Vital Voices from the Digital Divide: Testimonies of African American Women Leadership Across Tech

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VITAL VOICES FROM THE DIGITAL DIVIDE: TESTIMONIES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN LEADERSHIP ACROSS TECH

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

May 2024

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ABSTRACT

Many organizations seek to highlight diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, but African American women are still significantly underrepresented in leadership roles within the workplace (McKinsey, 2023). Within the technology (i.e., tech) space, there is concern regarding the inclusivity of African American women in leadership positions. A hostile and unsupportive environment raises concern for the future of African American women being able to attain key leadership roles. (McGee, 2018).

This study explored multifaceted experiences of eight African American women leaders in for-profit tech organizations. Black feminist thought and organizational culture and belonging were conceptual frameworks that shed light on the persistent barriers and cultural adversities. Narrative inquiry was employed to amplify participant voices through a three-phased data collection approach, including open-ended questionnaires, sista. circle conversations, and follow-up interviews.

The study contributes to a broader discourse on how organizations can support the inclusion and advancement of African American women in leadership positions, ultimately enriching the diversity and effectiveness of leadership within the tech industry and beyond. The study identified four themes: (a) breaking barriers: Navigating isolation and echoes of exclusion; (b) African American women leadership: Normalcy of resiliency and supportiveness while experiencing cultural adversity; (c) perceptions of leadership and organizational culture; and (d) complexity and contradictions of sense of belonging. Using sista circle conversation in this study offered compelling evidence on the necessity of supportive networks and inclusive practices to enhance the presence and success of African American women in leadership within the tech industry and beyond.
Findings revealed a complex landscape where African American women navigate isolation and illuminates the remarkable resilience, persistence, and adaptability of African American women in leadership roles within the tech industry. The study underscored the critical importance of understanding the nuances of organizational culture and its impact on African American women’s sense of belonging and leadership experiences. This study contributes to leadership and belonging research while highlighting the importance of acknowledging historical and current factors that may hinder or enable a sense of belonging for African American women leaders in tech.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the brave and courageous women who chose to participate in this study. Your unwavering support and willingness to share your voices and narratives have been invaluable contributions. To the numerous bold, resilient, and strong African American/Black women who navigate workplaces daily, where they may not always receive the recognition, understanding, or appreciation they deserve, please know that you are not alone. Additionally, this dedication extends to the women who diligently cultivate spaces, such as Sista Circles, fostering healing and transformation.

In loving memory of Willie and Bertha Tucker, Dewie and Beatrice Bozeman, Sims Good Sr. and Nannie Pendergrass-Good, Oliver Gray, Jr., and Lena Gray, and Eddie Gray.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

_I had fainted unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait on the Lord, be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart:_

_wait, I say on the Lord-_ Psalm 27:13-14 (KJV)

First and foremost, I give all praise to Jesus Christ, my Savior, for guiding me throughout this transformative journey. You have been and will always be my hiding place, my refuge and strength, and I am forever grateful for your steadfast presence.

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To my sisters in dance, you have inspired me so. You have taught me that the dance of one is the dance of many. I’m particularly ever grateful for my dance sisters #DOZOFGI, God’s Grace Church, and Apostolic Faith Church. To each women’s auxiliary at MORE Life, God’s Grace Church, and Apostolic Faith Church thank you for being part of my spiritual journey, which has been the foundation for me to live out my purpose.

To my P31 Sisterhood, from my undergraduate commencement to this momentous occasion of adding a PhD to our community, your unwavering support through prayer, fasting and encouragement has been a constant source of strength and inspiration.

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To my last living grandparents, Leon and Carrie Good, I am glad that you were able to witness just a glimpse of my journey. Your pride in our accomplishments as your grandchildren has always been encouraging.

To my God family — The Martins and the memory of The Petereons — Thank you for your timely presence, prayers, and wisdom imparted. Your impact on my life is immeasurable.

A special shout out to my aunts and uncles, and ALL MY COUSINS!! I love y'all.

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I am deeply thankful for the love and support of my family, friends, colleagues, peers, mentors, prayer partners, and those that I may have only interacted with briefly during this journey. Whether through Zoom, WhatsApp, FaceTime, or social media, every word of encouragement and prayer has propelled me to this pivotal moment.

*And blessed is she that believed; for there shall be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord* - Luke 1:45 KJV
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

For far too long, she’s been hidden in plain sight.
Her vision interrogated as she struggled for her rights
To simply be.
Case after case,
She has waited for resolution for a space
For her face to find embrace
And her vision not to be debased
Because she simply is.

—Litney Gray¹

At the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the racial tension and bigotry
within the United States were amplified. Many tech organizations, such as Twitter,
Facebook, and Google, have sought to make diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)
statements by forming steering committees or developing initiatives to keep their
competitive advantage (Rooney & Khorram, 2020). However, diversity reports indicate
increases in African American representation within the field and within leadership have
only increased by a small percentage, so the impact of DEI initiatives appears to be very
limited over the year (Rooney & Khorram, 2020). African American women have been
significantly underrepresented in leadership roles within the workplace (Field et
al., 2023). Despite accomplishments in education and employment, as of 2019, none of
the 24 women leading Fortune 500 companies were African American (Sims & Carter,
2019). Collectively, African American women remain poorly represented in high-level

¹ Note regarding To Simply Be She  (c) 2022 is a poem written by Litney Gray, my younger
sister. Litney wrote this poem in the Spring of 2021, as an ode to women in the workplace during Women’s
History month. At the time, I was in the second semester of my doctoral program. I offered this poem to
my Applied Leadership Practices classmates as a parting gift for our learning and found myself referencing
this poem throughout my matriculation as a doctoral student. This poem is an added layer to this study and
indirectly speaks to the generalizability of this study with other women’s workplace experiences. A stanza
from the poem is provided at the start of each chapter and at the conclusion of Chapter 5.
executive roles, lingering at 1.0% to 1.1% of chief executive officers (CEOs) and members of boards of directors (Beckwith et al., 2016). Even in environments where growth is encouraged and progress appears to be occurring, African American women are not led toward roles such as the CEO. This phenomenon—called the concrete or Black ceiling—is said to be borne out of the cumulative biases African American women uniquely experience due to their complex positionality of race, gender, and class, which results in African American women only representing 7% of the U.S. workforce (Bishop, 2020). Yet, because of the ability to code switch and successfully navigate between corporate and diverse cultures, African American women demonstrate sophisticated adaptive skills, innovation, creativity, and leadership, which benefits all organizations (Parker & Ogilvie, 1996).

Although DEI efforts have become a focus of many organizational culture discussions, researchers believe incorporating a gender lens can also be useful in addressing risks at an individual, group, and systems level (Wong, 2019). The adoption of more equitable and inclusive practices aims to address the cultural inequity that has become embedded in the organization’s identity at the interpersonal and structural levels. Structural inequities tend to be deeply embedded within the fabric of society, which only leads to systematic disadvantages of one social group compared to other groups (Baciu et al., 2017). According to Wong (2019), acknowledgement of experiences of marginalized groups rather than ignoring differences is important to ensure true inclusivity. Organizations only stand to gain from creating more diverse and inclusive workspaces (Duchek et al., 2020; Wong, 2019). The challenge then becomes how an organization can move from acknowledgment to exhibiting its aspirational value of creating a culture that
is, in fact, equitable and inclusive. Earlier research suggests a working relationship between perceived fairness and organizational inclusiveness (Fassinger, 2008). Thus, this study enhances the lens by which we can understand how the actualization of belonging within an organization fosters inclusiveness for African American women.

**Background**

In corporate settings, Black women have been disregarded because of the color of our skin, the texture of our hair, and our use of Ebonics. In addition, every day in the workplace, we carry the grief of our melanated sisters and brothers, what is going on in the country, and what the future holds. Black women in leadership are moving the struggle for liberation forward in the workplace, and they have undoubtedly had to “confront the legacy of this unreconciled grief” (hooks, 1996, p. 236). Much of my desire to study other African American women as a researcher is because of my experience as an African American woman. As someone who has been considered by their community as a leader, I believe I have a responsibility to uncover what is hidden and to legitimize the centrality of African American women ideals and values. Such ideals and values serve as valid frames of reference for acquiring and examining (Chilisa, 2009).

For minority women, it is important to be strategic within the workplace regarding image and identity to gain a sense of belonging (Allison, 2010). The marginalized experience as a result of biased corporate culture is known to favor white-identifying individuals and men because of societal norms within the United States (Allison, 2010). Therefore, Black women confront dual battles of gender and racial workplace discrimination and are forced to challenge the ideas of being perceived as professionally inferior, even after having many qualifications and being competent
Within the workplace, Black women are forced to conform, evolve, and shift to survive such workplace cultures (Allison, 2010).

Research has shown a persistent gap in gender discrimination in work experiences and outcomes reflected in differences in organizational access, evaluation of performance, advancement, pay, and perceived treatment (Dipboye & Colella, 2013). These differences are “reflected in many personnel practices and in the perceptions of those who are the presumed targets of gender discrimination” (Dipboye & Colella, 2013, p. 151). Gender bias in recruitment, selection, and development opportunities are critical predictors of gender differences in access to many other types of organizational outcomes, such as salary and promotion (Dipboye & Colella, 2013). When women and racial minorities are underrepresented in the workplace, they may experience belonging uncertainty (Casad & Bryant, 2016; Walton & Cohen, 2007). When facing challenges and setbacks, members of underrepresented groups can interpret struggles as a sign that they may not belong (Casad & Bryant, 2016 Walton & Cohen, 2007) and may feel they alone are experiencing struggles.

Research has indicated it takes more for African American leaders to succeed than their white counterparts (Beckwith et al., 2016). There is historical evidence indicating racialized and gendered inequality in the workforce is still prevalent. African American women face the duality of race and gender bias in the workplace, which creates barriers to promotion and career growth (Beckwith et al., 2016). There are still disparities pertaining to race and gender when taking into consideration the employment of Black women (Broady & Barr, 2022).
Within STEM fields, women comprise only 34% of the workforce, and there are even fewer women of color (AAUW, 2023). African American women in tech only makeup 1.7% of industry (Floyd, 2022). Today, women still experience obstacles to promotion and other determinants, such as tokenism, in determining whether they move into management in a gender-matching process consistent with the glass escalator (Algeria, 2019). Discrimination is often visible given various barriers, such as accessibility to a safe work environment that ensures Black people are treated fairly in compensation and in organizational practices that provide individuals with a sense of dignity and respect (Ford, 2023).

A sense of belonging is not always attainable for various social groups who are underrepresented and identify as women (Brewer, 1991; Georgeac & Rattan, 2023; Tsui et al., 1991). One reason for this problem is that simply diversifying the workforce does not automatically create a more inclusive work environment (Georgeac & Rattan, 2023). An organizational business case for diversity claims it is valuable because of its benefits for organizations’ performance, and the organizational fairness case for diversity argues that diversity is just the right thing to do (Georgeac & Rattan, 2023).

The organizational business case for diversity is prevalent in Fortune 500 companies (Georgeac & Rattan, 2023), which ignores the need to move beyond mere diversity measures. Diversity alone does not create a sense of belonging which shapes people’s interest in joining an organization or industry (Cheryan et al., 2009; Dasgupta, 2011; Georgeac & Rattan, 2023; Good et al., 2012), which is a reliable predictor of actual joining (Chapman et al., 2005; Georgeac & Rattan, 2023). Research has demonstrated a sense of belonging impacts engagement and performance levels (Cohen & Garcia, 2008;
Georgeac & Rattan, 2023; Georgeac et al., 2019; Good et al., 2012; Walton & Cohen, 2007).

Social identity threats within organizations lead women from underrepresented groups to question their sense of belonging (Georgeac & Rattan, 2022). Because stigmatized social identities of African American women in underrepresented groups are more salient, researchers argue their socialized identity is the lens through which they would be evaluated or judged within the workplace (Georgeac & Rattan, 2022; Goffman, 1963). The Eurocentric perspective that dominates the workforce does not have to worry about demonstrating vigilance for identity-relevant cues (Georgeac & Rattan, 2022).

**Purpose of the Study**

Research pertaining to racial and gendered experience can have limitations, and even engaging in research around diversity from the perspective of African American women can have its challenges (Nkomo, 2021), which is why even those who are African Americans may be hesitant to engage in corporate DEI conversation. Theorizing race in organizations is central to undoing the continuing effects of racism, otherwise it will be difficult to develop strategies that get to the roots of racial inequality in organizations (Nkomo, 2021, p. 212).

There is a plethora of research regarding addressing this issue from an educational perspective. These initiatives include educational pipelines and stronger pipelines with historically Black colleges and universities. However, little research examines what organizations are doing to address these disparities. Developing inclusive environments consists of addressing the pay gap of Blacks in tech spaces, and it is also about the future of inclusive technologies. Even beyond advancement, tech companies have a
responsibility and obligation to ensure Blacks are treated fairly and can thrive in this space.

Previous studies have indicated more mentoring is needed from organizations that say they support equity of all, as actions indicate otherwise. According to researchers, the lack of mentorship for African American women only perpetuates the lack of preparedness for C-suite positions\(^2\) (Beckwith et al., 2016). Mentoring is considered a valuable development strategy and an affirmative action tool that can be used to support and promote women and groups that have been viewed as previously disadvantaged (Mcilongo & Strydom, 2021). Although much research points to mentorship being a critical factor for advancement within an organization, African American women are less likely to receive the support needed to advance within organizations (McKinsey, 2023). Often chances to interact with senior leadership or those within C-suite positions are limited, and thus impacts the trajectory of more African American women obtaining C-suite positions in the near future. Some research suggests a call for leaders in tech spaces to move beyond mentorship and transcend into sponsorship when it comes to addressing the gap of Black leaders within companies.

Historically, research methodologies focused on the African American community have had a negative connotation because researchers did not take the time and resources to learn what methods may work in distinct communities to improve community acceptance. Critical social science research helps to “transform social relations to critique and transform social relations by revealing the underlying sources of social control, power relations, and inequality” (Neuman, 2000, p. 111). Social science

\(^2\) C-suite positions are also known as executive level leadership positions within an organization.
addresses the issues that marginalized communities experience by providing a platform for their truth to be shared rather than masked by colonized methodological frameworks.

Previous research conducted regarding the experience of Black women’s involvement within predominantly white institutions has been employed (Jaggers, 2022). Using phenomenological research to study the lived experience of African American women in the workplace can provide stronger analysis of assumptions and usual ways of perceiving the data collected from questionnaires (Jaggers, 2022). Phenomenology is useful for the researcher because of the emancipatory knowledge that increases awareness of the hidden or distorted by everyday understandings, and in doing so, it directs attention to the possibilities for social transformation inherent in the present configuration of social processes (hooks, 2000; Lather, 1986). Furthermore, it is important that the preservation of individuals’ voices in research is done with respect for participants’ values and beliefs (Chilisa, 2009). There must be a mutually beneficial relationship between the researcher and the researched, which provides support for ethnic minorities producing research in their communities to allow for such authentication.

Current international management theory building trends offer research that should account for the uniqueness of different cultures and contexts present (Kriek et al., 2009). If different cultures and context are important, then highlighting the experiences of African American women should be accounted for in organizational culture narratives. When studies are limited to questionnaires, researchers lose the chance to adequately account for experience.
The review conducted is an invitation to researchers to seek to understand African American women’s experience and their sense of belonging within their particular organizations, including the evaluation of organizational factors that contribute to sense of belonging. There is a plethora of research analyzing women’s experience in the workplace as it pertains to organizational culture, but the research is limited in its focus on African American women experiences. There is still a need to address African American women’s experiences in other organizational settings, such as in tech.

From articles cited, organizational culture was analyzed using quantitative methods and case studies. Studies using qualitative research methods that capture the individual experience in relation to organizational culture are limited. Researchers have suggested the need for qualitative research endeavors to take up broader questions to include questions about the relevance to transforming practice (Gutierrez & Penuel, 2014). Examining meaningful and equitable workplace change requires acknowledgment of recurring problems and practice and evaluating ways to elevate the work experience of African Americans (Gutierrez & Penuel, 2014). This cannot be done without observing the constraints of how and why organizations are designed a particular way (Gutierrez & Penuel, 2014).

**Study Significance**

This study examined African American women leaders’ experiences working in tech spaces. Through the use of narrative inquiry, this study was able to center the voices of African American women, which led to rich discoveries about their organizational experiences and understanding of their sense of belonging within their work environments. The study highlights how Black women’s experiences are not a monolith,
and the accounts shared have some similarities. The unique experience of each woman in this study highlights the diverse perceptions they each have regarding their work experiences.

The conceptual framework integrates Black feminist thought, organizational culture, belonging perspectives to explore the challenges and opportunities faced by African American women in corporate settings, particularly in the tech industry. Black feminist thought was used because it acknowledges the intersectional identities of African American women and their unique experiences in organizational settings. Black feminist thought provides a lens to understand the lived experiences of African American women and empowers them to shape their own narratives within organizational contexts. These frameworks also emphasize the need to challenge dominant narratives and structures that perpetuate discrimination and hinder belonging (Sanchez et al., 2019). Black feminist thought provides a lens to understand the lived experiences of African American women and empowers them to shape their own narratives within organizational contexts.

This study contributes to the limited literature on African American women working in both technical and nontechical roles through the utilization of narrative inquiry. By centering the narratives of African American women in this study, we can capture and account for lived experiences that would otherwise not be taken into account in traditional workplace reports.

Organizational culture, structure, and governance can have considerable influence on the advancement and experiences of women of color (Gause, 2020), particularly African American women, in leadership roles. It encompasses various aspects such as
work processes, management systems, and leadership practices. Organizational culture highlights values, beliefs, and artifacts that are both visible and invisible (Watkins, 2013). In this study one aspect of organizational culture that comes to the forefront is sense of belonging. While sense of belonging, along with employee well-being, can present both visible and invisible aspects that ultimately impacts one’s engagement and perceptions of the workplace.

The study also aims to contribute to research examining the sense of belonging within organizations that accounts for ethnic minority experiences, particularly African American women leaders in tech. The significance of this study is for organizations to consider the barriers that make it difficult for cultures of belonging to ensure the presence of African American women in the workplace. According to Brown et al. (2023), tech organizations must work to ensure Black professionals do not remain underrepresented within the tech space. Given the forecast of the expected increase in technology jobs by 2032, it is anticipated that Blacks in such roles are only projected to grow by 8%. How much of the stake will be represented by African American women?

This study is important because African American women are not widely represented in the tech space, which is why there are minimal research studies available to reference regarding their lived experiences. Despite qualitative studies examining STEM leadership for African American women working in higher education institutions, there are limited studies accounting for African American women leaders who are sole practitioners in tech. The study explored the complexity of belonging for African American women leaders in tech. This study also allowed participants to be seen and
heard from another African American woman, who curated an opportunity for them to pen and narrate their experiences in a way that speaks to the individual and the collective.

Belonging within an organization is crucial for employees, particularly for underrepresented groups like African American women. It involves being seen, heard, understood, and valued by colleagues, contributing to psychological safety and engagement. Cultivating a sense of belonging requires intentional efforts such as fostering connections, building trust, and facilitating collaboration.

Current conversations regarding African American women in tech experiences suggest the dependence on outside organizations to establish a sense of belonging within the tech field. Organizations such as Black Girls in Tech were founded on the premise of creating a community where African American women in tech could thrive. However, this research is focused on ensuring that organizations are not absolved from their responsibility to facilitate the growth of African American women.

The significance of this study is for organizations to consider the barriers that making it difficult for cultures of belonging to ensure the presence of African American women in the workplace. Tech organizations must work to ensure Black professionals do not remain underrepresented within the tech space (Brown et al., 2023). Given the forecast of the expected increase in technology jobs by 2032, it is anticipated that Blacks in such roles are only projected to grow by 8%. To what extent African American women will be represented within this percentage still is to be discovered.

The African American women in this study had at least 1 year of experience within their leadership role. African American women leaders working in tech spaces hold both technical and nontechnical roles. The women in this study resided in different
geographical regions of the United States. Depending on their organization, some women were strictly remote, others hybrid, and some remote with in-person travel requirements quarterly.

**Research Design**

African American women leaders in this study included those who have leadership positions with some women in the study of having direct reports; others oversee major projects and collaborate across team groups within their organization.

This study investigated the experiences of African American women leaders in tech through narratives about their organization and their sense of belonging by addressing the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of African American women working in tech organizations?

RQ2: In what ways, if any, does organizational culture impact African American women leaders’ experiences in tech?

The study identified four themes: (a) breaking barriers: Navigating isolation and echoes of exclusion; (b) African American women leadership: Normalcy of resiliency and supportiveness while experiencing cultural adversity; (c) perceptions of leadership and organizational culture; and (d) complexity and contradictions of sense of belonging.

Across these themes, experiences shared by African American women in the tech industry highlighted critical issues surrounding representation, inclusion, and the professional dynamics encountered in dominant space. The intersection experiences, offered by African American women in the tech industry, echo aspects of the conceptual framework informed by Black feminist thought. A key takeaway is truly in unpacking the
multifaceted nature of African American women’s leadership in tech. African American women leaders highlighted the importance of having a growth mindset that can help leverage the face-paced environments they work in. African American women have a strong sense of belonging within supportive networks and communities outside of their workplaces. The study also highlights the importance of supportive leadership being reciprocated, in response to how they lead others. The study serves as a reminder of how positive interactions with a leader who understands the intricacies of supporting African American women in leadership is valuable. There is a call for more authentic leadership, suggesting that leaders who share their challenges and vulnerabilities can foster a more empathetic and supportive work environment. Lack of visible African American leadership in tech is problematic (Mitchell, 2019). This study determined the need to clearly define what fostering a sense of belonging means for their organization, while also being more curious in learning what belonging actually means to its African American women employees.

Chapter 2 summarizes research regarding Black feminist thought, organizational culture and belonging. This study was concerned with the thoughts, feelings, and doings of African American women in tech told from their perspectives (see Figure 1).
Figure 1

*Chat GPT Framework Picture*

*Note. Generated by Chat GPT-image generator with prompt provided: “Illustrate an African American woman with a contemplative and nurturing demeanor, surrounded by imagery that radiates a caring and inclusive nature associated with a tech-oriented organizational environment. The image should integrate elements that represent family, community, and socioeconomic status, visually connected to the woman's brain, illustrating their impact on her thoughts and identity. Her clothing is to reflect her role in the tech industry, adorned with symbols of technology and innovation. A warm, glowing purple color surrounds her stomach area, symbolizing her sense of belonging and integration in the tech field. The overall atmosphere should be one of warmth, thoughtfulness, and professional belonging.”*
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Born an innocent girl
in a big ol’ world.
Her dreams are bigger than fairytales, yet her identity is suppressed.
Her inner worth is rich, but valued less by society when compared to her dress.
She is seen, but not heard,
Involved in the work, but yet to emerge.
She is brilliant and intelligent.
However, that seems to be less relevant.
For she is overlooked for simply being who she is.
—Litney Gray

This chapter begins with a review of relevant studies and a subsequent
development of a conceptual framework informing the research. The first part of the
chapter brings together literature surrounding the experiences of African American
women in tech and other STEM organizational environments. The literature review
speaks to the historical context of minority women’s workplace experiences, which was
informative to this study. The literature review encompassed public consulting reports
that discussed Black and minority experiences within tech, and highlighted challenges
that Black women may encounter and that could impact their sense of belonging also
determined what strategies should be best employed for study. Research specific to
African American/Black women in tech and their experiences, along with their
perspective of organizational culture and sense of belonging are limited. The second
portion of the chapter highlights the conceptual framework for this study, which
encompasses Black feminist thought and organizational culture and belonging as it

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relates to organizational culture. This framework informs the methodological framework (see Chapter 3) and overall discussion of recommendations and implications for practice and future research.

**Definitions of Terms**

- **African American**: A popular categorization used in the United States for a particular cultural group that refers to individuals and their descendants who have African ancestry, with many tracing their lineage back to enslaved persons (Agyemang et al., 2005).

- **Black**: This is a term used to describe the heterogeneous population of those residing in the United States. It does not determine one’s ethnicity. It refers to persons with African Ancestral origin with Brown or Black complexion. It signifies a non-white minority (Agyemang et al., 2005).

- **Tech/Technology Industry**: The area of the stock market focused on technological growth, development, and manufacturing.

- **A Sense of Belonging**: The subjective feeling that encompasses a strong connection to social groups, physical spaces, and personal and shared experiences is essential for predicting mental, physical, social, economic, and behavioral outcomes (Allen et al., 2021).

**Using Black Feminist Thought as a Lens to Understand Historical Organizational Culture and Belonging Experiences**

African American women share a common cultural and racial heritage and have labor force participation and educational degree achievement that is the highest of people of color in the United States (Haimerl, 2015; Sims, 2018; U.S. Department of Labor,
2016 as cited in Sims & Carter, 2019). Women of color have been known to face organizational and attitudinal barriers (Giscombe & Mattis, 2002). Previous literature has suggested aversive racism, or the individual’s subconscious feelings of prejudice, alter how a person’s not holding a marginalized identity relates to women and minorities and who they recommend for leadership roles (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Based on literature and empirical studies, intersections of race, gender, and class within leadership lead to sexual stereotyping, token status, inaccurate assessment of work productivity, and unrealistic expectations that mitigate against attainment of high-level positions (Malhotra, 2023; Logan & Dudley, 2019; Johnson, 2019; Logan & Dudley, 2019; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Current literature suggests organizations will continue to become more diverse, and there is more curiosity about what diversity should look like across organizations (Carter & Phillips, 2017).

Examining organizational artifacts of discrimination highlights how the intersectionality of African American experience contributes to the challenges and barriers that women in leadership experience in relation to gender and race (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Researchers have sought to unpack why an increase of women and women of color leadership is important for organizational growth (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Although race and gender are more readily available for individuals to highlight, it is important to note there are “indirect forays, and ventures into foreign territory rather than a straight line to the top” (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010, p. 172). Recent research highlights the connection between identity and leadership and the movement of multiple identities to intersectionality (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).
In the corporate sector, sponsorship mentoring and development mentoring are available. Lack of mentorship is believed to impede the advancement of African American women into senior leadership (Scott, 2011). Mentorship is to increase visibility (Scott, 2011). In a 2011 case study, researchers examined challenges experienced by women aspiring to leadership positions in medicine and academia (Salas-Lopez et al., 2011). The study took into consideration race and ethnicity, organizational culture, and gender, along with other variables. Study participants included four Latinas, two African Americans, one Asian, and one Caucasian. All participants held senior leadership positions in medicine or in academic medicine, and some women fell into both categories. Participants in the study reported they believe it is important for leaders who have succeeded to support and advocate for other women, as gender was viewed as a huge issue in the attainment of leadership positions (Salas-Lopez et al., 2011).

Tech Studies Exploring Race and Gender

The National Center for Women and Informational Technology provided a report on women of color in tech spaces (Ashcraft et al., 2016). The research highlighted various biases present within the tech field, specifically for those in technical roles. The report suggested actionable steps that they believed would address such challenges, including but is not limited to “enlisting top leadership support” (Ashcraft et al., 2016, p. 50. The invitation for executive and senior leadership to engage in diversity efforts that lead to action was informed by a research study that examined more than 700 private sector companies’ diversity efforts. The researchers found the establishment of diversity committees where senior leaders remained accountable to strategic goals was most effective because of how diversity goals were communicated. As a result, the strategy
increased the odds of Black women holding a management position by 27% (Ashcraft et al., 2016; Kaleve et al., 2006). Diversity training, mentorship in conjunction with leadership, and institutional accountability were also factors contributing to the effectiveness of the strategy in place.

Furthermore, the report highlighted the importance of male allyship and advocacy to facilitate more rapid changes (Ashcraft et al., 2016). Along with Ashcraft et al. (2016), other research has sought to explain how vital it is for organizations to understand that research-based change efforts are about striving to address biases we all share. This study is also about addressing access within the field and demystifying what African American women are actually experiencing in their organizations. It is an invitation to majority groups to become more informed of the environment desired by African American women.

McGee (2018) examined the role of gender and race in the advancement journey of women from different racial and ethnic groups. Each woman had experienced advancement from technical or operational level information technology (IT) roles to senior IT executives (SITE) roles, and currently occupied a SITE role, or occupied the role within the last 3 years in a U.S.-based organization in corporate America (McGee, 2018). McGee conducted a pilot study to determine the best recruitment process, data collection process, and interview questions for the open-ended semistructured interviews. McGee used thematic analysis of the data and used an inductive and theoretical approach to identify themes as outlined. Six themes arose as a result of the interviews (i.e., pathways to the SITE role, informal network bias, credibility and legitimacy, support, and the importance of technical skills), but the main findings indicated two routes to
achieving a SITE role: internal and external advancement (McGee, 2018). Informal networks have exclusionary practices and behaviors as well. In addition, results indicated gender is an exclusionary criterion when it comes to the advancement of women (McGee, 2018). Furthermore, the various types of organizations and IT environments where women work greatly affect their individual advancement journeys (McGee, 2018). This study also supports reasoning to specifically examine African American experiences because the study demonstrated that women are not all the same, specifically in terms of racial and ethnic experiences.

Bell (2018) examined the life experiences of women of different ethnic, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds who work within technology and their journey to become technology leaders using feminist theory and gender role incongruity theory as a theoretical framework. By employing narrative inquiry as a methodological framework, the study illustrated the experiences of five female technology leaders within the southern region of the United States (Bell, 2018). The study found that all participants had faced societal and political discrimination, such as gender discrimination, that they overcame by taking on challenges and navigating barriers within the workplace (Bell, 2018).

These studies highlight minority group experiences, but they also highlight the gap in literature concerning African American women in tech. As a result, consideration and inclusion of social location in theory is absent (Nkomo & Rodriguez, 2019). Due to the intersectional identities of African American women, there is such richness of experience to offer organizational and leadership scholarship. There needs to be an elevation of race as an important concept within analytical and theoretical processes
(Nkomo, 2021), especially given racial tensions in the United States during the height of the COVID-19 global pandemic and the crisis of belonging and dissatisfaction within organizations, which resulted in millions of Americans leaving their jobs (Nkomo, 2021; Parker & Horowitz, 2022). African American women's literature in organizational and business management publications is needed because production of knowledge is often constructed based on a Eurocentric view. When the voice and experiences of African American women are amplified in the workplace, a unique synergy emerges that cultivates not only an organizational culture of inclusion, but belonging and organizational development for all.

**Conceptual Framework**

This conceptual framework is informed by Black feminist thought to examine and address the unique experiences of African American women in the tech industry (see Figure 2). By exploring the interaction between this particular critical social theory and the constructs of organizational culture and belonging, the framework aims to identify factors impacting the workplace experiences of African American women. There is an emphasis on the importance of understanding and addressing the multidimensional aspects of being an African American woman leader in the tech industry. This framework led to the discovery of strategies that could contribute to a more diverse and inclusive tech industry.
Using Black Feminist Thought to Examine Organizational Experiences

Black feminist thought is a framework used to examine the experience of those who are Black and female in the United States (Collins, 2000). Black feminist thought encapsulates components of intersectionality to examine the role of race and gender in women’s career paths through tech work (Alegeria, 2019). In congruence with Black feminist thought, this study is set to intentionally capture the diverse expression and experience of African American women navigating workplace experience here in the United States (Collins, 2000). Although African American women are becoming more noticeable in corporate settings, the marginalized status of Black women remains a concern (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). By examining the state of research in regard to inclusive organizational culture for African American women, I intended to contribute to conversations about African American women in corporate settings using the lens of African American women. Black feminist thought serves as an appropriate theoretical framework to employ when studying Black women due to the intersectional identity of
Black women in this study (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Black feminist thought also helps to highlight the lived experiences of African American women in the tech sector, explore the unique intersections of such experiences between African American women in tech, and seek revelation and understanding of the commonalities and diversity across multiple contexts that may be provided. By highlighting the voice of African American women, they can shape the narrative that is most often told by outside influences, rather than themselves.

In this research, attention is centered on an intersectional group of leaders—African American women. The term intersectionality is grounded in Black feminism and critical race theory (Carbado et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality urges those examining antidiscrimination policies and practices to not limit the multidimensional experiences of Black women because their experiences are not limited by the utilization of a single axis analysis lens (Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1989). To approach African American women’s individual and collective experiences as one dimensional narrows the focal points to which organizations might attempt to structure their tactics for creating a “sense of belonging” and not actual belonging. Crenshaw (1989) argued, “there is a problematic consequence of the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” (p. 139). Crenshaw’s (2016) most recent work examines the need to move from grief to action, then transformation when it comes to addressing violence that African American women experience as a consequence of the American justice system. Similarly, this research explores the ways African American women experience inequitable organizational cultures in the workplace that threaten their sense of belonging, perpetuate discrimination, and impede growth.
Black feminist thought is derived from critical feminist theory. Critical feminist theory argues ecosystems (e.g., organizations) influence socialization and perceptions (hooks, 2000). In the United States, organizations are exposed to patriarchal designed structures. According to hooks (2000), patriotism and patriarchy informs educational practices.

Hooks also discussed the importance of having clear definitions, especially in educating others concerning systems of oppression. Individuals who desire to be allies or supportive need to understand their role in why the system has not changed (hooks, 2000). Therefore, organizations, even diverse ones, may have the tendency to support dominance when they do not know how to change systems. Hooks elaborated on how even those who identify as members of oppressed groups can still support systems of oppression (hooks, 2000). For example, just because people participate in antiracist struggle does not mean that they have divested white supremacy (hooks, 2000).

Similarly, African American women can unconsciously promote agendas that are a social identity threat, just as white individuals are raised with a dominant perspective. It is important that African American women, allies, and organizational leaders examine such agendas and practices and become aware of the implicit bias within structures, systems, and processes that are adapted to prevent perpetuating and maintaining a flawed system. Examining organizational culture theory, particularly that of the organizational iceberg, may be useful in making such connections to reach more equitable gains.

**Organizational Culture and Belonging Role in Shaping Workplace Experiences**

Black feminist thought acknowledges African American women have been shaped by outside influences (Howard-Hamilton, 2003), which is why this research seeks to explore the ways in which organizational culture has impacted the experience of
African American women in tech. Organizational culture covers a broad range of issues, including work processes and practices, roles and type of work, management systems, and leadership practices (Bukhari & Sharma, 2014). Organizational culture has been studied to explore ways in which organizations hold individual differences (e.g., motivations, experiences, and values) and how such differences create certain differences that can result in divergent organizational behaviors (O’Neill et al., 2001). Paradoxically, organizations are then challenged to reduce variability among individuals for the purpose of achieving organizational goals (O’Neill et al., 2001). The development of organizational culture is a natural sociodynamic. Culture is a more effective mechanism for reducing uncertainty and equivocality than structure in situations where face-to-face communication is limited, and the physical dispersion of employees is great (O’Neill et al., 2001).

Culture conveys to employees a sense of identity, facilitates the generation of commitment to something larger than the self, enhances social system stability, and guides and shapes behavior (O’Neill et al., 2001; Smircich, 1983). It is important to note that within the context of work, individuals such as African American women are constantly readjusting themselves due to social interactions with others within the organization, which constitutes sense-making, forming the basis for organizing (Weick, 1995). From the perspective of employee perception, organizational culture contributes to whether an organization is considered to be a healthy place to work (Tsai, 2011).

According to Chatman and O’Riley (2016), there has been a need for continued exploration of the connection between culture, leadership, organizational structure, and performance. Studies have highlighted support mechanisms that should be in place for
African American women (Beckwith et al., 2016; Scott, 2011). Organizational culture has been a crucial factor in determining opportunities for advancement (Massimino & Turner, 2018) and the progression of women of color in the tech (Avolio et al., 2020). There has been concern regarding the inclusivity of technology spaces for African American women in leadership positions; in particular, intentional or unintentionally hostile and unsupportive environments can impact the future of African American women being successors of key leadership positions (McGee, 2018). Organizational culture has the capacity to outline the responsibilities necessary for creating environments that may lead to a sense of belonging for African American women.

**Understanding Belonging**

Typically, organizational narratives are the main modes of knowing and communicating what sense of belonging might mean for individuals in the workplace. Evaluations of employees’ sense of belonging are typically scale driven and have a 360 approach, but do not examine the depth of individual accounts of sense of belonging. Some Black feminist scholars suggest there is a lack of a sense of belonging because there is no alignment between experiences and the dominant culture experience (Howard-Hamilton, 2003).

Organizational culture provides framing for how organizations might foster a sense of belonging and enhancing employee wellbeing (Waller, 2020). Belonging is typically characterized as “being a part of something,” but measuring individual employee’s belonging within organizations has not been standardized. Sense of belonging describes the extent to which one feels they are an accepted group member whose contributions are valued by others in the setting (Georgeac & Rattan, 2023; Good
et al., 2012). Sense of belonging also impacts interpersonal relationships, which means an individual’s sense of belonging in an environment is dependent on the strength of relationships within that environment (Lampinen et al., 2018).

How can organizations move beyond diversity? Scholars and practitioners believe cultivating a sense of belonging for employees is the next step in the process. Belonging within an organization entails employees being seen, heard, understood, accepted, and acknowledged (Huppert, 2017). It can also be classified as an employee’s sense that their uniqueness is treasured by their organization and colleagues (Bond, 2022). Belonging is considered a viable factor in providing psychological safety to employees, along with having an impact on employee engagement (Huppert, 2017). Cultivating a sense of belonging requires actions and initiatives that include, but are not limited to, intentionality in fostering connection, developing and facilitating programs that lead to building trust, collaboration regarding various decision-making conversations, and honoring purposeful storytelling (Cornell University, 2023).

**Conclusion**

The aim of this literature review and conceptual framing was to lead to further research development, as it pertains to African American women experiences within corporate organizations. As the researcher, I was determined to discover any interpretable trends or patterns within the literature and to aggregate empirical findings related to a narrow research question that might support evidence-based practice. Using an inductive integrative approach emphasized the importance of organizational consideration for ethnic minority subgroups, particularly African American women. The dynamic of Black feminist thought, organizational culture and Black feminist thought aided me in the
exploration of African American women’s lived experiences within tech. Understanding how organizational culture may impact, if at all, the experiences of African American women.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Allied with words of affirmation and inspiration, she recognizes the facts. Her determination redefines the stats. She presses forward, onward with vision. Her works speak for themselves and accomplishes the mission. She breaks barriers waiting to be broken, Simply because she is chosen . . .
To be.

—Litney Gray

The Invitation for African American Women Narratives to Be Amplified in Tech

This chapter details the methodological approach and research procedures employed in this study. The chapter provides a description of participants, recruitment and selection process. The chapter concludes by providing a discussion of data collection and data analysis and quality measures of the study as a means to accept the invitation to explore, recognize and honor the narrative of African American women in tech.

A campaign initiated by Google Women Techmakers (2022b) aimed to spotlight the often overlooked experiences and contributions of Black women in the U.S. tech industry amid racial biases and inequalities. The campaign, launched during the COVID-19 global pandemic, highlighted the underrepresented role and often overlooked contributions of Black women in the American tech sector. The campaign was designed to inspire and empower the next generation of Black women in tech by sharing relatable stories of individuals who held technical and nontechnical roles (Women Techmakers, 2022a). This included the narratives of a woman who served as the head of Civil Rights at Google, a quality engineer at NASA, and the CEO of a financial tech startup company.

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The stories stressed the importance of representation and resilience in overcoming systemic barriers and fostering inclusivity within the tech sector. These women’s diverse perspectives and achievements were amplified, while also challenging prevailing narratives and advocating for greater recognition and opportunities for Black women in technology (Women Techmakers, 2022c).

**Narrative Inquiry as a Methodological Framework**

This study used qualitative research methodology to highlight accounts of African American women’s lived experiences within the workplace, without misrepresenting or distorting what was shared. Therefore, this study draws upon the oral storytelling tradition of African Americans (Hamlet, n.d.). The stories that the women in this study elaborate on were filled with emotion and wisdom that can serve a cultural function to connect people through shared identity and embolden the narrative of African American women in tech. As a result, narrative inquiry was employed to better inform diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) work within organizational settings.

Narrative inquiry has been informed by Black feminist thought, particularly through modes of storytelling. Black feminist thought has been used to illustrate the individual uniqueness Black women intellectuals best contribute to a Black women’s group standpoint by using their experiences as situated knowers (Collins, 2000). In defining my population and recruitment process, I was aware I would possibly have low participation due to the small population of African American women in tech. Therefore, the participation criteria were broad to not limit women in leadership roles to those at the executive level, middle management, or senior level (Hamilton, 2020). As part of intersectional feminist research methodology, this narrative inquiry remained open to the
diverse and at times contrary or unexpected ways” (Hamilton, 2020, various social locations emerge within the narratives of the lived experiences of women in tech in this study.

**Timeline**

The timeframe of the study was about 6-months after the study design. The institutional review board process took about 1.5 months in a constant cycle of receiving feedback to ensure that this human subjects study would not insight any form of harm to those who participated. The recruitment of participants took 3 months once approved, which overlapped with a 3-month actual data collection process that took 3 months. It was challenging to retain participants in a possible 3-hour long Zoom conversation along with ensuring they would return for a one-on-one interview that could last up to 1 hour.

**Recruitment**

Flyers were shared on LinkedIn, Facebook, and within online women’s groups whose aim is to support women in STEM, such as BlackComputerHer, SisterSister Circle: Women in Technology. As an African American woman, I am keenly aware of the stigma associated with academic research and the African American community, particularly harmful reinforcement of stereotypes. To counter this, I decided to have a picture of myself on my recruitment forms to ensure that participants would understand the importance of self-selecting into this study. Initially, this study was designed not to compensate participants; however, as a researcher, I felt highly moved to show my respect, appreciation and value for participants’ engagement in the study by providing compensation in the form of a gift card.
Participants

Due to the small percentage of African American women in the technology sector (Rooney & Khorram, 2020), purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants. Participants in the study self-identified as African American women. Other criteria include each participant having held a role within the tech industry for at least 1 year, and must have held some form of leadership role (e.g., a manager, supervisor, team lead) within their current organization. These leaders are considered mid- and top-level leaders within their organization. Participants can hold either a technical or nontechnical role within the tech industry. For example, a nontechnical leader can identify as a leader within their respective organizations that engages in work around employee engagement and talent/leadership development at a technology company. Recruitment took place during July–September via virtual platform.

In total, seven of the research participants primarily held leadership roles. These participants in the study could hold a technical or nontechnical role within their organization. Participants held middle management, senior leadership, and vice president roles within their organization. Each participant had responsibility for management of projects within their organization, requiring them to work with other organizational leaders. About half of the participants had supervisory responsibilities, while others managed projects that required individuals of other teams to report to them.

Due to funding limitations, participants were recruited to take part virtually. The sample was comprised of individuals working in the West Coast, Midwest, South, and East Coast of the United States. Research participants worked in technology
organizations that have a large impact in banking, finance, data, computer software, and crowdfunding.

It is important to acknowledge that two participants only completed the questionnaire, with one of them engaging in relatively brief the second sista circle conversation.

**Data Collection**

This study used a questionnaire, sista circle conversation, and individual interviews for data collection (Collier, 2017; Roweley, 2014). The forms of data collection were open-ended and semistructured. The three methods of data collection are also means to validate, using a narrative approach.

**Questionnaire**

An electronic questionnaire was the first data collection point for this study. Questionnaires are often used in business and management data collection processes and in social science research because it allows for the researcher to collect meaningful data regarding participants’ position regarding their experience within the workplace (Rowley, 2014). At a basic level, the questionnaire serves as an opportunity to collect demographic information beyond participants racial identity. The initial questionnaire that participants completed was designed to engage the participants in deep personal reflection prior to joining the sista circle conversation. The questionnaire was designed for open-ended responses, so that participants shared more freely about themselves. Participants provided a written account of their sense of belonging within tech and how the world around them influences their navigation of workplace.
Table 1 provides an overview of the demographics offered by the women. The demographic questionnaire was open-ended, these are the data points the women decided to offer. Despite her valuable experiences and insights, Beatrice was unable to participate in the sista circle conversation, leading to her discontinuation from the study. Bertha only participated partially in the Sista Circle Conversation, which also led to her discontinuation from the study. However, both individuals’ written narratives provided in the questionnaire were included in the overall data analysis process.

**Table 1**

*Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sista</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Religious affiliation</th>
<th>Current role</th>
<th>Industry experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Black African American</td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td>Senior Data &amp; Applied Scientist</td>
<td>Tech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yvette</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Apostolic Christian</td>
<td>Application Owner</td>
<td>Tech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bertha</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Hispanic and Black</td>
<td>Nonreligious</td>
<td>Senior Manager of Organizational Change Management</td>
<td>Change &amp; Diversity roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beatrice</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Black African American</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>Discontinued from study</td>
<td>Tech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrie</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>Senior Manager in User Experience</td>
<td>UX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazan</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>African American Black</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Director of Quality Engineering</td>
<td>Tech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lena</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Spiritualist</td>
<td>Spiritual Customer Care Specialist</td>
<td>Tech</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sista Circle

Due to African American women experiences being multidimensional it is important for researchers to use culturally sensitive approaches. Therefore, a sista 5 circle conversation was chosen as a mode of data collection because within the African American community storytelling and sharing of workplace experiences within a group setting is known to provide a rich dialogue that honors the experiences shared within the space (Coleman, 2020). “Sister circles are support groups that build upon existing friendships, fictive kin networks, and the sense of community found among African Americans females” (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011, p. 2). Sister circles have been safe community containers where authentic truth telling and deep listening help to facilitate an exchange of “support, knowledge, and encouragement” (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011, p.2). This approach complements earlier discussion on narrative inquiry and using qualitative methods to explore more deeply the experience so Black women. The use of Sista circle aligns with these methods because it is a culturally congruent framework that deepen the understanding of the unique challenges and triumphs that African American women face.

With small group sizes there is a possibility for more candid and spontaneous conversation to be had among each other. Using a sista circle provides the opportunity for participants to bring their own thoughts and ideas to the discussion (Merriam & Grenier,

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5 The term sista is an abbreviation of the word sister and is used interchangeably when referring to a female friend or family member. It is term that that represents connection and familiarity.
Sista circles also validate lived experiences of Black women; it also is rooted in an ethic of care (Collier, 2017). Using sista circle methodology in the collection of data requires that the researcher engages as a co-inquirer to the subject matter with participants (Coleman, 2020). Engaging as a co-inquirer requires that the researcher takes on the role of convener and facilitator for the sista circle gathering. The format the sista circle convening will follow a particular format that ensures the adherence to community guidelines established, but introduces questions and topics for discussion that leads to new insights and learnings by the group.

Typically, the structure of a sista circle meeting requires a time frame of approximately 2 hours (Buxton, 2022). Sista circle size requires four to five participants. This study occurred over 23 different focus groups, which would result in a sample size of 12–15 participants. Each meeting consisted of the following practice, (a) I begin with opening statement, which was followed up with (b) individual group member check-in. Participants shared how they were feeling as they joined the space. We then (c) established community guidelines before beginning our centering. The centering activity invited individuals to share an artifact that described their overall sense of belonging which led to (d) an open dialogue based on Research Question. Due to the length of time on zoom, (d) a midway check-in to determine the length of time of break occurred. We returned to the (e) open dialogue based upon drafted questions, and (f) concluded the discussion with discussing the way forward, before (g) participants said goodbye to one another and expressed their well wishes for completion of the research study. The interview guide utilized is listed in Appendix B.
The women in this study had the opportunity to establish community guidelines at the start of their sista circle conversations, which was also their first interaction with the researcher. In Sista Circle Group 1, participants expressed desire to cocreate a space that would foster open dialogue. In support of one another in the space, there was an agreement to provide examples to help clarify and drive points home. Participants also said a safe space for them encompassing permission to speak honestly was important for the conversation.

**Follow-Up Interview**

The last phase of data gathering occurred after sista circles using semistructured interviews. By listening to the stories of African American women at an individual level, information about how certain events and experiences may connect to sense of belonging and might offer implications for tech organizations and African American women in the tech field or those seeking to join the tech field.

Due to the follow-up interview portion of the study being conducted over Zoom, environmental factors for participants were not easily controllable on the researcher’s end, which could be concerning (Saldaña, 2016). Each piece of the data collection process was used to understand themes of lived experiences of research participants’ own perspectives (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015). As the researcher, there is a constant dilemma whether the interview process is sterilized when using Eurocentric research practices, due to the conversation style that African American women tend to have in safe spaces versus spaces embedded with colonized frameworks (Brown, 2011). Making sense of the data and ensuring adequate representation of the data were important to the study. As an African American researcher, I acknowledge that my marginalized identity has
heightened my concern with how critically, socially relevant, and trustworthy the research is for the population of individuals (Brown, 2011). Using three modes of data collection aided in validating research findings.

**Data Analysis**

The interpretation of the data is a result of integrating both literature and bracketing was used to avoid assumptions or misrepresent participant narratives in the analysis of the data. Data from follow-up interviews were analyzed by first transcribing interviews using Otter and NVivo. Data were organized based on mode of data collection (i.e., questionnaire, sista circle, and 1:1 interviews). The data analysis, which is also a narrative analysis, was interpreted using a thematic process which entailed familiarizing myself with the data, generation of initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing of themes, defining and naming of themes in order to produce final takeaways.

The first step to analyzing the data was reading through the questionnaires, followed by each sista circle group, and concluding with one-on-one interviews. This provided an opportunity for me to see connections, and in what way they were very distinct, which provides the researcher with a sense of what is to be learned from all interviews, followed by a summary of findings in preparation for a preliminary research presentation (Lareau, 1996).

The next step consisted of coding using NVivo software. Coding is used in the data analysis for the purpose of summarizing and highlighting the most salient takeaways from the questionnaires, sista circles and interviews (Saldaña, 2016). An inductive coding process was employed, to facilitate code based upon what is expected based on prior knowledge relevant to this topic and the identification of surprising, not anticipated and
what addressed the conceptual theoretical perspective in this research (Olow, 2021).

Subsequently, coding resulted in marking specific segments of participant reflections for association with designated codes. The distillation of topics led to the overall categories that helped to classify and minimize the breadth of codes.

Over 100 codes were generated, and through the process of iterative refinement, the codes were narrowed down to 29 codes. Then organized into 15 categories (ranging from 2-5 per theme), which helped to determine underlying patterns within the narrative. These categories emerged into four overarching themes that captured the essence of the data, resulting in comprehensive analysis (see Table 2).
### Table 2

**Overview of Codes, Categories, and Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Example Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Breaking barriers:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Navigating isolation and echoes of exclusion</td>
<td>● Isolation and challenges of being the sole Black woman in tech</td>
<td>Challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● The tension between other Black folks</td>
<td>Isolation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Microaggression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stereotypes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Underrepresentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American women leadership: The</td>
<td>● Growth-oriented</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>normalcy of resiliency and supportiveness</td>
<td>● Support and resources for grounding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>while experiencing cultural adversity</td>
<td>● Black women as guiding light</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Leadership challenges</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of leadership and organizational</td>
<td>● The role of supportive leadership</td>
<td>ERG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>culture</td>
<td>● Appreciating moments of connection while encountering other Black women</td>
<td>Inclusive culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ in the workplace</td>
<td>Exclusive culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Employee resource groups (ERGs) and supportive resources</td>
<td>Mentorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● The desire for authentic and supportive leadership</td>
<td>Sponsorship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Perceptions of c-suite advancement</td>
<td>Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The complexity and contradictions of sense of</td>
<td>● Reflections of African American women on faith representation and identity</td>
<td>Belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>belonging</td>
<td>● The nexus of compensation, support systems, and inclusivity in career</td>
<td>Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>○ development</td>
<td>Compensation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● space as belonging</td>
<td>Cultural connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Seen, heard, and valued by the organization</td>
<td>Equity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Safe space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Spirituality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Representation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Validation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Quality Measures of Study

It is important to note that race played a significant role in the research inquiry of this study (Brown, 2011). The reporting from companies regarding DEI is too questionable because of the historical pervasiveness of racism in the United States (Brown, 2011). Even the racialized nature of academic research, including qualified research, is considered in the development of this study despite participants having shared research identities (Brown, 2011). Therefore, this study may be useful to understand both interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics between African American women and their workplace community (Lessenich et al., 2018). Although this study could benefit from being a cross-cultural research study, interviews were conducted to reveal researcher blind spots (Lessenich et al., 2018). This study accounts for the possibility that shared identity assumptions may bias research outcomes (Lessenich et al., 2018). The study highlights how cultural and contextual blindness might be present even in methodological design when it pertains to studying African American experience in the workplace (Lessenich et al., 2018).

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this study is that it has been processed and storied closely with the human experience (Stahl & King, 2020). Research strategies employed to address trustworthiness of the study encompassed purposeful sampling, reflexivity, triangulation, member checking and thick descriptions. By inviting research participants to provide feedback on final findings, receiving critical feedback from peers ongoing, and being challenged by my principal investigator for IRB helped to address any concerns
about the rigor of this qualitative study (Bloomberg, 2023). I particularly highlight credibility, dependability, and transferability as trustworthiness criteria for the study.

**Credibility**

The study employed methodological triangulation of collecting three different modes of data: participants’ written narratives, the one-on-one interviews, and the sista circle group (Stahl & King, 2020). Given the thick descriptions provided by participants and myself as a researcher to include contextual information about the realm of organizations, particularly tech (Stahl & King, 2020). To address potential power dynamics that could emerge in the data collection process on account of my role as researcher and the women in this study as participants, I used participatory approaches that emphasized transparency and reflexivity.

**Dependability**

As the researcher, it was imperative that I uphold my values and passions in relation to this research, particularly my commitment to honor the voices of African American women. My reflexive process included creating voice memos and written memos following sista circle conversations, and one-on-one interviews, while transcribing, and during data analysis. I used voice notes during the data collection process, particularly after I suffered second-degree hand burn less than 24 hours prior to the start of my first sista circle conversations. This resulted in receiving verbal encouragement and care from participants. As an inquirer, I also engaged in reflexivity, which was crucial in identifying codes that would inform the development of the overall themes in the study. Moreover, reflective practice was how my findings were constructed, while also maintaining ethical practice in being responsive to the power
dynamic of me being the dominant narrator of the written and oral accounts provided by
the women in this study (Hamilton, 2020; Mortari, 2015). For example, when working
with the questions regarding organizational efforts that support the retention of African
American women, all participants offered valuable analysis of various workplace
processes that could share this. My peers in other fields, such as nursing and education,
shared similar sentiments to these women in their review of the findings reported.

Prior researchers highlighting intersectional feminist research have used
reflectivity as an incisive tool to navigate complex dynamics that emerge in the research
process (Hamilton, 2020). Hamilton (2020) emphasized how intersectionality serves as a
useful tool to tease out these dilemmas, and though it cannot preempt or solve all
challenges, it provides reflexive space for exploring such dilemmas and a tool for
navigating power in the research process (Hamilton, 2020). Reflexivity in Black feminist
thought is connected to the ethical assurance of researchers remaining accountable to co-
inquires/creators of knowledge (Hamilton, 2020). Reflexivity is based upon the principles
that lived experiences and dialogues shape meaningful knowledge, recognizing the
impacts of intersectionality of social identities on the research process and honoring the
created knowledge (Hamilton, 2020).

**Role of Researcher**

Relating to this study particularly, I know of the negative workplace experiences
that my African American family and friends encountered. Some have worked for
organizations where they were underpaid and unsupported. Although every negative
encounter has been disheartening, it has increased my desire to help organizations create
safe work environments that provide peaceful experiences for employees. I believe using
my professional, educational, and personal experiences provides me with an opportunity to educate others regarding the significance of effective strategic planning. Moreover, it is urgent that others also understand the need to embrace and expand equity, diversity, and inclusion.

As a researcher, I aimed to be intentional in ensuring the voices of research participants are understood. It is my personal vision to address workplace social and cultural barriers for African American women by providing keen insights that can support the development of strategic initiatives that advance gender equality in the workplace. To senior leadership on advancing gender equality and women. As a mediator, my desire is to educate potential allies for women in leadership, based on statistical data along with personal accounts attesting to the disparities they have encountered. I plan to create spaces that allow for dialogue, which can lead to all women in the workplace being assured that the career pathway to becoming an executive is a genuine opportunity. This bridges the gap between theory and practice, in addition to advocating and promoting the inclusion of African American women and how their lived experiences should be accounted for in the visible and invisible aspects of organizational culture.

**Transferability**

The methodology of this study contributes to the importance of culturally responsive research by utilizing the sista circle conversation foster a safe environment where stories could be shared, and experiences validated. Respect and love for one another was palpable throughout this study, which informs research practices for marginalized groups, such practices uphold ethical standards which ensure the perspectives of participants are held respectfully and responsibly by the researcher. The
methodology also offers a nuanced stance in considering the intersecting identities of research participants which also expands the applicability of the study’s findings. This study is also intentionally designed to inform DEIB practices within organizational settings, which adds to current research focused on improving organizational cultures and behaviors beyond tech. Consequently, participants were given the opportunity to review the research findings within over a six-week time frame. Participants were invited to voice their agreements or dissent. No instances disagreements were reported.

Summary

The methodological framework of this study contributes to the discourse within academia on race and gender, particularly within tech. The reflexive nature of the process ensures a level of authenticity on the end of the researcher and participants. In an aim to inform potential organizational culture strategies connected to DEIB practices. Most importantly, this methodological framework holds true to centering the voices of African American women as it pertains to their experience within tech.
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Though meek, her voice will not remain petit
For the record, her voice was never weak.
    Hidden and silenced,
    Yet never fully quiet.
    She remained unstoppable.
To rehearse to her future that the impossible is conquerable.
She is valiant with momentum in vision, voice and visibility
She is advancing from history and progressing towards new possibilities.
    She has served.
    So let not one be disturbed or perturbed.
    She is not asking for pity, but not apologizing for progression.
    She is powering forward in destiny’s direction.
    For it is her time to be.
—Litney Gray

This study was designed to learn about the lived experiences of African American women in the tech industry. This study also sought to examine organizational impact on African American women leaders’ experience. This chapter discusses the findings for the research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of African American women working in tech organizations?

2. In what ways, if any, does organizational culture impact African American women leader’s experiences in tech?

These findings are written to understand the experiences and to highlight aspects of organizational culture that impact sense of belonging. Throughout the second and third section of this chapter, participants’ experiences are captured in quotes to best narrate the

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6 To Simply Be She by Litney Gray © 2022
conglomerate of experiences shared with me in my roles as researcher and convener of the sista circle.

R1: What are the lived experiences of African American women leaders in tech experiences?

In Phase 1 of this study, participants completed a questionnaire, which was designed to be an open-ended autobiography where participants could provide written narration of experiences that influence their workplace persona as African American women leaders in tech. Participants mainly reported demographic information, but also provided information useful in informing Research Question 1. The subsequent phases of the study were sista circle conversations and one-on-one interviews. The findings in this phase of the study highlight four themes that address Research Question 1 and Research Question 2 (see Tables 3 and 4). Participant narratives highlighted four overarching themes: (a) breaking barriers: navigating isolation and echoes of exclusion; (b) African American women leadership: the normalcy of resiliency and supportiveness while experiencing cultural adversity; (c) perceptions of leadership and organizational culture; and (d) complexity and contradictions of sense of belonging.

Table 3

*Themes of African American Women’s Experiences*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Main theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Breaking barriers: Navigating isolation and echoes of exclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>African American women leadership: The normalcy of resiliency and supportiveness while experiencing cultural adversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Perceptions of leadership and organizational culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Complexity and contradictions of sense of belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research question</td>
<td>Theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R1: What are the lived experiences of African American women working in tech organizations?</td>
<td>1. Navigating isolation and echoes of exclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. African American women leadership: The normalcy of resiliency and supportiveness while experiencing cultural adversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2: In what ways, if any, does organizational culture impact African American women leaders’ experiences in tech?</td>
<td>3. Perceptions of leadership and organizational culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Complexity and contradictions of sense of belonging at work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
During my analysis process, I found myself reflecting upon black films that highlight African American women’s leadership and the power of sisterhood. Being someone who has three sisters, I understand how every individual’s story contributes to the larger narrative. That is why I decided to incorporate the names of these films in some of my section headings in this chapter. To honor black storytelling, I used the color purple in the design of figures and images generated throughout this written dissertation. This was a subtle way to highlight contributions of black women and pays homage to the work of Alice Walker’s. “The Color Purple”, which tells the story of African American women who have experienced both pain and triumph. It also amplifies the power of sisterhood that extends beyond one's bloodline. It is a true representation of the intersectional experiences of black women and the world around them, that I aimed to build upon in the exploration of women in tech experiences.

**The Secret Life of Bees (African American Queens)**

In this study, I delved into the experiences of African American women in the tech industry, focusing on their personal and professional journeys. To maintain the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms were used. These pseudonyms were not arbitrary; they held deep personal significance as they are the names of my sisters, mother, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers. This choice was a tribute to the lineage of strength, resilience, and pioneering spirit that has flowed through generations, mirroring the qualities observed in the women whose stories are shared in this research. The use of these familial names served multiple purposes, including but not limited to anonymity, personal connection, symbolism, and empowerment of African American women in the context of this study.
By ensuring anonymity, participants’ privacy was upheld, which is a crucial ethical consideration in any research involving personal accounts. By using pseudonyms, I protected the identities of the individuals and allowed them to share their experiences openly, without fear of personal or professional retaliation. Embedding the names of women from my family as pseudonyms created a personal connection to the research. It underscored the respect and honor I hold for participants’ narratives and elevated their stories with the same reverence I have for my own family’s matriarchs. This connection enriched the research with a layer of emotional depth and commitment to integrity. The choice of these particular names symbolized the continuity of challenges and triumphs faced by women across generations and backgrounds. Just as my grandmothers navigated their respective worlds with grace and tenacity, women in this study demonstrated similar resilience in the tech industry. This parallel drew attention to the ongoing journey of women’s empowerment and the breaking of barriers in professional workspaces. Lastly, by naming these participants after strong women in my own family, the study implicitly celebrated the strength and agency of women of color in tech. It served as a reminder of their contributions, struggles, and the systemic barriers they navigate and framed their experiences in a broader narrative of female empowerment and perseverance.

In essence, the selection of these pseudonyms was not merely a methodological choice but a deeply intentional act to weave the personal with the academic, the historical with the contemporary. It reflected a commitment to honoring the voices of participants while acknowledging the enduring legacy of women who have paved the way for future generations. This approach enriched the study and provided a nuanced understanding of
the experiences of women of color in the tech industry through a personal and universal lens.

**Hidden Figures in Tech**

**Beatrice**

Beatrice was a Black/African American woman with a diverse professional background spanning various technical roles. Hailing from Chicago, she was exposed to architecture and manufacturing from a young age. Growing up in less privileged neighborhoods, Beatrice recognized the importance of education and technology as a means to carve out a safer path in life. She harbored aspirations of pursuing a career in engineering or IT, fueled by her early affinity for computers and technology.

Beatrice’s journey in the tech industry began with her distinction as the sole computer-savvy individual in her family, even during her grade school years. Throughout her academic pursuits, including undergraduate and master’s programs in computer science, she often found herself as one of the few individuals of her background and gender. Undeterred by the lack of representation, Beatrice forged ahead, accumulating over 15 years of experience working for renowned companies such as Apple.

In her professional roles, Beatrice frequently encountered situations where she was either the only person of color in her position or one of a handful in her technical department. Despite facing such challenges, she persevered, gradually gaining confidence and embracing her technical expertise with greater assurance.

**Bertha**

Like other women in the study, Bertha was a highly educated woman of color from an urban community supporting various sectors, including tech, which has
supported her to show up freely in capacities that are admirable. Simultaneously, being highly educated and being willing to own spaces, she found herself in, has led to moments that have taken a toll on her well-being. She has worked above and beyond what is expected to prove her worth and, at times, making necessary compromises to facilitate positive change. As she has progressed in her career, she learned to minimize the weight of it all by reducing her inclination to “code switch,” and, instead, choose to show up as her authentic self. This included embracing her Chicago accent, wearing sneakers and fashions that align with her style, using African American vernacular English (AAVE) when appropriate, and being well-spoken and a trusted peer and leader in her organization.

Michelle

Michelle, a Black African American woman who hailed from the Midwest, was primarily raised in Columbus, Ohio. Her upbringing was marked by various relocations across states like Pennsylvania, Texas, California, and Indiana. Despite not being targeted for tech opportunities and lacking personal connections in the field, Michelle’s innate proficiency in mathematics laid the foundation for her eventual career path in data science.

Michelle leveraged her expertise in data analytics and program management to earn the position of senior data and applied scientist. Her career trajectory included roles such as data analyst, senior analytics program manager, director of data analytics, which reflect her progression and growth in the field.

Michelle’s journey into the tech industry was largely self-directed. Although she excelled in mathematics, she had limited exposure to technology beyond basic software
applications like SPSS, Minitab, and Excel. It was not until her time at Carnegie Mellon University that she was introduced to the vast potential of technology; thanks to the university’s rigorous curriculum, Michelle was exposed to various tech classes regardless of her major.

Driven by her curiosity and determination, Michelle embarked on a journey of self-learning and exploration, attended events, and immersed herself in the world of technology. Despite not receiving overt encouragement or guidance from mentors or peers, Michelle took intentional steps to carve out her career path in data science.

At the time of this study, Michelle shared her life with her husband, whom she had known for 8 years. Alongside her partner, she enjoyed the companionship of two cats.

Regarding cultural upbringing, Michelle acknowledged, although she cannot speak for all African American women, her roots lay in a blue-collar family with modest beginnings. Given the absence of other examples of tech professionals in her immediate circle, Michelle occasionally sensed the need to prove herself to those who followed a more traditional career path. Raised with the belief she must outshine her peers in knowledge and preparedness as an African American woman, she approached her professional life with a strong work ethic.

**Yvette**

Yvette is a 62-year-old Black woman with a rich professional background in business analysis, project management, and release management. She was born and raised in the Midwest near the Great Lakes. Yvette grew up in a close-knit family with five brothers and no sisters. She earned an undergraduate degree in accounting from one
of the top public business schools in the country. She also held a Master of Business Administration in Management Information Systems. Yvette emphasized the importance of bringing her authentic self to work and fostering a culture of openness and honesty in her team and organization.

With over 33 years of experience in her organization, Yvette’s career had been marked by a diverse range of roles and responsibilities. Throughout her career, Yvette continuously sought opportunities for growth and development, expanding her skill set, and adapting to the evolving needs of her organization. Starting as a business analyst and tester, she gradually transitioned into program management and project management roles. At the time of this study, Yvette was serving as an application owner and product owner, overseeing critical applications in her organization.

Despite never directly managing people, Yvette has successfully led projects and teams, demonstrating her expertise in project management, and showcasing her influential leadership style that is upheld by her commitment to delivering results. Although she has worked mostly with those with a more technical skill set, Yvette’s strength lies in her project management skills rather than hands-on coding, highlighting her value as a nontechnical leader.

Yvette’s profile reflected a seasoned professional with a track record of success in project management and leadership within a technical organization. Her dedication to authenticity, coupled with her extensive experience and expertise, made her a valuable asset to her organization. Yvette remained unapologetically proud of her identity and roots, diligently putting in extra effort to stay ahead and consistently showing up
prepared. Her daily demeanor was a testament to her commitment to embodying resilience and pride in who she is and where she comes from.

**Lynn**

Lynn had been in the tech industry for 18 years, starting in a system administrator role and gradually progressing to her current position as a director. She had acquired extensive knowledge and experience in her field, having worked her way up the ranks through her hard work and dedication. Lynn’s journey in the tech industry was marked by continuous growth and leadership development. Over the past 6 years, she has held leadership roles and demonstrated her ability to lead teams effectively and drive results. Lynn emphasized the importance of relationships in her professional journey and acknowledged, although knowledge is crucial, one’s professional network and interpersonal skills play a significant role in career advancement. Lynn’s leadership style revolved around the belief that being pleasant to work with is paramount. She understood technical expertise alone was not sufficient for success; fostering positive relationships and maintaining a collaborative work environment were equally essential. Lynn encouraged a friendly and inclusive atmosphere, often injecting humor and personality into meetings to create a comfortable space for her team members. She advocated for authenticity and believed individuals should bring their true selves to work rather than adopting a separate persona.

Lynn possessed a deep understanding of the tech industry, backed by 18 years of experience and progression through various roles. Lynn was relationship-oriented. She valued relationships and recognized their significance in career growth and opportunities. Lynn prioritized teamwork and encouraged a supportive work culture where individuals
felt valued and respected. She aimed to effectively communicate her ideas and foster open dialogue in her team, which contributed to a positive and productive work environment. Lynn advocated for authenticity in the workplace and encouraged individuals to be themselves and bring their personalities to their professional roles.

Lynn shared, as a first-generation Nigerian American, there had always been a familial preference for careers in medicine or engineering during her upbringing. Despite the expectation, she chose to major in computer information systems and encountered resistance from her mother who favored pharmacy due to a limited understanding of technology as a profession. Originally, intending to attend law school after graduation, she discovered a genuine enjoyment for technology during her studies and decided to make it her career. In her household, academic excellence was the norm, with anything less than an ‘A’ prompting questions. The resulting pressure led her to focus on achieving high grades, and she ultimately secured an internship and job after graduation. Although her college grades were deemed okay, she emphasized the role of professional relationships in her success. She wholeheartedly believes that personal connection opens doors, whereas, being equipped and honing one’s expertise will sustain them in rooms of opportunity. She leveraged the strength of her professional network to navigate various roles in her career. She approached her roles with the understanding she stood out in any room, a sentiment derived from a lifetime of feeling different due to her name and cultural background. This life experience equipped her to navigate the complexities of blending in and acknowledge both the advantages and challenges that come with it.
Carrie

Carrie had a diverse background in user experience design spanning over 12 years and, at the time of this study, was a senior manager of user experience (UX) and design optimization. She started her career in communications, working in the newsroom of a newspaper. Over time, she transitioned into a digital role in the newspaper with a focus on interactive graphic design. Carrie also ran a web design business and served as an adjunct instructor at a public institution, where she taught user experience design for 7 years. During various phases of this study, Carrie spoke about her being a devoted mother, grandmother, and fiancée, which in some ways was reflected in her leadership. She described herself as caring, empathetic, and always willing to assist others. Carrie’s role in her organization was remote; therefore, she was accustomed to online collaboration and communication and often participated in meetings via video calls. Although some meetings require her to be on camera, she typically has had the opportunity to work remotely in a casual setting.

Kazan

Initially interested in pursuing a career in music as a piano teacher, she was encouraged by her mother to explore other options due to financial concerns. Kazan discovered her passion for technology at a young age, often tinkering with computers and typewriters while other kids played outside. This early interest led her to pursue a career in the tech industry.

After considering computer forensics but ultimately deciding against it, Kazan found her niche in quality assurance and performance engineering. She began her career as a performance engineer, specializing in load testing and identifying system
vulnerabilities. Despite being among the few Black individuals and women on her team, Kazan navigated her way through the predominantly male environment by leveraging creative strategies, such as using humor and food to build rapport and gain recognition for her contributions.

As her career progressed, Kazan continued to seek new challenges and opportunities for growth. She transitioned to a manual tester role at a new company before quickly ascending to leadership positions. Kazan’s dedication to learning and overcoming challenges enabled her to thrive in her career despite facing obstacles along the way.

In her leadership role, Kazan exhibited a blend of introverted and extroverted tendencies. Although she was reserved with certain teams, she actively sought opportunities to empower her colleagues and foster open communication. Kazan was on a journey to build confidence in her abilities, trust in her instincts, and recognize the importance of self-belief in achieving success.

Outside of work, Kazan was actively involved in her community and volunteered with the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) as the Legal redress chair. She also enjoyed pursuing hobbies such as aerial arts and found joy and challenge in activities that provided a break from her everyday routine. Despite being single and without children, Kazan embraced life as a work in progress and continually strove for personal and professional growth.

Kazan’s story reflected resilience, determination, and a commitment to making a positive impact both in her career and her community. Through her leadership and
willingness to challenge herself, Kazan inspired others to embrace their unique strengths and pursue their passions.

Kazan reflected on her being the oldest of five siblings. She was the first person in her family to graduate from college. Kazan’s upbringing as the oldest of five, taking on significant responsibilities in her family, has shaped her leadership style. She approaches her roles with caution, reservation, and extreme diligence, a trait that has sometimes hindered her career progression. Cautiousness in decision-making, fear of judgment, and a tendency to seek approval from others are rooted in her upbringing. Despite facing challenges, she is perceived as a leader, often tasked with responsibilities due to her strong work ethic. Learning to build confidence from within, she strives to transform how she shows up for herself and in the tech industry. This transformation includes overcoming the unknown by working through ambiguity, embracing new technologies/processes, speaking up more, and taking calculated risks.

**Lena**

Lena is a 28-year-old Black woman with a spiritual outlook on life. She brings a unique blend of experiences to her role as a Customer Care Specialist at a crowdfunding organization, having previously worked in higher education before transitioning to the tech industry. Lena’s journey reflects her adaptability and her curiosity for new challenges.

In her current position, Lena provides support to individuals, businesses, charities, and organizations raising funds for various causes. Lena’s role involves high-level and high-impact processes, demonstrating her ability to handle complex tasks and make meaningful contributions to her organization’s success. Her role involves project
management, focusing on initiatives such as motivation and engagement programming, maintaining automatic text responses, and overseeing specialists’ onboarding through learning and development.

Lena has enjoyed the transition from higher education to the tech industry because it has permitted her a level of autonomy and agency to drive high-level processes with her current role. Lena’s leadership style is collaborative, emphasizing co-creation and teamwork in her department. She actively contributes to discussions and decision-making processes, drawing on her experiences with organizational leadership to provide valuable input.

Lena considers herself to be an unapologetically authentic Black woman. She approaches her work with honesty and authenticity, providing valuable feedback and insights to her colleagues and superiors. Lena expressed that she often navigates the challenges of feeling and being underutilized, along with the pressure to shrink herself at times. Despite this, she employed defense mechanisms to protect her well-being while maintaining her integrity and professionalism.

These introductions only capture a small fraction of the identities of this group of women and what they might represent (see Table 5). The availability of data reflected across themes, is based upon the duration of the participants’ engagement in the study, their tenure within tech, and the depth of the narratives. This prompted consideration of the relevance of data in response to the research questions. To ensure that each theme was based upon substantiated categories, this approach led to participants with longer tenure in tech to offer richer narratives within specific categories than those with less
experience. This also helped to analyze the available data comprehensively leading to conclusions that are grounded in lived experiences of the participants.

Table 5

Direct Quotes and Mentions from Participants in Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Theme 1: Breaking barriers</th>
<th>Theme 2: AA women leadership</th>
<th>Theme 3: Leadership and organizational change</th>
<th>Theme 4: Belonging</th>
<th>Total (percentage)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21 (26.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beatrice</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2 (2.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrie</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14 (17.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazan</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12 (15.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynn</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yvette</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14 (17.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lena</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8 (10.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>78 (100%)</td>
</tr>
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Theme 1: Breaking Barriers—Navigating Isolation and Echoes of Exclusion

The Black female experience in tech is not a monolith. However, a connecting thread between the stories shared by the women in this study reemphasizes the experience of African American women across many organizations and a variety of professional industries. The narratives in this study highlight the systemic issues of underrepresentation and the lack of support for African American women in tech. A common theme that has been present in many studies examining the workplace experiences of African American women is the experience of being the sole
representation of African Americans and having to navigate stereotypes, microaggressive behaviors, and dealing with experiences of isolation.

These experiences encompass but are not limited to reflections of one’s physical presence as the only one in predominantly white spaces, and the conflicts have come with the lack of support from colleagues and leadership. African American women are often faced with the task of trying to maintain a level of authenticity in the professional setting, but still have the burden and the pressure to conform to dominant culture or face additional scrutiny of discriminatory behavior. These narratives also reveal the persistent disparity in the acceptance of different cultural backgrounds, with African American culture often being overlooked or marginalized in the corporate discourse (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

*Breaking Barriers—Navigating Isolation and Echoes of Exclusion*

**Isolation and Challenges of Being the Sole Black Woman in Tech**

Being the sole African American woman in any given industry poses inherent challenges, a sentiment echoed by the participants of this study, who assert that such challenges are notably exacerbated in the tech industry. Beatrice’s narrative shared earlier regarding participants invites us to the journey of being the only one within tech. Over
the course of 15 years, Beatrice became accustomed to being either the sole person of her demographic in a given role or one of less than five on a team, and often one of fewer than 100 in a technical department. In the early stages of her career, she initially approached her work with a quiet and reserved demeanor. She reflected upon the intentionality of navigating challenges of being the only to have strong confidence in being comfortable to show up as her true self, and owning her expertise as a highly skilled techy.

Like Beatrice, Michelle expressed that there are instances when she perceives herself as out of place, particularly when posing questions. She oscillated between moments of strong confidence and occasional doubts. She detailed feeling a sense of responsibility to represent her entire demographic, as opposed to solely herself, because she is mindful of potential stereotype threats. She shared how she approaches collaboration with caution, aiming to strike a balance and avoid being unfairly labeled as “aggressive.” Michelle noted a disparity in her interactions with predominantly white stakeholders, having described these relationships as transactional. She expressed, “I feel like our relationship is very transactional. They only like me when I’m helpful. And then when I’m not, then they can be kind of short.” Michelle also revealed, “and I’m the only Black person and the only Black woman.” Other accounts similar to this were offered by the other women in this study including myself, and denote how interactions with another Black woman in tech exemplified the rarity of such occurrences, indicating limited opportunities for collaboration and mentorship among Black professionals. This scarcity of representation highlights the importance of implementing diversity and inclusion.
efforts to address systemic barriers and provide equal opportunities for African American individuals in the workplace.

Michelle’s account of a recent reorganization further illustrated the underrepresentation of Black Americans in her workplace. Despite the diverse backgrounds of her colleagues, there was a noticeable absence of U.S.-born citizens on her team, particularly Black Americans. This highlights the systemic barriers that hinder the inclusion of Black professionals in corporate environments. Michelle provided insight into her experiences, stating, “actually…someone asked me…, what my age is or something, and then I guess I look younger than I am. And I say, well, I’m Black.” She noted how mentioning her race often surprises others, suggesting a discomfort with acknowledging race in conversations. Michelle also remarked, “I will say that sometimes I do throw people off when I talk about something that I like, because it’s outside of their expectation of me.” She named the prioritization of her efforts to normalize being Black in her environment, challenging stereotypes and encouraging open dialogue about diverse interests.

Similar to Beatrice and Michelle, Kazan added that she grapples with the idea of being her authentic self in the workplace, selectively revealing aspects of her identity. Her upbringing significantly influenced her approach to the tech industry as an African American woman. She acknowledged ongoing efforts to unlearn past behaviors and reshape how she presents herself in her career. Her identity as a Black woman, characterized by changing hairstyles, limited travel experiences compared to counterparts, and a nontraditional family background, has led to instances of feeling the need to shrink in certain spaces. She has encountered less-than-favorable comments and
even recalls legal action being taken against a terminated individual, who engaged in
discriminatory behaviors. As a Black woman in Tech, she found this event to be ironic as
it was a rare occasion of action being taken for someone enacting racial and sexual
discriminatory behaviors.

Building upon the previous participants’ narratives, Carrie has often found herself
as the only African American individual in various professional settings in the field.
Despite this, she has grown accustomed to the dynamic and developed resilience over the
years. She was taught to be persistent and resilient, inherent to being an African
American woman. She has faced challenges from managers and senior-level designers
throughout her career, despite holding a master’s degree in the field. She has learned to
rely on data to validate her findings to reinforce the value of her work in the face of
skepticism or resistance. When participants were asked about the support they had
received throughout their careers, many reflected on their earlier career experiences that
shaped their perceptions and readiness for their current roles. Carrie shared her
experiences of feeling inadequately equipped with the tools and resources necessary for
success in the tech industry. She recounted instances of not receiving support in her
previous positions and even enduring bullying from a manager. Carrie highlighted her
decision to leave a toxic work environment, which ultimately led to a significant career
advancement, underscoring the importance of recognizing and addressing workplace
mistreatment.

Within the context of examining isolating and exclusionary experiences, the
participants in the discussion highlighted the pervasive issue of underrepresentation of
Black individuals in various industries, particularly in leadership roles and corporate
settings. Consistent with what Kazan discussed, Lynn’s experience shed light on the prevalent male-centric culture in the companies she has worked for, emphasizing the scarcity of Black individuals in leadership positions. She noted a lack of diversity, with few Black individuals in leadership roles compared to a predominantly Caucasian/white American male representation. She also described having felt the ongoing need to soften her delivery and refrained from showing frustration reflects the fear of being labeled the “angry Black woman.” Her venture into the tech sector in the Oil & Gas industry was notably challenging. The atmosphere was marked by a “good ole boy” network, resulting in numerous uncomfortable situations due to her identity as both a Black person and a woman.

Yvette’s observations reinforced this narrative, as she navigated a work environment where Black individuals were notably scarce despite the presence of other ethnicities. She described a predominantly white, Asian, and Indian male-dominated floor, with minimal representation of African American women, drawing attention to the lack of diversity and inclusion initiatives in the workplace. Yvette also recalled how a particular interpersonal dynamic exemplified the complexities of advocating for others in an environment where career advancement and personal relationships intersect. She recounted a situation where she felt unable to address mistreatment by a friend’s manager. Her friend was an ethnic minority striving for career progression and her friend’s manager was a white woman. Yvette recognized the potential consequences for her friend’s professional aspirations, and knew that her friend did not have the capacity to stand up for her because of her personal desire to climb the corporate ladder.
Lena’s perspective on navigating predominantly white spaces highlighted the isolation and surprise often experienced by Black individuals in such environments. She stated how she often felt sad when only seeing five or six individuals within her organization from time to time given how large size of the organization. She shared her beliefs around being black bodied individual and the stares she sometimes receives when in office. She also spoke to the challenge of holding a non-technical role, which is an added layer of isolation when working in tech spaces. She also reflected upon the challenge of remaining true to self while also trying to meet the expectations of others within her organization. Despite finding solace in camaraderie with other people of color, she stressed the need for intentional recognition and inclusion in corporate settings.

**Tension Between Other Black Folks**

Michelle expressed disappointment regarding negative experiences with other Black stakeholders in their organization who held leadership roles. Despite the potential for support, these individuals chose to remain distant or competitive. Kazan recounted a specific incident involving a Black male leader in their organization who acknowledged the challenges Kazan faced but opted not to offer support. This experience was particularly disheartening for Kazan, who expected solidarity among Black colleagues. Kazan also reflected on past experiences of support from individuals of different racial backgrounds, which requires one’s ability to discern supportive allies from those who may hinder progress.

These accounts illuminate the complexities of navigating professional environments, particularly for individuals from marginalized groups. They deepen the significance of supportive workplace cultures and the impact of both positive and
negative interactions on career trajectories. Moreover, they highlight the importance of allyship and solidarity among colleagues, especially in communities that face systemic challenges and barriers to advancement.

The narratives presented in this section underscore the multifaceted challenges faced by Black women in the tech industry. From being the sole representation of their demographic to grappling with stereotypes, microaggressions, and isolation, these women navigate a complex landscape where authenticity is both desired and scrutinized. The experiences shared shed light on the profound impact of underrepresentation and lack of support in the tech industry. They illustrate the resilience and determination required to navigate environments marked by a lack of diversity and inclusion. It emphasizes the importance of fostering inclusive workplaces that prioritize support, collaboration, and allyship. These narratives also reveal moments of frustration and misunderstanding, where Black women find themselves educating their peers about aspects of their culture.

**Summary of Finding 1**

This comprehensive analysis of experiences shared by African American women in the tech industry highlights critical issues surrounding representation, inclusion, and the professional dynamics encountered in dominant space. The intersection experiences, offered by African American women in the tech industry, echo aspects of the conceptual framework informed by Black feminist thought. Participant narratives offered reflections that introduced the insertion of race and gender dynamics that influence workplace experiences, such as the navigation of being a sole representative of their demographic within a department or organization.
Previous research has indicated the lack of representation of African American women within STEM fields (Sanchez et al., 2019). At their organization, African American women face challenges related to isolation and exclusion in the tech industry. During this study, there were still conversations surrounding the persistence of isolating experiences encountered by African American women who are the only or a small representation of the African American population (Sanchez et al., 2019). Black feminist thought provided a lens to understand the lived experiences of African American women and empowers them to shape their own narratives within organizational contexts. Despite their diverse backgrounds and experiences, a common thread emerged: the pervasive systemic barriers that hinder their advancement and well-being in predominantly white spaces (Sanchez et al., 2019).

As convener and facilitator of this conversation, I sensed participants grappling with their confrontation with stereotypes and microaggressions, which was a recurring theme throughout narratives. The accounts also emphasized on organizational culture impacts on the experiences of African American women in tech, particularly those that have scarce or exclusionary diversity practices and have a high tolerance for microaggressive behaviors that perpetuate the prevalence of stereotypes (Samuels, 2022; Sanchez et al., 2019). The study highlights the imperative it is for organizational cultures to engage in work that will mitigate the harmful instances that contribute to feelings of isolation and exclusion.

This study reveals the constant internal identity negotiation that many African American women engage in as a result of being the only. These Black women in tech exclaimed being compelled to filter their behavior to avoid being labeled with pejorative
stereotypes such as aggressive. There is a unique dance being performed in attempt one
from falling prey to microaggressive and discriminatory behavior. However, this
narrative reveals that no matter what part of the country an African American woman is
in, within the industry, certain things are notably recurring.

These experiences point to a broader cultural and structural issue within the
workplace that requires significant attention and action. Participants also encompassed
seeking validation, while also holding the challenge of navigating interpersonal
dynamics, in order to effectively advocate for themselves and others also suggests. This
hints at aspects of belonging being a factor in shaping workplace experiences. Thus, there
is the possibility to better understand how organizational stakeholders might stand in
solidarity in addressing implicit bias in structures and practices. Unpleasant interactions
with both white colleagues, other Black professionals and even other ethnic groups
within the industry shed light on the complexity of workplace relationships and the
nuanced nature of support and allyship.

Theme 2: African American Women Leadership—Normalcy of Resiliency and
Supportiveness While Experiencing Cultural Adversity

In this section, the narratives of African American women in leadership roles in
the tech industry reveal a multitude of insights into their experiences, challenges, and
strategies for success (see Figure 4). Although I did not directly ask them about their own
leadership, what emerged in their exchange with one another and with me as the research
led to meaningful insights. Through their powerful reflections, it becomes evident that
these women embody resilience, persistence, and adaptability. They demonstrated a
growth-oriented approach to navigating various workplace dynamics. Despite facing
inherent responsibilities and unconscious biases, they exhibit a commitment to self-
authorization and leadership that serves as a guiding light in their organizations. One
prominent datapoint that emerged is the essential need for adaptability and a growth
mindset in leadership roles. These women attribute their success to diligence, leveraging
workplace experiences, and actively pursuing growth and development in their careers.
The narratives illustrate the diverse ways in which these women navigate challenges and
strive for excellence in their respective roles. The exploration of support systems and
personal resources underscores the importance of self-care and community affirmation in
their professional journeys. Although external spaces for Black women in tech exist,
these women rely heavily on personal practices, supportive networks, and affirmations
from peers to thrive in their roles.

**Figure 4**

*African American Women Leadership: Normalcy of Resiliency and Supportiveness While Experiencing Cultural Adversity*
Growth-Oriented

In leadership roles, there is an essential need for adaptability and a willingness to do whatever it takes to support the organization’s goals. These women embody a growth mindset, as they attributed much of their success to diligence and their willingness to maximize and leverage various workplace experiences. Being considerably new to the world of tech, Lena expressed surprise at her own discipline, emphasizing the consistency of getting up every day and working from home. This newfound discipline, she believes, is cultivated through the trust placed in her to fulfill her responsibilities. She finds it refreshing not to feel micromanaged or excessively tied up in meetings. Lena also reflected upon how highly skilled she has become at managing her assigned tasks, but also the willingness to explore new ways of learning and growing that contribute to the organization’s success. Lena often finds herself exploring interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics that inform how she manages and monitors her own growth.

Michelle, like Lena, is no stranger to participating in outside of work activities that she has not fully disclosed to other coworkers. She shared how challenging it could be to articulate her value at work beyond demonstrating productivity as she recounted stories of actively seeking outside support to fulfill her desire for constant career growth. Michelle named how she has always been accustomed to being in a natural state of flow in response to various tasks, but with recent team changes she has found herself in a phase that is completely the opposite. Nevertheless, her commitment to building her capacity is relentless.

Kazan acknowledged the complexity of her feelings toward the work ethic, expressing a “love-hate relationship” with the notion of doing just enough to fulfill job
responsibilities. From her experience both as an individual contributor and a manager, Kazan has observed the tangible impact that going beyond the bare minimum can have on opportunities for raises and promotions. She emphasized her personal commitment to excellence, stating, “I don’t like half doing stuff. I want to make sure if I’m doing something, it’s right. It’s good. It’s well received.” This ethos has not only facilitated her own career progression but has also enabled her to advocate effectively for her team members’ advancements. Kazan also on the challenges faced by those who limit themselves to performing only their assigned tasks, noting that such an approach may lead to minimal salary increases and fewer opportunities for growth. She contrasts this with her own experiences, where her proactive approach and willingness to tackle additional challenges have been recognized and rewarded by her managers.

Building upon this narrative of being relentless and evolving in one’s career, our most senior tech sistas in this study elaborated upon how they welcomed new opportunities. Lynn and Yvette are not afraid of facing new challenges. Both individuals have recently transitioned into new roles. Lynn’s role is external; Yvette’s role is internal. Both briefly mentioned their process of assessing how they are adapting to be of support to their organization’s stakeholders to ensure good success. Both highlighted why they are well equipped to fulfill the demands of the roles, even if underestimated by others at times. Carrie emphasized the importance of thorough preparation when approaching projects. She stressed the necessity of knowing one’s subject matter well due to the challenges inherent in her field. Carrie has found herself navigating through various difficult situations, such as temper tantrums and bullying from other colleagues. She believes it would not be tolerated by most.
The overall resounding commitment to personal and professional growth serves as an important value to uphold as leaders. In exploring other components that impact leadership, the data revealed different types of support and resources that African American women in tech might rely upon while navigating their workplace experiences.

**Support and Resources for Grounding**

In the landscape of tech, although there are spaces created by and for Black women, the women in this study emphasized their reliance on personal resources to navigate their work environments. This included a diverse array of supportive tools, from meditation apps to therapy sessions. Michelle highlighted her use of the meditation app as a way to decompress during breaks or before and after work, finding solace in the application’s ability to promote relaxation and mindfulness amid stress. She noted how it serves as a reminder of her worth and capabilities, combating tendencies to focus solely on negative aspects. Moreover, there’s a profound reliance on affirmation from other Black women. Michelle shared how conversations with her Afro Latina therapist and interactions with acquaintances outside of work, who are also Black women, provide invaluable affirmation and perspective. These interactions serve as a reminder of her qualifications and accomplishments, countering self-doubt and negative thinking.

Lynn discussed her involvement in a Salesforce user group in the Southwest, emphasizing its dual role in knowledge sharing and networking. She acknowledged the importance of employee resource groups (ERGs) and her previous role in facilitating workshops and networking opportunities. Despite recognizing areas for improvement in networking, Lynn expressed her intention to be more intentional in expanding her professional connections.
Carrie spoke about her participation in groups like “Black Women in UX” and “Women in Tech,” highlighting the relationships and mentorships she has formed. She stressed the value of finding solidarity and support among peers who understand the challenges faced in the industry. Carrie also emphasized the importance of open conversations in these groups, where experiences and advice can be freely shared, fostering both personal growth and community support. In summary, external spaces for Black women in tech exist, but these women lean heavily on personal practices, supportive networks, and affirmations from peers to navigate their professional journeys. Her motivation has always been her children, who have kept her grounded through tough times. Similar to Carrie, Yvette also reflected upon how family, both immediate and extended, serve as a source of strength.

**Black Women Leadership as a Guiding Light**

The women participating in this study emerge as proactive individuals, committed to actively supporting others in their leadership roles, fostering growth and empowerment in their professional spheres. Yvette, for instance, underlines her approach of assisting colleagues without hidden agendas, prioritizing collaboration over confrontation. She recounts instances of offering guidance and support, both professionally and personally, illustrating her dedication to nurturing supportive relationships. Yvette stated, “I’ll work around somebody before I throw him under the bus. That’s just not my MO but I know that’s not the majority of the people that I work with.”

Michelle, similarly, highlighted her involvement as a mentor, emphasizing the positive impact of her guidance on others’ professional development. She stressed the importance of providing valuable support to colleagues, a sentiment reinforced by
Yvette’s narrative, who also exemplifies her supportive nature by recalling instances of offering guidance to individuals starting their careers. Yvette emphasized the significance of providing a listening ear and offering advice, underscoring the importance of mutual support in professional relationships.

Yvette shared her approach of subtly demonstrating her contributions, such as sharing a forecasting spreadsheet with multiple colleagues to showcase her capabilities without overtly seeking recognition. She also emphasized her responsiveness to communication, ensuring prompt responses and follow-ups, which have earned her admiration and respect from her peers. Yvette said:

If you email me today, 9 times out of 10, I’m going to read it no later than tomorrow. And I will respond, even if it’s to say, “I’m looking into it.” I can tell you how many people email, no response. Just being willing to say, “I’m not the person that can really do this for you, but let me see what I can find out. Let me do some digging and get back to you.” And when I hand off the person to somebody else, going back to that person is saying, “Hey, did you get your question answered? By the person I referred you to?” I can’t tell you how many people who have been shocked that I took that kind of ownership, even though it wasn’t my issue, just to help somebody out. Why not? I have had people come to me with random things. I’m like, “How would I know that?” Well, they referred me because I helped them out last time. So I’m like, “Oh, sure. Well, let me see what I could do.” But I did qualify, you know, to be transparent here. “I don’t know anything about this. But let me see. I’ll talk around, see what I can find out.”
For Yvette and Lena, the dichotomy between technical and nontechnical roles in the tech industry. As persons occupying nontechnical positions, who nonetheless play pivotal roles in ensuring the success of various projects undertaken by technical teams. Yvette explicitly asserts her nontechnical background, emphasizing her position as a project manager amid a milieu predominantly composed of technically proficient individuals. She emphasized the value of her organizational skills and adeptness in project management, despite lacking technical expertise.

Lena, on the other hand, reflected on her sense of detachment from the technical aspects of the industry, citing her background in higher education and leadership as potential hindrances to advancement in the technology sector. She expressed a perceived lack of belonging in her current role compared to the broader collective in the tech industry, noting the challenges of breaking past the confines of her current position to explore further opportunities. This sentiment elucidates the nuanced dynamics at play in the tech industry, where individuals in nontechnical roles navigate their roles amid a landscape largely dominated by technical expertise.

Carrie joined by discussing her role as a manager dedicated to the well-being and growth of her team members. She describes her approach of advocating for her team and providing mentorship and guidance to facilitate their professional development. Carrie stressed the importance of being the kind of manager she wished to have, fostering a supportive environment where team members feel empowered to succeed.

The narratives convey the commitment that these women have to supporting others in their professional journeys, reflecting a culture of collaboration, mentorship, and empowerment in their respective workplaces. Their experiences help to magnify the
transformative impact of supportive leadership and highlight the importance of fostering inclusive and empowering environments for all individuals to thrive professionally. These women epitomize individuals who not only get the job done but also actively contribute to the growth and success of others in their leadership roles.

Kazan’s leadership approach is captured by her intent and ability to bring people together and drive action through effective communication. She highlights the importance of asking the right questions when individuals struggle to articulate their thoughts, emphasizing the need to translate ideas into tangible results. Despite not having all the answers, she takes on the responsibility of collaborating with her team and the five engineering teams to ensure that initiatives such as implementing simulators and fostering a culture of quality are successful. Kazan stresses the significance of protecting her team and advocating for them when necessary, which is often the foundation for the success of their work, along with intervening to prevent undue pressure. She acknowledged that while she may not possess all the solutions, she provides clear direction where possible and delegates tasks to the appropriate individuals or groups. With her team’s cross-functional nature, Kazan also leverages her extensive network in the organization to address challenges efficiently, making introductions and facilitating collaboration across different business units. The leadership styles offered highlight how African American women strive to be inclusive.

**Leadership Challenges**

The challenges faced by this group of women leaders highlight their resilience in the face of adversity. Lynn spoke about the difficulty of making unpopular decisions as a Black woman in a position of authority, acknowledging the pressure to perform perfectly
due to the heightened scrutiny faced by minorities in leadership roles. She emphasized the additional burden of representing an entire demographic, where any misstep could reinforce negative stereotypes. Lynn’s reflection brings out the internal and external pressures faced by Black women in leadership positions.

Even as senior leader, Carrie discussed encountering insecurities and resistance from colleagues, particularly from white women, who perceive her presence as a threat rather than a collaborative opportunity. She emphasized her commitment to making decisions based on what’s best for the product and the customer, rather than personal agendas. Carrie recounted instances where her authority was challenged or dismissed, highlighting the need for greater inclusivity and recognition of diverse perspectives in the workplace.

Carrie along with others in this study also noted the lack of accessible leadership opportunities in certain organizations. Carrie shared her experience of seeking advancement by transitioning between roles, seizing opportunities for growth and progression. This proactive approach led her to her current role as Senior Manager of User Experience, reflecting her determination to secure positions commensurate with her skills and capabilities. This highlights the barriers faced by Black women in professional settings, from the pressure to excel in leadership roles to the need to navigate biases and limited opportunities for advancement. Yet, they also reflect the resilience and determination of these women to overcome challenges and carve out successful careers on their own terms.

The exploration of support systems and personal resources underscores the importance of self-care and community affirmation in navigating professional
environments. Although external spaces for Black women in tech exist, these women rely heavily on personal practices and supportive networks to thrive in their roles. The leadership exhibited by these women goes beyond traditional notions, emphasizing collaboration, mentorship, and empowerment. They actively support their colleagues and foster inclusive environments, despite encountering challenges such as resistance.

The women in this study offered powerful reflections regarding how they have authorized themselves in their previous and/or current leadership roles. The resilience, persistence captured in the stories told indicate the adaptability and the growth-oriented approach that African American women embody to leverage various workplace experiences. An exploration of the type of support and personal resources that they lean into as leaders also informs what is accessible to those who are leading as African American women. Although the role of nurturer is often linked to African American women in the workplace, the leadership described in this study also serves as a guiding light even when such a role has not been tangible in the organization. There are inherent responsibilities and challenges that come with taking on a leadership role; however, the narratives report on claims of African American women leadership can be met with resistance as a result of unconscious biases that are prevalent in organizations.

The leadership described goes beyond traditional notions, emphasizing collaboration, mentorship, and empowerment. However, their narratives also shed light on the challenges they face, including resistance, biases, and limited opportunities for advancement in certain organizations. Despite these obstacles, these women demonstrate remarkable resilience and determination to overcome challenges and carve out successful careers on their own terms. This adds valuable insights into the complexities of
navigating professional environments. Their stories highlight the importance of self-authorization, adaptability, and community support in fostering inclusive and empowering workplaces. These women serve as inspirations, not only for their ability to succeed in leadership roles but also for their commitment to supporting and empowering others in their professional journeys.

**Summary of Finding 2**

The data shed light on the growth orientation, leadership process, leadership challenges experienced by these women in tech. Although adaptability is crucial in tech, these African American women leaders highlight the importance of having a growth mindset that can help leverage the face-paced environments they work in. This finding supports the notion that African American women technology leaders may be influenced by factors, such as being lifelong learners, desire for expressing their own creativity, the possible commitment to be resilient and persist in their determination, to not be consumed or overtaken by social factors impacting their experience in tech (Ashcraft et al., 2016; Bell, 2018). It also implies that prioritizing talent development could support overall leadership capacity (Ashcraft, 2016).

This study revealed that some technological resources can facilitate forms of support that are accessible at any given point in time. This study gives way for the importance of African American women to having supportive networks (Ashcraft, 2016). This theme highlights how African American women have a strong sense of belonging within supportive networks and communities outside of their workplaces. This suggests how environments where belonging has been fostered can be an oasis and a place of solace.
Responses to inquiry were pretty direct from participants; it was also surprising how they indirectly spoke to their role of caregiving and nurturing to their colleagues and direct reports. These findings indicate how the role of nurture and caregiver is often unconsciously fulfilled by African American women in the workplace. The willingness to support others, who are not even on their team, reflects how they prioritize mentoring and empowering others (Samuels, 2022). The stories captured in this theme clearly indicate how African American women leaders are giving their all and working tirelessly to pave the way for others. African American women are notorious for going “hard in the paint.” They demonstrate how transformational and impactful being an inclusive and supportive leader can be.

Despite exhibiting a growth-oriented mindset or being advocates and supporters, or holding a leadership role does not absolve African American women leaders from having to encounter cultures that may not keep diversity, inclusion, or need for support mechanisms at the front of mind. Although the stories shared do not overemphasize the scrutiny of African American women in tech, it does showcase the level of resiliency and determination that these leaders must employ while navigating both leadership and systemic challenges.

A key takeaway is truly in unpacking the multifaceted nature of African American women’s leadership in tech. It is an unending journey of growth and resilience that encourages and empowers others surrounding the magnitude of the light each woman in this study is carrying. It also serves as a representation that many African American exude that generously serves as a guide to illuminate the pathway for themselves and
others navigating organizational cultures that are still needing to lean into more culturally inclusive practices.

**Theme 3: Perceptions of Leadership and Organizational Culture**

Study participants reflected upon moments regarding the nature of their relationship with leadership and the type of support they have been able to receive in the tech space, along with the types of support where they have not been direct beneficiaries. The women emphasized the importance of having supportive, authentic leadership. Figure 5 captures this relationship.

**Figure 5**

*Perceptions of Leadership and Organizational Culture*
The Role of Supportive Leadership

Lynn emphasized the significance of mentorship, stating that it is due to help from mentors, who are also women in leadership, but from previous companies that she has been able to obtain even her current role. She highlighted the importance of having women leaders as mentors, acknowledging the different dynamic between male and female leaders and their experiences in reaching leadership positions. Lynn further explained, “So I have leaned into a few women leaders, as mentors, who that I still keep in contact with, regardless of the company that I go to.” She emphasized the value of maintaining connections with mentors from past job experiences, indicating a preference for seeking mentorship externally rather than solely relying on internal resources in specific companies.

Yvette’s experience with her managers has predominantly involved men, and she expressed a clear preference for the type of support she desires from her leaders. She recounted an interesting anecdote about a previous manager with whom she initially clashed but later found herself reporting to. Despite initial skepticism from her manager about her capabilities, Yvette eventually gained his trust. She explained, “He’s like that, but I don’t really know what she does . . . We just need somebody to do the administrative stuff, right?” Over time, their relationship evolved into a friendship, and Yvette now values his support in allowing her autonomy to manage herself and execute her responsibilities without micromanagement. She emphasized, “He does what I need him to do now. And that is to leave me alone. And let me do my job. And have my backup. I need them.” This highlights Yvette’s preference for self-management and
independence in her role, with her manager providing support as needed rather than overseeing her every task.

Yvette also expressed appreciation for one of the Black male leaders in her organization, specifically her manager’s manager. She highlighted his proactive support during a meeting where he advised her to share information about her work with his superior. Recalling the interaction, Yvette shared:

My manager’s manager is a Black man. Okay, so he is one of the people that’s over the winders so, so I see him on, you know, on the daily. Whenever I’m in the office or whatever, so, um, it was interesting because you know, it during the call, he was just like, I asked a question. So, when the conversations start and who’s at the table, and he said to me, you need to get my manager’s manager some information about what you’re doing.

She expressed gratitude for his support and noted that his encouragement validated her presence and contribution during the meeting.

Yvette reflected on the limited trust she has for most of her colleagues in the following manner:

When we first started, there’s maybe three people that I would say, I trust maybe 80% of the time. . . . And then everyone else, I don’t really trust them. I trust them to varying degrees and in varying situations. Because I know that you’re subject to I feel like I have to watch my back with the majority of the people that I work with.

She then stressed the importance of trust and loyalty, particularly toward her managers and said:
So you know, it’s really, there’s a handful, my back, my manager and one of them that I trust. Because I have seen him go to bat for those of others on our team.

When he could have just oh now they screwed up. He took the fall for it and I believe he would do that for me too. I mean, he’s never shown me any. Who’s going to bat for me, and drive home that you know, what I bring the value I bring, if he can’t even do it for himself.

Michelle described her experience with her current and previous bosses, noting a significant difference in their management styles. She expressed dissatisfaction with her former boss, highlighting a lack of guidance and a “figure it out” attitude that did not align with her needs. In contrast, she praised her current manager for being more hands-on and responsive to her requests for assistance. Regarding mentorship, Michelle revealed though she had not participated in formal mentorship programs, she has had informal mentor relationships, particularly with a former manager from two positions ago, whom she clicked with and still connects with occasionally. However, she expressed a lack of sponsorship, feeling that no one currently represents that role for her.

Similarly, Yvette shared her perspective on sponsorship, stating that she does not have a sponsor at work but relies on external support from individuals outside of her workplace, especially those in the same industry. She attributed this partly to being surrounded by younger colleagues focused on advancing their careers, while she herself is less interested in climbing the corporate ladder. Both Michelle and Yvette emphasized the importance of having advocates who positively impact one’s career trajectory. Yvette also discussed her preference for reporting to her current manager despite his lack of expertise in her area, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a supportive work
environment. She recounted a conversation with her manager’s manager, where he initially joked about not wanting her to report to him but ultimately agreed, highlighting the significance of strong managerial relationships in fostering a positive work environment.

Carrie emphasized the importance of feeling valued and supported as an individual in her organization, highlighting a significant difference from her previous workplace where she felt like just a cog in a machine. She expressed gratitude for the support she received when facing challenges with a former team member, noting that her manager, his manager, and leadership rallied behind her, demonstrating that they knew her, valued her, and had her back—a stark contrast to her previous experiences. Reflecting on her career journey, Carrie acknowledged the significance of needing to build “thick skin” but also emphasized encountering supportive and encouraging individuals along the way. She credited a previous manager, who introduced her to connections in the organization and played a pivotal role in her hiring process. She named that this particular manager was a white man and that he stood out as one of her strongest supporters, underscoring the impact of positive relationships and allies in her career advancement.

Kazan offered reflection on the transformative journey of her company from a traditional manufacturing mindset to a more inclusive, technologically advanced organization, emphasizing the pivotal role of leadership in fostering this change. She shared that the shift not only altered the company’s industry focus but also initiated a cultural metamorphosis, moving away from the “old white man kind of mentality” that previously dominated the workplace. The arrival of a new CEO during a critical period
marked by the pandemic and heightened awareness of social justice issues catalyzed significant changes in the company. Kazan expressed appreciation for the CEO’s proactive approach to addressing these issues, highlighting his efforts to engage with employees on matters of racial justice and civic responsibility. These communications not only demonstrated empathy but also signaled a commitment to understanding and addressing systemic inequalities.

**Appreciating Moments of Connection While Encountering Other Black Women in the Workplace**

One of the most fulfilling aspects of many women’s career journeys has been encountering other Black women in their organization, even if only temporarily. Participants expressed gratitude for the moments of connection where there’s a mutual understanding of the workplace experiences, viewed through the lens of shared identity. Expanding on her experiences, Michelle elaborated, “I have another stakeholder who is an African American woman, I have really good positive experiences with her.”

For other women in this study, sometimes these encounters happen in passing, while other times they occur through participation in ERGs, which will be elaborated upon in subsequent findings. These interactions indicate the appreciation for moments of connection while encountering other Black women in the workplace. In these interactions, there is an invitation to continue to challenge stereotypes and advocate for authenticity in professional settings.

Yvette expressed her fondness for those instances when she shares a knowing glance with another woman in the room, where communication happens effortlessly. Yvette reflected:
There are times when I’ve synced up with the one other Black female. Sometimes it’s just a look, sometimes we don’t even have to say anything, but it’s like, you know, that look that says, “What the heck?” And I love that. I love when we don’t even need to articulate it, but we already understand each other. I think what throws people off about me is that I’m comfortable in my skin, and I genuinely love my people, just like that colleague I mentioned. It’s like a bond, you know? I love that we have our own way of doing things. I love my people.

Yvette further shared a poignant memory of a former colleague, a Black woman in a senior position in the company, who left a lasting impression. With admiration, Yvette reminisced:

We used to have this one lady, she was something else. She left the company eventually, but she was a real powerhouse, you know? Close to the CEO, rocking her braids, sharp, okay. I used to think, “When I grow up, I wanna be just like her.” Well, I’ll probably never get there, ‘cause I’ll be retired before I reach that level. But let me tell you, she was something else. I loved that she owned her look, you know? She once said on a company call that she wears those braids because she’s busy working out in the morning and doesn’t have time to fuss with her hair and still show up on time. But she also said something that stuck with me. She said, “I wear these braids to show every young Black woman here that they can bring their authentic selves to work. We shouldn’t be judged by our hair.” And that meant the world to me. This was like 10 years ago, but I still remember it like it was yesterday. She might not have been around for me to talk to, but her
words spoke volumes. If she, almost at the CEO level, could be herself, then heck, so could I.

However, there are moments in the workplace where this sense of understanding is lacking, particularly when interacting with other peers. Yvette recalled instances where she had to educate her colleagues about aspects of Black culture, such as gospel music and traditional foods like greens with smoked meat.

**Perception of Organizational Cultures Lack of Inclusivity**

The narratives shared by the women in this study provide a nuanced exploration of the organizational experiences faced by African American women in corporate environments, delving into the intricacies of inclusivity, cultural dynamics, and diversity retention initiatives.

Yvette’s account serves as a poignant illustration of the subtle forms of exclusion experienced by African American women in the workplace. She recounted a personal anecdote where she felt overlooked and marginalized when colleagues consistently excluded her from informal lunch gatherings. Her candid conversation with her manager about this issue underlines the importance of fostering an inclusive environment where all employees feel valued and respected. Yvette recalled, “I said that. . . . You always ask Pat to go to lunch? Why don’t you ever ask me? I just flat out asked him. I’m like, I do eat. And I don’t bite.” Her manager’s response, “I’d never really thought about it. I didn’t think you were gonna go,” highlighted the lack of consideration given to her inclusion. Yvette expressed how such simple gestures, like an invitation to lunch, could have made a significant difference, especially early in her career, enabling her to form connections and feel more integrated into the workplace. Reflecting on her experience, she noted that
although being invited to lunch might not hold the same significance for everyone, it could profoundly impact someone’s sense of belonging, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and addressing subtle forms of exclusion in the workplace.

Yvette reflected on the level of trust she holds for her colleagues, stating:

When we first started, there’s maybe three baby people that I would say, I trust maybe 80% of the time. . . . And then everyone else, I don’t really trust them. I trust them to varying degrees and in varying situations. Because I know that you’re subject to I feel like I have to watch my back with the majority of the people that I work with.

She emphasized the rarity of those she fully trusts, highlighting her managers and one colleague in particular. She elaborated on her trust in this colleague, stating:

Because I have seen him go to bat for those of others on our team. When he could have just oh now they screwed up. He, he took the fall for and I believe he would do that for me too. I mean, he’s never shown me any.

Yvette’s commentary sheds light on the importance of trust in the workplace and the impact of supportive colleagues in fostering a sense of security and value.

Michelle’s perspective offers a deeper examination of the cultural dynamics at play in corporate settings that play into the feeling of being welcomed. She highlighted the disparity in how discussions about other cultures are received compared to conversations about African American experiences. Michelle’s frustration with the lack of emphasis on African American cultural norms and behaviors in corporate discourse speaks to the broader issue of cultural insensitivity and marginalization faced by African American employees. Michelle discussed how she has observed workplace dynamics
where people are extremely curious about other cultures such as those with German or Italian upbringings, but there appears to be ambivalence around engaging in discussion or having interest around African Americans. She noted, “I feel like other cultures have people from other cultures who feel comfortable talking about their experiences. I feel like it’s a little bit more accepted in corporate America.” Michelle expressed her observation that although discussions about other cultures are welcomed, there is often hesitance or discomfort surrounding discussions about African American experiences. She further articulated, “We are American, I feel like sometimes we’re not regarded as a different culture.” This sentiment adds to narratives surrounding the challenges African American employees face in navigating their identities in the workplace, where their cultural perspectives and experiences may not receive the same acknowledgment or consideration as those of other groups.

Carrie’s insights provide valuable commentary on the broader organizational challenges surrounding diversity and retention. She emphasized the need for individuals to seize opportunities while acknowledging the systemic barriers that hinder the retention and advancement of African American women. Carrie’s recognition of the expanding pool of diversity considerations in the workplace underlines the evolving nature of diversity initiatives and the need for organizations to adapt accordingly. Reflecting on her experiences, Carrie remarked, “I don’t think they can focus on just retaining African American women, right?” She expressed the complexity of diversity initiatives, suggesting that focusing solely on one demographic may not be feasible or effective.

Carrie recounted her efforts to diversify her organization by reaching out to potential candidates on LinkedIn. However, she encountered challenges as some
candidates expressed reservations and unrealistic expectations about the organization. She elaborated, “But the few that I did speak to they had tons of reasons why they didn’t want to and what’s your organization like? And what’s this, looking for this perfect utopia that I don’t think exist.” Carrie’s experience highlights the importance of managing candidates’ expectations and addressing misconceptions about organizational culture. Despite her efforts to promote diversity, Carrie acknowledged that organizations may not prioritize diversity initiatives unless candidates prove their value. She remarked, “But, you know, for the most part, the organization is not going to go out of their way to retain a person because they’re a Black person or a Black woman.” Carrie emphasized the need for individuals to demonstrate their competence and effectiveness in their roles to garner support from the organization. She further elaborated on the expanded scope of diversity considerations, noting, “The pool of diversity has expanded to include other groups.” Carrie emphasized the intersectionality of identities, suggesting that individuals may face multiple forms of marginalization beyond race and gender. She concluded by urging individuals to seize opportunities for advancement and representation, emphasizing the importance of proactive engagement in diversity initiatives.

**Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) and Supportive Resources**

Michelle expressed her thoughts on ERGs, noting that her company hosts ERG groups for various demographics, including those she actively participates in. Reflecting on her experience, she mentioned having previously held ERG leadership position. Despite their existence and her involvement, Michelle remained skeptical about their effectiveness. While acknowledging their attempt to provide a sense of belonging, she questioned whether participation truly fosters deeper connections in her community.
Michelle confessed to feeling disconnected and speculated that interactions in ERG groups might lack authenticity compared to conversations outside of these formal settings. Although topics such as workplace challenges related to race, gender, and politics are often discussed, Michelle felt these conversations rarely lead to tangible outcomes, leaving her uncertain about the level of support ERGs provide in reality.

Yvette shared her perspective on ERGs in her organization, highlighting their diverse nature and the existence of women-specific organizations like “Take it Forward” and “Women on the Move.” Despite the range of ERGs available, Yvette admitted that her busy schedule sometimes prevents her from actively participating in them. She expressed uncertainty about whether involvement in these groups truly enhances her sense of connection with others. Yvette recounted her experience with the “Advancing Black Leaders” group, noting that although it provided insights into the year-end evaluation process, it did not significantly strengthen her sense of belonging.

Furthermore, Yvette lamented the lack of genuine connections formed through ERGs, attributing this to the possibility that companies merely view them as checkboxes for diversity initiatives. She observed the proliferation of ERGs across various demographics, suggesting that their establishment may serve more as a symbolic gesture to showcase organizational diversity rather than fostering meaningful connections or providing tangible benefits to employees.

Lynn elaborated on the value of collaboration with individuals who share similar experiences in corporate America, highlighting the importance of being able to engage authentically and exchange advice. She expressed appreciation for the support such collaborations provide, acknowledging their role in navigating the challenges of daily
work life. Additionally, Lynn mentioned the presence of mentorship programs in some companies, which offer workshops and training sessions aimed at enhancing leadership skills. These programs, she noted, contribute to personal and professional development, helping individuals excel as managers, directors, or leaders in various capacities.

Carrie outlined the extensive support structures available in her organization, stating, “We have management conferences, we have on a semiannual basis, we have mentoring programs, we have courses, we have an EAP [employee assistance program] program.” She emphasized the comprehensive nature of the EAP, which provides a range of services including support for financial, legal, medical, and mental health issues. Additionally, she highlighted the flexibility offered to employees, such as the option for flex time, allowing them to take half a day off on Fridays if they are caught up with their work.

Continuing, Carrie elaborated on the diverse resources accessible to employees, including conferences, LinkedIn courses, and podcasts. She emphasized the importance of using these resources, noting her personal engagement with the EAP service and financial services for budgeting and retirement planning. Through her description, Carrie underscored the organization’s commitment to providing comprehensive support for its team members and encouraged others to take advantage of the available resources for their personal and professional development.

Building upon Kazan’s earlier offerings around leadership, she stated that as a result of this new leadership, her organization has embraced diversity and inclusion more robustly, establishing its first LGBTQ+ ERG (employee resource group) and enhancing benefits to support gender reassignment surgery and adoption, reflecting a broader
understanding of employee needs. The implementation of associated surveys and the integration of feedback mechanisms into the company’s operational strategies underscore a systematic approach to improvement. Kazan valued the creation of a DEI council, which leverages internal talent to spearhead change, contrasting with companies that may seek external solutions to DEI challenges.

Kazan also reflected upon the avenues through which she has accessed professional development resources in her company, revealing a mixed experience. She noted:

So I’d say we don’t do a good job and proactively providing resources, a lot of the resources that I’ve found, have been either through our ERGs, or me talking like the skip level meetings with my manager or other managers.

This statement indicates that there is possibly an issue around accessibility of developmental resources, that requires individual initiative to seek out such opportunities. Despite this initial critique, Kazan recounts several mechanisms that have facilitated her professional growth, albeit through more personal and indirect channels. As Kazan delves deeper into her reflection, she realizes the extent of resources and initiatives in place, such as the sharing of webinars, monthly training sessions for tech leads and managers, and discussions around soft skills and organizational applicability of new knowledge. She mentioned a mentorship, sponsorship, and allyship discussion that led to a connection with a leadership coach, highlighting the value of networking and engagement opportunities provided by the company. The concept of skip-level meetings, which was new to Kazan upon joining her current company, stands out as a valuable platform for
direct communication with senior leadership, offering insights into useful resources such as books and conferences.

Kazan acknowledged the existence of a training budget and tuition reimbursement policies, which, although beneficial, seem to require a proactive approach from employees to leverage fully. She reflected, “they all say they do provide a budget for training, but it’s up to the individual to decide how you want to use that.” This statement points to a flexibility in professional development opportunities, yet also hints at a potential barrier for those who may not feel empowered or informed enough to initiate such requests.

As Kazan delves deeper into her reflection, she realizes the extent of resources and initiatives in place, such as the sharing of webinars, monthly training sessions for tech leads and managers, and discussions around soft skills and organizational applicability of new knowledge. The reflections offered point to a sense of cautious optimism, acknowledging the progress made while recognizing the journey ahead. It also highlights how positive change to the leadership’s willingness to listen and engage with employees’ concerns, thereby fostering a more inclusive and equitable workplace culture.

The Desire for Authentic and Supportive Leadership

Carrie expressed her desire for more authentic leadership in workplaces. She stated the importance of leaders showing vulnerability and transparency about the challenges they face. By sharing their struggles, leaders can humanize themselves and create a sense of solidarity among team members, reassuring them that they are not alone in their own struggles. Carrie suggested that understanding the leader’s circumstances can offer valuable insight into the rationale behind their decisions, fostering a more
empathetic and supportive work environment. Kazan articulates a nuanced perspective on the dynamics of workplace performance, recognition, and the desire and need for managerial support. This support, coupled with her dedication, has played a crucial role in her career development, including addressing disparities in compensation. Kazan noted a time when she was being undercompensated in comparison to her counterparts, but she highlighted the instrumental role of her HR business partner in ensuring equitable salary adjustments, stressing the importance of advocacy and visibility in the organization.

**Perceptions of C-Suite Advancement**

Lynn provided insights into perceptions of the C-suite, noting, “I don’t think there’s a lot in the C-suite. If there might be one. I would have to check.” She expressed a realistic approach to career advancement, considering the sacrifices required for higher positions, particularly in terms of work-life balance. Lynn emphasized her commitment to prioritizing family, acknowledging the trade-offs involved in pursuing C-suite roles. She reflected on discussions at women leadership conferences about balancing career aspirations with familial responsibilities, recognizing the need for candid conversations about the challenges faced by women in leadership roles. While acknowledgment the feasibility of advancement, Lynn highlighted the importance of assessing personal priorities and making informed decisions about career trajectories.

Carrie echoed similar sentiments, indicating, “I think I’ve seen some. I’ve seen a few. So I can’t say it’s not accessible? Um, yeah, I think it’s possible. It’s not something I aspire to.” Carrie acknowledged the accessibility of C-suite positions but clarified that it was not a personal aspiration for her. Her perspective aligns with Lynn’s emphasis on
weighing personal values and priorities when considering advancement opportunities in organizations.

On the other hand, Lena expressed uncertainty and skepticism about the attainability of career advancement, particularly noting a trend toward hiring external candidates with specific corporate experiences. Lena observed, “it feels like a lot of the people that they’re seeking now when we’re hiring external folks who have had an X amount of experience within a different corporation or whatever to come in.” This sentiment underscores a perceived preference for external hires over internal talent development, which she finds discouraging and somewhat exclusionary. Moreover, Lena shared an interaction with the DEI coordinator that further illustrated the challenges she perceives in advancing in her organization. Despite the existence of a DEI position and her own readiness to transition to new roles, the preference for candidates with corporate DEI experience was emphasized, leaving Lena feeling as though her background and capabilities were undervalued. She recounts, “I’m like, okay, like, I’m just out here applying for jobs, because I’m ready to do something else. And he was like, ‘yeah, like, we’re looking for someone externally, because we’re looking for someone who has, like corporate experience.’” This interaction not only highlights the emphasis on corporate experience but also suggests a disconnect between the company’s DEI initiatives and the actual practice of inclusivity and talent recognition in the organization.

Lena’s experience reflects broader concerns about the authenticity and effectiveness of DEI efforts in corporate settings, where the focus may lean more toward appearing politically correct rather than fostering genuine inclusivity and growth opportunities for all employees. Her commentary on the exhaustive list of expectations...
for job applicants, coupled with noncompetitive compensation, further accentuates the barriers to internal growth and advancement. Lena’s narrative, punctuated by her laughter and the rhetorical “girl, you know,” conveys a sense of resignation and critique of the systemic issues in corporate culture that impede meaningful career development and equity for employees, particularly those from diverse backgrounds.

The sentiment expressed by many women in this study, including Kazan, reveals a critical gap in the efforts of organizations to recruit and retain African American women talent. Kazan’s reflections provide a poignant glimpse into the emotional landscape experienced by employees who witness the cyclical pattern of hiring and subsequent departure of African American women in their workplace. She candidly states, “not as much as they should. And it sucks, because I get excited when I see people. And then when they leave, like a really sad, so we do not do a very good job and retaining.” This admission highlights a stark reality: the initial optimism and sense of belonging that comes with seeing increased diversity is often short-lived, eroded by the organization’s inability to sustain these talents. Kazan’s acknowledgment of her company’s shortcomings in retention is accompanied by a sense of hope and personal responsibility, as she expressed a desire to contribute to improving this situation.

**Summary of Finding 3**

The stories shared by these women highlight the importance of supportive leadership being reciprocated, in response to how they lead others. The study indicates how positive interactions with a leader who understands the intricacies of supporting women in leadership is valuable. In this study the participants noted not having formal sponsorship within their organizations, which reveals how formal support systems still
have work to do to ensure more visibility and opportunities for African American women leadership in tech spaces. At times there has been an absence of advocates as it pertains to career growth. Participants emphasize on the significance of mentorship from other women leaders, along with the value of connections with mentors from past experiences, highlighting the importance of external mentorship. However, mentorship may be valued differently when rendered from one’s own leader.

On the other hand, there is a call for more authentic leadership, suggesting that leaders who share their challenges and vulnerabilities can foster a more empathetic and supportive work environment. This study invites readers to be curious in finding out folks’ leadership preferences. For example, in this study, African American women leaders in tech preferred leaders who amplify trust and autonomy at work, which allows them to fully show up in their roles of being responsible leaders. What is also clear is a strong disdain for being micromanaged as it is a sure detonator to fostering a supportive work environment. However, not being micromanaged is not an invitation for lack of guidance from upward leadership.

Lack of visible African American leadership in tech is problematic (Mitchell, 2019). Due to the appreciation of being a community and connection with other Black women in tech, particularly within one’s own organization, there is then an invitation for more comprehensive support systems for African American women in tech. What is the level of attention being given to such a cause? Because of the minimal interaction with African American women in tech, there appears to be little effort on retention and recruitment efforts focused on African American women leaders (Samuels, 2022; Sanchez et al., 2019).
Organizations have developed ERGs and affinity groups, created formal mentorship programs, created training and development programs in hopes to foster stronger relationships and demonstrate their commitment to employees that are nondominant groups (Beckwith et al., 2016). However, there is limited research on how the aforementioned organizational strategies have been classified as supportive mechanisms that can lead to the advancement of African American leaders within predominantly white organizations (Beckwith et al., 2016). In this study, participants expressed appreciation and skepticism of ERGs, it opens a door for future exploration of what tangible outcomes individuals perceive as impactful. It appears that the women were attracted to ERGs because of past/early career experiences with isolation and exclusion. Culturally inclusive practices such as simple gestures and social gatherings contribute to a feeling of belonging within such groups.

The experiences shared in this study underscored the importance of not only attracting African American women talent but also creating an environment that supports their growth, acknowledges their contributions, and addresses the unique challenges they may face. It calls for a more nuanced understanding and action from organizations to move beyond surface-level diversity initiatives and toward meaningful, sustained inclusion practices. This entails a comprehensive approach that considers the entire employee lifecycle, from recruitment and onboarding to professional development, career advancement, and retention strategies that are sensitive to the specific needs and experiences of African American women.

Establishing supportive communities that offer role models and professional development opportunities is another key strategy highlighted. Additionally, ensuring
access to mentors from diverse organizational levels is emphasized. Technical managers are advised to undergo training to provide constructive feedback, recognize biases, and effectively manage teams. Encouraging higher-level leaders to sponsor underrepresented individuals is suggested to enhance their visibility and advocate for their advancement, while addressing biases in sponsorship selection processes. Overall, these strategies aim to cultivate an inclusive environment, provide ample opportunities for skill development, and tackle biases in talent recognition and career advancement within technical fields (Ashcraft et al., 2016).

The women in this study were keen on wanting to mentor and support future generations, and even their current team members and organizational stakeholders, but not many instances described the true antedate that African American women are being cared for within their organization beyond what they have requested.

The women in this study shared that they did not believe that their organization is making an effort to recruit and retain African American women talent. It was named how encountering other Black women in the workplace serves as a source of empowerment and solidarity, offering moments of connection and understanding in an otherwise challenging environment. The women in the study pointed to ongoing efforts to diversify the workforce, particularly in technical roles where representation remains lacking, while underscoring the importance of expanding recruitment efforts beyond traditional networks and institutions, advocating for a more inclusive approach to talent acquisition.

**Theme 4: Complexity and Contradictions of Sense of Belonging at Work**

The final theme that emerged during this study is described as the complexity and contradictions of sense of belonging at work, given that this study evaluates the
organizational experiences of African American women. With all the insights provided, the concept of belonging emerged as a crucial yet understated aspect. In their personal lives, belonging was intricately tied to family, interests like Star Wars, and even their names, themes that later echoed in their professional dialogues. Despite this, the women in the study expressed that they had not pondered much about their sense of belonging in their respective organizations until being prompted by me during their participation in the study. There were many unknowns and many interrelated factors that even led to some participants describing belonging as merely a buzzword devoid of real substance in many organizations. Participants alluded to the fact that belonging does require personal participation but grappled with concrete examples regarding what organizations could do to foster a sense of belonging (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6**

*Complexity and Contradictions of Sense of Belonging at Work*

[Diagram showing complexity and contradictions of sense of belonging at work]

- Reflections of African American Women on Faith, Representation, and Identity
- Nexus of Compensation, Support Systems, and Inclusivity in Career Development
- Space as Belonging
- Seen, Heard, and Valued by the Organization

**Theme 4: Complexity and Contradictions of Sense of Belonging at Work**
Reflections of African American Women on Faith, Representation, and Identity

During the sisīa circle conversation, each participant was invited to share an artifact, metaphor, or an expression that captures their overall sense of belonging. Individuals shared their personal beliefs that were rooted in faith in God and family, societal representation of African American Women. The following are just a few takeaways of what was offered.

For some African American women, faith and spirituality serve as pillars of strength, grounding them in a sense of belonging. Carrie reflected on the Serenity Prayer as a guiding principle in her life. She expressed:

The one thing that I live by is the prayer of serenity. . . . God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things that I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Carrie emphasized the significance of this prayer in navigating life’s challenges, whether in personal matters with her children or in professional dilemmas. It prompts her to reassess situations and discern whether they align with her path or warrant a change.

Michelle shared her affinity for sci-fi and the positive representation it offers for Black women in STEM fields. She highlighted the character of Uhura from Star Trek as a revolutionary depiction. Michelle expressed:

I chose a Time magazine that has Star Trek on it, like a 50-year anniversary series.

And I chose it because I’ve always been a huge sci-fi fan and the character of Uhura was very, very revolutionary for the depiction of Black women in STEM.

Through characters like Uhura, played by Nichelle Nichols, Michelle found affirmation and a sense of belonging in the tech industry. Michelle’s account serves a reminder that
representation within mainstream media matters because it informs many folks lived reality surrounding what is possible.

Yvette drew strength from her extended family, particularly the strong Black women in her life. Reflecting on a photo of her daughter in-laws, she remarked:

And I picked this up. I thought of this just because I’m looking at the women in this picture. And every one of them are strong Black females . . . I say look at these strong women, you know, doing what they need to do on a daily, showing up for their families and showing up for work on a daily.

Yvette found inspiration and belonging in the resilience and fortitude of her family members.

Lena contemplated the multifaceted nature of the Black experience and the quest for belonging in a society marked by displacement and fragmentation. She pondered, “So do we really belong anywhere, and then, with my lineage, it’s really being displacement by free and all this stuff. So like, everyone’s always seeking that.” Lena’s statement was present amongst other participants as they too questioned what is this belonging really all about. Eventually Lena landed on the resolution that sense of belonging to her is captured by true freedom. For her, true freedom lies in unapologetically embracing her identity and celebrating it in every space she occupies. Lena’s reflection posed an invitation to recognize the enormous complexity of holding freedom and belonging as being interconnected for African American women in the workplace.

Kazan shared a powerful affirmation that resonated with her journey toward self-acceptance and belonging. She revealed, “One of my favorite quotes is ‘trust your dopeness.’ It’s an affirmation.” Kazan emphasized the importance of self-acceptance as
the foundation for belonging. She acknowledged the tendency to seek external validation but stressed the significance of embracing one’s uniqueness and worthiness. For Kazan, true belonging begins with embracing and celebrating oneself authentically.

**The Nexus of Compensation, Support Systems, and Inclusivity in Career Development**

The concept of belonging is often perceived as a hierarchical need contingent upon the fulfillment of fundamental prerequisites. The findings gleaned from this study shed light on the pivotal role of factors such as compensation in shaping the professional aspirations and decisions of the women involved. Though there is a multifaceted nature of support desired in their respective roles, they consistently emphasized the significance of adequate pay as a foundational consideration. Kazan asserted the significance of pay, stating it aligns with her core values, reflecting her sense of responsibility toward her community and family, despite being a single working professional. Yvette succinctly expressed her perspective, stating, “I’m not interested in being promoted. I just want money, like, just compensate me, you know. Appropriately, right.”

Yvette’s succinct assertion regarding her prioritization of compensation over promotion reflects a pragmatic perspective prevalent among individuals seeking equitable recognition for their contributions. Moreover, Michelle’s previous commentary on the importance of advocacy and supportive mentorship highlights the nuanced interplay between financial remuneration and career advancement strategies. These insights collectively underscore the intricate nexus between financial considerations, professional support systems, and the cultivation of inclusive organizational cultures in facilitating holistic career development pathways.
Kazan underscored the significance of pay, stating it aligns with her core values, reflecting her sense of responsibility toward her community and family, despite being a single working professional. Michelle reiterated the importance of considering both pay and the type of support desired when entering the tech space. She highlighted the necessity of having advocates who positively influence one’s career trajectory, stating, “I think it’s important to make sure you have someone that can advocate for you and someone that’s going to be a positive force on your career, for sure.”

Yvette further stressed the importance of creating a safe space for everyone to be heard, regardless of their background, without facing undue criticism based on their appearance or identity, saying:

One more thing that came to me is creating a safe space for them, for everyone to be heard, for everyone to be heard, a safe space, and not criticizing just because the person whose mouth it came out, looks different from you.

Kazan shared her perspective, stating, “I do feel that I belong, I have the tools.” She expressed confidence in her role, despite uncertainties, highlighting her readiness to contribute to the organization’s technological advancements. Carrie noted, “I feel for me, I do. I work in a very diverse environment.” She emphasized the organization’s efforts in fostering inclusivity through respecting various cultures and holidays, fostering a sense of belonging among employees. Through these reflections, it becomes evident that while belonging may not have been at the forefront of their minds, its presence or absence significantly impacts their experiences in the workplace.

Michelle articulated her sense of belonging in the following manner: She feels a sense of belonging, though it does not always come effortlessly. She stated that, “Being
the only Black woman, although you sort of almost get used to that after a while, unfortunately.” Yvette candidly acknowledges moments of feeling unwelcome, unheard, or unseen. Despite finding pockets of community, Yvette often finds herself as one of very few individuals at the table. In her efforts to foster community and equity, she admits to having been in positions that she later regretted. However, Michelle elaborated that the negative factors impacting belonging are usually bad management, or being the only Black woman, although one might adapt and become accustomed to this.

Similar to Michelle, Yvette felt the need to continually prove herself, which has been a recurring theme in her career. Although she perceived her knowledge and experience were now more appreciated as she ascended in her career, she noted a lingering sense that her peers may not fully know her as an individual. Bertha acknowledged the minimal sense of belonging for people of color, particularly women of color, in her field. In Carrie’s career journey in UX, she has encountered the challenge of working in a field that is not widely accepted and automatically met with resistance.

Kazan reflected upon her external team, sponsors, allies, mentors, and mentees acknowledge her visibility and impact throughout the organization. Her work and accolades speak for themselves, and she has been fortunate to have supportive managers and sponsors who advocate for her promotions and fair compensation, proactively addressing any discrepancies. She has heard stories about others who have not been in the same position and is truly thankful.

Internally, Kazan has struggled with satisfaction, harboring concerns about others having more experience and frequently seeking reassurance or overachieving to ensure she is doing things correctly. Despite external success, she does not always feel a sense of
belonging and assumes her colleagues possess more experience than her, a perception she
acknowledges is often self-imposed.

Lena reflected more heavily on a sense of belonging that has struggled with the
sense of not belonging in a predominantly white-bodied space, one that tends to
sensationalize crises and tragedies while attempting to meet DEI quotas with BIPOC
individuals. Remaining true to herself in all aspects, she confronts challenges arising
from expectations and molds that dictate how she should present herself to customers and
in the corporate structure. Despite these challenges, she stands unapologetically as a
unique, honest, and forthright Black woman. Her commitment extends to providing
constant feedback and insights to those in positions of power in the tech space where she
works. In this environment, she acknowledges being underutilized but asserts her
unwillingness to go beyond the scope of her role without appropriate compensation. At
times, she finds herself compelled to shrink herself, using this as a defense mechanism in
response to the dynamics of her workplace.

In the tech industry, Lynn described feeling a sense of belonging as a whole. Lynn
offered that in her experience with the tech industry, she has generally encountered
positive situations, never feeling singled out solely because they are a Black woman.
However, the constant awareness of being the only Black woman in many meetings has
resulted in feelings of mental isolation and stress. Lynn described a heightened awareness
that is accompanied by the pressure of not wanting to make mistakes, considering the
responsibility she feels toward the Black individuals who look up to her. In the context of
belonging, Lynn later expressed that the concept doesn’t resonate with her, attributing
this to her cultural upbringing. She elaborated, stating, “I’ve never really belonged.”
Lynn explained that as a first-generation individual, everything feels new, and there’s a disconnect between her home background and the external environment. She emphasized the importance of authenticity, noting, “So I like to just be me.” Over time, she learned to prioritize compatibility in relationships rather than striving to fit in or belong. Lynn redefined belonging as finding people with whom her personality meshes well, regardless of external factors. In a corporate setting, particularly as a minority, she emphasized the significance of being true to herself and seeking acceptance from those who embrace her authenticity.

Carrie reflected on her sense of belonging in her current role, expressing that it’s the first time in her career where she truly feels she belongs. She contrasted this with her experiences in previous roles and organizations, where she often found herself as the only Black woman or person present, such as at events like World Usability Day. Despite being accustomed to this role, she noted that prior positions were marked by instances of bullying, particularly from white women. Although hesitant about the political correctness of her statement, Carrie candidly shared the biggest challenges she faced as a Black woman stemmed from interactions with white women. This candid admission provided additional insight into the complexities of what it means to garner a sense of belonging.

**Space as Belonging**

Yvette, reflecting on her workplace environment, shared:

I’m a creature of habit. Okay, very routine. And when I originally started working, we had cubicles. And so, I had my family pictures, I had all my
notebooks and items that I needed to do my job on the daily. It was my space, right?

She expressed a sense of belonging associated with her dedicated workspace. However, changes in office layout due to COVID-19 protocols disrupted this sense of belonging. Yvette lamented the loss of personalization and privacy, stating, “Now, I don’t know who’s gonna be sitting next to me from day to day, or across from me.” Despite these changes, Yvette finds solace in the relationships forged with long-standing colleagues. She emphasized the value of camaraderie, saying, “What makes me feel my sense of belonging is the handful of people that have been there through the years. We value each other . . . When we need each other, we have each other’s backs.”

Continuing her reflections, Yvette acknowledged that while her personal strategies for fostering belonging, such as creating a personalized workspace, may not resonate with everyone, they remain important to her. She recognized the diverse needs and preferences of individuals in the workplace, stating, “What made me feel more included and belong, this is my space, and you know I belong here, might not do it for somebody else.” Yvette emphasized the importance of creating a safe and inclusive environment where everyone feels heard and respected, regardless of their background. She stressed the need for authenticity and acceptance, saying, “Creating a safe space for them, for everyone to be heard, a safe space, and not criticizing just because . . . the person whose mouth it came out, looks different from you.”

Lena also articulated a nuanced perspective on the dichotomy between her personal space’s safety and the absence of physical camaraderie in the workplace when she does go into the office. Lena’s personal space offers her a sense of safety and
inclusion, benefiting from not having to physically be in the office. This distance allows her racial identity to be less of a forefront concern, which she acknowledges as a privilege. In her reflection, Lena states, “I do miss like the camaraderie and like the culture of being in community with folks physically.” This expression might be interpreted as a longing for more tangible interpersonal interactions. Despite this, she values the clear demarcation between her professional and personal realms, remarking, “I’m grateful to have the boundary of like, I just do work. And that’s it.” This boundary allows her to maintain a certain detachment from her colleagues, leading her to ponder, “I spend a lot of my time here, why isn’t that I don’t know more about the folks that I work with? Or like building those relationships and stuff like that.” There is the sentiment of remote, hybrid world providing a layer of protection, but also engenders a sense of disconnection from collective cultural and relational dynamics that may be felt more heavily with the frequency of working in office in comparison to other industries.

**Seen, Heard, and Valued by the Organization**

Participants in the study expressed varying degrees of feeling seen, heard, and valued in their respective organizations. Lynn conveyed a sense of affirmation, stating, “I don’t feel like I’m scared to share ideas here or I don’t get that feeling.” She shared an example of a project she spearheaded, highlighting how her contributions were acknowledged and well-received by both the team and executives. Lena reflected on her experiences with feedback, acknowledging instances where her input was considered and acted upon, yet also recognizing areas where not all feedback was addressed. Lynn further emphasized her sense of acceptance in the organizational culture, affirming that she always felt valued and respected. She offered:
There’s a project that went live today that had been stagnant for months and months and months. So even before I got here, and so it was the first project that I took underneath my wing. So, I’m excited to see it to completion given, you know, the stagnation that’s been here for a few months, and it’s something that’s been very well received by the team and by, by the executives as well, too.

Carrie recounted a recent interaction with a VP in her organization while her manager was away, highlighting the receptiveness of leadership to her suggestions and the ease with which she could communicate her ideas. She emphasized the importance of authenticity in fostering an environment where individuals feel comfortable expressing themselves without pretense. Carrie also acknowledged the role of direct leadership in facilitating open communication and addressing issues, noting the importance of understanding the limitations leaders may face in effecting change.

Michelle shared her observation regarding acknowledgement in the workplace, expressing, “I would say that’s also kind of new, because I am used to being acknowledged a lot more. I am acknowledged by the select few, but I’m outside of them. Not a lot now.” Her statement highlights a shift in the frequency of acknowledgment she has experienced, noting that while she still receives recognition from a select few, it has diminished among others in her professional sphere.

Kazan expressed a nuanced view of her workplace dynamics, highlighting a sense of being seen and heard by management, albeit with reservations about the follow-through on issues raised. She remarked:
I do feel that I can be open with management, depending on what it is I can see people taking action. And then other things, I can see people saying, “Yeah, we gotta get there” and not making a plan to do it.

This acknowledgment of responsiveness, contrasted with a lack of actionable plans for certain concerns, reflects a complex interaction with the leadership.

Kazan also felt validated by the tangible changes resulting from her input and the continued reliance of her colleagues on her expertise. She shared an encounter that underscored this sentiment:

I was in the lab today, and I ran into some of our teams that I used to work with, like 3 years ago. And just having a conversation and one mentioned, “well you’re doing something right, because you’ve managed a quality team longer than anybody else here.”

This interaction, coupled with her observation that “people do see the value and the input that I give,” illustrates a recognition of her contributions and the impact of her actions in the organization.

Lena acknowledged the attempts by her organization to create a supportive environment but critiques the one-size-fits-all approach, which she found inadequate, especially for Black individuals like herself. She expressed appreciation for her team and direct superior for their mindfulness and efforts to create a space where she feels heard and supported. Lena highlighted the importance of advocacy and the positive impact of her relationship with her direct superior. Despite this personal support, Lena has felt at times a disconnect between the organization’s intentions and the actual experiences of employees, suggesting a lack of universal application of these supportive measures. She
noted the organization’s work with diverse individuals globally and efforts to support Black lives, presenting a complex view of the organization’s inclusivity efforts.

Lena also pointed out the challenges in her department, where she and another Black woman were the only Black individuals. Lena critically reflected on the lack of consideration for individuals’ circumstances, such as being new to the job type, working from home, or navigating new processes. The recurring pattern of failing to retain African American employees, despite intentional hiring practices, points to a deeper systemic issue in the organization’s retention strategies. Lena expressed a desire to contribute through mentorship and support but hesitates due to concerns about being perceived as fulfilling a quota rather than being valued for her capabilities.

Lena also noted a discernible effort in recruitment strategies aimed at diversifying the workforce, indicating an intentional approach to hiring people of color. She pointed out a significant gap between hiring practices and retention efforts. She articulated:

They have been very intentional about hiring folks of color. And it’s kind of like, Okay, we’re gonna hire folks of color, then you go through this intense 5-week training, then you have 12 weeks to get your shit together. And if you don’t, you got to go.

This observation highlights a one-size-fits-all approach to employee onboarding and development, which fails to account for the unique challenges and adjustments new hires, particularly those from underrepresented groups, may face.

These accounts reflect a critical need for organizations to reassess and adapt their retention strategies to be as intentional and nuanced as their hiring practices, ensuring that
diversity efforts extend beyond recruitment to include meaningful support and development opportunities for all employees.

Summary of Finding 4

Similar to Curtis (2017), in exploring the intersectional complexities of black women and the impact it has on their leadership, this study revealed that faith and spirituality serve as pillars of strength, grounding them in a sense of belonging. This study determined that organizations that have gravitated toward the buzz phrase “fostering a sense of belonging,” which needs to be defined more clearly. The stories are also an indication for organizations to be more curious in learning what belonging actually means to its employees.

Individuals reflected upon certain instances, where they had received support from their manager, or leadership. Participants often reflected upon counter stories, where they did not have a sense of belonging or instances where they felt they were extreme bias as a result of the privileges and power assumed by those whose social identity differed from their own.

Though the sense of belonging varies between individuals, this study invites organizations to be curious about how it is approaching belonging conversations. The women in this study acknowledged that mandatory diversity, equity, inclusion and (DEI) training programs are important, especially in focusing on the importance of bias recognition at both conscious and unconscious levels. However, there is a desire for organizations to explicitly name behaviors that are acceptable and unacceptable that will continue to support addressing critical issues that African American women in tech navigate.
ERGs have the potential of being viable spaces for fostering belonging. ERGs are important, but it is important that organizations continue to do work around the perceived and felt biases that the formation of such groups can have. For example, organizations with ERGs should also ensure a system where employees can report issues without fear and retaliation. There is also an invitation that no matter the size of the organization, there needs to be mechanisms in place for employees to truly share the difficulties they are experiencing given that much of the workplace is aligned with the dominant culture of what workplace experiences and even belonging look like.

Giving consideration for how organizational restructures (i.e., re-orgs) can have an impact on African American women is also important. There is a potential benefit of employees feeling a strong sense of belonging, but African American women express their lack of confidence in the organization’s ability to foster a sense of belonging. Resources that are at the disposal of African American women can contribute to this.

Belonging is often linked with feelings of rejection, isolation, and exclusion, especially for marginalized individuals who may experience these due to various reasons such as behavior, physical traits, or cultural differences (Allen et al., 2021). Despite facing adversity, they demonstrate resilience and determination, carving out successful careers and paving the way for future generations of Black women in tech.

**Conclusion**

This research contributes to Black feminist theory, organizational culture and belonging research. Using the lens of African American women leaders in the tech industry led to the discovery of new narratives that contribute to research. Although the narratives in this study illuminate the remarkable resilience, persistence, and adaptability
of African American women in leadership roles within the tech industry. These women embody a growth-oriented approach, leveraging their workplace experiences to overcome challenges and drive personal and professional development (Bowers, 2021). Despite facing inherent responsibilities and biases, they demonstrate a commitment to empowering themselves and others, serving as guiding lights within their organizations.

They exuded a willingness to empower others, while navigating their own challenges that are inherent in tech. They make their mark on creating an inclusive environment for others, by constantly showing up in a helpful and supportive manner.

**Research Question 1**

What are the lived experiences of African American women leaders in tech?

Theme 1 of the study aligns with black feminist thought, focusing on gender, racial and other factors influence the experiences of African American women. In the brief synopsis, African American Women in this study discussed their personal identities that have shaped how they presence themselves within tech. The women highlighted their cultural upbringing, including but not limited to family values, educational matriculation, faith and even their desire to challenge negative stereotypes around the African American women.

Participants were never directly asked about their experience of being the only African American in their job, yet it was accounted for by every participant to some degree either in their questionnaires, in the circle conversations, or in one-on-one interviews. Participants were also not asked about the leadership directly beyond the roles they had, but all participants shared accounts of how they have worked diligently to support others. When participants were asked about their overall sense of belonging that
transcends tech spaces, many of the participants reflected upon their sense of belonging within their family and community.

**Research Question 2**

What are the organizational experiences that impact or influence African American women?

When asked about their overall experience within tech and their organization, participants highlighted challenges faced when they were not in a leadership role or early in their career. Participants reported malicious behaviors of former peers and organizational stakeholders during their workplace interactions. However, participants reported positive experiences with their current leaders, emphasizing their appreciation for the support they received and being granted the autonomy to do the jobs for which they were hired. Regarding peers, leadership, and other members of their organizations, many of the women describe their direct leadership in a positive manner; however, in many of their stories, they often named peers or other members of their organizations as perpetrators of aggressive behaviors when they experienced negative interactions.

When asked about their connections, many participants highlighted the ways in which they had connected to their ERGs, but also the ways in which they still felt disconnected from individuals with their organization.

When asked about their connections, participants described aspects of organizational culture that were visible and invisible that contributed to their sense of belonging. Participants admitted that to a degree they did feel seen, heard, understood and acknowledged. They specifically expressed appreciation for being able to share their ideas with current leadership thought partners and other organizational stakeholders.
However, participants highlighted the ways in which they had connected to their ERGs, but also the ways in which they still felt disconnected from individuals with their organization. However, when asking them directly about their sense of belonging it was offered that they had never considered the question of belonging. They did not feel as though they belong, or just a general “yes.” These narratives emphasize the need for organizations to foster inclusive environments that prioritize support and collaboration, promoting the success and well-being of all employees.

In transitioning to the next chapter which will discuss the overall conclusions of this study, it is apparent that challenges persist for African American Women in the workplace, but there is also a pathway forward. Chapter 5 will build upon the narratives shared by offering possible practices and strategies that organizations can incorporate to lead to more inclusive environments. It will inform initiatives being aimed to the improvement of tech organizations and how they support African American women leadership. The discussion contributes to future research that will aide in the advance of African American women leadership in professional settings.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

For, she is me.
She is you,
She is us coming together in unity.
For I am not you and you are not me.
But collectively, we women are she,
Who will be uniquely distinct with poise and dignity
We will exercise our right to be and engage with our purpose to become.
We will lift up and encourage one another because though we are many, yet we are one.
—Litney Gray

In examining the lived experiences of African American women leaders in tech, along with organizational culture impacts on lived experiences, this study identified four major themes: (a) breaking barriers: Navigating isolation and echoes of exclusion; (b) African American women leadership: The normalcy of resiliency and supportiveness while experiencing cultural adversity; (c) perceptions of organizational culture; and the (d) complexity and contradiction of sense of belonging. Across themes this study determined that the experiences of African American women are unique in that they navigate tech organizations with knowledge of historical references of being the only, and often face challenges in both non-leadership and leadership roles of being supportive and not always having it reciprocated. There are also desires for dedication for the recruitment and retention of African American women within tech as a whole and within C-suite roles. In this chapter I synthesize insights gained from lived experiences of African American women leaders in response to this study’s research questions, which leads to overall connections to this study’s framework of employing Black Feminist Thought as a lens to examine the lived experience of African American women within

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The chapter concludes by highlighting implications for Sista Circle Conversations along with implications for organizations and future research, with the aim of creating inclusive and supportive work environments that are also culturally responsive.

**Research Question 1**

What are the lived experiences of African American women working in tech organizations?

Research Question 1 was designed to ensure African American women felt authorized to examine and explore any part of their experience that they deemed important or necessary. Related to this research question in particular the women in this study shared accounts of being the only one, which was pervasive across participants narratives. The research highlights are markedly underrepresented African American Women are in tech and the ongoing subjugation of overt discrimination and subtle microaggressions still present in organizations.

**Theme 1: Breaking Barriers—Navigating Isolation and Echoes of Exclusion**

Similar educational research regarding the experiences of women in tech spaces (Yamaguchi & Burge, 2019), African American women are not adequately represented in tech. Despite research showing that diverse teams can help drive innovation, the collective narrative that the women offered is that there is still lots of work to be done in DEIB work (Yamaguchi & Burge, 2019), as African American women represent a very small fraction of employees within tech organizations. The lack of diversity contributes to a sense of isolation and leaves African American women open for exclusionary experiences within an organization.
Being on the receiving end of microaggressions can have an even more demeaning impact on African American women (Field et al., 2023). Even being wrongly mistaken as a junior leader or being critiqued for intensity of emotions expressed due to intersectional identities that we as African American women hold, are the result of organizational behaviors that further exacerbate alienation (Field et al., 2023).

The theoretical perspective of the intersections of race gender, as well as other identities is a true show for unpacking this shared sentiment amongst participants. Some of the accounts reflect differences based upon cultural norms, such as how conversations are framed within organizations. Many individuals shared the indirect effects of having to represent or be seen as a representative of all African American women. Facing implicit bias, negative stereotypes manifesting in exclusion and feelings of isolation is no easy feat. However, these leaders’ stories help to liberate others, letting other African American women know that they are not alone when considering tech as a whole.

African American women willingly enter the workforce knowing the possibility of encountering stigmas and exclusion. However, it is even more difficult to process when you have those with shared identities who have conformed to dominant culture that can leave a negative imprint in one’s memory. In listening to the stories that were slightly filled with sadness and disappointment, I thought of the common catch phrase used within the African American community, “it be your own people.” There is almost an expectation that one may have a negative interaction with a male counterpart or colleagues (Samuels, 2022), but the stories offered in this study of African American men perpetuating systems of oppression by not fully reciprocating the type of support they receive from Black women (e.g., their mothers, sisters, cousins, daughters) toward their
colleagues in the workplace can be frustrating. It is a double whammy, receiving unwelcomed or distant engagement from African American women also deepens the dig because African American women are owning their femininity, while also owning other parts of their identity to show up as their best professional selves.

**Theme 2: African American Women Leadership—Normalcy of Resiliency and Supportiveness While Experiencing Cultural Adversity**

“Give light and people will find the way.”

—Ella Baker

African American women know that the impact of their contributions transcends the challenges they encounter, and understand how important it is for them to care for themselves to ensure that they are properly supporting their community (Yamaguchi & Burge, 2019). For African American women being both a woman and Black are complex, which often leads to more adverse experiences (Chance, 2022). Research suggests that due to such difficulties, African American women’s leadership is often overlooked in leadership research connected to resilience (Chance, 2022). This research contributes to leadership studies that take into account women’s leadership and adverse leadership challenges. Companies that focus on providing the necessary resources in support of ensuring they have a strong network of connections, build relationships and create a strong career for themselves (Samuels, 2022).

African American women leaders are known for taking advantage of opportunities and being self-motivated (Sales et al., 2020). Part of growth requires individuals to stretch, this study highlights the ways in which these leaders are driven and committed to taking ongoing risks that also serve as a source of encouragement to those
around them. African American women strive to bring their “authentic professional” self to work. The leadership experiences shared recognize the strength and resilience of African American women. In my collective and individual interactions with participants, conversations each spoke indirectly about their leadership that captured their radiance, making the Zoom meeting room metaphorically filled with light. Participants’ accounts communicate resilience to show up brilliantly and bravely, not playing small and taking up just the right amount of space for them to be respected by colleagues. As a guiding light, the participants in this study help others to shine bright as well by supporting them in the completion of tasks or projects that they may not be responsible for. Each woman was positioned to communicate in a manner that is enlightening and not shrinking or cowering to challenges. Black women are known for being triumphant and given adverse experiences, which further equips them in their leadership (Chance, 2022). The intersectional identities of African Americans can aid organizations in facilitating conversations that only deepen understanding of differences that also allow the collective to benefit from the “human, social, psychological and cultural” capital (Roberts, 2020, p. para.4) that African American women have to offer.

**Research Question 2**

In what ways, if any, does organizational culture impact African American women leaders’ experiences in tech?

Every organization has a cultural framework that informs basic assumptions, values and artifacts surrounding the nature of their work, what they actually do, and the direction that they are headed. Research Question 2 was designed to explore participants’ perspectives of the organization’s culture based upon stories offered. Across participants,
there was genuine contemplation regarding the degree to which organizations could really foster a sense of belonging.

**Theme 3: Perceptions of Leadership and Organizational Culture**

The study indicates that if supportive leaders are in place, African American women have no trouble owning their voice and showing up as their best professional and authentic self (Yamaguchi & Burge, 2019). The study also highlights how support and autonomy are important factors for leadership. This aligns with previous practitioner suggestions of inclusive leaders being willing to engage in flexible practices that reflect a diverse organization (Roberts, 2020). Furthermore, organizations with inclusive leaders at the helm are knowledgeable of toxic behaviors and address such behaviors by ensuring accountability measures are in place that will lead to change that fosters a safe environment for the organization’s people (Roberts, 2020).

I am trying to argue the importance of African American women seeing other African American women leaders in the workplace. It is inspiring and comforting when other African American women can share the same spaces with other African American women. Having other African American women as leaders can help push others. We will be each other’s sponsors. Studies have shown that Black women are the least likely to have friends or acquaintances who can push them toward open job positions.

The women in this study were gracious with their feedback regarding the level of support that their organizations willingly provide for its people. This study does not purport that African American women should have preferential treatment. However, this study does suggest organizations ensure that resources are leveraged appropriately when it comes to supporting African American women who are in the leadership pipeline.
Part of that support means understanding why African American women see autonomy and flexibility as an important determinant in them remaining within tech. There also has to be a willingness to protect African American women from toxic workplace behaviors, which is critical for organizations to address as it relates to being accountable to its most vulnerable stakeholders (Roberts, 2020).

Employee resources groups (ERGS) are often deemed as viable when they provide an abundance of resources and thoughtfully curated events (Samuels, 2022) that address concerns of a particular subcommunity within organizations. Employee resources groups are also seen as a factor contributing to a sense of belonging because it provides an opportunity for connection. Whereas, research (Allen et al., 2001) indicates when the connections are not valued it impacts belonging. However, the skepticism in regard to what all employee resource groups is in fact plausible. Thus, the resource group cannot be the only measure confronting and addressing systemic injustices that are present within the workplace (Samuels, 2022).

The desire for authentic and supportive leadership aligns with best practices that indicate leaders who are inclusive are “willing to lead essential cultural changes that create more welcoming, safe climates for people from diverse backgrounds” (Roberts, 2020, para. 6).

In a plight to dismantle systematic barriers that impact African American women in C-suite roles, this study alongside Roberts (2020) and Samuels (2022), highlights the pervasive issue that despite many organizational diversity initiatives the underrepresentation of African American women in C-suite roles is also present within tech. This study’s findings are congruent with previous research discussions that have
found more often than not, “women of color are still the most likely caregivers, and are least represented in the C-suite across industries” (Roberts, 2020, para. 7). Although managing professional ambitions and family responsibilities is often the drawback for African American women to pursue C-suite, the reality is that there are no early recruitment or retention efforts to ensure the possibility of African American women in succession plans across industries. C-suite roles continue to be white or male dominated, which makes these roles less attractive, as they signal the possibility of even more isolation and exclusion (Bishop, 2020).

There is a slow progression within the tech industry as it pertains to fostering change that incorporates diverse perspectives in leadership (Samuels, 2022). More diverse perspectives in C-suite roles, as suggested by Galinsky et al. (2015) will only enhance decision making, creativity, innovation (Bishop, 2020). However, there has to be a shift from diversity and inclusion as just a business strategy. The establishment of clear goals that support equitable opportunities for upward leadership across all sectors is an avenue to consider. African American women should be considered for the unique leadership experiences that do not sometimes different from status quo. This would result in unique contributions that aide in the reimagining and redefining of conventional norms that may lead to enhancement of organizational culture.

**Theme 4: Complexity and Contradictions of Sense of Belonging at Work**

In this study belonging was examined as a relational phenomenon (Filstad et al., 2019). Persons with a history of rejection might question their belonging or seek alternative affiliations (Allen et al., 2021). Belonging is critical for understanding individuals and the processes of inhabiting and contributing to the workplace (Filstad et
This study highlights the interplay between individual and organizational factors influencing African American women’s sense of belonging. The study is also useful in that it takes into account historical rejection and alienation of African American women, which supports the further understanding of why belonging at work is so complex.

African American women are not one dimensional (Yamaguchi & Burge, 2019); therefore, it is important for organizations to consider diverse support systems that are in place. The women in this study were able to own up to what they were or were not doing that they believed contributes to their sense of belonging.

In this discussion there is an invitation to organizations to make sure folks’ fundamentals needs are being met. Organizations must understand that those who are in the current workforce and those entering will prioritize pay. Therefore, understand that pay is a principle that needs to be accounted for prior to even having conversations. Additionally, it’s important to explore everyone’s experiences to identify the determinants of common belonging practices within the organization (Yamaguchi & Burge, 2019). Historically, Black women have been known to be undervalued based upon pay. However, the women in this study were very frank in sharing their value for adequate compensation in comparison to their colleagues. The days of trying to make a dollar out of 15 cents are over, which is a phrase commonly expressed within the Black community. According to TV Producer Issa Rae, Black women are over the notion of being expected to settle for less (Framke, 2016).

The potential benefits for increased visibility of African American women in leadership and in tech can contribute to innovation and productivity (Yamaguchi &
Burge, 2019) and more inclusion within an organization (Yamaguchi & Burge, 2019).

When organizations can lean into what African American women have to offer beyond their technical expertise, it can provide insights on how to go about having more culturally responsive practices that might actually foster diversity (Yamaguchi & Burge, 2019). African American women are known to need people who can serve as mentors or sponsors within the organization who are culturally competent. This also means create space where people feel that there are genuine connections. Strong organizational culture contributes to overall well-being and sense of connectedness (Pew Research Center, 2021). This study serves as a critical examination for ensuring leaders that promote belonging, a major component of DEI efforts, are engaging in social justice related practices and considering how they prioritize certain practices. It challenges leaders to bring awareness to historical and current factors that are markers for hindering or enabling sense of belonging.

Framework Connections

“You’ll never end racism unless you look at how Black women or women of color are left behind.”

—Stella Nkomo

Black Feminist Thought

This study makes a significant contribution to current discourse examining diversity and leadership within the tech industry, particularly by utilizing the lens of Black feminist thought to engage participants regarding their experiences of organizational culture and belonging. Black feminism provides a more nuanced understanding of African American women in tech experiences. The study contributes to
an awareness of historical and social impacts African American women encounter within the realm of tech which is often seen across fields of studies and organizations. In alignment with Aaron (2020), this study also contributes to research that centers the narratives of the African American community providing more understanding of cultural factors that determine the behaviors and norms enacted within African American women’s leadership. This study provides further insight on how African American women survive and thrive as they navigate the tech industry, which can be attributed to African American women’s supportive and caretaking natures, along with their strength and resilience exhibited in their leadership. This research study is an invitation for ongoing support, but also the recognition that Black women are doing immensely challenging interpersonal and intrapersonal work daily. Tech stakeholders must not hide behind the resilience of African American women, but rather bring their perspectives to the forefront that will enrich understanding of intersectional challenges faced in order to better model what it means to be truly diverse and inclusive along with fostering a sense of belonging.

Organizational Culture

In examining both the positive and challenging experiences African American women in leadership face in tech, this study is also able to contribute to organizational culture research literate because it offers a critical analysis of how shared assumptions, beliefs and values are in support of or create barriers for African American women in leadership, and potentially for African American women who may desire to pursue a C-suite role in tech. This research highlights the opportunity tech organizations have to shift the narrative around the percentages of African American women in the industry
(Samuels, 2022) and within executive leadership. There is an invitation to not just name that African Americans or other folks of color are welcomed, but to create environments (e.g., in-person/remote) that allows external and internal opportunities to be more accessible. As many of the women in this study expressed, visible intentional efforts that impact recruitment and retention are needed for entry and advancement into formal leadership roles.

In congruence with Curtis (2017), this study contributes the importance of using new traditional leadership practices that support cultural competence. This study further suggests organizational cultures should reflect “the different tones and meld diverse melodies into complicated cooperative harmonies by attending to the ways, views, and qualities of those with varied cultures, histories, social class experiences, ethnicities, and races” (Ballou and Suyemoto (2007, as cited in Curtis, 2017, p. 98).

This study also highlights how important the “managers” of African American women leaders are. They can engage in behaviors that are supportive and rewarding, and they can play a crucial role in being proponents of how DEI should be fostered in ways that will also ensure the well-being of African American women to the highest level of leadership (Field et al., 2023).

Organizational cultures should reflect clear commitments regarding diverse experience. Based upon the descriptions of organizational culture in connection to, it appears that African American women are challenged to figure it out on their own, leading one to question are drivers of DEI seen or felt within organizations by folks of color. Nkomo shared with Knowledge of Wharton’s podcast (Creary et al., 2021) that organizations are lacking in realizing intersectional spaces where race and gender coexist,
which also sheds light on how Black women have the potential of being invisible within workplace settings. Nkomo said:

> When anybody starts talking about gender, white women’s eyes light up and they get all animated. When people talk about race, they dim. . . . There was something about people not realizing this intersectional space. When you want to change the experience or change the possibilities for Black women or women of color, you must talk about what does it mean to sit at the intersection of race and gender where both identities can lead to invisibility. (Creary et al., 2021, 40:50)

Nkomo concluded by stating that companies that are truly committed to dismantling systemic racism need to look at race and gender, and that occurs examining ways Black women and women of color are left behind (Creary et al., 2021).

**Belonging: What Really Matters?**

Organizations are the benefactors to the complex and challenging work of African American Women, which reiterates the narrative of black women being strong and resilient leaders. At times throughout this study I was filled with tears, inspired and moved by how the women in my study remained undaunted by the organizational cultures where they choose to work. The question then becomes why should or do African American women choose to put themselves in harm’s way, there are so many other opportunities to take advantage of. The women in this study demonstrate that African American women are immovable because their leadership in some way is a movement. As they continue to move the needle forward, it would be helpful if organizations are held to a standard in replenishing African American women leaders with the abundance of what is being poured out.
This study contributes to research by exploring African American women leaders’ navigation of tech spaces, and how they contribute to fostering environments where others are seen and supported through their leadership. This ultimately impacts organizational cultures in meaningful ways. Despite challenges that they encountered, the impact these women leader’s narratives indicate the importance of leaders nurturing positive and inclusive work environments. Thus, this study underscores how belonging can be a critical factor in understanding individuals and the processes of inhabiting and contributing to the workplace. Belonging at work contributes to practices, meaning making, goal attainment, relational and personal investments, along with representation and growth (Filstad et al., 2019).

Beyond mere participation, the study highlights how individual belonging may inform the larger organizational achievements in belonging, as it moves to pathways that further define identity, representation and community within tech as a whole. African American women are not one dimensional (Yamaguchi & Burge, 2019), therefore, it is important for organizations to consider diverse support systems that are in place. I suggest becoming more curious and being able to listen more to see exactly how African American women are interpreting the organization’s values and practices around fostering a sense of belonging. Organizations need to identify the disconnect regarding what belonging should detail beyond just internal feelings the individual holds, but also, organizations should evaluate how they can provide more clarity around their initiatives that will foster belonging.
Implications

The aim of the methodology employed in this study was to ensure culturally responsive research practice that would support building a container of trust and safety for participants to share their stories (Bloomberg, 2023). Despite a plethora of studies that account for African American women narratives by conducting one-on-one interviews, incorporating the sista circle dialogue allowed for thick/rich description of workplace experiences. Using a sista circle has benefits similar to that of focus groups, in that it can add to participant interaction and overall engagement that goes beyond what one might offer in a single interview (Bloomberg, 2023). Sista circle groups also created an environment where participants could evaluate their own perspective in relation to the other women in this study. Participants reported they had indeed felt they could be candid in their offerings when among the other women in the study. Congruent with Bell (2018), this study also highlights the sense of pride that the women had in reflecting and sharing their career progression and how future women in technology could benefit from such valuable insights.

Lessons From Sista Circle Conversations

The sista circle yielded valuable insights for the participants and researcher/facilitator. The connection between individuals was quite palpable during this study. There were beautiful exchanges regarding participants’ personal appearance, which spoke to the ways in which African American Women see each other. Such moments were responded to with bright smiles and glowing faces. When accounts were shared about such interactions, I questioned how much more participants desired to be viewed by eyes who hold similar experiences as they do. It also alludes to the fact that
African American women do see each other, and that it is starkly noticeable when there is no one else present who can hold the intersections of their identity such as taking extreme pride in their appearance. The sistas in this study expressed appreciation for being able to share space with other women who are in similar positions, despite varying roles that they hold within the industry. It is understood that there are not many.

Lynn appreciated the group’s transparency and found the conversation enjoyable and insightful. She recognized the importance of networking with other Black women in leadership roles, acknowledging the scarcity of such representation. She further emphasized the significance of sharing and learning from shared experiences, highlighting the importance of networking not just for career advancement but also for mutual support and learning.

Carrie left the conversation feeling a sense of connection and validation. She resonated with the weight of being a Black woman in the tech industry, where the pressure to excel is intensified by the lack of representation. Carrie found it to be refreshing realizing that others shared similar experiences and appreciated their resilience in navigating challenges. There was also a sense of comfort and solace in knowing that she was not alone in facing these obstacles and was encouraged by the strides made by her peers.

The participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to connect with others, particularly within groups that reflect their identity and experiences. One participant remarked, “I just love seeing you guys all on the screen like this. So now I feel less lonely about this.” This sentiment underscores the importance of virtual gatherings in alleviating feelings of isolation and fostering a sense of community.
Another participant emphasized the significance of belonging to groups, particularly those composed of Black female individuals, within the context of a predominantly nondiverse industry like tech. They expressed appreciation for the presence of others who share their background, stating,

*I just love being a part of groups. And I think being a part of an all-Black female identifying group is very important, and working tech. I’m one of probably five or six people that are Black here (at their organization), and not even knowing all the Black folks within my organization, which is very sad.*

This highlights the importance of representation and support networks for marginalized individuals in professional settings.

The participants thanked each other for being present to allow them to show up as themselves. Kazan felt a profound sense of community, as a result of the exchange that occurred amongst herself and the other women. The vulnerability and transparency offered validated her experiences and struggles and served as a reminder that she was not alone. The sista circle was also a reminder of how important it is for her to engage with peers across tech, so that they can also share in one another’s victories and deltas. Due to the demanding nature of tech at times, Kazan stressed the importance of continued open dialogues and sharing experiences within supportive networks. Kazan felt the nudge to do better in her commitment to actively contribute to and foster these essential spaces for connection and mutual support among African American women in tech.

Lena reflected on her experience with a sentiment filled with warmth and love. She stated, “I feel like if I didn’t share the sentiment for these beautiful women to make sure that they’re pulling us up. I think that’s the only thing that I would share.”
emphasized the importance of both the willingness to be supported and the need to be seen. Lena recounts feeling unexpectedly supported by Carrie, recalling, “I actually learned a lot. . . . I felt very held and seen by her in a way that I didn’t know I needed to be.” The heartfelt exchange was an acknowledgment of the necessity of sometimes “playing the game” to achieve success, even if it conflicts with her inclination to resist conformity. Lena also expressed admiration for the presence of Black women in leadership positions within the tech industry, highlighting their efforts to effect change and mentor others.

This sista circle was an indicator that space curated for Black women often serve as a source of collective strength and is conducive for them envisioning the possibilities that lie ahead for the future of African American women who will enter tech. Although there is often a significant learning curve in navigating unfamiliar terminology and concepts that are not always in alignment with one’s cultural upbringing, spaces crafted with African American women can lead to continuous growth and a level of fulfillment that transcends titles and roles.

**Implications for Practitioners**

In culminating the discussion within the sista circle conversations, each woman offered visionary insights regarding their hope for the future of those entering into the technology space and how organizations can support them. There is a desire that the future of the technology space will be intentional in planning the pipeline of African Americans, this could possibly impact the narrative of being “the only.” Organizations have to be willing to engage difficult conversations, such as the pipeline is problematic when it comes to recruitment of African American women.
Organizational culture should reflect that people of color should be held in high regard not a lesser regard. The C-suite leadership pipeline should account for African American women early in their careers.

The women also understand the importance of leaning into community more. We started with community guidelines, even the “contractual agreement” included community language that was agreed upon and upheld by the sistas in this study. There is a call for folk to attend to knowledge that nourishes our souls and have the support of peers and leaders as mentors or sponsors.

In the competitive tech industry, the importance of networking cannot be overstated. It is often about who you know rather than just what you know. Opportunities to make these crucial connections abound, from professional platforms like LinkedIn to more community-oriented groups like the sista circle. Such networks are invaluable for those looking to advance their careers, providing a space for mentorship, assistance, or even just general support.

The women in this group were committed to not being the only. One participant reflected on the painful experience of having to eat lunch alone earlier in her career experience. The account highlighted the challenges of being the ‘only’, but also the desire for professional colleagues to consider the impact of a simple invitation, or kind gesture, can influence the experience of being seen by others. The experience of being the only has come with examining and reframing what community looks like for this group of individuals.

This study also highlighted the crucial perspective on the necessity of diversity in upper management. Yvette exclaimed, “You know, or when you’re not in the C-suite. We
need us in the C-suite.” This statement, along with others, is a call to action for mutual support among professionals to facilitate upward mobility for underrepresented groups. Organizations need to address the barriers to entry for African Americans in the tech space, pointing to systemic issues like inadequate education systems and a lack of investment in African American communities. The findings propose that organizations need to continue to work towards bridging the gap between African American women and training opportunities that can serve as a direct pipeline to jobs within the industry. Such initiatives could significantly enhance diversity and inclusion, making the tech industry more accessible to talented individuals who might otherwise be overlooked due to traditional hiring practices.

The study contributes to the literature by addressing the challenges and disparities in professional advancement for women in technology. It underscores the frequent reminder that African American women receive to be exceptionally prepared (e.g., “work hard”). Organizations continue to benefit from the perseverance and dedication that African American women bring to the table. Even when not aiming for C-suite positions, African American women are constantly striving to evolve and improve. Although some might interpret this as a “superwoman complex,” many of these efforts are fundamentally about self-preservation, which often leads to inadvertently “saving” or “rescuing” others in the workplace.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of self-acceptance and authenticity, advocating for the acknowledgment of one’s inherent value. Participants stressed the importance for those entering the tech industry to feel comfortable and confident in their own skin, and to fully embrace all aspects of their identity, recognizing
that this is more than sufficient. The significance of embracing one’s true self is emphasized. African American women bring a unique value to the workplace, a value that is different from most and extends beyond conventional measures of success. In return, there is an expectation that organizations will recognize and reciprocate this value by ensuring fair compensation and providing support in the form of advocacy and autonomy.

The importance of relationships and networks within the tech industry is emphasized by Carrie, who asserted:

The tech industry is really, really like you got to know someone. I really think and I’m sorry, one second. You it’s all about making connections, right? So there are different opportunities to meet through LinkedIn, there are different opportunities to link through the sista circle, which is why I think those networks are so important.

She also discussed the significance of networking with individuals who hold positions of influence or can offer mentorship and support, stating:

If you’re able to connect with people who are in the position that you’re trying to get to, or at least have some mentoring or assistance that they can provide. Even just support. It’s important to make those connections because my jobs, like I have said, have come from knowing other people.

Carrie highlighted the role of referrals in securing job opportunities within the industry and noted:

Well, this job in particular came from someone else. Even in my position at . Someone referred me to that position. So it wasn’t
like I was like I stood out as someone who would be a good fit for that job.

Someone else referred me so that’s why these networks, why networking is so important.

Yvette echoed a similar sentiment, emphasizing the importance of mutual support within the community: “We have to agree that we’re going to support each other.”

Michelle added a perspective on the need for more inclusive training opportunities within the industry, especially for underrepresented communities:

Let’s say training. I feel like a lot of African Americans have the potential to be in this space, but they didn’t have the opportunity to because of either the crappy education system or because no one’s willing to invest in the African American community. Instead, it’s easier to just, you know, continue the traditional hiring practices. So I would say if organizations could offer more direct training opportunities that are like direct to pipeline jobs. I think that would be great.

These women expressed their desire to partake in this study because it was an opportunity to tell their story. Some believed their stories were not fully different or unique from other African American women in their position, but they understand that more stories told can possibly help shift the narrative.

There are various pathways for fostering belonging, including seeking alternative sources outside established norms, highlighting the importance of creating inclusive opportunities to mitigate problematic contexts for belonging at individual, institutional, and societal levels (Allen et al., 2021).
Future Research Recommendations

Present research of African American women experiences tends to occur within studies that attempt to hold multiple ethnic minority groups and/or focus solely on women (Salas-Lopez et al., 2011; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). However, I do believe this study can be expanded to specifically examine other racial groups in the U.S. Previous studies conducted have lacked critical examination on how race and gender impact informal networks of African American women in tech beyond their higher education experiences. Therefore, I also recommend exploring women’s leadership experiences across various workforce sectors.

During the time of this study, layoffs within tech and reorgs may have had an impact on the availability of potential research participants. Research participants offered small anecdotes around their experience as mothers, current burnout within tech organizations as a result of riffs and reorgs, which would be viable topics to explore in the future.

To deepen the exploration of sense of belonging for women in the workplace, researchers could explore somatic responses African American women leaders experience because of instances that fostered a sense of belonging or a sense of not belonging in the workplace. This could be informed by physical and mental consequences and coping responses used among African American Women in the workplace. While the women in this study appeared to be fortitude mentally, at times their exchanges with one another also reinforced the super woman schema that is a result of trauma exposure.
The timeline of this study presented some limitations, therefore there is an opportunity to study cohorts of sista circle conversations over time that could lead to even more discovery of immediate practices for organizations. Additionally, doing this study with African American women leaders in the tech sector who have already achieved a C-suite role could offer additional insights for organizations.

**Researcher’s Final Reflection**

In closing, I have decided to include a final research reflection, that is a conglomerate of my raw thoughts and research notes throughout the dissertation process. It is a reminder to African American women that though our daily lives and work can be complex, we are seen, we are heard, and we are understood.

_African American women will hold stakeholders accountable. We know that closed mouths do not get fed; therefore, we are communicating clearly that we deserve seats at the table, not just one. What is very clear is that Black women will “stand on business.” We call upon organizations to pay attention to historical cycles that keep African American women and other minorities only representing a small fraction of those who have formal authority in the workplace. Let’s be clear, African American women are not one of y’all’s little friends. African American women are not showing up in tech for play. African American women are trying to keep influencing change._

_We know why we are here; we are more than just a token, we are CHOSEN. We will keep working to move the needle forward, not because our lives depend on it but because our families, communities, cities, places of work depend upon it. We go to war when we go to work. Fighting spiritual battles that no one sees, trying to dismantle the systemic injustices that are play._
From city streets and the suburbs, from farms and fields,
From birthing rooms to boardrooms, from the White House to Capitol Hill,
We move ahead debunking the myths and embracing this gift -
   To simply be
   To simply be "she."
   To simply be free.
—Litney Gray

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8 To Simply Be She by Litney Gray © 2022
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APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE PROTOCOL

Introduction University of San Diego Institutional Review Board Research Participant Consent Form For the research study entitled:
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN TECH EXPERIENCES

I. Purpose of the research study VinSché Gray is a PhD student in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study she is conducting. The purpose of this research study is to examine the experiences of African American Women in Technology.

II. What you will be asked to do If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to share your experience and perception of your organization’s culture since the onset of the great resignation. The survey will include a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions to allow for exploration and evaluation of how effective you believe these support mechanisms contribute to your career advancement. Responses to this questionnaire will be taken electronically.

III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts
   a) This study involves no more risk than the risks you encounter in daily life.

IV. Benefits While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better understand the impact mentorship, coaching, and sponsorship has on the careers of African American Women in the technology sector.

V. Confidentiality Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher’s office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used. The results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually. The information or materials you provide will be cleansed of all identifiers (like your name and e-mail address will not be used in future research).

VI. Compensation
   a) You will receive no compensation for your participation in the study.
VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this, and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you’re entitled to, like your health care, or your employment or grades. You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

VIII. Contact Information If you have any questions about this research, you may contact:

1) VinSché Gray, Lead Researcher Email: xxxxx@sandiego.edu

In order to truly understand the experiences of different employees, we need to understand the diverse ways that employees self-identify. These demographics enable us to understand the experiences of diverse groups in the industry. This data will never be used to identify an individual, but only reviewed in aggregate to understand the experiences of people who identify with the same factors. Aggregate data is only viewed if there is a large enough group to maintain confidentiality.

Questionnaire Questions:
- How would you describe your career in tech, including the positions you’ve held?
- Describe your cultural upbringing and how it contributes to how you show up in Tech spaces?
- Please describe, in narrative format, how you believe your identity as an African American woman shapes how you show up in Tech.
APPENDIX B

SISTA CIRCLE PROTOCOL

Participants join the zoom room with music in the background. Participants may join the room up to 15 minutes before the Sister Circle officially begins.

Researcher (Facilitator/Convener): Thank you all for being present and in attendance for today’s conversation. As a reminder, this conversation will be recorded. Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher’s office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real names will not be used. The results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually. The information or materials you provide will be cleansed of all identifiers (like your name and e-mail address will not be used in future research).

We want to begin by establishing collective community guidelines. While you all have agreed to participate in this study, we want to ensure that throughout this conversation that everyone has the opportunity to share what’s needed in order for us to be openly transparent.

What do you need in this moment from this group in order to communicate openly and honestly?
(Allow for all voices to be heard).
Allow participants to visibly see what has been offered verbally.

Sense of belonging relates to feeling or being connected to and valued by people and communities. We are here today to engage in an exploration of what sense of belonging means to us, what it looks like, how we desire it to be present within our respective organizations. We will begin today with a centering activity.

Centering Activity

Researcher (Facilitator/Convener):

1. Share an artifact (i.e., picture, token of appreciation, or song) to describe your sense of belonging, what would it be?

2. What does this artifact mean to you as it pertains to your sense of belonging with your organization?
The Conversation
Researcher (Facilitator/ Convener):

3. Consider relationships with peers, leadership and other members of your organization, who and what are your connections?
   a. What are your interactions like?
   b. What type of support have you received or not received within your organization?

4. What would you like to share with this group that you may not have been able to express within your own organization, pertaining to your sense of belonging?

5. What has it been like for you to engage in dialogue around African American women’s experience within your organization?
   a. In what ways does being apart of this conversation impact your willingness to remain in Tech?
Appendix C

Follow-Up Interview Protocol

Introductory Protocol

Date (of interview): ________________________________
Participant ID: _______________
Approximate Age of Interviewee: _______________
Location: _______________________________________
Interviewer(s): ________________________________

Interviewer:
Thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedule to meet with me. My name is VinSché Gray, I am a PhD student in the Department of Leadership Studies at the University of San Diego. This is the final phase of the research study being conducted to fulfill the dissertation requirements set forth by the University of San Diego. This part will focus on learning more about the experience of African American Women in the Tech pertaining to sense of belonging and your experience of participating in the Sister Circle. I am interviewing only a few African American Women in technology.

As shared, this interview will take approximately one (1) hour and all data will be kept strictly confidential. During this time, we have several questions that we would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Before we start, I would like to ask your permission to record the conversation with this digital recorder so that I do not miss any of the important parts of our conversation.

For your information, only researchers on the project will be privy to the tapes which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. In addition, you must sign a form devised to meet our human subject requirements. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Thank you for agreeing to participate.

A. Interviewee Background

1. Please share your previous roles within the tech industry leading up to your current role.
2. At what career level are you in your tech industry sector?

B. Sense of Belonging

3. For the duration of our interview, I would like you to consider your current organization’s culture, what does sense of belonging mean to you?
   a. Can you give an example?
b. If participant does not have clarity of sense of belonging then the interviewer will ask the following questions:
   i. Do you feel that you can share your ideas or beliefs with others in your organization? What about with leadership?
   ii. Do you feel that your ideas or contributions to the organization are valued or have been valued?
      1. Please provide an example.
4. How would you describe your sense of belonging at your current organization?
5. Considering the overall culture of the tech industry, how would you describe your sense of belonging within the tech industry?
6. What other factors do you believe have impacted your experience in the tech industry?

C. Support
7. What, if any, are the supportive resources [coaching programs, mentorship programs, leadership development programs, etc.] your job offer? Can you tell me about your experience with those types of supportive resources?
8. As an African American woman, what organizational factors have influenced career progression in the tech industry? Can you share more about your experience with . . . (Highlight the factors that they have mentioned)?
   a. Do you feel that you receive more or less support as a result of social identities?
9. Do you think the organization makes an effort to retain African American Women in your field?
   a. Can you provide an example.

Promotion
10. How many times have you been promoted since April 2021?
11. Considering your current organization, how accessible is achieving a C-suite position for African American women? Can you elaborate more about this?
12. What other factors do you believe have impacted your experience in the tech industry?

Sister Circle
13. Based on the discussion had amongst the sister circle participants, what are some thoughts that you feel have not been shared around your sense of belonging within the tech industry?
14. What were some major takeaways for you?

Interviewer:
Thank you again for your time and willingness to participate in this interview. Your information will be combined with others who have completed the to further understand African American Women in the Technology field and their experiences. Please do feel free to contact me, should you have any further questions about the study.

[Turn off recording and save survey in a secure and locked drive.]
Post Interview Comments and/or Observations
July 14, 2023

Vinoshe Gray  
Sch of Leadership & Ed Science  

Re: Modification - IRB-2023-411 AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN LEADERS IN TECH ORGANIZATIONAL EXPERIENCES  

Dear Vinoshe Gray:  

The University of San Diego Institutional Review Board (USD IRB) has reviewed the decision below for IRB-2023-411: AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN LEADERS IN TECH ORGANIZATIONAL EXPERIENCES.  

Decision: Return to PI  

IRB Review Category: Expedited  
7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interviews, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human lectures evaluation, or qualitative research methodologies (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)  

Findings: Returning to the PI for further editing. See notes below.  

Research Notes: Modification section:  
- Please also check the box for "Participants and recruitment" and specify that you updated the recruitment document to include compensation of $50 for participation.  
- Since you are offering participants compensation, upload a new consent form with this information. Also check the box for "Consent" and specify that you updated the consent form to include compensation of $50 for participation.  

Informed Consent section:  
- Please upload a new consent form that includes the $50 compensation amount in section VI of the form. Specify that this participants will receive compensation even if they don’t complete the study.  

Institutional Notes:  
The USD-IRB requires annual renewal of all active studies reviewed and approved by the IRB. Please submit an application for renewal prior to the annual anniversary date of initial study approval.  
If an application for renewal is not received, the study will be administratively closed.  
Note: We send IRB correspondence regarding student research to the faculty advisor, who bears the ultimate responsibility for the conduct of the research. We request that the faculty advisor share this correspondence with the student researcher.  

Applications for full review must be submitted at least two weeks prior to the next scheduled monthly IRB meeting; see https://www.sandiego.edu/irb/updates/ for specific deadlines. You may submit an IRB application for expedited or exempt review at any time.  

Sincerely,  

[Signature]  
IRB Administrator  

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