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Unprofessional hair: The experiences of Black women with hair in South African Corporate Organisations.

A research report submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Organisational Psychology in the Faculty of Humanities

By

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CONTEXTUAL DEFINITION OF TERMS

Black: A term used to racially categorise people; in South Africa, this term encompasses previously disadvantaged groups (i.e. Black Africans, Coloured, and Indian). For the purpose of this paper, this term will refer to Black Africans.

Black hair: This term is used when referring to Black people's hair.

4c type hair: 4c hair is a classification term within the hair typing system that categorises hair texture. This system ranges from type 1 (straight hair) to type 4 (coiled/springy hair), with subcategorises (A, B, C) used to further differentiate the tightness of a curl texture. 4c hair is the tightest curl pattern, defined by springy coils, which – irrespective of the actual length of the hair, can shrink up to 75%, giving the effect of short hair.

Natural Hair: Natural hair refers to hair that is in its natural state and has not been altered by relaxers or other treatments which change its natural curl pattern and texture.

Relaxer: A chemical cream used to semi-permanently alter the natural coil and texture of Black people's hair to become straighter.

Eurocentric Hairstyles: Hairstyles that mimic or resemble European textured hair. For example, relaxed hair, hot ironed straight hair, weaves, and wigs.

Corporate Organisations: Work environments where professional activities and interactions take place. The spaces are often shaped by organisational codes of conduct, policies, cultural norms, and physical settings, which influence the daily experience of employees.

ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing acceptance and admiration of natural hair, Black women still alter their hair to resemble more Eurocentric hairstyles when immersed in certain environments. This is because, for Black women, their natural hair is not just hair; it is a phenotypical characteristic that has - and continues to subject them to racial discrimination (Gougen & Hamlims, 2021). This study explores Black women's experiences in relation to their hair in South African corporate workplaces, examining ideas of *professionalism* within these spaces and their impact on Black women's hairstyle choices at work and overall workplace experience. In South Africa, the pertinence of Black women's hair is not recognised, and consequently, injustices towards hair are often minimized, thus failing to recognise and address hair discrimination as a form of racial discrimination. Further exacerbating the situation is the limited scope of literature in South Africa documenting the challenges Black women face with their hair, particularly in corporate workplaces. A study of this nature is therefore essential because corporate workplaces often serve as a microcosm of a country's socio-political climate (Mokoena, 2020), and this is amplified in South Africa, where the remnants of colonial and Apartheid intervention (mirrored in corporate spaces) are prevalent.

Using qualitative research methods rooted in an interpretivist design, data was collected from 16 Black women working in South African corporate organisations. Participants were interviewed using one-on-one semi-structured interviews conducted on Microsoft Teams, and the data from these interviews were manually transcribed. Thematic analysis revealed three key findings: (1) In an effort to fit in and avoid the daily adverse effects of having natural hair in corporate workplaces, Black women negotiate their identities by wearing Eurocentric hairstyles; (2) There are specific conditions, such as seniority in the workplace, having a 'good' Afro, and self-advocacy which permit Black women to feel empowered to wear their hair naturally at work; (3) Corporate organisational culture indirectly and subtly influences Black women's hairstyling choices – often putting them in positions where they have to pander to the white male gaze and dominant Western ideology in order to be considered *professional.*

CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Black women's hair is more than just hair. It was and remains an important expression of culture. In Africa and the diaspora, natural hairstyles have been used to communicate geographical origins, marital status, ethnic belonging, religion, age, and pregnancy (Rosado, 2008). Overall, hair has served as a marker of identity and cultural expression for Black African women. However, due to colonial intervention, the historical and cultural significance of hair among Black Africans, particularly women, has diminished over time. Colonialism had a profoundly devastating impact on Black women's self-esteem and pride in their natural hair, as it was associated with labels such as: 'unruly', 'unkempt', 'dirty', 'too masculine' and 'radical' (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014). Black women in South Africa suffered a similar reality, wherein under the Apartheid government, their hair shifted from being a cultural signifier to becoming a racial marker of an oppressed group. Afro's, Dreadlocks, and braided hairstyles were indicators of Blackness and, consequently, met with racist associations of being poor, dirty, backward and uneducated (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014). In an effort to circumvent these labels and the perception of being 'too Black', which historically has had a set of adverse repercussions, Black women have (1) strategically opted for Eurocentric hairstyles or (2) have been subtly influenced to conform to Eurocentric hairstyles (Mathenjwa, 2021). In the following paragraph, two key examples have been included to illustrate how this occurs.

The first example can be drawn from Michelle Obama, who, in an interview with *The Washington Post,* expressed her reason for not wearing braided hairstyles during former president Barack Obama's presidency - "They [US citizens] were not ready; they were just getting adjusted to having a Black family in the White House… let me keep my hair straight; let us get health care passed" (Washington Post, 2022). These sentiments highlight how Black women strategically navigate societal and professional expectations by casting aside their preferences and authentic self-representations and, instead, conform to Eurocentric beauty standards to foster white acceptance and thus achieve larger career goals.

The second example can be drawn from a personal account. As a Black woman with natural hair, specifically a 4c type Afro, I have experienced how environments previously developed for white people, and in which they still have systemic power, subtly influence how Black

women style their hair. In 2011, while in grade four at a predominantly white school, my white Afrikaans teacher prohibited me and another Black female student from participating in the annual school photo day until we "fixed our hair". In other words, until we chemically straightened it to resemble the hair of the other Black and white female students in our class. We both heeded the instruction, and I continued to style my hair this way until grade ten. This encounter depicts the subtle and indirect manner in which white institutions impose their preferences of Eurocentric hairstyling on Black women. The two provided examples, though differing in geographical context and setting, are similar in that they both reflect how spaces dominated by and historically designed for white people consistently exhibit patterns of policing Black women's natural hair and, as a result, can directly and indirectly, influence Black women's hairstyling choices.

This dynamic is not limited to social or educational settings. It extends to the workplace because it is a microcosm of a country's socio-political climate (Mokoena, 2020). Consequently, the workplace often mirrors and reinforces Eurocentric ideals of presentability and appearance irrespective of organisations' transformative agendas. Many organisations have workplace grooming policies which stipulate that employees' hair should be worn in a neat and orderly fashion, which communicates *professionalism* (Danahoo, 2022). The term 'professionalism', which is associated with neatness, has been emphasized because its loose definition makes it difficult for Black women in white-dominated workplaces to determine whether their natural hair meets this standard. Furthermore, Black women's natural hair is constantly at the centre of conversations surrounding society's ideas of unprofessionalism (Danahoo, 2022). A viral tweet made by Rosalia, a master's candidate, concurred with Danahoo (2022) and publicized the racially bias and alarming discovery that googling "unprofessional hair at work" yielded results of Black women with Afros, Dreadlocks, Bantu knots, and Box braids (The Guardian, 2016).

The negative associations with Black people's hairstyles render Black women unable or reluctant to express their true identities through their hair at work in fear of being labelled unprofessional. To circumvent this, they instead opt to negotiate their identities by wearing white 'passing' hairstyles in order to fit in and successfully navigate and progress within corporate workplaces. This has been documented in studies situated in the global north, where scholars such as Thompson (2009) capture a common dilemma faced by Black women in corporate environments where a participant stated, "One day, when I'm more established in my career, I would like to get dreadlocks… I can't do it now… I want to be in corporate in Canada"

(p.853). This intersection between identity and corporate professional norms poses a nuanced challenge for Black women, which has not been adequately addressed in the South African context.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Few studies have recorded Black women's experiences in relation to their hair in South African corporate workplaces. The bulk of literature surrounding the topic of Black hair in South Africa was incited by the 2016 incident at Pretoria Girls High, which witnessed a covertly racist code of conduct which stipulated that hairstyles should be neat and conservative (Ngwadla, 2018); indirectly discriminating against students, such as 13-year-old Zulaika Patel, who had Afros that were deemed exotic (Ngwadla, 2018). As a result of this, empirical studies in South Africa have situated this topic in institutions of learning (Shabangu, 2016; Majali, 2017) or have explored what hair means to Black women (Matjila, 2020; Amemate, 2020; LeRoux & Oyedemi, 2023) while other scholars (Mbunyuza-Memani, 2019; Jacobs & Kelemi, 2020) draw on the natural hair movement to elucidate the return of Black women's pride in their natural hair. The only scholars who reference the workplace as a research site mention hair in passing, as their studies are centred around Black employees' identity as a whole (Mathenjwa, 2021), while others reference employees within institutions of learning (Knight & Long 2019). These studies are important in South African Black hair discourse and have served as seminal pieces of literature. However, they neglect corporate environments as a critical space where hair politics remain significant. The current study addresses this contextual research gap by exploring Black women's hair experiences in South African corporate organisations.

1.3 RESEARCH AIMS, OBJECTIVES, AND QUESTIONS

The primary aim of this study is to explore Black women's experiences in relation to their hair in South African corporate workplaces. The secondary aim is to uncover and understand how Black women navigate the intersections of corporate organisational culture, professional identity, and personal authenticity through their hairstyles at work.

There are four research objectives:

1. To explore Black women's experiences in relation to their hair in corporate

2. To understand whether Black women feel empowered to wear their hair naturally at work.
3. To explore whether corporate organisational culture influences/dictates Black women's hairstyle choices.
4. To explore how Black women negotiate their self-representation identities in corporate workplaces.

There are four main research questions:

1. What are Black women's experiences in relation to their hair in corporate workplaces?
2. Are Black women empowered to wear their hair naturally at work?
3. Does corporate organisational culture influence / dictate Black women's hairstyle choices?
4. How do Black women negotiate their self-representation identities in corporate workplaces?

1.4 STRUCTURE OF THE RESEARCH REPORT

This research report is divided into six chapters. Chapter 2 is the literature review, which is made up of two components. The first component presents a historical conception of Black women's hair through three different historical periods. The second component is a detailed description and analysis of previous research studies surrounding Black women's hair from the Global North and Global South. Chapter 3 presents the dual theoretical frameworks of this paper, and they are the Authenticity at Work Framework and Identity Negotiation Theory, both of which are used as a lens to interrogate Black women's experiences in relation to their hair in South African corporate workplaces. Chapter 4 describes the research design and methodologies used in this research report. It further outlines the strategies employed to ensure the quality and rigour of this study and concludes by describing the ethical considerations adhered to throughout the research process. Chapter 5 presents the findings of the study, arranged in eight different themes with corresponding sub-themes – both of which were drawn from participants' lived experiences. Chapter 6 discusses the findings of this study as they relate to the research questions, previous studies and theoretical frameworks. Chapter 7 is the concluding chapter of this report, and it discusses the theoretical and practical implications, the limitations of this study, and finally, provides direction for future research.

CHAPTER 2:

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

To understand modern conceptions of Black women's hair and hairstyling choices, it is necessary to trace the history of African hair – examining its cultural significance to African people, how it has been used as a tool of oppression, its role as a racial identifier during apartheid, and the modern trends that influence Black women's hairstyling practices today. Analysing hair culture in pre-colonial Africa illustrates the centrality of hair to African people. The slavery, colonial and apartheid eras provide context and reinforce Johson and Bankhead's (2014) assertion that there is a hyper-awareness of hair within the Black community due to its historical linkages. Therefore, it should not be perceived as a trivial aesthetic. The following section presents African hair from three eras, namely, precolonial Africa, colonial Africa, and apartheid.

2.2 BLACK HAIR – MEANINGS OF HAIR

2.2.1 Precolonial Era - The Value of Hair for Black People

Black hair has never been a simple phenotypical characteristic for African people; instead it has always been a marker of identity (Omotoso, 2018; Le Roux & Oyedemi, 2023). Hair denoted gender, ethnicity, leadership role, and social rank. It also served as a line of non-verbal communication when a woman was ready for courtship or in her fertile stages (Le Roux & Oyedemi, 2013). Hairstyling choices were also symbolic of sensitive periods, such as pregnancy and mourning/being widowed (Le Roux & Oyedemi, 2023). For instance, most ethnic groups in South Africa shave off all their hair when a close family member has passed on, in a belief that it rids the household of the unwanted spirit of death (Greensword, 2021; Omotoso, 2019; Le Roux & Oyedemi, 2023).

Black hair held deep cultural and spiritual significance for African people. The head, often referred to as the temple of the body, was a crucial aspect of African spirituality and had spiritual attributes attached to it (Greensword, 2021). For instance, the Yoruba people of Nigeria believed that hair had medicinal properties and, as such, used it for traditional medicine and other healing practices (Omotoso, 2018). There was a sacredness to one's head (and hair),

leading to great caution on who could touch or access it. As a result, known hairdressers were highly esteemed and dubbed as high priests due to their frequent contact with one's hair (Omotoso, 2018).

Cultural beliefs regarding hair extended to the Southern parts of Africa. In an attempt to protect the spiritual well-being of Black women and their unborn children, Basotho indigenous prenatal caregivers and family members advise expectant mothers to refrain from touching or allowing others to touch their hair. In conjunction with these important aspects of hair, African people also had a vast enjoyment of their hair. They used it as a medium to express their personal style and as a method of enhancing their self-esteem and self-image (Le Roux & Oyedemi, 2023).

2.2.2 Slavery – Hair as a Tool for Oppression

The following section places emphasis on the American experience of Black people during slavery. This focus is intentional, as the subsequent sections of the literature review draw heavily on literature from the Global North. Including this perspective serves to establish parallels between the American and African, particularly South African, experiences, highlighting shared themes of oppression, resistance, and identity formation.

White slave owners used Black hair textures as a measure of one's Blackness; this introduced texturism within society, which later permeated the Black community and is evident within modern society at large. Texturism is the belief that there is a hierarchy among hair types. This ideology places 4c-type hair at the bottom, stating that looser curls and straight hair are superior (Brown, 2018). Consequently, enslaved Africans with tighter curls were assigned more labour-intensive work in the plantations, whereas those with looser curls were made house slaves – which was relatively easier work (Brown, 2018). White slave owners ascribed to texturism. Insofar as to consider Black people's hair – particularly women's hair as highly offensive, thus often demanding that it be covered up with wigs or scarves (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014). Terms such as woolly, peppercorn-shaped, and matted were used to describe Black hair, essentially equating it to animals (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014). These conceptions of Black hair extended beyond disdain. Black hair was weaponised as a site of oppression to dehumanise Africans, break their spirit and completely sever them from their identities (Greenwood, 2022; Rowe, 2022).

In addition to offensive language, white slave owners continued to subjugate Africans by shaving their heads (Knight & Long, 2019; Rowe, 2022). This was a common form of punishment and was a method to humiliate African people, tear down their self-esteem, dismantle their femininity, and deprive them of spiritual experiences (Thompson, 2009; Johnson & Bankhead, 2014; Knight & Long, 2019; Greenswood, 2021). This had catastrophic consequences for the culture and identity of Black people. Hair shaving is amongst the many but overlooked methods used by White people to dispossess Black people of their African roots and identities. The period of enslavement, which later laid the groundwork for colonialism, witnessed the vilification of Black hair (Rowe, 2022). Negative attitudes and perceptions of Black natural hair cemented texturist ideologies within the Black community. This led to the inception of the "new Negro" (Rowe, 2022), referring to Black people, particularly women who either had features that closely resembled whiteness or altered their hair to appear more Eurocentric. This newfound identity was associated with respectability, access to wealth, education, and upper society (Rowe, 2022).

2.2.3 Apartheid – The Formation of Racial Identities

Apartheid was a system of institutionalised racism in South Africa, with its origins rooted in slavery and colonisation (Le Roux & Oyedemi, 2016). Similarly to its predecessors, it dealt a devastating blow to African culture and stripped Africans of their identities by creating new racial classifications using hair as one of the key signifiers. The apartheid government formed four main racial categories by order of superiority: White, Indian, Coloured, and Black. It was essential that this hierarchy was maintained to ensure that Black people were not mistaken as coloured because race determined the type of resources an individual was afforded. Numerous strategies were used to ensure this; amongst them was the pencil test (Montle, 2020). The apartheid government believed hair was the most accurate measure of blackness, superseding skin colour (Powe, 2009; Montle, 2020). Consequently, officials would often run a pencil through suspicious (i.e., light / fair-skinned) persons to determine their racial category. If the pencil fell, they were classified as coloured; however, if it got stuck, they were classified as Black (Powe, 2009). As a result, natural hair amongst Black people became an indicator of being a lower-class citizen, uncivilised, and uneducated (Powe, 2009; King & Niabaly, 2013).

To free themselves from these classifications, Black South Africans adopted a culture of "white-passing", whereby they would alter the natural state of their hair– using cream relaxers

to appear closer to whiteness (Le Roux & Oyedemi, 2023). An identity alteration of this magnitude, requiring both money and time – scarce resources for Black people at the time - signified how crucial hair texture was for Black people during Apartheid. Tracing these three historical eras reaffirms Le Roux and Oyedimi's (2016) argument that colonial intervention transformed the role and meaning of hair for Africans. It shifted from being a marker of identity and a source of pride to a site of oppression and daily inconvenience that had to be altered to fit white standards.

2.2.4 Post Apartheid – Modern-day South Africa

Hair straightening practices continued in post-Apartheid South Africa, as Black hair was still associated with ugliness and white hair with beauty (Brown, 2018; Montle, 2020). According to Montle (2020), these perceptions of beauty were propagated by colonisers to other African people, to dismantle African standards of beauty and reinforce the notion that beauty originated exclusively from the West. These Eurocentric beauty ideals led to the commercialisation of relaxers. Thus, relaxed hair became a form of assimilation and was an ongoing trend until its gradual decline in 2018 – exemplified by the 20% drop in hair relaxer sales in South Africa and broader Southern Africa (Jadazweni, 2018). Similar reports were found in the United States of America, where relaxer sales dropped from $71 million to $30 million between 2011 and 2021 (Forbes, 2022). This steady decline has been dubbed a celebratory milestone for the natural hair movement[1]. They view it as a move away from hair alterations, which assimilate into whiteness, to an embrace of natural Black African hair (Jadazweni, 2018; Forbes, 2022). However, the existence of other forms of straight hair worn by Black women (i.e., weaves and wigs) questions this milestone's accuracy.

Conversely, in more recent years, there has been an increasing trend for Black women to wear their hair naturally with no shame. An example of this is Zozobini Tunzi, who attained both the titles of Miss South Africa and Miss Universe in 2019 while having short 4c hair. A black woman winning globally recognised beauty pageants with hair, considered at the bottom of the beauty standard for countless years, indicates that local and global Eurocentric ideals may be starting to break down. Irrespective of this progress, there are social environments where Black women are reluctant to wear their natural hair. For instance, in graduation ceremonies, interviews, and weddings, as there are expectations of "looking presentable" (Amemate, 2020).

[1] A movement which encourages Black Africans to be proud and embrace their hair in its natural form.

This implies that African hair, in its natural state, is still regarded as unappealing and should be altered to enter such spaces.

2.3 RACIALIZED CORPORATE WORKPLACES

The demise of Apartheid marked a significant turn of events for South Africans, particularly Black South Africans. However, Mokoena (2020) cautions not to be naïve in the face of this apparent transformation as "past" racially discriminant ideas remain prevalent and upheld by the white minority. This issue also manifests in professional workplaces because these spaces serve as microcosms of the country's socio-political and economic environment (Mokoena, 2020). Expressed more brazenly, Gumede (2018) contends that South African corporate culture is firmly rooted in institutional racism and is consistently maintained by structures that enable its continuation (Maluleke, 2016). However, its expression has become less outward and more covert (Bosman, 2014; Canham & Williams, 2016; Mokoena, 2020; Mathenjwa, 2021).

This covert form of racism is delivered as microaggressions (Boswell, 2014). These are subtle verbal and non-verbal responses that "put down" (Pierce et al., 1978, p.66 cited in Sue & Spaniernam, 2010) marginalised groups. Microaggressions, according to Sue and Spanierman (2010), can manifest in different forms, namely, micro-insults and micro-invalidations. The former refers to rude and insensitive verbal and non-verbal comments that disparage one's identity. Micro-invalidations, on the other hand, are remarks that subtly negate the lived experiences tied to one's identity. The covert nature of these racist attacks creates a "non-racist racism" (Fiske 1988 cited in Canham & Wiliams, 2016, p.28) that perpetrators easily circumvent because professional work environments have mastered the art of concealing subtle yet dangerous and damaging expressions of discrimination (Baker, 1995, cited in Mathenjwa, 2021). This is of particular concern in South African corporate organisations because many deny or cannot identify the existence of microaggressions, and as a result, fail to adequately address them (Mathenjwa, 2021). Moreover, because of the institutionalised nature of this racism, it is embedded in workplace policies, procedures, norms, beliefs, and values which make up the organisational culture. Ultimately informing ideas of professionalism, perceptions of Black employees, and unspoken assumptions about presenting oneself at work (Gumede, 2018; Mathenjwa, 2021).

2.4 ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

Organisational culture has been conceptualised by numerous academics, researchers, and philosophers alike. Pettigrew (1979) defines organisational culture as a set of cognitive structures that inform how employees think and make decisions. Stewart (2010) contends that organisational culture is the principles and values of an organisation, which directly impact those associated with the organisation. Schein's (1990) model of organisational culture aligns with the above definitions as encompassing intangibles but goes further by introducing tangible elements, such as signs and symbols, which are physical manifestations of an organisation's culture. Schein (1990) distinguishes culture as having three fundamental levels: artefacts, espoused values and underlying assumptions. Artefacts are visible and tangible characteristics of an organisation, which manifest as dress code, manners of address, and language, which ultimately symbolise the deeper cultural values and assumptions of an organisation (Schein, 2004). These levels are progressively deeper and represent more nuanced and profound aspects of culture and illuminate how tangible and intangible elements of an organisation influence workplace behaviour, norms, and expectations (Schein, 2004). Similarly, findings from Gumede (2018) and Mathenjwa (2021) indicate that organisational culture (i.e., in workplace policies, procedures, and norms) informs ideas of professionalism and assumptions of presentability at work. Suggesting that visible artefacts in corporate spaces are appearance policies and grooming standards, which often expose deeper espoused values, such as ideas of professionalism, which are rarely openly communicated, instead, are rooted in assumptions about what is deemed as presentable, acceptable and appropriate for the workplace. These assumptions create a shared understanding of what is expected, consequently becoming the "normative glue" and normative function in an organisation (Tichy, 1982**)** induced by organisational membership (Sinclair,1993). Changing or re-examining these assumptions would destabilise one's interpersonal and cognitive world, inducing feelings of anxiety and discomfort (Schein, 2004). To avoid this, individuals often employ a defence mechanism that involves falsely perceiving the beliefs of an environment as congruent to their own through denying, distorting, and projecting what is occurring around them (Schein, 2004). This, according to Schein (2004), is the ultimate power of culture, as it is successful in shaping the perceptions and behaviours of individuals within an organisation.

2.5 EMPIRICAL STUDIES ON BLACK HAIR

2.5.1 Literature from the Global North

Prior to reviewing literature set in the workplace, it is essential to draw from Thomson (2009), who was instrumental in discussions surrounding hair. Juxtaposing her findings with more recent bodies of work elucidates the immense change in Black women's perceptions of their natural hair. Simultaneously, it serves as an indicator of how stagnant and unchanging ideas of *professionalism* have been.

Thompson (2009) examined how Black women's media consumption and interaction with others influenced their hair grooming choices. She conducted qualitative interviews with Black and Bi-racial women of Caribbean or Indian descent living in Canada. The findings of the study suggest that Black women are still constrained by their hair as they are expected to adhere to mainstream Eurocentric beauty ideals. Even more concerning is that they, unlike other racial groups, are asked to have such standards completely override their natural state of being (Thomson, 2009). Findings from this study indicate that Black women subscribe to this standard because, from a young age, they have been socially conditioned to dislike their hair by their mothers who relax their hair to make it "look good" and magazine covers that lack representation of Black women and girls with natural hair (Thompson, 2009).

This is an issue unique to Black women because their hair choices are made to be signifiers of socio-economic class, level of education, degree of femininity, and how political or radical they are. Thus influencing their perceived employability and attractiveness. In an attempt to maintain a positive view of these perceptions, Thomson (2009) found that Black women emulate Eurocentric hairstyles by relaxing their hair and wearing weaves at work and in other social spaces. A participant in Thompson's (2009) study expressed the importance of altering their natural hair in the former environment, saying that "in the professional landscape… if you do not look a certain way and don't speak a certain way, your opportunities career-wise just do not present themselves" (p.854). These findings suggest that Black women's hair, in all facets of life, is villainised and misunderstood. Thompson (2009) adds that Black women are further pushed to wear inauthentic (p.846) hairstyles to the point that they wrongfully interpret relaxed hair and braids as authentic hairstyling. The scholar concludes by asserting that hair alterations in any form uphold legacies of slavery and self-hate, thus advising Black women to collectively agree on this point in order to curb controversy surrounding their hair.

The arguments made by Thompson (2022) are threefold: (1) media and perceptions of others resulted in Black women disliking their natural hair, (2) Black women's natural hair is not deemed professional, (3) wearing Eurocentric hairstyles upholds legacies of slavery and exemplifies self-hate. A juxtaposition with current literature from the Global North indicates that in the present day, the first and third arguments mentioned above do not hold; however, the second argument remains the same. The following section reviews more recent literature to elucidate the above points while also critiquing and highlighting the relevance of the current study.

2.5.1.1 Quantitative Studies on Black Hair

Opie and Phillips (2015) conducted three experimental studies comparing Black women wearing Eurocentric and Afrocentric hairstyles based on managers' ratings of dominance and professionalism. The findings suggest that there were adverse reactions to Black women with Afrocentric hairstyles. As a result, they were awarded lower ratings on professionalism than women with Eurocentric hairstyles and were said to be unlikely to succeed in corporate America (Opie & Phillips, 2015). Suggesting that the corporate definition of "professional" hair refers to a specific type of hair texture and style, which most likely excludes Black women's natural hair. Similarly to Thompson (2009), Opie and Phillips (2015) found that Black women wear straight hair to conform to ideas of professionalism at work.

In line with using a quantitative methodology, Johnson and Bankhead (2014) conducted a study examining the experiences of Black women with natural hair; the workplace environment was among the environments used to understand these subjective experiences. The scholars collected data quantitatively using an internet-based survey. They aimed to examine the forms of discrimination experienced by Black women and understand their degree of comfort in wearing their hair in its natural state. To achieve this, they sampled adult African American women living in the United States as research participants.

Findings from the study indicate that Black women are extremely comfortable wearing their natural hair at work and in other social spaces; participants further add that it makes them feel good (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014). This refutes the idea that Black women dislike or are uncomfortable with their hair, as Thompson (2009) suggested. This contradiction indicates changing attitudes. In addition to the above findings, Black women are said to experience minimal to no discrimination at work because of their natural hair; instead, most of it stems

from peers and family (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014). Johnson and Bankhead (2014) mention that these results were highly unexpected. Consequently, this brings into question whether Black women's natural hair is, in fact, a site for discrimination in the workspace.

Johnson and Bankhead (2014) account for this by mentioning that all the participants were young, highly educated women from a relatively high socio-economic class. As such, their experiences could have differed from those Black women who do not fit this demographic. Moreover, the study failed to clearly define the type of organisations the participants were sampled from. This is a small but essential detail, as the experiences of Black women with natural hair may differ depending on the industry and type of organisation. Finally, quantitative surveys, specifically the scale used to measure subjective experiences, have also served as a limitation of the study because anchors in a scale tend to provide limiting phrases and, as such, cannot capture the nuances of subjective experience.

Considering both Opie and Phillips (2015) and Johnson and Bankhead's (2014) methodologies, it is likely that using quantitative methods to study such an intricate and nuanced topic, which differs from individual to individual, is reductionist. Therefore, this review will examine previous empirical studies within the global North that have employed a qualitative approach, ultimately informing the aspects of the theoretical and methodological approach of the current study.

2.5.1.2 Qualitative Studies on Black Hair

Danahoo and Smith (2019) conducted a study analysing seven legal court cases pertaining to discrimination targeted at Black women's hairstyle choices at work. This analysis was guided by two legislatures: the New York City Human Rights Law (NYCHRL) and the Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair (CROWN) Act. The findings of this study revealed that six out of the seven women implicated in the legal cases lost their jobs due to "wearing" their Blackness at work. Although there was no direct evidence of this, their employer's inability to demonstrate that the women's job performance was not hindered by their decision to change their hairstyles and wear more natural hairdos asserts the discriminatory nature of their termination. Additionally, Danahoo and Smith (2019) found that irrespective of the promulgation of progressive laws such as the NYCHRL and CROWN Act, Black women continue to face significant pressure to adhere to white beauty norms to secure employment.

This conformity is evident during the interview process and, for some, persists throughout their employment as a strategy not only to obtain but also to retain employment.

Danahoo and Smith's (2019) study reveals that hair discrimination is a form of racial discrimination. In the workplace, Black women's natural hair is deemed unacceptable and unprofessional because it does not look like or attempt to imitate whiteness. Participants of this study stated that workplace organisational culture is founded on white culture. Therefore, Black bodies are often isolated and excluded because their image is not a culture-fit. Black women encounter this through intrusive questioning by white colleagues, such as: "Your hair is wide today; are you going to do something with that?" (p.197). These questions, according to Danahoo and Smith (2019), are microaggressions that ultimately serve as a reminder that Black women are not accepted in the workplace. Finally, Danahoo and Smith (2019) conclude that there is a need for freedom of identity for Black women, whereby they can wear and style their natural hair as they please without being made to feel that their hair choices communicate professional incompetence. This is especially true when the same hairstyles (e.g., braids, Bantu Knots) are glorified when worn by white women but when worn by Black women, it results in hostility.

Dawson et al. (2019) researched natural Black hair bias in the workplace, the aim being to understand how Black women think and feel about their hair at work. Data was collected from five websites that post articles on Black hair. Dawson et al. (2019) analysed 274 comments from these articles using grounded theory. Key findings indicate that hair that deviates from the norm of straight and smooth is stigmatised at work. Most women felt that their hair, in its natural state, was perceived as less beautiful and unprofessional. As a result, Black women straightened their hair for work. These findings suggest that perceptions of Black women's hair influence their hair choices. Dawson et al.'s (2019) methodology differs greatly from the current study; nonetheless, this study seeks to build on their theoretical framework, which is briefly explored below.

Dawson et al. (2019) understood Black women's conformity to Eurocentric hairstyles at work from a Labelling Theory and Identity Transition Framework. Arguing that Black women internalise the labels (e.g., good hair vs bad hair, nappy hair, professional vs unprofessional) projected onto their hair and in an attempt to be less conspicuous at work, they alter the natural state of their hair (i.e., identity transmission). The studies reviewed up until this point illustrate the influence of society's labelling of Black women's hair. Therefore, the current study omits

the labelling theory for the Authenticity framework, which seeks to understand whether, amidst these labels, Black women feel they can be their true authentic selves at work. The current study also aims to expand on the Identity Transmission Theory by broadening it to the Identity Negotiation Theory, which has more assumptions to explore.

Danahoo (2022) conducted a qualitative study, the aim being to understand Black women's perceptions of their hair, the challenges they face because of their hair at work, and their hairstyling choices when looking for employment. The study was conducted in various states in the United States of America. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with 22 black women studying and working in post-secondary institutions with Afrocentric and Eurocentric hair. Participants were purposively sampled from a Facebook page for professionals and via snowballing (Donahoo, 2022). The findings indicate that (1) all participants opted for Eurocentric-inspired hairstyles when looking for employment, and (2) all participants experienced some form of discriminatory behaviour/remarks towards their natural hairstyles at work.

Similarly to the literature reviewed above, Donahoo (2022) found that the fear of discriminatory behaviour, being viewed as incompetent and unprofessionally presenting, led Black women to adopt hairstyles which align with Eurocentric beauty norms. The current study differs from Donahoo (2022) in that it does not directly look into issues of discrimination pertaining to hair at work. It instead seeks to understand whether Black women feel empowered to be their true authentic identity at work. Nonetheless, the present study draws from the methodology of this seminal research. Like Danahoo (2022), I use purposive and snowballing strategies to recruit participants and semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences Black women have in relation to their hair at work.

2.5.2 Literature from the Global South

There is a lack of discussion surrounding Black women’s natural hair in South Africa, which is evident from the scarcity of literature on the topic. Of the limited studies found, it seems as though 2016 was the onset of natural hair discourse in South Africa. This comes as no surprise as this signifies the year of the Pretoria Girls High hair discrimination incident involving then-student Zulaika Patel. This was further fuelled by the hair discrimination saga of the large retail company Clicks in 2020 (Ngwadla, 2018). As a result, most studies found for this section of the review used these two incidents as a point of reference. These studies primarily focus on

contexts, such as institutions of learning (Shabangu, 2016; Majali, 2017; Knight & Long, 2019), an exploration of the meaning of hair and hair norms within the Black community (Matjila, 2020; Amemate, 2020; LeRoux & Oyedemi, 2023), an analysis of natural hair blogs that pivot the natural hair movement, thus fostering sisterhood and resistance to white norms (Mbunyuza-Memani, 2019), and YouTube vlogs of Black women embracing their natural hair (Jacobs & Kelemi, 2020). These studies provide a clear backdrop for understanding Black women's complex relationship with their hair. However, all but Knight and Long (2019) and Mathenjwa (2021) exclude the workplace as a critical space where hair politics remain significant. The current study addresses this contextual research gap by exploring Black women's hair experiences in South African corporate organisations. The following section expands on and critically reviews the above-mentioned studies.

2.5.2.1 Black Hair in institutions of learning

Shabangu (2016) conducted a qualitative study exploring the perceptions of beauty in terms of skin, hair, and body held by students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The participants of the study were 30 black female students with an age range of 18-26, and data were collected from them using semi-structured interviews. The findings of the study specific to hair uncovered participants' awareness of the "good vs bad" hair dichotomy; however, they perceived it differently. Seven participants understood 'good' hair, as hair that is well kept irrespective of texture. Eight participants expressed that 'good hair' for Black women is natural hair as it showcases who they really are without being fake. The vast majority of participants associated 'good' hair with weaves and wigs because "every Black woman has a desire to have hair like other races because their hair seems nice and easier to manage" (Shabangu, 2016, p.21). The study revealed that Black women preferred straight hair because (1) weaves and wigs not only make a woman feel beautiful but also communicate wealth and affluence, (2) natural hair is perceived to be unmanageable, and this has been equated with the need for Western hair because Black women do not perceive their hair as manageable, and finally (3) having natural hair is associated with being unfashionable and backward amongst their peers.

Majali et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study exploring Black women's everyday perceptions of their hair, uncovering the meaning they attach to their hair. Eight young Black women, aged 19-29 and currently University students, were recruited for the Majali et al. (2017) study. These participants had a range of hairstyle choices, including weave extensions, braid extensions, chemically straightened hair, Afros, and short hair. Data were collected using

individualised in-person interviews, which were later augmented by a focus group. Majali et al. (2017) used a multi-layered theoretical framework, constituting phenomenology, social constructivism, and feminist theories, particularly intersectionality. This also informed the study's data analysis, which served to prioritise the voices of participants. Findings from this study indicate that hair for Black women is not just hair; it impacts their everyday lives, self-evaluations, and how others perceive them. As such, they go to great lengths to maintain it. According to Majali et al. (2017), the dominant discourse at the time suggested that Black women were pressured to conform to a Western standard of beauty by wearing straight hair. However, participants in their study revealed a return of and growing appreciation for natural hair. In fact, the majority of participants in the study indicated that the pressure to conform to Western beauty standards was not as strong as suggested in the literature. Majali et al. (2017) further reaffirm that Black women's hairstyles, whether straight or natural, reflect personal choice rather than an attempt to emulate whiteness or a symbol of self-hate. Two interesting points arise from the Majali et al. (2017) study: 1) that how one wears hair is a personal choice or preference, not always linked to approximating the Western standard of beauty; and 2) that reaffirmation is a process after years of denigration of the Black body.

2.5.2.2 Meaning of Black hair and Black hair norms

Matjila (2020) studied the meaning and practices surrounding hair in Windhoek, Namibia and Bloemfontein, South Africa. Data were collected from both locations using ethnographic methods of participant observations and individualised interviews. Matjila (2020) observed and interacted with her research participants by volunteering to work at local salons in downtown Windhoek and Bloemfontein townships. The scholar focused on the experiences of three women, resulting in three core themes: (1) Hair and Identity formation, (2) Hairituality (hair and cultural rituals), and (3) With Beauty comes pain. Findings from the first theme suggest that Black women experience a sense of freedom in wearing their natural hair, especially because many of them have spent years chemically straightening it. One participant shared that embracing her natural hair freed her from painful hair routines such as relaxers and heat straighteners; it allowed her to feel more authentic, representing a fuller expression of herself and Africanness. Interestingly, the participant mentions that her identity transcends beyond this and affirms that she is still African when wearing braids, weave extensions, and head scarves.

The findings from the second theme draw on the importance of hair for spiritual and cultural practices. The participant shared the importance of shaving off their hair for cultural mourning practices; she further highlighted the spiritual significance of dreadlocks as a devotion to God and staying away from worldly desires. In closing off this theme, the participant refers to Black women's experiences as similar to that of the Biblical Samson, who draws power from his hair. This power, according to Matjila (2020), is the strategic hairstyling Black women engage in to gain a certain status/respectability in various social spaces; for instance, covering your head as a married woman, growing your hair long to signify femininity, and styling it straight to convey professionalisms. The findings of the final theme suggest that Eurocentric beauty standards are a Black woman's pain, from having to endure their own mothers referring to their natural hair as *a* thin, dry wire or K-word *hair.* In addition to this, the study revealed that "suffering for beauty" is a common experience amongst Black women, as they often have to go through a physically painful process to style their hair in ways that are acceptable to Western standards.

Le Roux and Oyedemi (2023) conducted a qualitative study with the aim of understanding whether Black women who were born at various periods just before and during apartheid (47-83 years old), similar to the Apartheid era, continue to style their hair in Eurocentric presenting ways in order to gain access to social, cultural, and economic privileges. This was juxtaposed with "born-free" Black women's views from social media. Le Roux and Oyedemi (2023) recruited 8 participants from Limpopo and collected data using semi-structured interviews. Findings suggest that colonial-born women still prefer Eurocentric hairstyles because their natural hair is difficult to manage, and chemically straightening their hair makes them appear younger and more beautiful. This contradicts "born-free" views that dedicate entire YouTube channels to showcase how easy it is to style and maintain natural hair. On a broader scale, this study reveals that colonialism and apartheid intervention has erased hair as an identity representation for South African women. Irrespective of evidence of natural hair being embraced and associated with a sense of pride, Black women continue to hide their hair under wigs, believing that their natural hair is only suitable for public display once it meets a certain societal standard. Ultimately, Le Roux and Oyedemi (2023) conclude that their participants' views of beauty remain Eurocentric.

Amemate (2020) conducted a qualitative study to examine the influence of African women's hair norms. Amemate (2020) interviewed 30 Ghanaian women in order to understand whether their hairstyle choices were influenced by (1) internalised racism, (2) self-hate, and (3) style/preference. The findings indicate that internalised racism and self-hate do not form the

foundations of women's hair choices. Instead, similar to Knight and Long's (2019) study, participants revealed that there are certain privileges associated with wearing straight hair, such as greater employment opportunities and a lesser degree of mockery and racialisation. Suggesting that Eurocentric-inspired hairstyling among Black women is not a result of self-hate or internalized racism, but rather a strategic method of avoiding ridicule and racialization in the workplace, and instead, positioning themselves to receive the privileges associated with straighter hair.

Furthermore, these results have highlighted that employees living inauthentically by catering to dominant cultural norms are not driven by self-hate or internalised racism. Instead, these findings reveal that identity negotiation and inauthentic living are strategic choices made to gain certain work benefits and navigate the corporate environment more successfully. Further findings from Amemate (2020) indicate that from a young age, Black women have been conditioned to alter the natural appearance of their hair because when it is straighter or slicked down, they were told it is more appropriate for formal settings such as work, weddings, interviews and graduation.

Interestingly, Ghana, unlike South Africa, was not a settler colony and, as such, has a significantly lower white demographic, with white people forming roughly 3% of the approximately 33 million Ghanian population (Statista, 2022). Thus, white people do not form the dominant culture of the country or formal spaces. Despite their lack of dominance, Amemate's (2020) findings reveal that Black women still alter their natural hair to fit more Eurocentric beauty norms within formal settings. This indicates that the influence of Western modernity may exist on a global standard and have permeated Black women's own ideas of beauty.

2.5.2.3 Embracing Black Hair

Mbunyuza-Memani (2019) conducted a qualitative study exploring how online blogs on natural hair impact Black South African women. Three blogs were analysed, and 17 interviews were held with Black South African women in order to understand why blogs are used and the types of sisterhoods formed through them. Findings from this study reveal that Black women often experience challenges with their hair, many of them describing it as an inconvenience that may be corrected by emulating Eurocentric hairstyles. In addition, participants mention that media influence during their upbringing contributed towards negative perception of their hair. However, online blogs serve as a medium of resistance against this colonial mindset.

Mbunyuza-Memani (2019) found that for Black women, natural hair blogs have created online communities that are transformative and vital in supporting their identity reconstruction as they embrace and celebrate their newly found pride in their hair.

Jacobs and Kelemi (2020) conducted a qualitative study exploring how Black women on YouTube vlogging about their natural hair journeys impact their psychological well-being and sense of self. 10 YouTube vloggers aged 20-35 were selected as research participants, and a thematic analysis of their videos was conducted. Findings suggest that more Black women transitioned from relaxed to natural hair following the natural hair movement and began their journeys of unlearning colonial grooming practices. Moreover, documenting these experiences on YouTube provided a therapeutic outlet, resulting in increased confidence and self-acceptance. Having now reviewed the bulk of empirical studies on Black hair situated in the Global South, this literature review now shifts focus to research set specifically within the workplace context.

2.5.2.4 Black Hair in the Workplace

Knight and Long (2019) examined Black women's perspectives on their hair and how this impacts their positions as employees in a historically white institution. The study was conducted qualitatively, and data was collected from 14 staff members from the University of Cape Town using semi-structured interviews. The study's findings indicate that Afrocentric hair was considered a signifier of low financial income. In contrast, straight hair afforded women a higher level of respect and more access to opportunities. It was also found that Black women used their hair to negotiate their identities at work and construct "new" identities in order to get ahead. In contradiction, Knight and Long (2019) also found that some Black women straighten their hair simply because of preference, suggesting that there is a complex relationship between Black women, their hair, and their identities.

Mathenjwa (2021) conducted a qualitative study rooted in interpretivism to examine the experiences of Black professionals in South African corporate workplaces. The study's primary aim was to understand and describe the experiences of Black people as they navigate predominantly white environments. Mathenjwa (2021) interviewed nine Black senior management professionals - using the Identity Negotiation theory as a lens – to interrogate the different modes of code-switching used by these professionals to navigate white spaces. Mathenjwa (2021) found that Black people try to assimilate into whiteness in an effort to fit in

and avoid the daily adverse effects of being Black in a white-populated environment. Notably, this has detrimental psychological and emotional implications, such as emotional stress as a result of identity erasure and heightened imposter syndrome (Mathenjwa, 2021).

These two studies provide valuable insights into the experiences of being Black women in predominantly white workplaces. They diverge from the previously reviewed literature from the Global South in that they consider the working environment. However, they have certain limitations. For instance, Knight and Long (2019) use the university space as their research context, while informative, does not fully capture the dynamics of broader workplace environments such as corporate. Similarly, Mathenjwa (2021) explores Black people's identity in its entirety, thus only making brief remarks on hair. Despite these limitations, both studies were significant for this review as they help situate the literature within the context of South African workplaces. In particular, Mathenjwa (2021) has informed aspects of the theoretical framework of the current study.

CHAPTER 3:

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK/S

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Black women's hair identity at work has become topical, but there is no single theory to directly address the issues of Black women's hair in the workplace. Therefore, two theories have been used to understand this phenomenon fully, as elaborated below.

3.2 AUTHENTICITY AT WORK FRAMEWORK

According to Taylor (1992), authenticity is when an individual lives life in their own way, not by imitating others. Authenticity at work may also be framed as the degree to which an employee can be their "true" self in his/her work environment (van den Bosch et al., 2019). Employees are said to be authentic when behaving and presenting themselves in alignment with their core beliefs, values, self-representations, preferences, and needs and wants (Hewlin et al., 2020; Gino et al., 2020). The degree of authenticity may be measured using three dimensions, viz. self-alienation, authentic living, and accepting external influence (Wood et al.,

2008, cited in van den Bosch et al., 2019). Self-alienation is feelings of detachment from one's true self and “not knowing who one is” at work (van den Bosch et al., 2019, p.248). Authentic living is the degree to which an employee works and behaves in accordance with their personal values and beliefs (van den Bosch et al., 2019). Accepting external influence concerns acknowledging the views of others in the work environment and attempting to live and present oneself in a manner that meets their expectation (van den Bosch et al., 2019). An employee is deemed as living authentically when they exhibit low levels of self-alienation, increased authentic living, and a lack of accepting external influence (van den Bosch et al., 2019).

Taylor (1992) highlights the benefits of living authentically, arguing that it results in self-fulfillment and self-realization. In line with Taylor (1992), recent literature suggests that authenticity increases employees' job satisfaction, motivation, engagement, well-being, performance, and sense of belonging at work (Goldman & Kernis, 2006; van den Bosch et al., 2019; Hewlin et al., 2020; Gino et al., 2020). Irrespective of the benefits authenticity at work provides, employees ignore it; instead, they lean towards “catering” (Gino et al., 2020, p.83). Catering is where employees attempt to make a good impression on their employers, supervisors, or those held in high regard by adjusting their verbal and nonverbal behaviours to align with their target groups’ perceived interests, beliefs, preferences, and self-representations (Gino et al., 2020). Employees cater for gratification purposes such as employment, promotion, and being tasked with a project. However, this comes at the detriment of their well-being as they are said to experience discomfort, which actualises as anxiety when performing catering (Gino et al., 2020).

This framework is appropriate for the current study as it enables the researcher to interrogate the experiences of African women with natural hair in corporate organisations from an employer-employee aspect. Thus, the study aims to provide nuanced details of how these employees, whether consciously or unconsciously, alter their natural hair to suit what they perceive to be their target group's preference in hopes of career progression and other rewards. Of concern, from an identity perspective, the framework accounts for only one out of the many aspects that exert undue influence on an employee to transform their true self. The concept of catering posits that an employee transforms his/her identity to impress their target of interest (.i.e. employers, selection panels, etc.) (Hewlin et al., 2020). This narrow focus neglects other aspects of the work environment that pressure employees to modify their identity. The Identity negotiation theory has thus been incorporated to address and interrogate these other influential factors.

3.3 IDENTITY NEGOTIATION THEORY

The Identity Negotiation Theory (INT) comprises two main concepts: identity and negotiation. In the context of the INT, identity refers to individuals' multilayered identities by gender, socio-economic class, religion, sexual orientation, professional/familial role, and self-image (Ting-Toomey, 2015). Identity may also be understood as personal and unique attributes individuals associate themselves with through comparison with those of others (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018). It is, therefore, argued that one's identity is formed through social conditioning, life experiences, and recurring in-group and out-group interactions (Ting-Toomey, 2015). In the context of the INT, negotiation refers to an interchange of verbal and non-verbal cues between either in-group or out-group members, which serve to maintain and assert or modify and challenge the personal identity and self-image of others (Ting-Toomey, 2015).

The INT is premised on ten core assumptions that are paramount when seeking to understand how individuals navigate social spaces. The assumptions presented by Ting-Toomey (1999) provide insight into the social prerequisites of identity negotiation. The first assumption contends that an individual’s identity is constantly reinforced through their interaction with others and their congruence or membership with specific groups (Ting-Tooney, 1999; 2015). The second assumption suggests that group membership is essential, as all individuals, regardless of difference, long for identity and emotional security, achieved through forming secure connections with others (Ting-Toomey, 1999; 2015). However, Ting-Toomey (2015) cautions against excessive identity and emotional security, arguing that it leads to the perpetuation of ethnocentric ideals, whereas a lack thereof (identity insecurity) results in feelings of anxiety, fear, and a longing to fit in (Ting-Toomey, 2015). The third assumption posits that identity security and/or insecurity are accentuated by the dominant culture of the environment (Ting-Toomey, 1999, 2015). If the culture is aligned with an individual, they are said to feel familiar and secure, while foreign environments breed unfamiliarity and insecurity (Ting-Toomey, 2015). The fourth assumption, in line with the above, says that feelings of identity security and/or insecurity are further reinforced by the social environment's acceptability of a particular identity (Ting-Toomey, 2015). In essence, an individual is more likely to maintain their identity if it is positively reinforced, whereas if it is stigmatized, they experience differentiation. The fifth assumption addresses interaction predictability, which brings forward the idea that individuals are more likely to experience interaction predictability when navigating culturally aligned and familiar environments (Ting-Toomey, 1999; 2015).

This is arguably a positive interaction as individuals know what to expect when communicating with coworkers/peers. On the contrary, interaction in unfamiliar environments breeds anxiety and mistrust due to unpredictability (Ting-Toomey, 1999; 2015). The sixth assumption posits that people desire interpersonal connection with those around them. The seventh assumption contends that unfamiliar cultural environments create identity turmoil, confusion, and chaos. In order to subdue these feelings, individuals undergo identity transformation (Ting-Toomey, 2015). Assumptions eight and nine contend that this is the onset of identity negotiation, as individuals have internalized the norms of their environments. In an effort to fit in and relinquish feelings of un-belonging, they change their identities and mirror those of the dominant cultural environment. Assumption ten contends that satisfactory identity negotiation is achieved when an individual feels respected, understood, and valued in their environment (Ting-Toomey, 2005, 2015).

The INT is appropriate for this study as it provides a critical lens to interrogate how interpersonal relations at work and the organisational culture of corporate institutions influence African women employees' identity at work. The study's dual framework permits the researcher to explore African women's experiences in corporate organisations holistically by addressing employee-employer relations, interpersonal work relations, and the corporate organisational culture.

CHAPTER 4:

METHODOLOGY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the research methodology employed to analyse Black women's experiences in relation to their hair in South African corporate workplaces. It details and justifies the study's qualitative design and interpretivist paradigm, both of which were strategically selected as they are appropriate to address the study's aims and objectives. This chapter continues to provide an in-depth description of the study's non-probability recruitment strategy, also detailing information about the participants, including the inclusion criteria, type of hair, age, industry, and position at work. In addition, this chapter describes the study's data collection methods, discusses the pilot study and its importance for this research, explores the use of thematic analysis and details how it was applied to the research, and includes a reflexive section. Finally, acknowledging the importance of a study's trustworthiness and adherence to ethical principles, this chapter describes how the researcher maintained research rigour and the ethical protocols followed.

4.2 RESEARCH DESIGN AND PARADIGM

This study adopted a qualitative research design. This research strategy seeks to understand and interpret social phenomena and unique human experiences through collecting and analysing non-numerical data (Bryman & Bell, 2014). Utilising a qualitative design enabled the researcher to carefully analyse the lived experiences and perceptions of Black women with various hair textures in South African corporate workplaces. This study is rooted in an interpretivist research paradigm. This paradigm, which has been the main anchor of this study, posits that there is no single truth to reality and instead argues that reality is premised on people's subjective, historically, and culturally rooted lived experiences (Blackwell, 2018). Employing this paradigm has restrained the researcher from projecting their own lived experiences as a Black woman who has faced discrimination and ridicule because of their natural hair, ensuring that the focus remains on understanding and reporting on the participant's unique experiences.

4.3 RECRUITMENT STRATEGY

Participants were recruited on the researcher's personal LinkedIn profile. This was deemed as an appropriate site for recruitment as LinkedIn is a professional network used by employment-focused individuals. This study's sample consisted of 16 Black women with natural and straight hair who were and are formally employed in South African corporate organisations. The participants were recruited using two non-probability sampling strategies, namely, purposive and snowballing sampling. The former is a recruitment strategy that permits the researcher to use discretion when identifying participants (Bryman & Bell, 2014). This was critical for this study, given the strict phenotypic inclusion criteria focused on gender and race. Snowballing is the second recruitment strategy employed and refers to the process whereby existing participants in a study refer or recruit potential participants (Bryman & Bell, 2014). In this study, snowballing occurred organically, without the researcher having to prompt participants to refer others, as they felt that this study provided an outlet for personal grievances and a platform to formally document private conversations surrounding Black hair.

Table 4.1 Participants Demographic Information (Names are in Pseudonyms)

Name (Pseudonyms)	**Age (in years)**	**Hair Type**	**Industry**	**Position**	**Years in Organisation**
Nandipha	23	Straight Hair	HR	Junior Position	1.5
Zonke	25	Natural Hair	Finance	Junior Position	Less than a year
Pamela	27	Natural Hair	HR	Middle Management	1.2
Miriam	36	Natural Hair	Industrial Psychology	Middle Management	2
Dineo	28	Natural Hair	Fintech	Middle Management	2.5
Talitha	27	Natural Hair	Mechanical Engineering	Middle Management	1
Phindile	53	Straight Hair	Supply Chain	Senior Management	15
Liezelle	37	Straight Hair	Telecommunications	Senior Management	5
Lucy	30	Straight Hair	ICT	Junior Position	1
Yolanda	31	Natural Hair	Health	Middle Management	4
Thando	35	Natural Hair	Industrial Psychologist consultant	Senior Management	3
Tanaka	42	Natural Hair	HR management	Middle Management	8
Mandisa	40	Natural Hair	Accounting	Middle Management	9
Nancy	24	Natural Hair	ICT	Junior Position	Less than a year

Fikile	28	Natural Hair	Accounting	Middle Management	2
Priscilla	35	Natural Hair	Finance	Senior Management	2.5

4.4 DATA COLLECTION METHOD

Data was collected using one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are a flexible yet guided interview technique that contains elements of both a structured and unstructured interview session (Bryman & Bell, 2014). The combination of both granted the researcher leeway to let the session flow as a conversation while simultaneously prompting where needed to ensure that the 'conversation' did not deviate from the purpose of the study. Aiding in this interview style was the incorporation of open-ended questions (see Appendix A). These questions elicit more elaborate participant responses (Lamb & Fauchier, 2001) and permit the researcher to probe for more information (Bryman & Bell, 2014). Using this interview technique accelerated the process of building rapport with participants, thus positioning the researcher to gain in-depth insight into participants' lived experiences in relation to their hair in corporate environments. All interviews were conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams. Participants were provided with the option of in-person or virtual interviews, and in consideration of their work schedules, the latter was the most favourable option for all participants as this platform provided a convenient data collection site. Although Microsoft Teams was a convenient platform for conducting the interviews, recurring issues with internet connectivity, bandwidth, and load shedding were some of the disadvantages of conducting virtual interviews.

Meeting links were sent to participants via email 3 – 7 days before their interview, and the duration of the interviews was 45-60 minutes. All interviews were recorded on the researcher's personal cell phone. Recording the interviews using a cellphone, rather than Microsoft Teams, ensured reliable access to the recordings and helped maintain a more comfortable atmosphere for participants. The Microsoft Teams platform automatically displays a recording notification, which can create tension or cause participants to become more guarded in their responses. Cellphone recording avoided this while still meeting ethical requirements, as participants were informed through the Participant Information Sheet and reminded again just before recording

began. This method also allowed for secure, long-term storage of the recordings, without the risk of automatic deletion after 60 to 120 days, as is the case with Microsoft Teams.

4.5 PILOT STUDY

A pilot study is a small-scale preliminary study carried out prior to conducting research on a larger scale (Malmqvist et al., 2019). There are two main types of pilot studies: (1) a feasibility study, which serves as a trial run and means to assess the practicalities of the larger scale study and (2) a pretesting study used to test out a specific research instrument (Malmqvist et al., 2019). For this research, a single interview was conducted as a pilot study to assess feasibility and as a form of pretesting. The feasibility pilot aimed to assess the practicality of virtual interviews; specifically, the researcher was determining whether personal resources (i.e., physical interview environment, MS Teams audio and camera, personal Wi-Fi) could support 40+ minutes of interview sessions. The outcome of this pilot confirmed the feasibility of the study; as such, no changes were made. The pretest was conducted to assess whether the interview questions could extract the necessary information. The outcome of the pretest led to two research questions being omitted due to redundancy, and one was rephrased for clarity. Conducting a preliminary study also enhanced the researchers' interviewing skills and preparedness. This was particularly crucial for the study, as it was the researcher's first experience conducting a study involving actual participants.

4.6 DATA ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis was used to analyse all the interview data. This method of analysis involves exploring trends and patterns within the data by identifying, critically analysing, and reporting on the themes found (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This is achieved through examining what, how, and by whom something is said (Vaismoradi et al., 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2019). Thematic analysis was selected as the most appropriate method of analysis for this study as it is uniquely suited for qualitative research as well as an interpretivist paradigm. Moreover, it is a highly flexible technique which may be modified based on the requirements of each study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For this study, the researcher generated themes, analysed and interpreted data using the following steps:

- Familiarising with the data: The researcher began by listening to all the audio-recorded interviews and transcribing them verbatim. This was completed manually, as the researcher

found that AI tools paraphrased and summarised the interview sessions and, as a result, lost the depth and nuance of participants' experiences. The transcribed interviews were read and re-read a few more times prior to generating the initial codes.

- Generating initial codes: Codes are words or phrases that appear frequently throughout various interview sessions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These may also be phrases that caught the researcher's interest (Vaismorandi et al., 2013). Informed by both these definitions, the researcher highlighted and noted codes throughout the dataset and made notes on how each could answer the research questions. A deductive approach to analysis was assumed. Deductive reasoning is when a researcher identifies and generates codes from a dataset driven by their study's theoretical framework and analytic interests (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Although this approach provides a less detailed description of the overall data, it was selected as the most appropriate for this study because it enabled the researcher to provide an extremely detailed description of particular aspects of the data (i.e., the research questions and objectives) (Braun & Clarke, 2019).
- Searching for themes: Themes are codes grouped into meaningful chunks or clusters (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher grouped the initial codes based on similarity and their conceptual resemblances, and a total of 19 themes were produced.
- Reviewing themes: This stage ensures that similar topics have been grouped together (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher achieved this by comparing themes with the codes from which they were derived. This resulted in re-coding as some themes were found to have lost the meaning behind participants' words and were overlapping. This reduced the themes to a total of 8 themes.
- Defining themes: The researcher defined themes, ensuring that both theme and sub-themes are clear, catchy, concise, and reflect the essence of the data. This was achieved through lengthy conversations and editing with the study's supervisor.

4.7 RESEARCH RIGOUR

Research rigour refers to the integrity of a study and the degree to which its findings are trustworthy (Bochner, 2018). The research rigour of qualitative studies is often questioned due to subjective data collection and analysis methods, as opposed to the more objective and scientific-based methods evident in quantitative studies (Bochner, 2018). To ensure rigour for this study, the researcher has followed the four widely accepted tenets for excellent and trustworthy qualitative research proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), cited in Alexander

(2019). The scholars advised on four important concepts: (1) credibility, (2) transferability, (3) dependability, and (4) confirmability.

4.7.1 Credibility

Credibility refers to the truthfulness of a study's data and the degree to which that data is an accurate reflection of participants' experiences, views, and perceptions (Haq et al., 2023). The availability of raw data in a study may be used to maintain credibility (Adler, 2022). This study established credibility by including direct quotes in the findings section, ensuring that the researchers' discussion was a direct interpretation of participants' experiences. Member checking is another commonly used and effective method to ensure credibility, whereby participants review findings and interpretations to ensure an accurate representation of their views (Haq et al., 2023). Due to time constraints associated with completing a professional master's in one year, for this study, the researcher, only member checked with three participants, who were strategically selected as their transcription files were unclear and ambiguous. Triangulation is another method used to reaffirm the credibility of qualitative research (Adler, 2022). For this study, credibility was ensured through the triangulation of investigators, which is the investigation of participants' perspectives by more than one researcher (Haq et al., 2023). This was achieved through a lengthy in-person session with the researcher's supervisor, whereby both parties listened to a portion of the audio-recorded interviews, read the transcription files and analysed the themes and interpretation.

4.7.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree to which a study is replicable and its findings are representative of a larger population (Haq et al., 2023). The nature of qualitative research does not aim for extremely broad generalisability due to its small sample size (Haq et al., 2023). Nonetheless, to ensure the transferability of this study, the researcher has provided rich and thick descriptions of data, such as participants' demographic information (refer to table 4.1), detailed data collection methods with attached appendices, and a descriptive methodology. Such contextual information allows the readers of this study to compare it to other contexts and easily replicate it (Haq et al., 2023).

4.7.3 Dependability

Dependability refers to the consistency and stability of a study's research process (Haq et al., 2023). It involves demonstrating that the researchers' discretion, choices, and the overall study's findings are dependable and reliable (Haq et al., 2023). For this study, the researcher demonstrated dependability by heeding the corrective comments and suggestions provided by the proposal reader and supervisor, checking and re-checking all the raw data and transcriptions thoroughly with the supervisor and following all interview and ethical protocols.

4.7.4 Confirmability

Confirmability is the degree of unbiasedness or relative objectivity of a qualitative study, which may be established through triangulation (Haq et al., 2023). For this study, the researcher established this by having a diverse representation of Black women in the study. Participants included Black women from various corporate industries, spanning a broad age range (from early 20s to early 50s) and occupying different hierarchical positions, from junior to senior management. This allowed for an analysis of a range of experiences and perceptions which differed from the researcher's experiences. Maintaining high transparency is another method for maintaining confirmability (Hadi & Closs, 2015). For this study, the researcher established this by following a narrative research approach whereby each decision in the research process was explained and justified. In addition to a narrative approach, a reflexive section (refer to 4.8) was included in the study, as it is an important strategy for disclosing the researchers' personal biases and other influential factors during the research process (Haq et al., 2023).

4.8 REFLEXIVITY

In a qualitative study, the researcher serves as the primary tool for data collection tool, as such, their past experiences and biases can influence the research process (Haynes, 2017). To manage this in my study, I practised reflexivity, defined as the researcher's awareness and acknowledgement of their role and its impact on the process and outcome of a study (Haynes, 2017). This process involved considering how my past experiences, and identity impact the study (Haynes, 2017). As a young Black woman with a natural 4c Afro, I have been met with multiple counts of covert discrimination since childhood (see section 1.1). I understand that my lived experience is a cornerstone of this study and has provided valuable qualities for this study, such as understanding, empathy, and forming rapport with participants.

However, I also recognise that my positionality could introduce bias in the research process. For instance, due to my negative experiences with my hair in predominantly white schools, I had initially assumed that my research participants' workplace experiences would inevitably be undergirded by discrimination. While I was aware of this potential bias, I had not formulated a concrete plan to address it. This changed during my first research meeting with my supervisor, who provided an invaluable solution when she presented me with two options: to study how Black women are discriminated against at work due to their hair or to explore whether Black women feel empowered to wear their natural hair at work. In choosing the latter, I avoided preconceived notions of discrimination while writing up interview questions, resulting in a broader range of participants' workplace experiences, as some participants shared no adverse experiences related to their hair work.

Further circumstances that served to mitigate these biases, was being allocated a white supervisor. Initially, I had met this working relationship with hesitancy, as our vast differences in identity and lived experiences meant that our perspectives and the way we conceptualised information were different. However, in hindsight, these differences provided the perfect opportunity for peer debriefing, particularly during data analysis and writing the results sections. For instance, approaching the analysis stage from an emic perspective, I often risked overanalysing participants' experiences as discriminatory, whereas my supervisor's etic perspective allowed me to avoid such circumstances and interpret participants' experiences for what they are, as opposed to attaching a discriminatory undertone to each. By maintaining an awareness of my position and biases, I connected deeply with my research participants without imposing my experiences. This was integral in reinforcing research rigour and upholding ethical standards throughout the research process.

4.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethics in research are basic principles which ensure beneficence and non-maleficence to participants and the discipline of psychology (Greaney et al., 2012). To ensure the study caused no harm, the researcher applied for and obtained ethical clearance from the University of the Witwatersrand Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC Non-Medical) (see Appendix D) before recruiting participants and/or conducting interviews. Participant information sheets (PIS) detailing the nature of the research, how it will be conducted, what it will be used for, participants' right to withdraw at any point, and the risks involved in participating were emailed

to all participants prior to data collection (see Appendix B). The PIS was accompanied by consent forms that ensured that participants understood the study they would be participating in, requested permission to use the data collection methods outlined in the PIS, and reiterated their rights (see Appendix C). To further protect participants from potential harm, they were not recruited nor approached within the context of their organisations. To ensure anonymity and privacy, the study refers to participants using pseudonyms and has omitted any direct or indirect references to participants' organisations or information that may link them to the study. To maintain confidentiality, all research data, audio recordings, and transcription files have been stored in a locked folder on the researcher's laptop, protected by a password.

4.10 CONCLUSION

This chapter outlined the qualitative research design used to critically analyse the experiences of Black women with various hair textures in South African corporate organisations. This study consisted of 16 black women, with an age range of 20-50+ years working in different sectors and levels in corporate. The participants were recruited using purposive sampling via LinkedIn and the snowballing technique. Prior to data collection, the researcher conducted a pilot study to ensure that the interview questions aligned with the purpose of the study. Data collection was achieved using one-on-one semi-structured interviews spanning 45 – 60 minutes conducted online via Microsoft Teams. The collected interview data was manually transcribed by the researcher and analysed using thematic analysis. The integrity of the research process and the quality of the study’s results were ensured by following the four tenets of quality research, namely: (1) credibility, (2) transferability, (3) dependability, and (4) confirmabilityand adhering to all ethical protocols as outlined by the University of the Witwatersrand Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC Non-Medical). Following this methodology enabled the researcher to explore the role Black women’s hair plays in their experiences in corporate workplaces.

CHAPTER 5:

FINDINGS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, Black women's hair has been a topic of contention, with its natural curls and coils often animalised and used as a tool of subjugation, rendering it a site of oppression (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014). Consequently, many Black women engaged in identity negotiation or 'passing' by engaging in hair straightening practices and hiding their natural hair under wigs and headscarves to conform to societal expectations (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014). More recently, while there has been an increased global acceptance and admiration for Black hair, various scholars (Amemate, 2020; Gougen & Hamlims, 2021) argue that white-dominated spaces are not readily accepting of Black hair, deeming it unappealing and necessitating alteration or hiding to gain acceptance.

The aim of this study is to explore Black women's experiences in relation to their hair in South African corporate workplaces. This study focuses on four main research objectives to achieve this, namely, (1) to explore Black women's experiences in relation to their hair in corporate workplaces, (2) to understand whether Black women feel empowered to wear their hair naturally at work, (3) to explore whether corporate organisational culture influences/dictates Black women's hairstyle choices, (4) to explore how Black women negotiate their self-representation identities in corporate workplaces. After interviewing 16 Black women who have worked and are currently working in South African corporate organisations, a thematic analysis revealed eight themes. This chapter presents the findings of this study through these eight overarching themes:

- Organisational context determines acceptability.
- They don't say it, but we hear it.
- Overcompensating to hide my Blackness
- The pain of conforming to and defying Western standards
- Navigating empowerment through natural hair in corporate spaces
- The social weight of Black hair

- I love it, but it's too much to handle
- My hair, my identity

The findings under each theme are presented using participants' verbatim accounts. This approach was taken to ensure accurate representation of both what participants shared and how they expressed their experiences, with minimal to no analysis of the meaning behind their words. The section is structured in this way to preserve authenticity, while the discussion that follows offers further context, interpretation, and analysis of these experiences.

5.2 THEME 1: ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT DETERMINES ACCEPTABILITY

This theme uncovered Black women's hairstyling choices as a reflection of the context of their organisations. Standards of presentability and professionalism differ on whether the environment is predominantly white, diverse, or Afrocentric. This theme explores how these various cultural dynamics influence Black women's hairstyling choices, thus highlighting the power of institutional expectations in shaping hair acceptability.

Talitha:

- When I am client-facing in settings where I am not familiar with the standing of the people [racial category], especially if their opinion matters and will impact me in some way, I will wear my hair in a way that is socially acceptable to them. As opposed to how I would prefer it. So basically, nothing too frilly, nothing too dramatic. Ideally, I will probably have them in braids or sleek back my hair to ensure it behaves. Nothing interesting, not in the way and not bringing attention to itself.

Dineo:

- At a recent workplace event, I wore my dreadlock extensions. It wasn't a big issue because 85% of the attendees were Black, and most of them came from other African countries. So, hair was not really a factor. I was more comfortable wearing this hairstyle because of this. If I'm being honest, if it were the usual events where there it was 85% white, I'd definitely come with my weave.

Pamela:

- I think there are spaces where we need to alter our hair. My current organisation is somewhat chilled. But I have a friend who is an accountant and has a big and thick Afro. She was instructed by her manager to wear a wig or straighten her hair when meeting an important client [mostly white]. I am sure she was not the first or the last person who will experience that in the workplace. There are spaces where Black women feel the need or are instructed to "look professional" at work.

Yolanda:

- In medicine [psychiatry], I think we are just too busy to care. So, hair is not a big thing. But for my friends who are in corporate, and I don't mean the government sector. They always get a lot of flak on their hairstyles and, as such, are more reluctant to wear their natural hair, as it is accompanied by stares, constant touching, and comments such as: "Oh, today you didn't have time to do your hair today" or the "in a week's times we have an important meeting please make sure to do your hair".

Liezelle:

- At work, it is predominantly a Black space, so there isn't really a bad perception made about one's hair. However, if I am going to a board meeting, I'm not going to go in with a super wild[2] hairstyle because I want people to listen to what I am saying and not focus on my hair.
- When I travel to our international offices, I style my hair accordingly. It all depends on where I am going. If I travel to our offices in Nigeria, I can do whatever because they are just as woke as we are. But if I am going to more conservative countries like Sudan, I'd probably go in my cornrows, not to cause unnecessary drama.

Dineo:

- Depending on which spaces you want to enter, you have to be mindful of your hairstyle and consider whether you look like those people in those spaces; you can't really be blind to these things.
- Its [hair] never really an issue here [new company]. I just tend to be mindful when I'm seeing clients, you know, because this is South Africa, it's still very much stereotypical, and

[2] Interestingly, Liezelle used the same term *wild* to describe her natural hair.

I don’t want to lose a deal just because of my hair. So, I am very adaptable when it comes to that.

5.3 THEME 2: THEY DON’T SAY IT, BUT WE HEAR IT

This theme uncovered how corporate culture reinforces and communicates a standard of appearance without explicitly stating it. The phrase “they don’t say it, but we hear it” reflects participants' experience of never being directly instructed to wear their hair straight but receiving subtle hints and cues which communicated this expectation.

Dineo:

- In my previous company, they were a bit racist, even if they wouldn’t say that they were. For example, there’d be comments like, “Oh, I prefer you better with this hair; in that case, I am wearing a weave. I think it was a cultural thing. They would also say, “You look neater like this”, and that’s the most vocal they’ll be, but you can pick up at these consistent sub-hints. And when I am wearing my Afro, it will be, “Oh, you look different”, or “And what inspired this look?” .

Tanaka:

- Managers, white Male managers, white female managers – speak in backhanded comments and it's not just ignorance. I firmly believe that it is rooted in racism, but often, people find other words to call it, such as curiosity. But these are the microaggressions we experience as Black women when in spaces that are fully occupied by white females. It’s a dangerous space especially when there are white males.

Nandipha:

- I remember this one time at work, I didn’t tie my hair back and it was in its frizzy state. There were so many stares from my white and Indian managers and supervisors; they’d also comment in shock, “Oh, is that your hair?”. This was my first and last time wearing my hair naturally. It's like they don’t outright say it looks bad and untidy, but you can tell from the line of comments and questioning that’s what they are implying.

Mandisa:

- When preparing to meet the board or important clients, our manager (white female) would often “nicely” comment on our looks – as a way of trying to tell us what is expected.

Zonke:

- When I had my Afro out, my manager (white female with mixed-race children) commented, “Oh, you look nice; I should try that hairstyle on my child,” and I was like “, Oh, okay”. At face value, it seemed like a compliment, but as I thought about it throughout the day, it wasn’t, and all I could say was, “Oh, okay”.

Fikile:

- With my Afro, I have been told that I look young; some even said I look like a 12-year-old. Naturally, in order to be taken seriously, I have opted to transition my hair to dreadlocks or wear weaves.

Talitha:

- In the office, no one says anything, but you feel it. I think the prevalence of anti-harassment laws in the workplace has made people more restrained. If it were not for this, I think there would be more open criticism of my hair.

Phindile:

- Yes, definitely, I am perceived differently based on my hairstyle, especially by my white counterparts. When I am wearing a wig, I’ll often get compliments that I would otherwise not receive when wearing my hair naturally.

Pamela:

- If I wear a weave or sleek back, I get comments like “Oh, your hair is so neat”. I work mostly with White people, so when they make these comments, to them, it's nothing. But to me, it comes as condescending and not really nice.

Nancy:

- I work with mostly white people, and they are always staring. So, I don’t feel comfortable letting my hair out. It’s like you’re a circus. It would take a lot for me to be comfortable.

5.4 THEME 3: OVERCOMPENSATING TO HIDE MY BLACKNESS

The term ‘Black/ness’ as a racial identifier in this study encompasses more than just skin colour, but hair texture as well. This theme explores how this expression of Blackness within

women in corporate is met with a perception of incompetence and laziness. This theme further uncovers how Black women sleek back their hair as a mechanism to evade these perceptions and assert their professionalism.

5.4.1 Sub-theme 1: You're too Black; you're incompetent

Thembi:

- In the position that I am in [HR manager], I often deal with cases where Black women feel as if they do not fit in, and others often feel that their views are not accepted. In investigating these cases, I often try to find the problem, and more times than not, I find that the problem is not the work but their Blackness. Some attempt to cover this up by opting for more likeable hairstyles; they keep quiet when their boundaries are being infringed upon.

Nancy:

- I think it's easy for other races to come to a space and be taken seriously. I am a software developer. Everyone in my space wears jeans, cool graphic t-shirts, and any hairstyle. I would love to do that, but I don't know if it's something that has been put into our brains when we were younger, or it's just how I see things, but I can't show up like that. It's unprofessional. It's me not respecting my work. It's difficult to walk in a space with an Afro and baggy jeans and be taken seriously. As a black woman, you need to show up constantly and look the part even though your co-workers don't look the part, but they got the part somehow. There is a black woman at work; she dresses like the white men [jeans and t-shirt], and no one takes her seriously because of that. Which is crazy because everyone else dresses like that.

Fikile:

- I work in marketing, so things are pretty chilled. People can come in jeans, sneakers, and any hairstyle. But I just realised that Black women never look like this, we show up. We wear suits and heels, our hair is always done up, and we look professional. Our finance manager is probably the only Black woman who shows up chilled. She is so relaxed that she will come to work in sweatpants and a T-shirt, and her hair, however, and because of this, even though she is really good at her job, she is labelled as someone who is lazy and doesn't care about her work.
- If you look at the way women take their hair so seriously. They spend a lot of money getting installs [glueing down a wig] and braids, sometimes monthly. I think 80% of my colleagues

always look hot, and they put in all of this effort to be perceived better and more highly. I think women in other racial groups think and worry about hair, but not as much as us.

Yolanda:

- There's a pressure to always have your hair done. If you're attending an event, the first thing that comes to mind is, “Ouu, my hair”. Even when one has a new hairstyle, they are already thinking about their next. As a Black woman, you must never look like your problems and must always look prim, proper, and presentable. Or else, negative perceptions on the quality of your work are formed.
- You must always be neat… I think it stems from way back when, for you to be considered clean, you must have your hair done. If you do not succumb to this pressure, you are thought of as lazy, unclean, unkept, and even say you are poor.

Priscilla:

- When you work in a system where you are not the intended beneficiary, the hurdles and the standards you need to reach and excel at are almost impossible to reach. It takes a lot; you need to be over-exceptional just to get to the same place where those who the system was intended for are.
- Corporate spaces have not become entirely inclusive. As a Black woman, you still need to be cognizant of how you appear. I am not a person who is very adventurous with how I wear my hair, how I dress, and how I speak. I do toe the line, which is acceptable in corporate spaces, but when I think about people who are very “out there” with how they do their hair, I don’t think they are accepted in corporate spaces. You kind of have to fit the mould to be taken seriously in corporate. Toeing the line is a skill I have acquired. So, I have no trouble doing it.

5.4.2 Sub-theme 2: Sleek back is the job hack

Fikile:

- I just applied for a new job, one that is a higher position than the one I am currently in, and I wore my Afro but sleeked it back. I think going into an interview for quite a senior position is an executive decision; I would never in my life wear my Afro out.

Zonke:

- The goal would be styling it as straight as possible. Sleeking it down. Professional hairstyles including tying your hair back, not in your face… I advise incoming recruits to gel down their Afros, and if they prefer to wear wigs and weaves, I would not suggest dreadlocks.

Talitha:

- I will wear my hair in a way that is socially acceptable to them [white male managers]. So basically, nothing too frilly, nothing too dramatic. I will probably have them in braids, ideally, or sleek back my hair and make sure it's behaving. Nothing interesting, not in the way and not bringing attention to itself.

Nandipha:

- You are more likely to be perceived as serious and competent with your straight or sleeked-back hair. If you had to select a consultant solely based on how they looked. You're more likely to go the one with the straight or sleeked-back hair. These are the biases that exist, Black people included.

Dineo:

- If I were invited to an interview, I wouldn't wear my hair like this [natural 2-strand twists]. I'd slap on my weave because I'm not going to ruin my chances of employment. When you get the job maybe then you switch your hair. This is the advice I gave to a relative when they could not find a job; I told them to cut their dreadlocks, and they did. They're now employed in white corporate.

Nancy:

- In a high-stakes meeting, Black woman definitely wear their hair in a wig or sleek back. At least if it's their first time, the second time, then maybe they would experiment with more natural hairstyles. I guess when people see au in Afro, they get scared; they think, "Oh my gosh, Pan-Africanism, this is someone who is disruptive and always advocating, like me, we don't need a strong Black woman". When they see a sleek pony, it's like, "Oh my gosh, she is so sweet; she won't do much". So I guess we do these hairstyles so that we don't get cancelled out, and be safe.

5.5 THEME 4: THE PAIN OF CONFORMING TO AND DEFYING WESTERN STANDARDS

This theme delves into the physical and emotional pain Black women are faced with when navigating Western beauty standards at work. Whether conforming to these standards by manipulating their hair or defying them by wearing it naturally, both choices carry unique challenges. This manifests in various forms, from physical discomfort caused by styling to the emotional toll tied to identity and acceptance in the workplace.

5.5.1 Sub-theme 1: Professionalism leaves me in pain

These are shared experiences of women who have made great attempts to conform to Western beauty standards at work.

Pamela:

- I don’t think Black women were considered when this standard of professionalism was set. Our hair has to grow to a certain length for us to actually be able to tie it. Even when you have achieved that length, having it tied up causes headaches, and doing this style continuously often leads to a receding hairline. These are things that were not considered.

Nandipha:

- Black women were definitely not considered when this standard was set. Tying an Afro or frizzy hair to the back is difficult, hurts, and causes headaches. Some even have to use shoelaces because there's no hair tie that can actually hold their hair.

Mandisa:

- I always had dreadlocks, but I cut my hair in 2014 because I developed psoriasis due to the pulling. This was mainly because I constantly had my hair twisted and in hairstyles, as this was the definition of professionalism. So, I would visit hair salons every 2 weeks.

Zonke:

- I don’t like tying my hair up because in order to tie up natural hair, you need to secure it tightly. It gets painful and causes headaches, and imagine doing this from 8 am to 5p. But I do because what else can I do?

Talitha:

- We were not part of the professional workforce to begin with, so the whole idea of professionalism was set up with Whites in mind. We had to integrate ourselves into systems that were preexisting. So we suffer and struggle trying to do that. People are getting more vocal about it, but we can usually only have conversations about it with people who are on the same level you are. People who are higher up don't have the same experience we have, so it's hard to kind of break those barriers.

Thando:

- There was a mutual friend of mine; she went to twist up her dreads. The next day, she never woke up because they were too tight; she passed on. I think Black women put themselves through this because of unattainable standards of beauty. People die for beauty; what has been defined as beauty, people tend to paste it in themselves and run with it, even if it's to their detriment. Similarly, if it's the culture of that place and it is deemed important at that time, people will follow.

5.5.2 Sub-theme 2: Don't touch my hair

These are the shared experiences of women who defy Western standards of beauty by wearing their hair naturally at work. The phrase 'don't touch my hair' captures the internal sentiments of participants, highlighting their frustration at the lack of respect for their personal space and boundaries.

Tanaka:

- The biggest frustration with having your hair out in the office is the more likely you are going to get the "Oh, your hair is so nice" as they land their hands on your head. And you are just like come on boundaries. Even after asserting your boundaries around your hair, some shame you for it… but it helps being a manager in HR cause they do not approach that quickly.

Priscilla:

- White and Indian women make these comments… "Is that your real hair?", "why haven't I seen your hair like this?" "How do you get it like that?", "Can I touch it". I don't like

these comments cause I feel like they other me and make me feel like an outclass. I mean, we live in an African country, and our hair is like this; it shouldn't be a huge topic of conversation in 2024.

Talitha:

- But with white women, they still ask, "Oh, is this your hair? Can I touch it?". There is so much curiosity, so they ask about it. Some try not to be rude about it because they do not want to be reported to HR.

Zonke:

- When I had my Afro out, I would have people within my team at work commenting and touching my hair. It's like, can't you compliment my hair without touching it?

Pamela:

- You will be minding your own business and quietly working, and the question comes from my white counterparts: "Can I touch it?" This question throws me off a lot.

5.5.3 Sub-theme 3: Unseen and Misidentified

This subtheme highlights two critical experiences shared by Black women, relieving how deviating from the norm, paradoxically, has rendered them forgotten, overlooked, and misidentified in corporate spaces. Although only two participants shared these experiences, their accounts highlight a significant challenge surrounding identity in environments that fail to recognise their individuality.

Tanaka:

- When I change my hair [from a wig to an Afro], I feel like I remain myself, but apparently, I don't because people won't recognise me. For example, when I had dreadlocks, I was confused with another colleague who had the same hair or any other Black colleague. Mind you these people who don't recognise me I have been working with for years.

Zonke:

- After wearing braids for 2 months, I took them out and wore my natural hair to work. I walked in with this other black colleague of mine in a meeting, and they assumed we were siblings. Yet the other colleague has been working there for over a year… but at least there's two of us now

5.6 THEME 5: THE CONDITIONS FOR NATURAL HAIR EMPOWERMENT

This theme uncovers the specific circumstances that enable Black women working in corporate to feel empowered to wear their hair naturally. The majority of participants expressed a lack of empowerment in wearing their natural hair at work due to the adverse attention and consequences it often attracts. Some expressed that straighter hair made them feel more attractive, while there was a shared general perception that natural hair can be perceived as a lack of effort. Interestingly, a few women deviated from this trend, expressing a sense of empowerment in wearing their hair naturally. However, this empowerment appears to stem from specific conditions that create this sense of confidence, comfort, and acceptance with natural hair. This includes seniority within the workplace, social acceptance of certain types of Afros (i.e., the "good" Afro), and intentional non-conformity as a form of resistance and self-expression.

5.6.1 Sub-theme 1: Seniority comes with empowerment

This subtheme explores the experiences of participants in senior positions within their organisations. While they were not questioned differently from others, their responses consistently highlighted a shared sense of empowerment in wearing their natural hair.

Liezelle:

- Back then [as a junior], it was different. When we entered the organisation, we were still the cohort of the first Black people; we were the original recipients of BEE, and as such, I was looking to impress. At that level, you are competing with many of your peers. Right now, I don't care. I am senior management, and nobody is going to tell me anything about my hair. If you want to fire me, fire me. I don't care. I can get a job somewhere else.

- You learn to navigate this. When I was a junior consultant I was constantly selling work, and I knew not to do something super wild. I had to look like someone you'd give R20 million to. So during this time, I wore braids, wigs, and short hair.
- Black hair does meet the standard of professionalism at work. Afros aren't even a thing anymore. Stereotypes on Black hair have phased out; people wear Afro's and dreadlocks to work now. Also, I think they've gotten used to us now.

Phindile:

- I used to have relaxed hair; in my 20s, it was the in thing to put chemicals in your hair. I think that as I grew around my late 30s, I started to wear my natural hair. At around 20, I had just started working at 30 maybe junior management. When I reached 40, I went into middle management. I think I have gradually become more comfortable with myself and confident with my natural hair over the years.
- I think it's a choice; they [organisations] don't force us to style our hair in a certain way. Nor will anyone say that "your hair is unkempt". Hence, I say everyone's hairstyle is a reflection of their personal choices. The younger generation wears weaves to work if they want to wear natural hair, they should take the initiative and feel confident, and others will follow suit because who is supposed to empower them?

Priscilla:

- If I were to completely change my appearance [wear my hair naturally]. That would not have a huge negative impact on my career because I've gotten to a point where I have proven myself and built a name for myself. I think it would come as a shock, and because of the work that I do, it would become a topic of conversation but that's about it.

Mandisa:

- If you were to google 'accountant' and see the pictures that are there, that's how they expected us to present ourselves at the firm. And then there comes us who are going to break the barriers. I tried by all means to fit the mould; I would visit salons every 2nd week to get my hair twisted and pulled on. I was not as brave as I am now to wear my hair out – I think maturity does that to you.
- Recently got interviewed, and before we began I told the panellist, this is who I am and this is how I will wear my hair [referencing her locs]

Tanaka:

- In Africa, it's ridiculous for there to be an expectation of what is professional. But when you are still low in rank you feel the pressure of complying with what they deem as professional… and when I did not comply, I was tagged as the "typical stubborn Zulu"

5.6.2 Sub-theme 2: Acceptability tied to having a "good" Afro

Yolanda:

- I have been blessed with good hair; my hair is not fine, but it's not too dense, and it is shoulder length now. So when I have it in an Afro, it's like this nice big crown. And I get a lot of attention and positive feedback so that has been motivating.
- I feel empowered to show up authentically in all social spaces. This is something that has gradually developed in my late 20s and now 30s; it wasn't always there. Once my hair started flourishing, that was when the positive feedback started, and that influenced how I saw myself.
- I have been genetically blessed with decent hair; it has always been long and healthy. Women with shorter Afros are not as empowered to wear their Afros out because there is a comparison, and they tend to fall short on that scale. "Your Afro is not worthy", and you have to do all these things to make it look appealing. This is associated with "struggle hair".

Pamela:

- I still feel cute and confident in all the different hairstyles. But if I were to compare, I'd say I like my Afro out more and feel more confident with it. When I have my Afro, I feel a little different. My Afro is quite big, and I like to wear it without tying it, so it will be puffed out.

5.6.2.1 The "not so good" Afro

Priscilla:

- It would also take us… to see those differences as beautiful and acceptable. In as much as we have stopped relaxing our hair, yay that's a great milestone. But we have now also gotten into the " which Afro is more acceptable" is it a 4c or a 4b and gone into scaling that Afro, and arguing that 4a and 4b are better than 4c. It would take us loving our differences as well. We can't expect people to accept us if we can't do the same…Also, Afros are

subjective. The shorter Afros are not perceived as nice as bigger linger Afros because they aren't as versatile when they are in the short phase.

Liezelle:

- I have an Afro and an extremely unmanageable Afro. So, I rarely walk out with my hair because even attempting to get it into a manageable state is a disaster. That's why I always have wigs, doeks [headscarves], or cornrows. I don't have those nice Afro's, it's just a short and sad-looking Afro.
- I can't be those ladies who wake up and puff out their hair. I have a funky texture; I must cut it short or grow it. I can't be at the midpoint; otherwise, I'll look homeless.

Talitha:

- Black women with short hair tend to suffer because, unfortunately, those are not the Afro's that are deemed beautiful.

Fikile:

- Not even to be funny, but I think my hair is untidy when it looks the way you have your hair [I, as the researcher, had let my Afro out in a shrunken state]. When I look at myself with that type of hair, I go, "Argh, I look like an absolute mess".

Nandipha:

- When it's in this state [natural] I look like a farm girl. I look all over the place, I don't know if untidy is the word, but I look like a Lion and not as put together as I would if I would tie it back.

Miriam:

- Waking up and not spending time manipulating my Afro to be longer might be the most convenient hairstyle. However, I do not conform to that style of Afro – to me, it looks scruffy and unkempt. If you would at least pull it back – then I think that's nice.
- This is not nice to admit, but I am not comfortable with my Afro. It's always my last resort; I usually wear it because I don't have time to do my hair. With weaves, There's a clean element to it as if to say I am well-kept.

5.6.3 Sub-theme 3: Its my hair; I'll do what I want

Pamela:

- I felt that my hair was unprofessional because of the comments I got. So, when I got to this new job, I thought, "Well, I like my Afro, and I should stop letting people put me under their thumb so that's when I started embracing my hair and felt like my authentic self.

Mandisa:

- I use my hair as a protesting type of thing, as an asserting myself type of thing. I am a Black woman – and I think academia and corporate, are spaces that were never meant for me to be a professional and exist in them. So it's a feeling of enforcing yourself in a space and telling yourself that I am staying because I know why I am here, and I will assert myself in any way that I can. I often do this using my hair because my hair signifies strength and the value that I have.
- Often, I wear my hair out for the benefit of my students. So that they see that people like them belong in these spaces. It is my way of saying I am here and here to stay.

Tanaka:

- I decided that life is too short to base my appearance on other people's standards and in an environment that very subtly fights who I am but simultaneously wants to maintain an image that they accept all people. I would rather suffer as myself than as somebody else.
- I fight for it every day. I fight to be myself at work… but I have since learnt to not do that via my appearance. It has nothing to do with the work I produce, so why should I?

5.7 THEME 6: THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC WEIGHT OF BLACK HAIR

This theme explores the societal perceptions and economic implications associated with Black women's hairstyling choices, both natural and straight. A number of participants mentioned dreadlocks, as a "problematic" hairstyle in the workplace, one that was tied to cultural stereotyping and judgement. Straighter hair is met with a different, but also stereotypical perception of being a *slay queen*[3], affluence and a sense of professionalism at work

[3] A term with a derogatory undertone referring to women, particularly, Black women who are "confident urban divas who perceive themselves as the epitome of beauty and allure, prioritizing luxurious lifestyle and material success (Ngcaweni, 2023).

5.7.1 Sub-theme 1: Dreadlocks, Marijuana

Liezelle:

- There are certain hairstyles that come with certain perceptions. One of the main reasons I cut my locs was because everywhere I went, people assumed I had drugs, or I knew someone who sold drugs. Whereas when I wear my weave there is an assumption of being a slay queen.

Talitha:

- In Zimbabwe, dreadlocks are not accepted, and I was surprised that this was the case in South Africa. People with locs are often looked down on and deemed unprofessional which gives them a bad reputation. They would often call them “Ah Rasta” and associate them with marijuana and Jamaican music.

Tanaka:

- When I had dreadlocks, people would often say, “Oh, I didn’t know that you are a Rastafarian” no, it's not only Rastafarians that get dreadlocks.

Zonke:

- Cutting my dreadlocks was the best decision from, my work life. At the office only males had dreadlocks, only one women had them too, but they weren’t like mine, she ensured to style them in tight sleeked-back hairstyles and I guess that it is professional.

5.7.2 Sub-theme 2: Hairstyling as an economic marker

Dineo:

- When you’ve got the weave your perceived as educated, you articulate well, and your life is in order. With an Afro, there are perception of broken English, being a recipient of the BEE, and there being financial issues.

Lucy:

- When wearing straight hair, like wigs, there is an assumption that you are a liker of things. But yet again, hair is often used to class a person, so maybe it’s just a coping mechanism. I attended an event, and this lady went with her natural hair. People spoke badly about her

and questioned whether she was short on money. So, I think it's the classist aspect more than it is about liking things. Some will even think you are a village girl if you go to fancy places with an Afro.

- All of these influencers wear wigs, and they get numerous compliments, so we also want to own a wig, look mature, and look like you have money. It's all these things. But with your natural hair, even if it's relaxed, you are just a girl.

Mandisa:

- Sometimes, it's not even a plight to look presentable; it's a trend. "I've got a Peruvian weave; people know that it's R15 000. It's a status symbol, and we produce a generation of young girls who chase this status.

Miriam:

- I am tired of being put into a box depending on my hairstyle. If I have a weave, there is an assumption that I like money or I come from money. Like can we be looked at more than just our hair – there is more to us. There's the general perception that straight hair equates to being a slay queen and a liker of things.

5.8 THEME 7: I LOVE IT BUT ITS TOO MUCH TO HANDLE

This theme explores the complex and deeply personal relationship Black women have with their hair. It highlights the love and deep care they express for their natural hair whilst also uncovering the difficulties of styling and maintaining it on a day-to-day basis; as such, they often manipulate it for convenience. This decision reflects a strategic and pragmatic adaptation to their daily lives rather than internalised negativity.

Zonke:

- My Afro is my pride, and I don't really see myself, nor do I want to change my hair texture. However, I mostly wear braids because it is a task to have to deal with my Afro in the mornings before work. With the Afro, you are concerned about shrinkage, having to prep it the night before, styling it, gelling it, it's all very time-consuming. With braids, it's quick and convenient and helps me look professional.

Yolanda:

- Out of all the hairstyles, I prefer and feel better with my Afro. Weaves are really expensive for no reason. It's a lot of money and effort – wash it, straighten it, curl it, glue it down. It's just too much and inconvenient for me. I search for convenience whilst preparing for work so I mostly wear braids as opposed to weaves or my Afro.

Fikile:

- I feel really happy with myself when I show up with my natural hair. It's just that there is a lot of admin involved with wearing it naturally. So I just pop on a wig.

Nancy:

- Mostly wear braids. Its partly a logistics thing; it's convenient to have braids as opposed to the Afro when preparing and going to work.

5.9 THEME 8: MY HAIR, MY IDENTITY

This theme explores what hair means to Black women, exploring how, for the majority of participants, their hair serves as a cornerstone of their identity. Talitha:

- It helps identify myself as a woman, it's also a medium of expression for me. For African women as a whole, it is a way of identifying ourselves, but with the existence of prejudices, it seems we can't just let our hair be and style it how we want.

Fikile:

- I do feel hair is an element that forms part of your identity. I used to have straight hair and relax it a lot because I grew up like that and did it up until 3rd year. After I cut my hair off completely and started growing it out as an Afro, I started feeling like myself and embracing who I am. Not only who I am but being comfortable in the fact that I am a beautiful black woman, and I appreciate the texture of my hair.

Miriam:

- Yes, I think it is a marker of my identity. The versatility of my hair and texture speaks to my blackness. A younger me always felt that my hair proved that I was a girl. I guess even in my adulthood, I would never cut it bald because then I would look like a boy. Well the

only time I would is due to cultural reasons, whereby we cut our hair when someone has passed on.

Yolanda:

- My hair is a huge part of my identity. Firstly, our self-image is often reliant on it, and I think this dates to the beginning look at the Nubian queens[4]. Secondly, it speaks to my identity and origins. If I had silky blonde hair, even with my skin colour, people would question my origins and where I am from. As a first-generation South African originally from Uganda, people often mention that although I am dark-skinned, they can tell that I am not Tsonga or Venda because of my long hair. People can place me on the map not only because of my skin colour but also largely because of my hair.
- I did the big chop around the period of the natural hair movement. After researching for 6-8 months and watching 1- and 2-hour YouTube videos, I was confident enough to transition to an Afro. It felt extremely liberating. It was different. I liked the texture and appreciated how much volume my hair has.

Talitha:

- By virtue of being Black, the texture of my hair is curly; it's unruly, and it goes against gravity. It identifies me as a Black person. I am often confused as coloured because of my light skin, so I like my hair because it communicates the fact that I am fully black.

Tanaka:

- My hair is definitely a marker of my identity. It presents who I am in so many ways. It will tell you about the state of my mind, how sensitive I was feeling at that time and what image I was trying to project. My hair tells a story of how confident I am in myself.
- You look at the Biblical Samson, who says: My power is in my hair, and that is exactly what our hair is to us. But we live in a society that tells Black women that "you are too much", and this dates to relaxers. The issue was never about the relaxer; it was more about the reason for using it, which was to minimize the visibility of Black women and girls.

Nandipha:

[4] Reference to Nubian queens underscores the historical and cultural pride associated with hair. One that depicts identity strength, and heritage (Rosado, 2003).

- I think now, our hair is important. Actually, it's always been important, but for a long time, we were trying to fit in that we completely dismissed the importance of our hair in our identities. Hence, now you will see more girls with their afro hair challenging what we once believed was the norm. But it still takes a certain person to do, and this only happens in artistic spaces; in corporate, you won't see that. But I feel like a lot of our confidence as Black women comes from our hair and how we style it, so it's a part of our identities.

Zonke:

- For the longest time, growing up in a predominantly Black environment. I have never associated my hair with my identity, but now, I have been made aware of it through the backhanded comments and constant touchy. Being in a white-dominated space and living area, my hair is constantly being pointed out. So, in that sense, it has made me a part of my identity, while I don't actually feel that it is.

Philela:

- That's a difficult one. In one way, it can be a marker of identity because that is how you are identified as a Black woman. But without my hair, I am still a Black woman, so it's a tricky one, and I don't know how to answer. So I'll just say that our hair is just hair. But our appearance is so political, it feels wrong so wrong to say that.

Thando:

- Yes, it is a marker of your identity. I am just thinking about the people that wear wigs, then take them off the next day and how I often do not recognise them, and I'm like, "Is this the same person?" cause there's kind of that distortion. So, it definitely is a marker of your identity, how you look, how you feel, and the brand you portray in society.

Phindile:

- Yes, to a certain extent, it is. I would not cross it over to the cultural lines; I am not keeping my hair because of any cultural reasons – it's not that deep. For me, it's simply about remaining authentic in my Africanness.

Nancy:

- It's very important. It's part of our identity. There's that level of freeness associated with your natural hair.

5.10 CONCLUSION

This chapter presented the qualitative findings of this study. It uncovered 16 Black women's first-hand experiences with their hair in corporate work environments. Their perceptions, experiences, and feelings were captured verbatim and grouped into 8 different themes, namely, Organisational context determines acceptability, They don't say it, but we hear it, Overcompensating to hide my Blackness, The pain of conforming to and defying Western standards, Navigating empowerment through natural hair in corporate spaces, The social and economic weight of Black hair, I love it but its too much to handle, My hair, my identity. The following chapter critically analyses and interprets these findings.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the findings of the study by critically analysing and interpreting the results. The study aimed to explore Black women's experiences – in relation to their hair in South African corporate workplaces. The secondary aim, set out to uncover and understand how Black women navigate the intersections of corporate organisational culture, professional identity, and personal authenticity through their hairstyles at work. Overall, this study aimed to answer these four research questions: (1) What are Black women's experiences in relation to their hair in corporate workplaces? (2) Are Black women empowered to wear their hair naturally at work? (3) Does corporate organisational culture influence / dictate Black women's hairstyle choices? and (4) How do Black women negotiate their self-representation identities in corporate workplaces? For clarity, this chapter is framed by these four research questions with an integration of the Authenticity at Work framework and Identity Negotiation Theory and empirical literature conducted on Black women's hair in the global North and global South as a lens of analysis.

6.2 WHAT ARE BLACK WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES IN RELATION TO THEIR HAIR IN CORPORATE WORKPLACES?

The discussion of the first research question is informed by three themes that were identified during the analysis stage, namely, theme 8: My Hair, My Identity, theme 6: The Social and Economic Weight of Black Hair, and theme 4: The Pain of Conforming to and Defying Western standard. The experiences captured under each theme shed light on the complex role hair has in shaping Black women's experiences in corporate workplaces, as it highlights the tension between Black women's personal identity and professional expectations.

6.2.1 Hair as a Symbol of Identity

Theme 8, 'My Hair, My Identity,' uncovered that many participants view their hair as an integral part of their identity. This aligns with Omotoso's (2018) assertion that for African people, hair is not just a simple aesthetic choice or phenotypical characteristic; instead, it has always been a marker of identity. Participants shared that their hair "communicates the fact that

I am fully black" (Talitha) and is often used to "place me on the map" (Yolanda). Indicating that natural hair for Black women is deeply tied to their social identities and is important for instilling a sense of belonging. Equally important, Matjila (2020) posits that hair is also a medium for self-expression that is used to enhance Black women's self-esteem and self-image. This is consistent with the findings of this study, as participants frequently shared that "a lot of our confidence as Black women comes from our hair and how we style it" (Nandipha) and "our self-image is often reliant on it" (Yolanda). These findings illustrate the significant role natural hair plays in shaping Black women's internal perceptions and self-image, indicating the relationship between hair and the formation of personal identity. This contradicts Le Roux and Oyedemi (2023), who argue that apartheid erased hair as an identity marker for South African women. Instead, in addition to hair being viewed as a critical aspect of identity, participants also describe it as a symbol of pride and "remaining authentic in my Africanness" (Phindile). However, corporate workplaces often mediate and hinder the expression of this authenticity because Black hair is subjected to stereotyping and biases, as illustrated below.

6.2.2 Black Hair Stereotypes and Challenges

Despite the personal significance of natural hair for Black women, theme 6, 'The Social and Economic Weight of Black Hair,' uncovered the offensive stereotypes and classifications Black women are exposed to when donning their natural hair at work, therefore rendering most disinclined to do so. Participants in this study revealed that when wearing dreadlocks, they were associated with illegal activities such as drug use and possession. These findings concur with Thompson's (2009) finding that Black women's hair is subjected to constant villainization. In corporate workplaces, these unfounded perceptions hold detrimental consequences because they threaten the employability of Black women. A participant shared that *"*a relative could not find a job; I told them to cut their dreadlocks, and they did. They're now employed in white corporate" (Dineo). Finding themselves in a similar predicament, another participant expressed, "Cutting my dreadlocks was the best decision for my work life" (Zonke). These findings corroborate Danahoo's (2022) study, which found that Black women avoid wearing their natural hair and opt for Eurocentric-inspired hairstyles when looking for employment.

These negative and harsh perceptions of natural hair are not only felt by Black women when looking for employment but often after securing it as well. Participants revealed that their natural hair at work is associated with securing employment through BBEEE, 'broken' English,

unkemptness, and low socio-economic status. Suggesting that the racist classifications of Black women's natural hair, such as being a lower-class citizen, uncivilised, and uneducated (King & Niabaly, 2013), formed during apartheid and colonisation are still pertinent today and negatively impact Black women's perceived professionalism. Conversely, participants frequently said, "When you've got the weave, you are perceived as educated, you articulate well, and your life is in order" (Dineo). Suggesting that the affluence associated with straighter hair affords Black women the perception of professionalism, these findings align with Opie and Phillips (2015), who found that ratings of professionalism were higher for women with straighter hair.

6.2.3 Negotiating with Professional Norms

This intersection between identity and corporate professional norms poses a nuanced challenge for Black women, one that requires them to alter their natural hair in order to fit into white-dominated spaces. According to the Authenticity at Work Framework, this is a form of inauthentic living referred to as catering, which minority groups perform to be palatable to and align with the interests of the dominant group (Gino et al., 2020). The findings of this study support the Authenticity at Work Framework, as they highlight that in corporate workplaces, "Depending on which spaces you want to enter, you have to be mindful of your hairstyle and consider whether you look like those people in those spaces; you can't really be blind to these things" (Dineo). Black women altering the natural texture of their hair to gain access to white spaces is a lived experience of many participants in this study, and the Authenticity at Work Framework highlights that this performance results in anxiety (Gino et al., 2020). The experiences captured under theme 4, 'The Pain of Conforming to and Defying Western Standards", expand on this argument by revealing that catering may also lead to physical pain and emotional distress. A participant said

> I don't think Black women were considered when this standard of professionalism was set. Our hair has to grow to quite a length for us to actually be able to tie it. Even when you have achieved that length, having it tied up causes headaches, and doing this style continuously often leads to a receding hairline (Pamela).

Another participant with a similar experience had this to say, "It gets painful and causes headaches and imagine doing this from 8 am to 5p. But I do because what else can I do?" (Zonke). These findings concur with Matjila (2020), who found that in a plight to emulate

whiteness and fit Eurocentric standards of beauty, suffering has become a common experience for Black women.

6.3 ARE BLACK WOMEN EMPOWERED TO WEAR THEIR HAIR NATURALLY AT WORK?

The second research question explores whether Black women feel empowered to wear their natural in corporate workplaces. Thus far in the study, the findings indicate that there are reservations towards natural hairstyles at work due to exclusionary ideas of professionalism. However, theme 5, "The Conditions for Natural Hair Empowerment", reveals that there are Black women who proudly and boldly wear their hair naturally in corporate workplaces. Interestingly, a critical analysis of the experiences captured under this theme uncovered specific conditions which create this sense of confidence and comfort.

6.3.1 Black Women in Senior Positions

The findings from this study indicate that Black women who are in senior positions are more likely to wear their hair in its natural state and experience less fear or reservations in doing so. Suggesting that Black women's seniority at work can act as a buffer against discrimination and exclusion, thus affording them the opportunity to wear their hair naturally. A participant shared

> I tried by all means to fit the mould; I would visit salons every 2nd week to get my hair twisted and pulled on. I was not as brave as I am now to wear my hair out – I think maturity does that to you… I recently got interviewed, and before we began, I told the panellist, this is who I am, and this is how I will wear my hair [referring to her dreadlocks] (Mandisa).

This participant embodies a high degree of comfort and lack of fear with deviating from the norm and the exclusionary yet accepted expectations of presentability for Black women at work. Interestingly, she starts by highlighting how this was not the case when she was younger; instead, her bravery gradually developed to the point that she advocated for authenticity during interviews. Mandisa's experience, up until this point, has not emerged from the findings. In fact, she has expressed the opposite of how most Black women in this study would present themselves at work, particularly for interviews.

When asked why there is a discrepancy in hairstyling choices among the younger and older generations, a participant shared that “when you are still low in rank, you feel the pressure of complying with what they deem as professional… and when I did not comply, I was tagged as the “typical stubborn Zulu” (Tanaka). Reflecting on her younger self in lower positions, Tanaka uncovers the repercussions Black women in white-dominated spaces are faced with when they do not conform to the dominant standard. The findings of this study differ from those of Le Roux & Oyedemi (2023), who juxtaposed the hairstyling choices of Black women who were born at various periods just before and during apartheid (older generation) and born-free (younger generation) and found that the former group opted for more Eurocentric hairstyles due to the remnants of colonial intervention. The findings of this study indicate that the older generation is comfortable wearing their hair naturally compared to their younger selves. A participant expands on this experience. She shares that

> If I were to completely change my appearance [wear my hair naturally]. That would not have a huge negative impact on my career because I've gotten to a point where I have proven myself and built a name for myself. I think it would come as a shock, and because of the work that I do, it would become a topic of conversation, but that’s about it (Priscilla).

This highlights a key difference in the consequences of wearing natural hair at work. For younger women in lower ranks, it is met with cultural stereotypes of being a ‘stubborn Zulu girl’, whereas for senior managers, it simply becomes a topic of conversation, and that’s about it. Similarly, another participant, who is also in senior management, expressed that

> Back then [as a junior], it was different… At that level, you are competing with many of your peers. Right now, I don’t care. I am senior management, and nobody is going to tell me anything about my hair. If you want to fire me, fire me. I don’t care. I can get a job somewhere else (Lizelle).

Priscilla and Liezelle's experiences highlight that for Black women in senior positions, their hair plays an almost insignificant role at work - not because stereotypical assumptions of Black hair are non-existent but because they have reached a point in their career where they have successfully proven their competency at work. Suggesting that for Black women to present themselves authentically via hairstyling choices in corporate workplaces, they must first prove and establish their competency and credibility in their roles. It is also worth noting that older

women may be less concerned with conforming to others' expectations around hair, which may be linked to increased confidence or maturity.

6.3.2 The 'good' Afro

Another dimension of natural hair empowerment is tied to Black women having 'good' Afros - described as long, thick, and voluminous. This type of Afro is associated with desirability because compared to shorter and less idealized textures, the 'good' Afro results in positive feedback and acceptance. A participant shared that

> I have been genetically blessed with decent hair; it has always been long and healthy. I feel empowered to show up authentically in all social spaces. This is something that has gradually developed in my late 20s and now 30s; it wasn't always there. Once my hair started flourishing, that was when the positive feedback started, and that influenced how I saw myself (Yolanda).

Whereas Black women who felt that their hair did not fit into these criteria of 'good' Afros shared a vastly different experience; a participant said,

> I rarely walk out with my hair because even attempting to get it into a manageable state is a disaster. That's why I always have wigs, doeks [headscarves], or cornrows. I don't have those nice Afro's, it's just a short and sad-looking Afro (Liezelle).

The difference between these two experiences illustrates how longer hair is associated with desirability and beauty. Therefore, making the 'good' Afro – when measured along Western standards of beauty more favourable. As a result, it reinforces a sense of empowerment in Black women to wear their natural hair in corporate workplaces. These findings illustrate how, to an extent, texturism has permeated the Black community. A participant shared,

> In as much as we have stopped relaxing our hair, yay that's a great milestone. But we have now also gotten into the "which afro is more acceptable" is it a 4c or a 4b and gone into scaling that afro and arguing that 4a and 4b are better than 4c (Talitha).

Unlike Shabangu (2016), whose findings indicate that the societal scaling of Black hair, also referred to as the 'good vs bad' hair dichotomy, was between wigs and Afro's, the former being considered as 'good' hair. The findings of this study highlight how this, to a certain extent, exists within the Black hair community, whereby good hair is associated with the Afro, which most closely resembles white hair in terms of length (i.e., long) and loosest curl pattern.

Suggesting that Western beauty standards have permeated what the Black community think is beautiful.

6.3.3 It's my hair; I will do what I want

The final factor in natural hair empowerment in corporate workplaces is Black women's strength and self-advocacy. When asked why she has opted to wear her hair naturally at work, a participant shared

> I use my hair as a protesting type of thing, as an asserting myself type of thing. I am a Black woman – and I think academia and corporate, are spaces that were never meant for me to be a professional and exist in them. So it's a feeling of enforcing yourself in a space and telling yourself that I am staying because I know why I am here, and I will assert myself in any way that I can (Mandisa).

Another participant shared a similar sentiment, she says "So, when I got to this new job, I thought, "well, I like my Afro, and I should stop letting people put me under their thumb, so that's when I started embracing my hair and felt like my authentic self" (Pamela). These findings indicate that Black women's comfort with wearing their natural hair at work has not been a result of organisational acceptance but courage and self-advocacy, whereby they use their hair as tools of protest to solidify their belonging in professional spaces that subtly negate their existence. As opposed to negotiating their identities, these women have asserted themselves and, as a result, feel more in touch with their authentic selves. These findings are in line with the Authenticity at Work framework, which suggests that expressing oneself authentically in the workplace fosters a sense of self-fulfilment and personal growth (Goldman & Kernis, 2006). However, this does not come without its own challenges; a participant shared that "I fight for it every day. I fight to be myself at work…but I have since learnt to not do that via my appearance. It has nothing to do with the work I produce, so why should I?" (Tanaka). This highlights the strength, daily willpower, and self-advocacy Black women require to exercise empowerment towards their natural hair. These are characteristics that most Black women at work do not have due to the fear undergirded by hairstyling at work. This theme, in its entirety, highlights women's comfort and empowerment in wearing their natural hair at work as being reliant on three conditions: (1) seniority, (2) 'good' Afro, and (3) strength and self-advocacy, which are unfortunately not at the disposable of all Black women in corporate. This

indicates that Black women's sense of empowerment in wearing their natural hair in corporate workplaces is complex and influenced by a multitude of contextual and personal factors.

6.4 DOES CORPORATE ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE INFLUENCE / DICTATE BLACK WOMEN'S HAIRSTYLE CHOICES?

The third research question of this study sought to understand the role organisational culture has in influencing Black women's hairstyling choices. This discussion is informed by four themes, namely, theme 1: Organisational Context Determines Acceptability, theme 2: They Don't Say It, but We Hear It, and theme 3: Overcompensating to Hide My Blackness (sub-theme 1: You're Too Black You're incompetent).

6.4.1 The role of culture

Organisational culture manifests in different forms, such as artefacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions (i.e., tangible and intangible factors) and serves to create a shared understanding of the norms of an organisation and what is expected from its employees, thus performing a guiding and binding role that encourages uniformity at work (Schein, 1990). However, this uniformity often comes at the expense of employees, as it often encourages behaviour that does not align with personal norms and values (Sinclair, 1993). The findings of this study concur with Sinclair (1993) and reveal that the organisational culture in corporate workplaces influences how Black women style their hair. Participants shared that "if you were to google 'accountant' and see the pictures that are there, that's how they expected us to present ourselves at the firm" (Mandisa). This Google search yielded images of predominantly white people, specifically straight-haired women. While Mandisa makes reference to an external influence (i.e., Google), this still constitutes organisational culture, as Schein (1990) explains that espoused values within an organisation are often derived from industry expectations and societal norms. As such, these findings reveal how the culture of an organisation informs expectations of presentability at work. Espoused values may also be informed by external stakeholders' preferences as they greatly influence an organisation's culture (Schein, 1990). The findings of this study illustrate Schein's (1990) assertion, a participant shared

> I think there are spaces where we need to alter our hair. My current organisation is somewhat chilled. But I have a friend who is an accountant and has a big and thick

> Afro. She was instructed by her manager to wear a wig or straighten her hair when meeting an important client [mostly white] (Pamela).

Suggesting that appearance expectations and policies at work are, to an extent, informed by the preferences of external shareholders. In a country like South Africa, where corporate workplaces and their external shareholders are dominated by white males, Black women find themselves in the unsettling position of having to present themselves in a manner that panders to the preferences and interests of the white male gaze through wearing Eurocentric hairstyles. This section also uncovers how the levels of culture, as presented by Schein (1990), are a deeply cumulative process, with the different levels tying into one another. For instance, the visible artefacts in corporate spaces, such as appearance policies and grooming standards (i.e., instructions to straighten hair), expose corporate organisations' deeper espoused values of only accepting and promoting Western standards of professionalism, thus maintaining structures of systemic racism. According to Schein (1990), the above ultimately informs unspoken assumptions of presentability at work, whereby employees unquestioningly adhere to Western standards of professionalism. A participant shared

> At a workplace event I wore my dreadlocks extensions. It wasn't a big issue because 85% of the attendees were Black…So, hair was not really a factor, and I was more comfortable wearing this hairstyle because of this. If I'm being honest, if it were the usual events where there it was 85% white, I'd definitely come with my weave (Dineo).

This experience illustrates the trickling effects of organisational culture, whereby it reaches a stage where expectations of Western professionalism and presentability do not require communication; instead, they are easily understood and become a shared understanding of what is deemed as presentable, acceptable and appropriate in the face of corporate employers. Nevertheless, in the event of communication, it is often through microaggressions, as discussed below.

6.4.2 Microaggressions towards Black hair

Boswell (2014) argues that corporate culture is rooted in a racist ideology, one that is subtle and covertly delivered as microaggressions. These microaggressions often extend beyond a means of insult but serve as a reminder that Black women are not accepted in corporate workplaces (Danahoo & Smith, 2019). The findings of this study concur with Danahoo and Smith (2019); participants frequently shared that when wearing their natural hair, they would

be asked, “Oh, is that your hair?” (Nandipha) and “I should try that hairstyle on my child” (Zonke) and [when wearing a weave] “Oh, your hair is so neat” (Pamela). These seemingly harmless comments and backhanded compliments are a type of microaggression referred to as micro-insults, which are intended to put down Black women (Sue & Spanierman, 2010) but also serve as a covert reminder that they do not belong in corporate workplaces. Other participants shared that “when preparing to meet the board or important clients, our manager (white female) would often “nicely” comment on our looks – as a way of trying to tell us what is expected” (Mandisa). These findings indicate that microaggressions also communicate a standard of appearance without explicitly stating it. These unspoken expectations create a taken-for-granted and unspoken assumption of presentability amongst employees, which becomes embedded into the values and beliefs of an organisation and ultimately informs an organisational culture founded on discrimination (Schein, 2004). This creates a challenge because the spoken, yet unspoken nature of this discrimination creates a ‘non-racist racism’ (Fiske 1988 cited in Canham & Wiliams, 2016, p.28). This is a concealed form of discrimination that perpetrators easily circumvent, and victims struggle to identify. The results of this study reaffirm both Schein (2004) and Canham and Williams (2016); however slightly differ in that the participants of this study did not struggle to identify these subtle racist attacks, as participants shared that

> White male managers, white female managers – speak in backhanded comments and it's not just ignorance. I firmly believe that it is rooted in racism, but often, people find other words to call it, such as curiosity (Tanaka).

These findings indicate that corporate workplaces have created a safe space to conceal these subtle yet damaging expressions of discrimination. Consequently, Black women are left with no option but to unquestioningly adhere to Eurocentric hairstyling that is subtly pushed on them.

6.4.3 You’re too Black; You’re Incompetent

When these subtle but prominent ideas of how Black women should look in corporate workplaces are not adhered to, Black women are viewed as incompetent and lazy. Knight and Long (2019) found that Black women with natural hair are met with lower levels of respect and afforded less access to work opportunities. A participant shared that

> I think it's easy for other races to come to a space and be taken seriously. I am a software developer. Everyone in my space wears jeans, cool graphic t-shirts, and any hairstyle. I would love to do that…but I can't show up like that. It's difficult to walk in a space with an Afro and baggy jeans and be taken seriously. As a black woman, you need to show up constantly and look the part even though your co-workers don't look the part, but they got the part somehow. There is a black woman with an Afro at work; she dresses like the white men [jeans and t-shirt], and no one takes her seriously because of that (Nancy).

These findings reveal the existence of unfair standards of professionalism in corporate environments whereby Black women are judged harshly for not conforming to Western standards of professionalism, while their white counterparts who do the same are not. In addition, Black women's competence in corporate workplaces is under constant scrutiny, and, therefore, they are expected to meet the highest standards in the quality of work produced and how they present themselves at work. This standard is uniquely crafted against Black women, not to promote excellence but as an exclusionary practice and as a means of stifling the growth of Black women who do not look like or, at the very least, attempt to imitate whiteness.

6.5 HOW DO BLACK WOMEN NEGOTIATE THEIR SELF-REPRESENTATION IDENTITIES IN CORPORATE WORKPLACES?

The discussion of the fourth and final research question is informed by two themes constructed during the analysis stage: theme 3: Overcompensating to Hide My Blackness, and theme 7: I Love It, but It's Too Much to Handle. This section uncovers Eurocentric-inspired hairstyling as a strategy Black women employ in response to corporate workplace expectations. Moreover, it sheds light on multifaceted reasons behind Black women's hairstyles at work whilst highlighting the consequences of each.

6.5.1 Mechanisms of Identity Negotiation

Donahoo (2022) found that the fear of discriminatory behaviour, being viewed as incompetent and unprofessionally presenting, led Black women to adopt hairstyles which align with Eurocentric beauty norms. Dawson et al. (2019) presented similar findings and further added that Black women also adopt this form of hairstyling to be less conspicuous at work. The

experiences captured under theme 3, ‘Overcompensating to Hide My Blackness’, concur with both Danahoo (2022) and Dawson et al. (2019), with participants frequently expressing that “You are more likely to be perceived as serious and competent with your straight or sleeked-back hair” (Nandipha). These findings indicate that wearing straight hair and sleeking hair back are the common strategies Black women adopt to assimilate into whiteness, and which allow them to be discrete and divert the negative perceptions such as incompetence associated with Black hair. These strategies, while practical and often necessary for Black women’s careers, come at the cost of personal authenticity and preferences, as participants often express that

> I will wear my hair in a way that is socially acceptable to them [white male managers] … I will probably have them in braids, ideally, or sleek back my hair and make sure it's behaving. Nothing interesting, not in the way and not bringing attention to itself (Talitha).

These results are consistent with the Identity Negotiation Theory, which emphasizes that minority groups change their identity to mirror those of the dominant cultural environment in an effort to be accepted, fit in, and heighten their sense of belonging (Ting-Toomey, 2015). The above indicates that identity negotiation via hair is a strategic choice made by Black women to navigate corporate workplaces successfully. Therefore, refuting Thompson’s (2009) idea that Black women wear Eurocentric-inspired hairstyles as a result of self-hate and internalized racism.

Nevertheless, a seemingly contrasting perspective – which is not entirely divorced from the experiences mentioned above emerged from a small group of participants who used negative descriptors rooted in colonialism, such as ‘farm girl’, ‘homeless’, or Lion’ to describe their natural hair. On the surface, this may seem to reaffirm Thompson's (2009) argument of self-hate and internalised racism. However, a deeper analysis reveals that these participants, like the first group, are simply negotiating their identities to fit into white corporate workplaces. This argument is founded on three viewpoints: Firstly, although problematic, the negative descriptors used by these participants do not fully embody what internalized racism actually is, which is – in relation to Black hair, the assumption and deep-seated belief that Black hair has an inherent subordinate status one that is natural and deserved (Versey et al., 2019). Furthermore, these beliefs would manifest as disrespect and disgust of not only their hair but all other Black women’s natural hair (Pyke, 2010). This is not the case with the above three participants; instead, all three negative descriptors used by this study’s participants reveal a

similar underlying meaning that communicates Black hair's misalignment and misfit within corporate workplaces.

Secondly, arguing for internalized racism is a form of victim blaming, one that singles out Black women as anti-Black and perceives that as rooted in their individualism. Therefore, failing to acknowledge this behaviour as a response to living and attempting to survive in a system dominated by white supremacist ideology. Thirdly, Pyke (2010) argues that white supremacy rewards those who conform to it while severely punishing those who defy it. It is from Pyeke's (2010) assertion that I argue that the group of participants using negative descriptors when speaking about their hair are, in fact, negotiating their identities to navigate corporate workplaces and gain the rewards associated with conformity. A key difference between this group of participants and the majority is that the latter do so on the physical level only (i.e., Eurocentric hairstyling) and are critically conscious about their doing so. Whereas the group using negative descriptors is negotiating on two levels, physically (i.e., Eurocentric hairstyling) and mentally using colonial-based descriptors of Black hair. This argument is supported by the sixth and seventh assumptions of the Identity Negotiation Theory, which contend that all employees desire interpersonal connections. However, culturally unfamiliar and foreign environments threaten this connection, as they create confusion and identity turmoil, one that may be exacerbated by using positive descriptors of natural hair yet straightening it and wearing Eurocentric hairstyles five times a week for work. To eliminate feelings of confusion and turmoil, minority groups internalise the norms of their environment in an attempt to fit in (Ting-Toomey, 2015).

6.5.2 Hairstyling as a Preference

Thus far in the study, findings indicate that Black women opting for Eurocentric hairstyles is a strategic decision used to navigate white-dominated corporate – a decision which is often misunderstood as self-hate and internalised racism. Additional findings indicate that Black women love their hair; however, they opt for Eurocentric hairstyles in search of convenience. A participant shared, "I feel really happy with myself when I show up with my natural hair. It's just that a lot of admin is involved with wearing it naturally. So I just pop on a wig" (Fikile). Another participant shared a similar sentiment as to why she hardly wears her Afro to work.

> My Afro is my pride, and I don't really see myself without it, nor do I want to change my hair texture. However, I mostly wear braids because it is a task to have to deal with

> my Afro in the mornings before work. With the Afro, you are concerned about shrinkage, having to prep it the night before, styling it, gelling it, it's all very time-consuming. With braids, it's quick and convenient (Zonke).

These findings corroborate Mbunyazi-Memani (2019), who found that Black women opt for Eurocentric hairstyles in a search for convenience because natural hair requires admin for the upkeep. These findings ultimately reveal that while Black women's hairstyle choice is influenced by a plethora of factors, such as corporate culture and ideas of professionalism and presentability in white-dominated corporate workplaces, Black women still – although often challenged, have agency when it comes to hair. Their hairstyles at work are a representative of personal preference that prioritizes convenience while preparing for work, and irrespective of hairstyle, the choice is founded on love and appreciation for their natural hair.

6.3 CONCLUSION

This chapter explored and interpreted in detail key findings as they relate to this study's research questions, highlighting the nuanced and complex nature of Black women's experiences in relation to their hair in South African corporate workplaces. The findings reveal that hair forms an integral part of Black women's identity and is often an expression of pride and a reflection of authenticity. However, when worn naturally in corporate workplaces, hair can expose Black women to stereotypes and biases, which serve to communicate Black women's misfit and lack of belonging in professional workplaces. In an effort to circumvent these adverse perceptions and assert their professionalism, Black women wear Eurocentric-inspired hairstyles. These findings shed light on two critical aspects in the discussion of Black women's hair: (1) Black women do not wear Eurocentric-inspired hairstyles as a result of self-hate and internalized racism; (2) their decision to wear straighter hair is a form of identity negotiation which they leverage in order to navigate corporate workplaces successfully.

CHAPTER 7

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS, PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS, AND DIRECTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

7.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a concluding note to the study by discussing theoretical implications, providing practical recommendations, discussing limitations, and providing direction for future researchers. This study aimed to explore Black women's experiences – in relation to their hair in South African corporate workplaces. The secondary aim, set out to uncover and understand how Black women navigate the intersections of corporate organisational culture, professional identity, and personal authenticity through their hairstyles at work. The findings predominantly highlight the challenging and, to an extent, empowering aspects of navigating these aspects through hairstyling. In examining this complex interplay between Black women's preferences, personal identities, societal norms, and corporate organisational culture, this study contributes to a broader discourse on identity and presentability politics at work, workplace inclusivity, and identity negotiation. This chapter provides practical recommendations for policymakers, corporate organisations, and employees (specifically Black women), discusses the limitations of the study and how future researchers could address these, and finally, highlights three critical aspects which future researchers may address to expand and contribute to this field of research.

7.2 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study support the Identity Negotiation Theory, particularly its assertion that minority groups in a social space are prone to identity insecurity, which they relinquish through emulating dominant norms in order to fit in. This study extends the Identity Negotiation Theory by highlighting additional factors that contribute to the onset of identity negotiation beyond minority groups internalizing dominant norms. This study has revealed that identity negotiation does not only occur to – but is also strategically performed by - the minority for workplace gratification purposes. Participants describe this process as "I want the job, so I will give you the version of me that you want". While others shared that identity negotiation via hair alterations is simply a matter of convenience, and for some, it is a matter of internalized Eurocentric norms. This not only speaks to the complexity of hair for Black women but sheds

light on the multiplicity of reasons that contribute to the onset of identity negotiation. These insights direct to the fluidity and flexibility of the theory, which is often overlooked as it is presented in a prescriptive manner through 10 core assumptions framed as prerequisites for identity negotiation.

The findings of this study support the core premise of the Authenticity at Work Framework, which posits that authentically presenting at work results in positive outcomes such as self-realization and fulfilment. The participants who felt empowered to wear their hair naturally at work shared these sentiments, sharing how it fostered a sense of pride, confidence and comfort. However, the findings also uncover the negative outcomes of authentically presenting, challenging the theory's core argument, which associates authenticity with positive outcomes. For instance, participants reported that when authentically presenting by wearing their natural hair to work, they are subjected to frequent and disruptive comments such as "Oh, is that your hair?", unconsented touching of their hair, which othered them and being forgotten or mistaken for another Black employee. This duality in experiences reveals that the Authenticity at Work framework only captures the internal workplace benefits of being true to oneself while neglecting the external cost of doing so. This theory could be expanded to include more practical and contextual factors, such as organisational culture and dominant societal norms that may influence the outcome of being authentic at work. This would provide a unique interplay between self-representation and workplace dynamics.

7.3 PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study indicate that hair discrimination, albeit expressed covertly, is prevalent in South African corporate workplaces. Considering the dark racial past of this country and the fact that hair discrimination is a form of racial discrimination, it is recommended that policymakers enact laws and policies explicitly protecting against hair discrimination in the workplace, similar to the CROWN Act of the USA. The findings of this study uncovered that discrimination and the lack of acceptance of Black women's natural hair in corporate workplaces is expressed through microaggressions, which conceal the damaging effects of this racist attack. As such, it is recommended that organisations develop employee-led inclusivity training. This initiative would give a voice to Black women's hair struggles and allow them to share their experiences of hair discrimination in the workplace and how it impacts them professionally and personally. Using the data from this initiative, it is

recommended that a workplace inclusivity training programme be developed; this will foster awareness and will educate on an unspoken and neglected issue at work and in broader society. Moreover, it will communicate intolerance of all forms of discrimination. Finally, it is recommended that Black women use this study and its findings to validate their experiences, reaffirm their belonging in all spaces, including professional environments, and ultimately empower them. The findings of this study indicate that most Black women do not speak up when their rights – in terms of appearance are being infringed on; instead, they opt for immediate assimilation through identity negotiation. It is with great hopes that Black women draw confidence from documented literature such as this study to protest and speak up against unfair standards of professionalism.

7.4 LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The first limitation of this study is the narrow contextual focus. This study was restricted to researching Black women's experiences in relation to hair within South African corporate workplaces. While this context is important, as it serves as a microcosm of the dynamics in broader society and thus provides valuable insights into how Black women negotiate their identities, it does not address how these dynamics might manifest in other professional sectors. For instance, in the government sector, creative spaces, and small business enterprises, participants such as Yolanda noted the discrepancy between these industries in saying "In medicine [psychiatry], I think we are just too busy to care. So, hair is not a big thing. But for my friends who are in corporate, and I don't mean the government sector, they always get a lot of flak on their hairstyles". As such, it is suggested that future researchers conduct a study on Black women's hair in these different industries, as they may uncover different challenges and opportunities regarding hairstyling, self-representation, and authenticity. Moreover, this would provide a broader understanding of how Black women respond to perceptions of professionalism within different spaces.

The second limitation of this study is the sample size and qualitative methodology. While a sample of 16 participants suffices for a qualitative study, and the qualitative methodology permitted the researcher to explore in-depth lived experiences of Black women, this limits the generalisability of the study. As such, it is recommended that future researchers adopt a quantitative methodology and conduct a larger-scale study that could complement the findings of this study while representing a broader population of Black women in different industries or

geographic locations. Therefore providing a more comprehensive understanding of Black women's experiences in the workplace.

The third limitation of this study is the limited diversity of the sample group. This study focuses only on Black women's experience in relation to their hair in corporate workplaces. While this is extremely important, as most issues surrounding hair, both historically and in the contemporary, have centred on Black women – this sample group excludes demographics such as Black men, who may share the same or similar experiences. As such, it is recommended that future researchers explore this research topic in relation to Black men. This would permit future researchers to determine whether the experiences explored in this study are unique to Black women, suggesting that hair discrimination at work is rooted in gender bias or is equally present in Black men's experiences, thus highlighting a broader racial issue. This would expand the current study by giving insight into the gender dynamics and intersectionality at play in corporate workplaces.

The final limitation of this study is that further research is needed on three critical aspects. Firstly, an exploration and interrogation of different elements of identity and appearance in the workplace, such as language, dress, and body, is needed. This will provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities of being a Black woman in corporate South Africa. Secondly, it is recommended that future researchers conduct a study interrogating the reasons why policies and laws explicitly protecting from hair discrimination in the workplace have not been enacted in South Africa. It is suggested that this study take the form of a multi-sited or comparative research focusing on the USA and South Africa, exploring the conditions Black women in the USA were subjected to in the workplace, which resulted in the promulgation of the CROWN Act. Thereafter, comparing those findings to the findings of this study, to determine whether Black South African women in corporate workplaces have not experienced the same or similar conditions.

Finally, one of the key findings of this study is that identity negotiation via hair is a strategic decision made out of necessity for Black women to navigate corporate workplaces successfully. On the contrary, although to a lesser extent, it was also found that some Black women hold negative perceptions towards their hair and use colonial descriptors to describe their natural hair. Narrowing down on these findings, it is suggested that future research explore whether Black women want change and advocate for natural hair in the workplace, thus moving away

from identity negotiation, or if they prefer to assimilate and are more comfortable with straighter hair.

7.5 CONCLUSION

In closing, this study makes evident that Black women in corporate workplaces do not simply exist within an organisation because they are in a constant state of proving their value, not only through performance and output but appearance as well. A participant in this study encapsulates this by saying: “When you work in a system where you are not the intended beneficiary, the hurdles and the standards you need to reach and excel at are almost impossible to reach. It takes a lot; you need to be over-exceptional just to get to the same place where those who the system was intended for are” (Priscilla). Sleek backs, wigs, weaves, and relaxers are some of the many hairstyles Black women wear to successfully navigate these hurdles and attempts to reach these exceptional standards. This is a form of identity negotiation and inauthentic living which is performed strategically by Black women to survive in a white-dominated space. This paper not only creates awareness on this often overlooked racial issue but also reveres at how – even dated back in history – Black women have mastered the ability to survive and thrive in spaces which were founded on their exclusion.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONAIRE

Name & Surname		
Age		
Occupation		
Organisation		
No. of years in organisation		

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

HAIR TRENDS AND PERCEPTION OF HAIR

1. [participant name] As you know, this research is about Black women's hair. I noticed that you are wearing your hair in [insert hairstyle]. Is that how you would normally wear your hair?
2. Do you wear your hair in other ways? If so, and how often?
3. Do you feel different when wearing different hairstyles? If so, in what way/s?
4. Do you think you are perceived differently when wearing different hairstyles?

- If so, by whom?
- In what spaces?
- Why do you think this is so?

5. Am I correct in assuming this is your day-to-day "at the office" hairstyle? Why do you choose to wear your hair this way at the office?
6. Please think of a formal event you have recently attended, what was it? How did you style your hair for the event?
7. What would you describe as unruly and untidy hair? / In what state would you describe your hair as unruly and untidy?

HAIR AND IDENTITY

1. Appearance is a marker of identity and hair, in particular. Do you feel that hair is a marker of your identity? How so? And what do you think your hairstyle (straight hair / natural hair) says about you?
2. Tell me how it would feel and what it may look like to bring your authentic self as a Black African woman into the workplace—tying your response to hair.
3. Do you feel empowered to show up the authentic person you have just described at work?
4. Do you feel like you or other Black women need to sometimes change or alter their hair when interacting in professional spaces?
   - Do you think Black women alter their hair's natural appearance to seem more presentable at work?
   - If yes, in what ways do you think Black African women do this?
   - Have you ever wanted/felt like you needed to alter the appearance of your natural hair? And why?
   - If so, did you? And in what ways did you alter your hair?
5. Do you think other racial groups apart from Black Africans experience this?
6. How important is hair to Black women? In what way?

EXPERIENCES WITH HAIR AT WORK

1. What is the most common hairstyle amongst Black women at work?
   - Why do you think this is the most common hairstyle? / Why do you think Black African women wear Eurocentric presenting hairstyles at work?
   - Why have you opted to keep your hair in its natural/straight state?

2. What role does, if any, does Black women's hair play in their experience at work?
3. What is the general commentary from co-workers/employees regarding your hair?
    - **No commentary**: Would I be correct to assume no one notices your hair at work and, therefore, is not a factor in your overall experience at work?
    - **Commentary**: Who makes these comments?
4. Are there any stereotypes of Black women related to their hair that you know of or have encountered in your workplace?

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

1. How racially diverse is your organisation or the unit/team you work in?
2. What hairstyle pops up when you are told to "look professional"?
3. What hairstyles are appropriate and inappropriate for work?
4. Ideas of professionalism within an organization are informed by the organisational culture. What is regarded as presenting professionally in your organisation?
5. Do you think Black African women were considered when this standard of professionalism was set? How so?
6. How would you usually style your hair for high-stake meetings/presentations or interviews?
7. Have you experienced any challenges with your hair at work?

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET (PIS)

Participant Information Sheet (PIS)

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

Good day,

I trust you are well.

My name is Iyanla Tezapi, a Masters's candidate at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (WITS). My supervisor is Prof. Karen Milner, I am conducting a research study about Black women's experiences with natural hair in corporate work settings.

I am inviting you to take part in a one-on-one interview for the purpose of the study. If you decide to take part, your participation in this research study will last about 30 – 35minutes. Interviews will be conducted either remotely (online) via Microsoft Teams or in person at a location which will ensure privacy and is convenient for you (in Johannesburg).

With your permission, I would like to audio record the interview session, and I will transcribe it. This data will be stored on my mobile cellphone and laptop in a locked folder. Both these devices are protected by passwords, and only I (the researcher) have access to them. I intend to store this data for the duration of my Master's year at WITS, and it will be deleted after my research has been marked. The interview will be confidential. When I share the results of the research study, anonymity will be ensured as I will not mention your name; instead, I will refer to you using a pseudonym. Moreover, I will not directly or indirectly refer to the corporate organisation you are employed in.

Please note that if you decide to take part in the research study, it will be on a voluntary basis. You do not have to take part, you may withdraw participation at any time, and you do not have to answer any questions if you do not want to. Participation in the study will not provide you

with any direct benefits, nor will you lose any services, benefits, or rights you would normally have if you decided not to join. Taking part in the research study may – depending on the interview venue, cost you data or travelling expenses. Please kindly note that you will not be paid for participation in this study.

The risks for this research study are no more than what happens in everyday life. It is not likely that any of the questions asked will cause you emotional distress. However, in the event that this does occur I will stop the interview and continue another time. This research study will be written up as a research report. The report will not be available online, but if you would like to receive a summary of this report, I will be happy to send it to you.

If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research study, feel free to contact me or my supervisor at the details listed below. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical procedures of this research study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) by telephone at +27(0) 11 717 1408, email hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za.

Yours sincerely,
Iyanla Tezapi (2912206)

Researcher:
Iyanla Tezapi, 2912206@students.wits.ac.za, 071 893 2692

Supervisor:
Prof. Karen Milner, karen.milner@wits.ac.za

APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM

Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

Title of project: *Unprofessional Hair:* The Experiences of Black Women with Hair in South African Corporate Organisations.

Name of researcher: Iyanla Tezapi

I, ……(please insert full name and surname) …….. agree to participate in this research project.

I agree to the following:
(Please circle the relevant options below)

The research study was explained to me. I understand what this study is about.	YES	NO
I understand that I am a volunteer in this study and can withdraw participation at any time.	YES	NO
I agree that the interview may be audio recorded.	YES	NO
I agree that direct quotations from my interview session may be used by the researcher in their research report	YES	NO

I agree that my participation will remain anonymous (my name or other identifying data will not be used by the researcher in their research report	YES	NO
I agree that other researchers may use the information I provide in my interview (depending on their own ethics clearance being obtained), but my name and any personal information will not be used or passed on	YES NO	

Please sign below.

…… (signature)
…… (name of participant)
…… (date)

I.TEZAPI (signature)
Iyanla Tezapi (name of researcher/person seeking consent)
14 / 05 / 2024 (date signed)

APPENDIX D: ETHICS CERTIFICATE

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ETHICS COMMITTEE CONSTITUTED UNDER THE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE	**PROTOCOL NUMBER: MAORG-24-11**
PROJECT TITLE:	Unprofessional hair: The experiences of Black women with hair in South African corporate organisations.
INVESTIGATOR	Tezapi Iyanla
SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT OF INVESTIGATOR	SHCD/Psychology
DATE CONSIDERED	08 July 2024
DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE	Approved unconditionally
RISK LEVEL	Minimal Risk
EXPIRY DATE	31 December 2026

ISSUE DATE OF CERTIFICATE 23 July 2024 **CHAIRPERSON** Aline Ferreira Correia

cc: Prof. Karen Milner (Supervisor)

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Chairperson of the School/Department ethics committee.

I/we fully understand the conditions under which I am/we are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I/we guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure be contemplated from the research procedure as approved, I/we undertake to submit an amendment of the protocol to the Committee.

I. Tezapi _____ **Date** ___30___/____07___/___2024____

Signature

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES