes continue to impede women's professional progression, influencing workplace attitudes, opportunities, and views of leadership.

2.4.1.2 Lack of mentorship, sponsorship, and access to social networks

Mentorship is widely acknowledged as a critical instrument for promoting career advancement (McIlongo & Strydom, 2021). Mentorship is a relational process that is essential for providing women with the skills, networks, and confidence necessary to advance in their professions (McIlongo & Strydom, 2021). This is achieved through the guidance of an experienced individual to a less experienced protégé (Meschitti & Smith,

2017). Block and Tietjen-Smith (2016) have found that gender-based mentorship is particularly effective in addressing leadership disparities by providing targeted support to women who are navigating male-dominated industries (Block & Tietjen-Smith, 2016). Additionally, research indicates that mentorship improves organizational efficacy by promoting inclusivity and developing strong leadership skills (Moore & Wang , 2017). Mentorship is not only beneficial for professional development, but it also assists women in maintaining a balance between their professional and personal responsibilities, which is a critical component of career longevity (Heath, 2012).

Black South African women within the banking industry have been significantly impacted by the absence of mentorship, which has limited their opportunities for career advancement (Matotoka & Odeku, Untangling discrimination in the private sector workplace in South Africa: Paving the way for Black African women progression to managerial positions, 2021). Their progression has been hindered by structural factors, including the absence of social networks, exclusion from mentorship programs, and restricted access to senior role models (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2010). Kokot (2014) emphasizes that male managers are less inclined to mentor or advocate for female employees, which further isolates Black women from critical career advancement pathways (Kokot, 2014). These women face significant challenges in navigating workplace politics, securing promotions, and accessing strategic career development resources in the absence of mentors (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021).

Career advancement is significantly influenced by social identity. According to the social identity theory of leadership, leaders and adherents establish a shared identity that cultivates a sense of collective purpose and belonging (Steffens et al., 2021). Resilience and advocacy networks can be established by utilizing social identity frameworks to address the financial and systemic obstacles that women in management frequently encounter (Meyer et al., 2016). In diverse environments like South Africa, women executives are better equipped to navigate multicultural workforces by comprehending social identities (Booyesen L. , 2007). Furthermore, research indicates that a positive

gender distinction can reduce tension, improve life satisfaction, and increase the desire for leadership (Karelaia & Guillén, 2014).

Mentorship offers guidance, whereas sponsorship actively encourages women to assume leadership positions. Influential individuals utilize their networks and influence to advocate for a mentee's career advancement through sponsorship (Ibarra et al., 2010). This targeted visibility assists women in surmounting systemic obstacles and gaining access to executive opportunities. Organizations that prioritize sponsorship programs experience faster career progression for women, particularly when sponsorship is tailored to enhance visibility and leadership (Chanland & Murphy, 2017).

Structured sponsorship initiatives, which facilitate upward mobility and challenge traditional gender-based career constraints, provide substantial benefits to women (Kumara, 2018). Nevertheless, the absence of mentorship among Black South African women leads to a reduction in sponsorship opportunities, which further impedes their advancement to leadership positions. These women frequently lack the required support to be considered for executive-level responsibilities and promotions in the absence of sponsorship.

Allowing individuals to establish meaningful professional relationships, share knowledge, and access opportunities, social networking is an essential component of career development. Research indicates that women who are actively involved in networking tend to advance more rapidly in their careers (Athanasopoulou et al., 2017). Nevertheless, Black South African women frequently encounter obstacles to networking because of their exclusion from private male-dominated connections and leadership circles (Mbuli & Sibindi, 2023).

Kokot (2014) observes that male leaders are more inclined to engage in social activities and form relationships with their peers, which results in the exclusion of women, particularly Black women, from critical career-building discussions and prospects (Kokot, 2014). Their lack of access to influential networks restricts their capacity to secure sponsorship, mentorship, and career visibility. Furthermore, organizational

structures do not always create inclusive networking opportunities accessible to a wide range of groups. Black South African women encounter diminished opportunities for leadership roles and high-profile initiatives and experience delayed career advancement in the absence of robust professional networks (Kokot, 2014).

Career advancement for women remains a challenge, particularly for Black South African women in male-dominated industries such as banking (Latchanah & Singh, 2016). While mentorship plays a crucial role in fostering career growth, its absence creates significant obstacles that hinder professional development (Singh & Myeni, 2024). This literature review explores the impact of mentorship, sponsorship, social networking, and social identity in leadership, and organizational support in ensuring women's success. The discussion also highlights how the lack of mentorship, sponsorship, and social networking affects Black South African women, limiting their access to leadership opportunities and essential career-enhancing connections. Future research should explore the long-term impact of mentorship, sponsorship, and networking initiatives on leadership development, ensuring sustained progress in gender equality.

2.4.2 Societal and Cultural Barriers

2.4.2.1 Traditional Gender Roles and Work-Life Balance

Black South African women often juggle career ambitions with traditional gender expectations, leading to career interruptions (Nkomo & Ngambi, 2009). Workplace cultures do not always accommodate flexible working arrangements, further disadvantaging women (Khan et al., 2022). Over the past few decades, there has been a substantial transformation in the implementation of women into the labour force (Davis, 2014). Nevertheless, women continue to encounter systemic obstacles to career advancement, even though they have faced greater opportunities for employment and legal advancements (Chanda & Ngulube, 2024). Work-family conflict continues to be a significant impediment, affecting the capacity of women to reconcile their professional obligations with their domestic responsibilities (Sandy et al., 2022).

Traditional roles still influence the dynamics of the workplace (Nkatini et al., 2023). According to social role theory, men and women are expected to fulfil distinct duties, with women being primarily perceived as caregivers and men as providers (Ellemers, 2014). Madon et al. (2003) states, this segmentation promotes stereotypes that link leadership qualities to masculinity, thereby disadvantages women in professional settings (Madon et al., 2003). Many organizations continue to be rooted in male-dominated cultures, which restricts the possibilities for female leadership, despite societal changes (Kahn A. , 2014).

The problems of work-life balance have been aggravated by the growing number of dual-earner families (Duxbury et al., 2007). Although families with two incomes can improve the stability of their finances, they can also hinder women's career advancement and induce additional stress (Adisa et al., 2017). The expectation of fulfilling both professional and domestic duties frequently causes women in leadership positions to have trouble in maintaining a healthy work-life balance, according to research (Brue, 2018). The persistent presumption that women are the ones caring for kids exacerbates these challenges, resulting in numerous career drawbacks (Sugiyama et al., 2016).

Organizational policies crucially influence the mitigation of work-family conflict (Mageni & Slabbert, 2014). Flexible hours and leave for parents are among the policies that have been implemented to assist female employees (Belwal & Belwal, 2014). These policies can occasionally exacerbate gender stereotypes, resulting in unintended negative consequences, such as reduced career growth opportunities or marginalization (Von Hippel et al., 2017). Many women continue to encounter workplace biases that impede their career advancement, despite the implementation of childcare facilities and remote work options (Moalusi & Jones, 2019).

The literature on work-family conflict and women's career advancement highlights the persistent challenges faced by women in balancing professional and personal responsibilities (Dzingwa & Terblanche, 2024). While theoretical frameworks provide valuable insights into the interplay between work and home life, the practical implications

remain complex (Dzingwa & Terblanche, 2024). Societal and cultural expectations continue to reinforce gender norms, making career progression more difficult for women (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). Despite the presence of organizational policies designed to alleviate these pressures, unintended consequences such as gender stereotyping and career stagnation persist (Sorenson et al., 2023). Moreover, the effectiveness of support systems varies, often placing the onus on women to develop coping strategies (Kobus-Olawale et al., 2021). Moving forward, a more inclusive approach is needed, where organizations, policymakers, and society collectively work towards creating an equitable environment that enables women to thrive in both their careers and personal lives (Chanda & Ngulube, 2024).

2.4.3 Digital Evolution and Role Transformation

The rapid digitalization of the banking industry is reshaping job roles, requiring employees to develop new competencies (World Economic Forum, 2025). Black South African women must navigate these changes while competing for positions in fintech, AI, and digital banking (Jenkin & Naude, 2018). The rapid evolution of technological advances has transformed industries, altering the structure of employees and the opportunities available to employment seekers (Hötte et al., 2023). Although digital transformation promotes efficiency and innovation, it also increases current discrimination, particularly in career advancement and access to digital skills (Chen & Zhang, 2023). Marginalized groups, such as Black women, are disproportionately affected by the expanding digital skills divide, which is one of the most urgent concerns (Keating et al., 2022). Digitalization is progressing rapidly, and the banking industry is expected to experience a more significant of innovations in the next decade than it has in the previous fifty years (Carbó-Valverd, 2017). The world of work is being profoundly affected by the rapid rate of change, which has affected nearly every global sector (Cascio & Montealegre, 2016). This evolution necessitates that banks no longer remain passive; instead, they are compelled to strategically evaluate their business practices, both in the present and in the future.

The continent of Sub-Saharan Africa has one of the lowest digital skills adoption rates at only 4% (Choi et al., 2020). This deficiency restricts possibilities for employment and economic growth, particularly in industries that are swiftly automating (Jenkin & Naude, 2018). Furthermore, Vasilescu et al. (2020) discovered that younger individuals are more inclined to gain digital skills than older generations, highlighting generational disparities that significantly complicate workforce inclusion (Vasilescu et al., 2020).

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) has transformed labour markets by displacing workers in traditional roles and generating new employment opportunities (Szabó-Szentgróti et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the capacity to capitalize on these opportunities differs among employees. In their 2020 study, Carbó-Valverde et al. investigated the digitalization of banking, which revealed that automation frequently leads to job losses among administrative and manual workers (Carbó-Valverde et al., 2020).

The emergence of roles that necessitate advanced technical skills has been a consequence of digital transformation, which has presented challenges for workers who do not have access to digital training programs (Krieger-Boden & Sorgner, 2018). Even though digitalization has introduced flexible work arrangements, notably during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gunjan & Ranjana, 2016). Black women continue to be underrepresented in digital-intensive roles because of systemic barriers in education, mentorship, and career development.

Research consistently highlights gender disparities in digital skills acquisition and career progression within technology-driven fields. Women remain underrepresented in digital careers and leadership positions, particularly in banking and technology (Fernández et al., 2021). Watson (2018) found systemic barriers limit women's participation in the digital economy, with workforce participation rates at 48% for women compared to 75% for men globally. In South Africa, although female labour force participation increased from 38% in 1990 to 55.8% in 2024 (Statistics SA, 2023), digital transformation has not significantly narrowed gender disparities in banking and financial services (Jenkin & Naude, 2018).

This review of the literature critically analyses the impact of digital transformation on career progression, specifically for Black women in the banking industry. Digitalization presents new opportunities but concurrently exacerbates systemic inequities stemming from discrepancies in digital skills development, workplace prejudices, and insufficient representation in technology-oriented positions. The analysis emphasizes the immediate necessity for focused interventions, such as inclusive digital education, mentorship programs, and regulatory reforms, to address the digital skills gap. By mitigating these obstacles, businesses and politicians can cultivate a more equal workforce, guaranteeing that Black women are not marginalized in the advancing digital economy.

2.4.4 Chapter Summary

This literature review used feminist and complexity theories to evaluate Black South African women's banking job growth hurdles. Theoretical ideas show how digital revolution and structural inequities maintain gender career gaps. The conceptual framework identified gender prejudice, discrimination, imposter syndrome, self-confidence difficulties, and digital evolution's obstacles and potential. The evaluation also examined institutional obstacles, inadequate mentorship and sponsorship, social expectations around gender roles, and the growing impact of digital change on career routes. Digitalization creates new opportunities but perpetuates pre-existing disparities, especially for Black women who confront intersectional race, gender, and digital skills problems. Policy changes, business actions, and digital skills education are needed to overcome these impediments. Methodology will be the subject of the next chapter, followed by a chapter on findings analysis, suggestions, and a conclusion.

CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

Goundar (2012) defines the term "research methodology" as the methodical procedures and processes that researchers employ to investigate a particular issue to produce an account, explanation, and prediction of the phenomenon under investigation (Goundar, 2012). Llewellyn (2013) provides a comprehensive overview of the research design and approach, sampling methods, data acquisition techniques, and data analysis procedures in the research methodology section of this study (van Zyl, 2013). The research approach, research design, target population, and sampling strategy are the primary focus of this chapter, which provides a comprehensive examination of these methodological aspects. Additionally, the methodologies employed for data acquisition and analysis are meticulously examined (Taherdoost, 2021).

3.2 Research Approach

This study used a qualitative research approach to investigate the barriers to personal career advancement of black South African women in the banking industry. Creswell (2014) defines qualitative research as the process of understanding a social or human problem through comprehensive narratives from participants in a natural environment. The study used a phenomenological research paradigm. Phenomenological research is a qualitative approach that examines individuals' lived experiences to uncover phenomena as seen by actors in a scenario (Hall et al., 2016). Using a phenomenological perspective helped in identifying barriers to black South African women's career advancement into senior leadership roles.

3.3 Research Design

Research design serves as a roadmap for achieving research objectives (Sileyew, 2020). This study used explanatory and descriptive research designs, aligning with the qualitative research paradigm. The descriptive research approach is important for characterizing existing attitudes, including characteristics, intentions, and preferences (Petre & Rugg, 2007). This allows for insights into the behaviour of South African black women in the banking industry (Thornhill et al., 2015). An explanatory research approach was used for this research to help identify research gaps on previously explored topics (Saka et al., 2023).

3.4 Data Collection Methods

The data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews with participants from three of the largest South African banks, which included open-ended questions. The participants had to sign the letter of consent first before the interviews could be scheduled. The interviews were conducted online via the Microsoft Teams platform. These interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes with an average time of 50 minutes. Generally, semi-structured interviewing techniques are preferred over rigid sequenced sets of standardized queries in qualitative research. The interviews commenced with the initial guiding questions, which were addressed in a specific order. Semi-structured interviews enable the use of initial open-ended guiding inquiries that can serve as a springboard for additional critical follow-up querying and probing techniques (Leedy , 2005). These interviews were recorded and then transcribed for further examination. The semi-structured interviews, as Rabionet (2011) outlined, successfully addressed areas important to the research questions. The semi-structured framework allowed participants to express their ideas comprehensively and freely (Rabionet, 2011).

3.5 Population and Sample

A sample is a subset of the population, while a population is a comprehensive collection of individuals with a specific set of attributes (Banerjee & Chaudhury, 2010). The initial sample size consisted of 24 Black South African women from the three major banks in South Africa. However, a total of 16 individuals were interviewed and data saturation was reached after interviewing 13 individuals. Neuman (2020) defines data saturation as the point in the research process at which the accumulation of more information no longer generates new insights, as the results begin to resemble those of prior cases (Lawrence, 2020). Although data saturation is inherently subjective (Khatooni & Rahimi, 2024), this study achieved saturation by the thirteenth interview, as no new themes emerged beyond this point. The themes identified in the previous interviews were validated and reinforced during interviews ten through sixteen.

Table 2 shows the profile of the participants. These thirteen individuals were carefully considered for this study to ensure a diverse and insightful representation of experiences. The participants were selected based on their career levels, years of experience, educational background, domestic circumstances, and job responsibilities, thereby enabling a thorough examination of the factors that influence career progression. These participants ranged in roles at multiple levels of employment, including junior, middle, and upper-middle management. This offers a valuable perspective on the challenges encountered at various career stages, notably the obstacles that hinder the transition from middle to senior management. Furthermore, the years of experience were considered to ensure that professionals in the early, mid, and late stages of their careers were included. This enables the investigation of whether duration is a determinant of career progression or if additional barriers hinder advancement in defiance of experience. Education was another critical factor, as the participants consisted of women with undergraduate qualifications or diplomas and those with postgraduate degrees. This assists in determining whether higher education provides leadership opportunities or if academic accomplishments are overshadowed by systemic obstacles. Additionally, the selection process considered the candidate's marital status and maternity, as caregiving obligations

are frequently identified as barriers to professional advancement. The study can investigate whether family responsibilities have a substantial impact on professional advancement by incorporating a diverse sample of women, including married and unmarried women, as well as mothers and non-mothers.

Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling design with specific criteria for inclusion in a sample (Thorp et al., 2015). Potential participants were vetted to ensure they matched the research criteria (Thorp et al., 2015). The sample aimed to include participants who fit these experience criteria and represent a wide spectrum of jobs in the banking industry. This included women from different divisions and job responsibilities inside the bank.

3.6 Demographic Profile of respondents

The Gauteng province of South Africa was the location of this research. The participants were Black South African females, ranged in roles at multiple levels of employment, including junior, middle, and upper-middle management. Sixteen interviews were conducted. As indicated in Table 2, majority of participants (9 out of 16) have accumulated substantial experience (ranging from 12 to 30 years) but are in middle management level. Furthermore, the 5 participants that are in senior management level, tend to have higher qualifications (e.g., master's degrees, postgraduate diplomas) and specialized roles. Middle management appears to be the default position for participants who hold diplomas or lower-level certifications (e.g., Management Skills Certificate).

Participant ID	Age	Marital Status	Motherhood Status	Highest Qualification	Current Title	Years of Experience	Management Level
Nolwazi	33	Single	Yes	Postgraduate Diploma	Product Head	9	Senior
Karabo	32	Married	Yes	BCom in Human Resource Management	Fraud Team Leader	12	Middle
Zinhle	44	Married	Yes	Postgraduate degree	Area Manager	21	Middle
Amahle	43	Single	Yes	BCom in Management	Administrator: Outbound Sales	18	Middle
Phindile	40	Single	Yes	Management Skills Certificate	Manager Credit Assessor	20	Middle
Thobile	38	Married	Yes	Degree in Accounting	Compliance Manager	20	Middle
Lwazi	41	Single	Yes	Certificate in Banking	Transaction Account Manager	21	Middle
Dikeledi	30	Single	No	Consultant in Business Banking	Postgraduate Diploma in Economics	7	Junior
Nonjabulo	45	Married	Yes	Postgraduate degree	Financial Advisor	20	Middle
Katleho	34	Single	Yes	Postgraduate degree in Auditing	Audit Manager	11	Senior
Kgomotso	34	Single	No	BCom Industrial Psychology	Validations Officer	10	Junior
Xanti	32	Married	Yes	Postgraduate degree in Financial Markets	Client Onboarding Specialist	7	Senior
Ayanda	50	Single	Yes	NQ Level 6 Risk Management	Admin Manager	30	Middle
Dakalo	41	Married	Yes	Advanced Certificate in Management	Acquisition Manager	20	Middle
Mpho	45	Single	No	Diploma in Banking	Local Market Manager	24	Senior
Nomsa	32	Single	No	Masters in Finance	Chief of Department	5	Senior

Table 2: Profile of respondents

3.7 Research Instrument

Data was collected through a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions to gather participants' perceptions of the subject under investigation (Davison, 2014). The interview guide outlined the demographics of the research respondents (See Appendix A). The open-ended interview guide included reasons influencing job choice, problems and barriers to advancement, forms of support received, and recommendations for advancing black women's careers (See Appendix A, 4.3.2). The participants were provided with an information document and a letter of consent (See Appendix A, 4.3.1).

Furthermore, participants were also informed that the recording will be retained and can be made available upon request.

3.8 Data analysis & interpretation

According to Zikmund et al. (2013), data analysis involves identifying key themes as well as insights from data gathered from interviews. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research approach that identifies and reports patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To further comprehend the themes that represent the barriers that black South women face within the banking industry, a thematic analysis was conducted to facilitate theme building, trend identification, and relationship mapping through code generation in data analysis. The below indicates the steps taken to analyse the data in Table 1:

Phase	Description
1. Familiarization with the data	Read and re-read the data, take initial notes, and immerse yourself in the content. Transcribe data if necessary.
2. Generating initial codes	Systematically identify key features of the data, apply codes to relevant segments, and organize information meaningfully.
3. Searching for themes	Identify patterns among codes and group them into potential themes that capture meaningful aspects of the data.
4. Reviewing themes	Checking that themes work in relation to the coded extract. Generate a thematic "map" of analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes	Clearly define and name themes, ensuring they accurately represent the data. Develop a narrative around each theme.
6. Producing the report	Present the analysis in a structured way, using evidence (e.g., quotes) to support themes and linking findings to the research question.

Table 3: The Six Phases of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

The discussion of the interviews was subjected to a general analytic procedure to identify the most significant factors (Mwita, 2022). The qualitative data was meticulously analysed using Atlas.ti and a deductive coding approach. An initial set of codes was

developed using the discussion guide as a framework which was subsequently applied to the interview transcripts. The research resulted in a total of 132 codes. The codes that demonstrated similar patterns and were of interest and relevance to the research questions were further examined and grouped. A total of 47 unique codes emerged as shown in Appendix B. While these findings are summarized by category, the significance of mentions is primarily determined by the number of respondents who mentioned them, rather than the absolute number of quotations from the transcript.

To identify recurring patterns within the data, several statements on the same topic would be coded within the transcripts of certain respondents. These codes were further refined and organized into families, categories, and ultimately, overarching themes as the analysis progressed as indicated in Table 3. To facilitate the classification of topics, organization into categories, and synthesis into meaningful themes, Atlas.ti was instrumental in the management and structuring of the data. Some participants provided multiple statements on the same theme, all of which were coded within their respective transcripts. Interviews were transcribed MS Team and were subsequently validated against the original recordings to guarantee data accuracy and integrity. This analytical approach offered a thorough comprehension of the personal obstacles that Black South African women encounter in their pursuit of career advancement within the financial industry.

3.9 Validity and reliability

Saunders et al. (2012) suggest that semi-structured interviews may cause dependability issues, requiring thorough and well-thought-out studies to ensure their trustworthiness, as other researchers may replicate the same results using similar procedures.

3.9.1 Validity

The validity of a research study is the extent to which the results obtained from the study participants are indicative of the true findings of similar people outside the scope of the research (Ferreira & Patino , 2018). There is internal and external, with internal validity

ensuring the study accurately represents phenomena being studied, and external validity assessing relevance of the findings to different groups (Ferreira & Patino , 2018). Saunders et al. (2012) suggest that semi-structured interviews can achieve high levels of validity by allowing researchers to clarify and probe participant replies. The researcher utilized these strategies in the investigation.

3.9.2 Credibility

Credibility relates to whether the researcher's results and conclusions can be believed and the degree to which they give thorough and reasonable interpretations of the facts (Stahl & King, 2020). Credibility is crucial for trustworthiness in research, as it ensures the researcher's results are trustworthy and their interpretations are reasonable. This study used strategies to encourage honesty, with respondents given options to opt-out and informed of their voluntary participation via email. Participants were provided with the opportunity to decline participation and were required to sign consent forms that also declared that participation in the research was entirely voluntary. This was done prior to the commencement of the interview.

3.9.3 Transferability

Shenton (2004) defines transferability as the ability of a study's findings to be applied to different situations. She argues that qualitative research cannot be generalized due to its uniqueness. Researchers must offer sufficient contextual information for other researchers to link the work to their own environment (Stahl & King, 2020). This study will provide extensive background in accordance with Stahl and King's recommendation, allowing future researchers to compare the study's findings to other contexts. The context of this study is consistent with Shenton's recommendations, which stipulate that qualitative studies should disclose the number of organizations that participated in the study, any limitations on the population being studied, the number of respondents, the data gathering techniques used, the number of interviews and the average length of the interviews, and the duration of the interviews (Shenton, 2004).

3.9.4 Dependability

Dependability is the same as the idea of reliability and includes replicating the study in a similar situation and indicating that using the same procedures would provide comparable results (Shenton, 2004). This is challenging in qualitative research. Demonstrating the credibility of results is crucial for ensuring their reliability (Stahl & King, 2020). The research on career advancement barriers for black South African women in banking will be reliable by clearly defining methodology, data collection methods, sample methodologies, and analysis procedures, and retaining complete documentation for audit trail verification.

3.9.5 Conformability

Conformability relates to the researcher's impartiality and objectivity, which ensures that the findings are unaffected by the researcher's prejudices or assumptions (Shenton, 2004). To guarantee conformability, the researcher was mindful throughout the interview process, recognizing and correcting any potential biases or preconceptions that may influence data collection and interpretation.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

In research, ethics is a set of moral standards that focus on ensuring that methods adhere to professional, legal, and societal commitments to study participants (Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018). The study adheres to the University of the Witwatersrand's Research Ethics Committee guidelines, addressing unique human rights protection issues. The University of Johannesburg received the research proposal and the necessary supporting documentation for ethical clearance. Participants were invited via electronic invitations with consent forms, and informed about audio interviews, the anonymity of names and identities, and the option to end the interview at any time. This ensured a written agreement to participate in the study.

CHAPTER 4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an analysis and presentation of the study's findings. The results begin with the presentation of demographic data, followed by the analysis and discussion of findings in alignment with the study's research questions. These research questions are as follows:

- Research Question 1: What are the primary structural barriers, cultural and societal factors, and personal challenges (e.g., confidence levels, ambition) that hinder the career advancement of black South African women in the banking industry?
- Research Question 2: How do these combined barriers impact the career progression and professional experiences of black South African women in the banking industry?

This section presents the findings from 16 semi-structured interviews with Black South African women in the banking industry. The results will be structured according to the major themes identified through qualitative analysis. These themes include (1) Structural Barriers to Career Advancement, (2) Cultural and Societal Factors Affecting Career Progression, (3) Personal Challenges and Psychological Barriers, and (4) The Role of Digital Transformation in Career Progression. Each theme is discussed with supporting quotes from participants to highlight the lived experiences of Black women navigating career progression in the banking industry.

4.2 Presentation of Results

In this chapter, the findings from the study will be presented. These findings will be presented according to the themes that emerged. The analysis and the presentation of findings will be in accordance with the study's research questions, as stipulated in this chapter's introduction section.

Table 5 below indicates the different themes that emerged from the research. Moreover, this table presents the frequency of mentions for specific codes, ranging from low to high. Certain codes exhibit a high frequency, indicating that participants referenced them frequently. This suggests that these areas represent the most significant challenges encountered by participants.

Themes 1 and 2 will address the primary structural, cultural, and personal barriers that are identified in research question one. Themes 3 and 4 will address research question 2, which investigates the influence of these barriers on career advancement.

Category	Unique Code (Barriers Identified)	Frequency of Occurrence (Total Mentions Across Participants)	Final Theme
Structural Barriers	Lack of mentorship & sponsorship	Medium	Structural Barriers in Career Advancement
	Limited access to leadership roles	High	
	Bias in promotion decisions	High	
	Workplace policies that do not support women	Medium	
Cultural & Societal Factors	Gender stereotypes	High	Cultural & Societal Factors Affecting Career Progression
	Cultural expectations of women's roles	High	
	Workplace exclusion based on race & gender	Medium	
Personal Challenges & Psychological Barriers	Imposter syndrome	High	Personal Challenges & Psychological Barriers
	Low confidence levels	Medium	
	Work-life balance struggles	High	
	Fear of speaking up	Medium	
Digital Transformation Barriers	Need for upskilling in digital banking	Medium	The Role of Digital Transformation in Career Progression
	Limited access to digital training programs	Low-Medium	

Table 4: Presentation of final themes in reference to career barriers identified.

4.2.1 Theme 1: Structural Barriers in Career Advancement

The career trajectories of the participants in the banking industry demonstrate a variety of entry points into the industry, which are influenced by both personal ambition and external circumstances. In some instances, participants described how unanticipated career shifts, structured graduate programs, and early exposure influenced their entry into banking. Although some individuals made steady progress, others encountered institutional and social obstacles that impeded their progress. The following sub-themes will investigate policies, workplace culture, and leadership dynamics that present challenges for Black South African women in the banking industry.

4.2.1.1 Lack of Fair and Transparent Recruitment Processes

A resounding theme emerged in the narratives shared by participants. Black South African women in the banking industry are frequently confronted with a recruitment system that appears to be exclusionary and opaque. Their experiences indicate the systemic barriers that hinder equitable career advancement, as the recruitment processes are characterized by nepotism, favouritism, and a lack of distinct evaluation criteria. These obstacles restrict their development and perpetuate a leadership culture that is not representative of the general workforce.

Participants expressed frustration with the lack of clarity surrounding the recruitment processes in their organisations. Several reported instances where vacancies were either not publicly advertised or were filled before the recruitment process officially commenced. Although organizations have formal recruitment policies, most participants concurred that these policies are not effectively enforced. Rather, they seem to function as a procedural formality rather than a genuine instrument for the identification and development of talent.

Thobile is a 38-year-old black woman who is a wife and a mother, currently working as a Compliance Manager. She has 20 years of experience in the banking industry. When asked about the recruitment policies in her organization, she stated:

“The recruitment policies are there but they are not really enforced. Because I can tell you of three people that since I've arrived here, there's been a position that was advertised, the next day already the process is done and then we already know who got the job.”

Thobile further stated,

“It's not like the recruitment policy was really followed through in a way that is fair to everyone, it's more like they are creating rules for specific people that they already know they're going to recruit”.

This issue was emphasized by Karabo, who is a 32-year-old black woman, married with a child and works as a fraud team leader in her organisation.

Karabo expressed,

“...Its very rare that when they put out the position for application that they do not have anyone in mind already. Yes, you may apply, and you will be declined if you are not that person that they want and if you are that person then you do know that already the job is yours”.

This lack of transparency could foster distrust in the organisation's systems and discourages qualified candidates from applying, as they are aware that decisions may have already been predetermined.

This also poses a challenge to the black women when it comes to an opportunity for them to negotiate for promotions with the managers. A significant number of participants expressed a lack of confidence in negotiating promotions, which was further exacerbated by the opaque recruitment practices. The narratives of Thobile and Karabo emphasize the impact of ambiguous employment decisions on the ability of Black women to assert themselves during career negotiations, which in turn creates uncertainty. This aligns with a more extensive body of research that suggests that women are less inclined than their male counterparts to negotiate for salary increases and promotions, frequently because of concerns regarding potential repercussions or being perceived as aggressive (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016).

Numerous participants identified nepotism and favouritism as substantial barriers to career growth. There was a common perception that leadership positions were frequently reserved for individuals who were already established in their networks, rather than those who had demonstrated excellence and experience. Moreover, the interviewees frequently described how they had been regarded differently than males, which led to the emergence of a sub theme regarding gender bias factors and discrimination. Katleho mentioned:

“There was an opportunity to travel, there was an intention to assign it to a male, purely because they are male. As a woman, I had write a motivation as to why I need to travel, that was my way of fighting”.

Katleho further states that,

“Even things like leading projects, I always have to put my foot forward, fight harder to lead certain projects. There are certain projects that women can lead, and there are certain projects that are led by men”.

Katleho expressed that there is pressure to work harder and there needs to be justification provided when she requires the opportunity to participate in leadership activities. This expectation is consistent with the "prove-it-again" bias, which requires women, particularly women of colour, to continually demonstrate their competence (Hoffmann & Musch, 2018). Katleho's narrative emphasizes the ways in which workplace biases perpetuate these obstacles, frequently compelling Black women to exceed their capabilities to be perceived as competent.

Kgomotso shared her own experience of when she applied for a role within the business:

“...But I was told that the decision was based on experience, not race or gender. It wasn't about needing a man for the role, though the person who was chosen was male. I've just observed that the person in charge tends to prefer managing male individuals, but that's just my observation.”

These results are consistent with the literature review covered in Chapter 2 on unfair recruitment and promotion processes and explain the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions (Hoffmann & Musch, 2018).

4.2.1.2 Leadership Challenges and Discriminatory Workplace Practices

Various challenges associated with leadership in the banking industry were identified by participants in this study. Their experiences exposed patterns of discriminatory practices, obstructive leadership, and an absence of support that hindered their career advancement. These obstacles perpetuate workplace inequality and establish an environment in which Black women encounter difficulties in advancing. Several participants have encountered gender bias and discrimination at their workplaces. Nonjabulo was asked if she has experienced or witnessed racial or gender-based discrimination in her organisation, she stated:

“...it was not fair because they would move you as a black female to any branch. If it comes to a push that they have to move a coloured or a white female, they will consider the area as to where do they stay”.

The below statement from Nonjabulo emphasizes the intersection of racial and gender bias, which reinforces the argument that the professional and personal circumstances of Black women are frequently overlooked in workplace decision-making. The implication is that Black women are perceived as more accessible, lacking the same level of consideration as their White and Coloured counterparts.

Several participants also reported that they encountered leaders who were either unsupportive or actively obstructed their professional development. These leaders frequently created obstacles that hindered career advancement, rather than acting as mentors or advocates. Nolwazi shared,

“The manager that we had was also not supportive at all towards us. He always tried to dim my light. I think he couldn't understand how I was confident how, I was able, how I was capable, and he literally questioned everything, even to a point where he used to tell me how I should such a thing, that's stupid!”

This absence of support not only affects performance but also promotes a work environment in which Black women experience feelings of undervaluation and

invisibility. Opportunities for promotion and recognition are restricted in the absence of strong leadership support.

The gradual advancement of women's careers has been defined by a variety of different terms. The glass ceiling is arguably the most frequent barrier (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986). However, some have gone further to characterize a more intricate barrier, referring to it as a brick wall, which entails the challenges presented by racism and sexism. The struggle to break through the glass ceiling and advance beyond middle management is one of the most persistent obstacles encountered by Black women in the banking industry. Many Black women experience career stagnation in mid-level positions, despite their qualifications, experience, and impressive performance records. Their access to executive positions is hindered by structural barriers, such as exclusionary leadership networks and discriminatory promotion practices.

Dikeledi reflected,

“...it is a race thing. A lot of black people are not moving. We are not moving into more senior positions. We are left at consultant levels or self-representative roles, like it's very hard for you to move from where you are into a leadership role without you having made any like connections or knowing anyone currently”.

This study revealed that numerous Black women are hesitant to submit applications for leadership positions because of their reservations regarding exclusionary recruitment practices. Dikeledi and other participants observed that leadership positions are frequently filled through informal networks, which makes it challenging for outsiders to gain entry. This is consistent with the "glass ceiling" and "brick wall" theories, which demonstrate how institutionalized bias impedes women's access to high-level positions (Sibindi & Mbuli, 2023). Several participants disclosed that they had contemplated leaving the banking sector due to systemic barriers. Feelings of stagnation, exclusion, and lack of career progression contributed to job dissatisfaction, reinforcing the argument that organizational cultures must evolve to retain diverse talent (Nkatini et al., 2023).

Nolwazi emphasized the restriction of Black women's advancement into executive roles by exclusionary leadership structures and implicit biases, which build upon this perspective. Nolwazi mentioned,

“Senior management, there's still a lot of work to be done, lots and lots of work to be done. It's not fair because people just hire who they think or who they gravitate towards more, even though they might not be as qualified and as experienced as other people, and often they're not. Unfortunately, it's racial, right.”

According to the lack-of-fit model, women who aspire to leadership are subjugated to bias because the stereotypical attributes of leaders are at variance with the gender stereotypes associated with women (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016).

4.2.1.3 Professional Development, Networking & Mentorship

The participants in this study also indicated that mentoring is a crucial component of career development to advance within the organization. Most of the respondents mentioned that their mentors were either black or white males. Several of the comments are as follows:

Zinhle shared,

“If it's me being deliberate, I need a gentleman because there's no filters when coming to men and we've got a long way to go as women. Men look into the business; they go straight into the business of the day. They give you context, assignments for you to do. That's it”.

The participant further mentioned when men are at a Braai and discussing an opportunity that requires a female candidate from the bank, they will casually recommend a name, even if they've only had a brief professional interaction with her. With women, it's different; they are less likely to make such recommendations.

The results from the study demonstrated a surprising difference in the availability of mentorship opportunities between women in senior leadership and those in middle and

lower levels of management. Early in their careers, women who have progressed to executive positions frequently received mentorship, and they continue to have access to structure mentoring and development programs. Conversely, Black women in lower-level positions encounter challenges in securing mentorship opportunities, which limits their career progression.

Nomsa, who is in Senior Leadership, highlighted this disparity:

“When I joined this business unit, they identified that I would need help from a mentorship perspective, and they gave me access to external coaches, fully paid for. I had 12 sessions, but they told me I could continue as much as I wanted.”

Nonjabulo had a different view when asked about access to mentorship in her organisation:

Nonjabulo stated,

“The company has a lot of beautiful benefits, things like that. I mean, they will even have staff assist for your kids, where for employees earning as in a certain segment. However, to get those things it is so hard that even if you were to have a sponsor, that person won't even have time, you know, to even do that because it gets so stressful and so hectic that you don't even have time to be doing all of those things. it's. It gets too hectic and It's a very stressful environment”.

From the findings, networking emerged as a critical factor in career progression. Many Black women are excluded from influential professional circles, even though effective career development frequently relies on long-term relationships, as indicated by the participants. This is consistent with previous research that underscores the importance of mentorship and sponsorship in the advancement of one's career (Axelrod, 2017). The disparity between the structured mentorship programs that are available to senior women and the lack of access for those in middle management and lower levels is underscored by Nomsa's experience as stated above.

It appears that mentorship opportunities are easily accessible for women who are in high-level positions. Nonjabulo also mentioned the tense and chaotic character of the work environment by highlighting the challenges encountered in accessing company benefits. This means that, despite the availability of mentorship programmes in the organisation, job demands may prevent individuals, such as Nonjabulo, and especially those at lower levels, from fully utilizing them.

4.2.2 Theme 2: Cultural & Societal Factors Affecting Career Progression

4.2.2.1 Family & Caregiving Responsibilities

Black women frequently experience a "double burden" by simultaneously managing their work lives and significant caregiving responsibilities (Kela et al., 2024). The notion that women should prioritize family responsibilities is reinforced by societal expectations, which may hinder career advancement in the finance sector due to a dearth of flexible work policies and support for work-life balance (Kela et al., 2024). Motherhood in the workplace comes with its own set of challenges, often extending beyond the typical gender biases women face (Nkatini et al., 2023). Many of the participants in this study shared how becoming a mother drastically changed how they were perceived at work. They spoke about the subtle but noticeable shift in attitudes not just from their managers, but from colleagues at the same level, regardless of gender. For some, the change began the moment they announced their pregnancy. Almost immediately, they found themselves excluded from meaningful projects, as if their abilities had suddenly diminished. Others experienced an increase in unreasonable expectations when they returned from maternity leave, as if they had something to prove.

Karabo provided a striking example of how pregnancy directly impacted her career progression:

‘The role was out because they wanted to appoint me on the role. And so it was during when I was pregnant, my first few months being pregnant. But I didn’t want to disclose that. However, because I was very sick, I needed to disclose that to my manager to say,

'Dude, please bear in mind if I'm sick, this is what happens and I'm pregnant. So just until the period is over, then I can be me again.' And then I said to him, *'Please do not share this with anybody.'* I just wanted to keep it between us, and I hid it from everyone at the office. Three days later, when I got into the lift, one of the executives who is part of my manager's meetings in their boardrooms said to me, *'Congratulations on your pregnancy.'* And I was like, *'How does she know?'* Because I said, *let's keep it discreet.* Next thing, before that week ended, I was declined for the position”.

Participants show a great dedication to their jobs despite many challenges. Many showed resiliency and tenacity in expressing commitment to their positions despite emotional and structural obstacles. But as Karabo's example demonstrates, when her pregnancy adversely affected her employment prospects, this tenacity often came at a personal cost. This emphasizes how race, gender, and maternity interact to provide difficulties for Black women working in banking (Kela et al., 2024).

Nomsa highlighted the differential treatment that Black women experience in the workplace during and after pregnancy.

Nomsa observed,

"You, as a Black woman, you fall pregnant. I look at it because I have other counterparts, females who have fallen pregnant. I've never been. So, I see it from experience. You fall pregnant or you take four months leave and your other counterpart takes six months leave. Well, it depends. It's out of preference for someone, right? But then the manner and the manner in which you are treated when you return is different from your other counterpart. When you want to leave at 3:00 PM, you're not offered the opportunity to do so. But your other counterpart, when they want to leave at 3:00 PM, that's allowed. That's understood."

During the interviews, certain participants who are in managerial positions and do not have children expressed concerns about societal perceptions of their capacity to relate to employees who have family responsibilities. This research uncovered that there is a

prevailing notion that because they do not have children, they lack understanding and empathy towards employees who face challenges balancing work and family life.

Nolwazi reflected on these perceptions, stating:

“There seems to be a notion that single, unmarried, childless females hold people more accountable on deliverables because they do not have children. I have had instances where people said I have high standards and don’t understand delays because I am single and don’t have kids. But for me, I don’t ask about how much time you’re spending at work; I am asking about the deliverable that you committed to deliver by a certain time.”

This sentiment emphasizes an ongoing workplace tension in which managers without children may be perceived as not being as empathetic or flexible, even though they are merely adhering to professional standards.

Nolwazi further explained,

“I think communication is important. People don’t communicate. They wait until you come and ask—when it’s past due. If you communicate and say, ‘This is now my new plan, or can you help me here?’—then everyone understands that life happens. But if you don’t communicate, the deliverable still stands.”

Interestingly, the Nolwazi noted that such concerns about perceived inflexibility had only been raised by Black female employees in her experience:

“I must say, and I say this with the best interest in Black females. I have never, ever had this complaint from a white female or white male. I have only had Black females say this to me.”

This insight suggests that cultural expectations and shared experiences within the Black community may contribute to differing perceptions of leadership and accountability in the workplace.

Mpho, who is a senior manager in her organisation, acknowledges that because she does not have children, she sometimes struggles to relate to the challenges working mothers face. Below is her reflection:

"And I always say even to my staff, because I, you know, put myself so much into my work and I sacrifice a lot. I come early; I leave late. I don't... I find it hard for me to understand when the next person tells me they can't do certain things. You know, if my staff members are like, 'I can't work every Saturday, I can't work when you want me to work, I can't work till late, I can't come early to work,' I really struggle. I'm like, 'What do you mean? It's doable. It's something that I do,' and then people will have to remind me that, 'Listen, we have children, we have families.' So, then you have to try and adjust 'cause I don't feel their pain. You know, what they have, I don't have. I don't have children."

4.2.2.2 Work-life balance struggles.

The participants expressed worry regarding the perceived ongoing conflict between their work and familial responsibilities, which threatened their career advancement. Work-life balance is frequently promoted as an attainable ideal, but for many women in leadership, it is a constant negotiation rather than a fixed condition. The women interviewed for this study consistently stated that genuine balance is difficult; rather, they constantly shift their priorities based on the demands of their work, personal life, and children. Their stories demonstrate that thriving in one area sometimes means sacrificing another, necessitating painful trade-offs.

Thobile candidly described the complexities of managing work, studies, and family responsibilities:

"There is no balance, but we strive to create a balance. Yeah. It's all about when you're put in the situation, you gotta do what you have to do to be quite honest. And that also comes in terms of, you know, at the expense of others. For example, what I do or what I'll say is how I manage to. But to try and balance is that if it's at a peak of my busy work time and studies because that take and then obviously my kids, that takes a lot of my time."

Then I would obviously not have a social life. So, either way, you cut somewhere to balance something.”

Women without children have unique challenges when it comes to achieving balance. Another participant, who does not have children, commented on how her job has absorbed most of her life, resulting in a sense of personal emptiness despite her professional achievement.

Mpho expressed,

“Now I feel like, OK, I’ve done all of this and I’ve sort of progressed in my career. I’m not where I want to be. Obviously, I still want to grow further, but I also feel empty, you understand? You feel like there’s something, there’s something that is missing. Not that I want to pursue that, but I just feel like sometimes for you to achieve your goals, sometimes you have to sacrifice something, right? You have to sacrifice your personal life. I have had to sacrifice my personal life in order for me to achieve, you know, all the things that I’ve achieved now.”

These findings indicate that women in leadership do not always attain balance, they manage imbalance. The capacity to adjust priorities based on the situation is a survival strategy, not a sign of failure. These observations call into question the traditional concept of balance as an attainable objective, instead emphasizing it as a fluid and dynamic process.

4.2.2.3 Cultural Expectations of Black Women

A critical challenge that many women encounter is highlighted by Mpho, which is the tension between cultural expectations regarding marriage and motherhood and career aspirations.

Mpho stated,

“...especially in the black cultures, you know, once you're married, it's important that you have a child. If you don't have a child, there's a certain stigma that they put on you because you don't have children, so you always have that pressure to be pregnant. And when you come back from maternity leave, obviously, you'll have to reapply for different positions because your role would have been filled by somebody else”.

This comment indicates how Black women, especially those in Black communities, are subjected to social and cultural pressures related to marriage and childbirth. The idea that a woman must have children after marriage or face stigma is reflected in Mpho's comment. Furthermore, Mpho highlights the negative effects of maternity leave on careers, pointing out that some women return to find their jobs occupied, which forces them to reapply for jobs and can impede professional advancement.

4.2.3 Theme 3: Personal Challenges & Psychological Barriers

4.2.3.1 Imposter Syndrome and Overcoming Self-Doubt

Self-confidence is crucial for effective leadership because it allows the leader to persuade his subordinates, or supporters, to develop task-specific self-confidence, which can improve their work performance (Axelrod, 2017). Participants expressed an overwhelming opinion that Black women in finance frequently undervalue themselves, while recognizing the worth they offer to the room. There appears to be a gap between women's understanding of their talents and potential and their ability to articulate it and fight for what they feel they deserve. Participants expressed that self-confidence and self-esteem are skills they learned later in their jobs.

Below is what Nolwazi shared when asked about imposter syndrome and self-doubt. Nolwazi mentioned,

"Every day. Every day I struggle a lot with it. But I don't show it. If you were to ask."

Despite these challenges, she continues to press on and assures that others do not see her worries.

Nolwazi stated,

"I still push forward, and you will never ever see it. If you ask anybody, 'Does Nolwazi have imposter syndrome?' they will, besides the ones whom I'm close to and I'm honest with, like some of my managers and my trust circle, they will tell you, 'Absolutely no way.' Some might even say she's maybe overconfident. So, it's something that I struggle with."

Nolwazi also shares how imposter syndrome affects her work:

"Even with my work, sometimes I double guess. 'Is it good enough? Oh my gosh, maybe they might question this. Oh my gosh, what about this? Did I think of everything? What about this point?' I struggle with it. I do not let it stop me."

The study found that imposter syndrome is a substantial psychological barrier for Black South African women working in the banking industry. Despite their education and expertise, several participants showed self-doubt, believing they needed to overcompensate to be taken seriously. Nolwazi's story shows this internal conflict. She displays confidence while dealing with deep-seated fears. This is consistent with the literature, which shows that imposter syndrome disproportionately impacts women in male-dominated areas, increasing self-doubt and impeding professional advancement (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016) The exclusive structure of leadership networks exacerbates these perceptions, resulting in an environment in which women continuously question their competence.

With Phindile, thoughts of imposter syndrome do not occur in a single occurrence, but rather develop over time, particularly in the face of isolation or self-doubt. She stated:

"...I had moments where I felt like I wasn't good enough. I struggled with expressing myself, and I thought to myself, 'I'm not good enough for this.' There was a lot of doubt, and I would question whether I even deserved to be there. It took a long time to get over those feelings...especially in a room where I'm the only female and my colleagues start speaking in Afrikaans, it feels like I'm being told I'm not wanted there. Even though they don't say it outright, the impression they give makes me feel excluded. I understand

Afrikaans, but I'm still excluded from the conversation. Sometimes, that really brings me down. It's a tough feeling to shake off.

4.2.3.2 The psychological toll of discrimination and workplace exclusion

Several participants expressed that they did not feel comfortable discussing psychological stressors or work-related concerns with leadership, as often, such discussions resulted in negative consequences rather than support.

Amahle shared,

"If you share something, it will be known by everyone, and you'll be asked about it later. There's no real safe space to talk about workplace challenges."

Thamsanqa explained,

"Raising concerns about workplace stress or mental health is seen as a weakness. You fear that it will be used against you in performance reviews."

Dikeledi participant added,

"There's no real outlet to talk about mental well-being without being judged or feeling like your job is at risk".

The absence of psychological safety was a significant concern, as several participants expressed concern that expressing concerns regarding workplace challenges could result in adverse consequences. Both Amahle and Thamsanqa observed the absence of safe places for discussing mental health issues with their leaders at work, which further exacerbates the idea that Black women must navigate workplace stress in isolation. This discovery is in accordance with the existing research that suggests that workplaces with low psychological safety discourage employees from seeking support, resulting in exhaustion and disengagement (Obrenovic et al., 2020). This absence of psychological

stability serves to discourage employees from advocating for themselves and further entrench systemic issues, resulting in exhaustion and withdrawal.

Almost all the participants expressed that they do struggle with imposter syndrome. External factors, such as exclusion from conversations or feeling like a stranger in a male-dominated space, can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and isolation for certain individuals. Conversely, individuals who endure imposter syndrome without disclosing their emotions encounter obstacles that are derived from the pressure to maintain a confident facade, dread of vulnerability, and perfectionism. Their emotions are suppressed due to the dread of being judged or shunned for expressing self-doubt, which subsequently hinders their ability to seek the support necessary to overcome their circumstances. If the feelings of inadequacy are not addressed, this perpetual internal conflict can also result in exhaustion.

4.2.4 Theme 4: Digital Transformation as a Career Barrier

The banking industry, which is reshaping industries worldwide, is a prime example of how digital transformation affects the industry. Technology is essential for career progression, accessibility, and efficiency. Nevertheless, the impact of digitization on the advancement of their careers and the availability of opportunities for Black South African women continues to be a multifaceted matter. Despite the existence of digital skills development initiatives, there are still concerns regarding their accessibility, inclusivity, and the way in which they contribute to career advancement.

Zinhle expressed that digital transformation has not negatively impacted her career progression. She credits her company's commitment to employee training and adaptation to technological advancements:

"No, not at all, because I think I'm still making one of the best companies to work for... We do have in-house training, so apart from using 'I wanna do my MBA' or 'I wanna do whatever,' we do have workshops and full classroom trainings for whatever that is coming just to make sure that you keep your role."

Amahle recognizes that the banking industry has been significantly affected by digital transformation, particularly in the context of branches. She emphasizes the impact of automation and online banking on downsizing:

Amahle shared,

"A lot of people were affected because now the branch has become smaller. Some people had to upskill or lose their jobs because now technology has been taking over. I mean, before, like I said, we used to do manual transactions, but now everything is online."

Phindile was asked whether Black South African women have equal access to digital skills training in her organisation, her response is direct:

"No, not at all."

This contrasts with other participants who mentioned that training programs exist but require personal initiative. She reinforces this by stating:

"No, you have to do it yourself. You have to go in and go check, 'Alright, how can I then improve myself?' Like they say, learning is an individual journey, you know. But you just need to, as a person, make sure that you are always ready for anything and you keep yourself upskilled. Otherwise, you're gonna be shown the door."

Nonjabulo recognizes the trend toward automation, but she emphasizes the importance of human interaction.

Nonjabulo stated,

"With being sales, we need both 'cause we still analyse data. Then we still need the human touch. The bank I'm with first tried to push out the human element... but they are now changing that to say, you know, people still need the human touch. You can't completely take that away."

Nonjabulo's statement emphasizes a critical obstacle in the process of digital transformation. Banks initially sought to eliminate human roles, but they later realized that personal engagement is essential for customer retention and education. She also emphasizes that automation has had a substantial impact on certain aspects of banking, such as back-office roles, but human support is still necessary for customer-facing roles.

"I've seen people mostly in the back office, where filing and doing things manually who were affected. They had to be retrenched because of that."

This implies that digitalization has resulted in employment losses in administrative functions as a result of automation, despite the fact that front-end responsibilities may remain stable.

Unlike some participants who view digital transformation as a challenge, Thamsanqa embraces it as an enabler:

"No. In fact, I love it."

She sees automation and data analysis as valuable tools, particularly in her area of legal risk and compliance:

Thamsanqa expressed,

"If I look at the legal risk and compliance portfolios, we've always done things so manual. I love data, and for me, seeing digital transformation, I'm like, yo, there's more that we can do in terms of forecasting risk and seeing some of the risk insights just by looking at data and what it can solve for us."

However, she also emphasizes that human oversight remains crucial:

"You will always need a person to make the ultimate decision because you need to weigh up what the data might be telling you and be able to provide any recommendations from a customer lens."

4.3 Conclusion of Findings

The objective of this study is to investigate the career advancement of Black South African women in the banking industry by identifying the main barriers they are faced with and evaluating their influence. Themes 1 and 2 directly addressed the first research question through thematic analysis, disclosing the personal, cultural, and structural obstacles that hinder career advancement for black South African women. Cultural biases and workplace norms that frequently marginalize Black women increased structural barriers, including restricted access to senior leadership positions and isolation from influential networks. Growth opportunities were further restricted by personal barriers, such as self-perception that was influenced by societal expectations.

Research question two is addressed by Theme 3 and Theme 4 where critical insights into the impact of these barriers on career progression are discussed. The analysis revealed that these obstacles could hinder upward mobility but also affect career choices, job retention, and overall professional confidence. The banking industry's systemic inequalities have been aggravated by the persistent cycle of underrepresentation in senior leadership, which was the result of the intersection of structural limitations and cultural biases.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

5.1 Introduction

The results of this research are examined in this chapter. The theoretical framework used to guide the study and aspects of the literature review are addressed in the discussion. The research questions serve as the framework for the discussion.

5.2 Workplace structures that hinder career advancement

5.2.1 Lack of Fair and Transparent Recruitment & Promotion Processes

This findings from this research have revealed that the most marginalized group in South Africa was and remains Black women, while White males continue to be the most privileged. This privilege is a direct result of the system of economic and social discrimination of people of colour under Apartheid (Albertus & Tong, 2019). The results of this research study indicate that the current Employment Equity practices and policies in place to address historical social inequities that continue to adversely affect the career advancement of Black women in the South African banking industry have not yielded the desired results. Instead, the participants' narratives reveal the role of nepotism, favouritism, and insider hiring, as well as the age and gender-related barriers impact promotion opportunities. The belief that vacancies are frequently predetermined prior to being publicly advertised reduces trust in the system and discourages qualified Black women from submitting applications for senior positions. This is in accordance with the current body of literature, which emphasizes that systemic biases in recruitment perpetuate workplace inequalities (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016). According to the participants, promotions and employment opportunities frequently hinge on personal relationships rather than qualifications. Qualified Black women are frequently overlooked in senior positions due to the prevalence of individuals with pre-existing relationships within the organization. Career stagnation was a common complaint among the women who

participated, with many expressing that they are stuck in their current roles, particularly those who are in middle management. That is clearly indicated on Table 2, where most participants (9 out of 16) have accumulated substantial experience (ranging from 12 to 30 years) but are in middle management level. Previous authors have recognized the invisible barriers that prevent women's advancement to senior positions. Hymowitz & Schellhardt (1986) refer to this as the glass ceiling effect where the women's feel they have hit a brick wall when it comes to the career due to the invisible barriers to grow into senior leadership (Hymowitz & Schellhardt, 1986). This indicates that organisations neglect to proactively implement measures to encourage qualified and high-performing women to apply for senior positions (Islam et al., 2018). This denies access to career opportunities that can help them grow into the next management level (Islam et al., 2018). Therefore, it is essential to eliminate both visible and invisible barriers to the advancement of women, such as stereotypes regarding their professional and leadership capabilities.

5.2.2 Leadership Challenges and Discriminatory Workplace Practices

A considerable number of participants reported that their career advancement was hindered by unsupportive or obstructive leaders. These leaders either suppressed the advancement of these Black women by actively creating obstacles or by failing to provide mentorship. The absence of advocacy and support further exacerbates workplace inequalities and contributes to career stagnation (Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015). Some participants complained about needing to put in more effort than their male peers to demonstrate their abilities or occasionally getting overlooked for leadership roles. Other black women also mentioned that although they are expected to submit a motivational letter to be considered for traveling for work opportunities, the white men in their organizations are given the opportunity to travel for business or take part in leadership projects without having to justify their motivation. These gender biases and discriminatory promotion practices render it challenging for Black women to obtain senior positions. In contrast to objective performance evaluations, many participants believed that leadership decisions were influenced by subjective biases. Participants also

identified the fear of retaliation as a significant obstacle, as they expressed apprehension that the consequences of speaking out regarding workplace discrimination could be detrimental to their professional development. The apprehension of being branded as "difficult" serves to limit the open discussion of workplace injustices, thereby exacerbating these systemic issues. This confirms that gender stereotypes persist in defining leadership as inherently masculine, resulting in a culture in which women are perceived as less capable (Kela et al., 2024).

5.3 Cultural and Societal Factors Affecting Career Progression

5.3.1 Gender & Racial Bias in the Workplace

There is expectation that women should adopt leadership qualities that are traditionally associated with men's qualities to advance in their careers (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). Hence, the self-confidence of women is dampened because of the socially prescribed roles and stereotypes that constrain their own unique leadership styles (Kela et al., 2024). Several participants expressed their dissatisfaction with being disregarded for leadership positions or having to exert more effort than their male counterparts to demonstrate their competence. Certain women stated that they were obligated to provide justification for their involvement in leadership initiatives, whereas white males were automatically handed over big projects to lead within the organisation. These findings are further substantiated by Barkhuizen, Masakane, and Van der Sluis (2022), who emphasize that traditional leadership archetypes associated with masculinity are frequently favoured by recruitment biases and workplace cultures. Their research identifies leadership identity distortion, a phenomenon in which women are compelled to acquire male-like behaviours to be taken seriously in executive positions, thereby reinforcing exclusionary workplace norms (Barkhuizen et al., 2022).

5.3.2 Family responsibilities

The career experiences of Black women in banking are also influenced by societal expectations, in addition to workplace structures. Women are particularly impacted by the burden of balancing professional responsibilities with caregiving and family responsibilities, which makes career advancement more difficult (Chanda & Ngulube, 2024). According to the results, Black women are frequently anticipated to accomplish traditional gender roles while simultaneously managing their careers, which results in difficulties with work-life balance. Career trajectories frequently stagnate at the critical juncture of motherhood. Most women reported that they were denied leadership opportunities upon their return from maternity leave or pregnancy. Several participants also emphasized the disparities in the treatment of various racial groups with respect to flexible work arrangements. Black women were frequently granted less provision for family responsibilities than their White and Coloured counterparts. These results are consistent with the broader research on the "motherhood penalty" in corporate environments, which demonstrates that women's career advancement is disproportionately affected by their caregiving responsibilities (Kahn et al., 2014). Furthermore, these findings directly address the research question by demonstrating how workplace inequalities impact career advancement and well-being. A surprising outcome of the study was the perception of inflexibility among Black female leaders. One of the participants, Nolwazi, observed that concerns over inflexible work expectations were predominantly expressed by Black women, indicating that cultural and societal norms may influence different standards of leadership within the Black community. Furthermore, despite their professional success, women without children expressed feelings of inner emptiness, underscoring the emotional toll that comes with putting work before family obligations.

5.4 The Role of Digital Transformation in Career Progression

This study highlights the influence of digital transformation on the career advancement of Black South African women in the banking industry. The transition to automation and

artificial intelligence (AI) has led to employment instability, especially in positions historically occupied by women (Jenkin & Naude, 2018). A multitude of participants articulated concerns regarding the necessity to perpetually enhance their skills to maintain relevance in an industry that emphasizes digital proficiency. Furthermore, there are still disparities in access to digital training, and many women are expected to take the initiative to learn technological skills on their own rather than receiving assistance from formal company policy. The findings indicate that whereas digital transformation enhances efficiency, it also perpetuates obstacles to professional progression for Black women in banking. The results correspond with other studies on technological advancement and occupational disparity. Administrative and customer-facing positions, many of which are held by women, have been disproportionately impacted by the advent of automation. Amahle and other participants observed that branch closures and the rise of internet banking had resulted in workforce reductions, compelling staff to either enhance their skills or face unemployment. This supports extensive study on the "digital divide," wherein underrepresented populations frequently have difficulties in accessing technology-oriented job advancement chances (Vasilescu et al., 2020). The expectation for employees to self-upskill indicates a deficiency in corporate investment in comprehensive digital training initiatives.

Automation and AI-driven methodologies have transformed the essence of employment in the banking sector. Some participants, such as Zinhle, said that digital transformation has not adversely impacted their employment due to access to in-house training, however others, like Phindile, asserted that Black women have significantly limited access to organized digital upskilling programs. The increasing dependence on AI and machine learning technologies in banking has resulted in job redundancies, especially in administrative positions. Nonjabulo emphasized that although banks first aimed to eradicate human positions, they subsequently acknowledged the significance of human connection in customer care, indicating that digital transformation should enhance rather than supplant human expertise (Verhoef et al., 2021). A surprising outcome was a difference in perceptions of digital transformation among participants. While some see it as a threat to job security, others, such as Thamsanqa, regarded it as a facilitator of

efficiency in compliance and risk management roles. This indicates that the effects of digital transformation vary by position, with certain functions reaping advantages from technology progress while others encounter increased employment insecurity.

5.5 Personal Challenges & Psychological Barriers

This research focuses on the major psychological, emotional, and structural challenges that Black South African women encounter in the banking industry. Key findings show that imposter syndrome, exclusionary recruiting practices, a lack of psychological safety, and demands to perform, all contribute to an atmosphere in which Black women must constantly prove themselves while managing systemic challenges. These findings clearly respond to the research question by illustrating how workplace disparities affect career advancement and well-being.

The findings are consistent with previous studies on gendered and raced career impediments. The study's findings on exclusion and prejudice reflect current ideas on the "glass ceiling" and "brick wall," which characterize the combined impacts of race and gender on career mobility (Rath & Mishra, 2022). Furthermore, the findings support earlier research showing that psychological safety is critical for career satisfaction and retention (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016). While some research highlight success in diversity programs, participant testimonials reveal that many of these efforts are cosmetic and fail to provide meaningful career advancement opportunities.

One surprising result was the degree in which Black women depended on male mentors for direction in their careers. Although mentoring is usually seen as a support tool, participants pointed out that male mentors gave more direct career possibilities than female colleagues, who were generally considered as more competitive or less willing to advocate for their peers. Furthermore, the degree of discontent among senior women who had reached professional success but felt alienated or unsupported was another startling outcome. This implies that workplace inclusion is not necessarily correlated with career

advancement, which challenges the notion that advancements in leadership representation result in great working conditions.

CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

This section highlights the main findings of the study on the barriers to advancement in their careers for Black women in the banking industry and presents recommendations for organizations to address these issues. It also identifies topics for future study to better understand and promote the professional advancement of Black women in the industry.

6.2 Conclusion

This study investigates the structural, cultural, and personal barriers that hinder Black South African women's career progression in the banking industry. Structural barriers, including discriminatory workplace practices, exclusive leadership networks, and opaque recruitment and promotion processes, exacerbate the glass ceiling and restrict accessibility to senior leadership positions within this industry. Furthermore, the absence of mentorship, financial incentives, and professional development opportunities further impedes career advancement.

These challenges are exacerbated by cultural and societal expectations, particularly for mothers who are in the position of balancing family responsibilities with career advancement. Additional pressure is placed on women to demonstrate their dedication to their careers, as workplace norms frequently presume that leadership potential is intrinsically linked to family status. The expectation that women should assume most caregiving responsibilities can restrict their professional opportunities, making it more difficult for them to compete for leadership positions or access critical networking spaces.

Psychological barriers, such as imposter syndrome, workplace alienation, and job dissatisfaction, have an impact on self-confidence and decision-making. Self-doubt and a lack of support are the primary reasons why many women are hesitant to pursue leadership positions or negotiate for promotions.

Additionally, the banking industry's accelerated digital transformation simultaneously presents both opportunities and challenges. While technology-driven changes open new career opportunities, Black women frequently encounter systemic obstacles that prevent them from obtaining digital upskilling and leadership positions in technology-driven banking functions. It is essential to ensure that career advancement is achieved by promoting inclusion in digital transformation initiatives and ensuring equal access to digital training.

Some women have effectively navigated their careers through strategic networking, mentorship, and resilience, despite these barriers. However, individual efforts are insufficient. Organizations must implement systemic reforms, such as transparent recruitment and promotion processes, leadership development programs, workplace inclusivity initiatives, and equitable access to digital upskilling, to effect meaningful change. The banking industry can cultivate a more inclusive and supportive environment that enables Black women to excel in leadership positions while simultaneously managing their professional and family obligations by addressing these barriers.

6.3 Limitations of the Study

The study is subject to several constraints that may affect the applicability and scope of its findings. Initially, the scarce representation of senior leadership, which comprises only two department heads, restricts access to executive-level experiences. A more comprehensive perspective on career progression barriers could have been obtained by examining a larger sample of senior leaders, as the challenges confronted at higher leadership levels may differ considerably from those encountered by mid-level and junior employees. Furthermore, there is a possibility of response and social desirability bias, as participants may have modified their responses, particularly on sensitive topics like workplace culture and discrimination, which could have impacted the data's authenticity.

Furthermore, the study's focus on the banking industry could prevent its findings from being directly applicable to Black South African women in other professional industries,

as industry-specific dynamics significantly influence career outcomes. The research was conducted within a specific timeframe, which could limit the depth of data analysis and participant recruitment, as time constraints also posed a limitation. Broader participation and more profound engagement with the data could have been facilitated by an extended study period. Finally, the results provide a snapshot of the present workplace landscape, considered the accelerating speed of digital transformation. Continuous research will be required to monitor long-term changes and emergent trends as career progression barriers and workplace dynamics continue to change.

6.4 Recommendations

The results of this research suggest that there are multiple recommendations that can be implemented to mitigate the obstacles that Black South African women encounter in their attempt to advance their careers in the financial sector. These suggestions emphasize the implementation of psychological, cultural, and structural interventions by organizations to cultivate a more inclusive and supportive work environment. Recommendations are listed below:

- **Transparent Promotion and Succession Planning:** It is imperative that banks establish explicit and objective criteria for promotions and ensure that all employees are informed of the available career advancement opportunities. The probability of implicit bias influencing career progression will be diminished by ensuring transparency in promotion decisions.
- **Sponsorship Programs:** Financial institutions should implement formal sponsorship programs that encourage senior leaders to actively promote the career advancement of Black women. This will guarantee that they have access to high-profile initiatives, mentorship, and leadership opportunities.
- **Inclusive Leadership and Cultural Competence:** Banks should establish leadership training programs that emphasize cultural competence and promote inclusive leadership. These programs will provide senior leaders with the

necessary tools to comprehend and address the diverse requirements of their workforce, thereby guaranteeing that Black women are acknowledged, appreciated, and integrated into leadership discussions. Furthermore, leadership models should be inclusive, incorporating a variety of leadership styles and questioning conventional, frequently exclusionary notions of success. This enables Black women to lead in an authentic manner without the need to conform to limited expectations.

- **Building Self-Confidence and Overcoming Imposter Syndrome:** It is recommended that specialized training programs be implemented to address imposter syndrome and increase self-confidence. These programs would equip Black women with the resources necessary to acknowledge their worth, overcome self-doubt, and cultivate the resilience necessary to progress in their professional lives. Personalized coaching, leadership skill development, and confidence-building exercises can provide Black women with the requisite tools to surmount these psychological obstacles.
- **Sponsorship and Networking Programs:** The banking sector can significantly benefit from the establishment of structured sponsorship and networking programs for Black women. The primary objective of these programs should be to facilitate the connection of Black women with senior leaders and mentors, both within and outside the organization. Fostering these relationships can provide women with critical resources that enhance their chances of career advancement, such as visibility, career guidance, and advocacy. Sponsorship can offer a distinct path to leadership positions, as senior leaders can advocate for their apprentices and guarantee that they are considered for high-visibility initiatives.
- **Support for Working Mothers:** Organizations must establish policies that promote work-life balance considering the heightened societal expectations that society places on women, particularly mothers. To guarantee that mothers, particularly Black women, are not penalized for their caregiving responsibilities, it is imperative to provide them with accessible childcare support, remote work options, and flexible working hours. The implementation of parental leave

policies that are equitable and inclusive, and that support both men and women equally, will enable Black women to pursue leadership roles without the shackles of traditional gender norms.

- **Leadership Development for Black Women:** To mitigate the underrepresentation of Black women in leadership positions, organizations should establish targeted leadership development programs. The primary objective of these programs should be to enhance the leadership abilities of Black women, with a particular emphasis on overcoming the distinctive obstacles they encounter, including gendered expectations and cultural bias. These programs can assist women in confidently pursuing leadership opportunities by cultivating their executive presence, public speaking abilities, and leadership skills.

6.5 Prospective Study Areas

This research addresses a substantial gap in the existing literature that relates to the barriers that Black women encounter in their pursuit of career advancement within the banking industry. Even though studies have investigated gender and ethnic disparities in career progression, limited attention has been paid to the specific intersection of these challenges for Black women within this industry. This study provides a thorough examination of the influence of cultural, personal, structural, and societal factors. It also examines the role of mentorship, digital transformation, work-life balance policies for mothers, and psychological barriers such as imposter syndrome. The research offers valuable insights into the systemic obstacles Black women face in advancing to leadership positions by analysing these interconnected elements. Furthermore, it provides actionable recommendations that are specifically designed for the banking industry, with the objective of promoting more inclusive and supportive career paths for Black women.

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of long-term trends and the efficacy of interventions, future research should investigate longitudinal studies that monitor the career trajectories of Black women over extended periods. The role of informal networks and social capital in career progression necessitates additional investigation, particularly

in terms of the extent to which these networks are either accessible or exclusionary for Black women in banking. Furthermore, future research should further investigate the intersectionality of Black women's identities, specifically the ways in which their career experiences are influenced by factors such as their socio-economic background, disability, or sexual orientation. In addition, it would be advantageous to evaluate the efficacy of leadership development programs and organizational policies, particularly those that benefit mothers, and to evaluate the impact of digital transformation on career advancement in terms of equity and accessibility.

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6.6 APPENDIX A:

6.6.1 Letter of consent



University of the Witwatersrand,
Wits Business School

Dear Sir / Madam,

My name is Nqobile Mavundla, and I am an MBA candidate at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. As part of my studies, I must undertake a research project, and I am investigating multifaceted challenges faced by black South African women regarding their personal career advancement, within the banking industry, under the supervision of Dr Emmanuel Quaye. The aim of this research project is to find out structural barriers such as discriminatory practices and limited access to leadership opportunities, cultural and societal factors influencing career progression, and personal challenges such as confidence levels or ambition affecting black women's advancement. Furthermore, it will provide a lens through which to investigate how technological advancements in the banking industry influence the career progression of black South African women, particularly in digital occupations.

As part of this project, I would like to invite you to take part in an online interview. The interview will be conducted by myself. I anticipate the session to take about an hour to an hour and a half. The interview can be conducted at any time that is convenient for you. With your permission, I would also like to audio record the interview using MS Team with transcription. This recording will be stored in a password-protected laptop at my

home and will host electronic information associated with the study where only the researcher will have access to the information. It will be deleted after 3 years.

There will be no personal costs to you if you participate in this project. You will not receive any direct benefits from participation but there are no disadvantages or penalties if you do not choose to participate or if you withdraw from the study. You may withdraw at any time or not answer any question if you do not want to. The interview will be completely confidential and anonymous as I will not be asking for your name or any identifying information, and the information you give to me will be held securely and not disclosed to anyone else. I will be using a pseudonym (false name) to represent your participation in my final research report. If you experience any distress or discomfort at any point in this process, we will stop the interview or resume at another time.

If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research, feel free to contact me on the details listed below. This study will be written up as a research report which will be available online through the university library website. The data collected from this research project will be stored in a password-protected laptop and will be kept for 3 years. If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the ethical procedures of this study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za

Yours sincerely,

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CONSENT

I officially agree to engage in study on barriers to personal career advancement for Black South African women in the banking industry. I realize that I am participating voluntarily and am not being compelled to do so. I also understand that if I do not want to continue, I can stop engagement at any time (from up to the submission of the study report), and that this decision will have no adverse effects for me.

I realize that this is a research endeavour that will not necessarily benefit me in the near or short term.

I understand that my participation will remain confidential.

Signature of participant:

Date:

I hereby agree to the recording of my participation in the study.

Signature of participant:

Date:

6.6.2 Interview guide.

Background and Career Progression

- Can you share your career journey in the banking industry and what motivated you to enter this field?
- What role do you currently hold, and how has your career progression unfolded over time?
- Have you faced any specific challenges as a black South African woman in advancing your career in banking?

Systemic and Discriminatory Practices

- What systemic or organizational barriers have you faced in your career progression (e.g., recruitment policies, promotion criteria, leadership support)?
- Do you believe that the promotion criteria in your organization is fair and transparent? Why or why not?
- Have you ever felt overlooked for promotions or leadership opportunities? If so, what reasons were given?
- Have you experienced or witnessed racial or gender-based discrimination in the banking industry? How was it addressed?
- How would you describe your access to mentorship, sponsorship, or leadership development programs?
- Have you noticed differences in mentorship or sponsorship opportunities for black women compared to other groups?
- Do you think the banking industry has adequate policies and initiatives to support the advancement of black women? Why or why not?
- Do you feel that black women are adequately represented in senior leadership positions within your organization? If not, why do you think that is?

Psychological Barriers and Internal Challenges

- Have you ever struggled with imposter syndrome or self-doubt in your career? If so, what triggered these feelings?
- How do confidence and self-perception influence your ability to apply for leadership roles or negotiate promotions?
- Have you ever hesitated to put yourself forward for leadership roles due to fears of not being "ready" or "qualified enough"?
- What role do workplace culture and leadership play in shaping your confidence and ambition?
- Do you feel safe expressing concerns or seeking support for workplace challenges, including psychological stressors?

Societal and Cultural Expectations

- In what ways do cultural expectations (such as family responsibilities, gender roles, or societal perceptions) impact your career growth?
- Have you faced additional pressures or biases based on balancing work and personal life?
- Do you feel that your identity as a black South African woman influences how you are perceived or treated by colleagues and leaders?

Digital Transformation and careers in banking

- How has digital transformation affected your career growth and access to opportunities?
- Do you feel that black South African women have equal access to digital skills training and development programs?

- Have digital competency expectations created additional barriers for your career advancement? If so, in what way?
- What support do you think is needed to ensure black women in banking can thrive in an increasingly digital workspace?

The Impact of These Barriers

- How have these barriers (systemic, psychological, societal, or digital) affected your overall job satisfaction and career aspirations?
- Because of these barriers you mentioned, have you ever considered leaving the banking industry due to these challenges? If so, why?
- What impact do these barriers have on your mental well-being and work-life balance?

Solutions and Recommendations

- What do you think needs to change within the banking industry to better support the career advancement of black South African women?
- What advice would you give to other black women aspiring to leadership positions in banking?
- Are there any programs, policies, or initiatives that you believe have been helpful in overcoming barriers?
- If you could implement one policy to improve the experience of black women in banking, what would it be?

6.7 APPENDIX B: Summary of Participant Selection Criteria

Criterion	Justification for Inclusion
Management Level	Ensures a mix of senior, middle, and junior managers to track career progression.
Years of Experience	Covers early, mid, and late career stages to analyze promotion patterns.
Education Level	Compares the impact of postgraduate degrees vs. diplomas in career advancement.
Motherhood Status	Tests the effect of caregiving responsibilities on career growth.
Marital Status	Investigates if marriage slows career progression.
Job Roles	Ensures representation from different areas within banking.

6.8 APPENDIX C: Frequency of Code Occurrence Across Participants

Category	Unique Code	Frequency of Occurrence (Total Mentions Across Participants)
Entry and Progression in the Banking Industry	Accidental Entry into Banking Due to Lack of Career Guidance	11
	Entry Through Temporary or Alternative Roles	9
	Early Career Progression and Unexpected Promotion	7
	Career Longevity and Role Progression	5
	Taking Risks for Career Growth	5
	Career Stagnation and Lack of Internal Promotion Opportunities	14
Structural Barriers to Career Advancement	Lack of Transparent Recruitment & Promotion Processes	16
	Rigid Promotion Structures Delaying Career Growth	12
	Gatekeeping and Leadership Exclusion	14
	Nepotism and Favoritism in Promotion	11
	Unfair and Pre-Determined Recruitment Practices	12
	Lack of Black Women in Leadership and Career Mobility Issues	16
	Facing Structural Barriers in Promotion and Career Advancement	12
	Barriers to Leadership Roles	11
	Lack of Support After Promotion	9
	Lack of Leadership Training	11
Workplace Discrimination and Bias	Racial and Gender-Based Discrimination in Career Progression	18
	Structural Barriers Favoring Certain Racial Groups in Leadership	12
	Preference for Certain Racial Groups in Leadership	11
	Bias Against Women in Leadership	12
	The Impact of Gender Stereotypes on Leadership Roles	9
	Discrimination in Hiring Women	11
	Male-Dominated Workplace Culture	12
	Workplace Discrimination and Unequal Career Mobility for Black Women	14
Work-Life Balance and Psychological Challenges	Work-Life Balance and Forced Adaptation	12
	Struggles with Work-Life Balance	16
	Expectations of Women in Leadership Based on Family Status	11
	Challenges of Being a Single Mother in Banking	9
	Perceptions of Black Single Mothers in the Workplace	7
	Work-Life Balance Struggles and Sacrifices for Career Progression	11
	Mental Health Challenges Due to Workplace Stress	16
	The Emotional Toll of Workplace Discrimination and Career Setbacks	12
	Psychological Safety and the Fear of Speaking Out	11
	Experiencing Impostor Syndrome and Self-Doubt	14
The Role of Sponsorship, Mentorship, and Networking	The Importance of Executive Sponsorship for Career Progression	12
	Influence of a Strong Black Female Mentor in Career Growth	9
	Long-Term Relationship Building and Career Growth	7
	Networking as a Career Advancement Strategy	9
	Strategic Networking and Relationship-Building as a Career Tool	11
Digital Transformation and the Future of Work	Impact of Digital Transformation on Career Opportunities	11
	Challenges Due to Digital Transformation	9
	Lack of Digital Skills Training for Black Women	11
	The Additional Barrier of Digital Transformation	7
	The Need for Black Women-Centered Leadership Programs	9
	Equal Access to Digital Training	5
	Lack of Practical Implementation for Digital Inclusion	7