

**A Qualitative Exploration of Black Women's Leadership Journeys to the C-suite:  
A Pilot Study**

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## Abstract

Despite longstanding diversity efforts, Black women remain significantly underrepresented in senior executive roles due to structural, cultural, and social barriers that restrict access to advancement and decision-making power. The problem addressed was the underrepresentation of Black women in the C-suite, which may often lead to a lack of diverse perspectives in decision-making, reduced innovation, and missed opportunities for equitable organizational growth. This qualitative pilot case study was conducted to explore CEOs' perspectives on the factors contributing to Black women's persistent absence from the C-suite. Bourdieu's theory of practice, guided exploration of habitus, field, capital influence norms, networks, and power structures that shape career trajectories. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit former Fortune 1500 CEOs and C-suite leaders with a minimum of three years of executive experience. Data were collected through five semi-structured interviews and triangulated with existing literature to strengthen validity and contextual grounding. Thematic analysis identified barriers including unclear promotion pathways, informal gatekeeping, narrow "fit" expectations, and insufficient sponsorship and mentorship. Enabling practices included formalized sponsorship aligned with succession planning, transparent selection criteria, targeted development initiatives, and intentional visibility for high-impact assignments. Participants emphasized that advancement depends on access, advocacy, visibility, and performance, all shaped by influential networks and unwritten organizational norms. Future researchers should broaden the scope of inquiry through intersectional and comparative analyses to deepen understanding of the structural, relational, and experiential factors affecting Black women's executive advancement and to inform more equitable organizational leadership strategies.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2023, only 1.6% out of 500 CEOs of Fortune 500 companies were Black, and only 14.4% of the eight were Black women (James & Desormeaux, 2023). Yet, 1.6% of 500 leaders is a near-record high as of 2024 (James & Desormeaux, 2023). Traditionally, Fortune 500 CEOs have been white men, but in recent years, executive boards of the Fortune 500 organizations have become more diverse (Sitzmann et al., 2024). Women and people of color face barriers to advancement, including a lack of access to informal networks that provide career advancement opportunities, gender stereotypes, and an “old boys’ club” (Das & Jha, 2024). Cullen and Perez-Truglia (2023) described the old boys’ club as men having a leg up in promotions because they can schmooze, network, and interact with more powerful men in ways that are less accessible to women.

Organizations benefit from attracting, developing, and retaining a diverse workforce (Levine & Bernet, 2022). In addition, knowing that developing and retaining a diverse workforce is beneficial, organizational leaders understand that creating and maintaining a welcoming and inclusive culture motivates talented people to join and stay (Levine & Bernet, 2022). According to a PwC report (Levine & Bernet, 2022), 16% of corporate directors believed their companies scored “excellent” for recruiting a diverse workforce, 15% felt their companies were excellent in developing diverse executive talent, and 83% believed that companies should be doing more to promote gender and racial diversity. Diversity and inclusion drive better decision-making and task completion by offering fresh perspectives, while sameness in thinking, often found in homogeneous teams, fosters complacency, limiting innovation and growth (Levine & Bernet, 2022; Wood et al., 2024).

Mehari, et al. (2024) found that companies with the most diverse workforce outperformed those with the least diverse workforce by an average of 29% a year between 2013 and 2022. Similar to Mehari, et al. (2024), Ciappei et al. (2023) and Ely and Mobasseri (2024) stated when women are at the table, the discussion is richer, the decision-making process is better, and the organizations are stronger resulting in better financial performance. Both researchers revealed recruiting and retaining more people from underrepresented “identity groups” is essential, and there is a need to tap into under-represented identity-related knowledge and experiences as resources for learning how organization can perform better than homogeneous teams (Ely & Mobasseri, 2024; Martin et al., 2025). This perspective encourages employees to rethink how work gets done and how best to achieve their goals (Ciappei et al., 2023; Ely & Mobasseri, 2024).

Increasing diversity does not alone increase effectiveness; rather, it is how an organization harnesses diversity, and whether it is able to reshape the power structure (Ciappei et al., 2023; Ely & Mobasseri, 2024). Arsel et al. (2022), Esparza (2024), and Hayvon (2024) found the relationship between leadership diversity, and company performance is associated with holistic growth ambitions, greater social impact and a more satisfied workforce. Furthermore, the researchers found an internal cultural of transparency and inclusion, and transforming operations is needed to meet social impact expectations (Arsel et al., 2022; Esparza et al., 2024; Hayvon, 2024).

Within corporate America much focus has been placed upon the representation of women within the C-suite, particularly in light of Affirmative Action and diversity, equity and inclusion. Based on Executive Order 11246 the Secretary of Labor was, for the first time, charged with the responsibility of ensuring equal opportunity for minorities in federal contractors’ recruitment,

hiring, training and other employment practices (Manning & Domesick, 1966). Executive Order 11246 reinforced the requirement that federal contractors not discriminate in employment and take affirmative action to ensure equal opportunity based on race, color, religion, and national origin (Manning & Domesick, 1966). Signed by President Johnson in 1965, Executive Order 11246 became a key landmark in a series of federal actions aimed at ending racial, religious and ethnic discrimination. Executive Order 11246, as amended and further strengthened over the years, remains a major safeguard, protecting the rights of workers employed by federal contractors—approximately one-fifth of the entire U.S. labor force to remain free from discrimination on the basis of their race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, or national origin and opening the doors of opportunity (Manning & Domesick, 1966). President Biden enacted Executive Order 13985 to further advance equity within the Federal Government to cultivate a workforce that draws from the full diversity of the nation on January 25, 2021 (Mayer, 1999).

Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) is needed to develop policies and programs that promote representation and participation of different groups of individuals, including different ages, races and ethnicities, disabilities, genders, religions, cultures and sexual orientations (Arsel et al., 2022). Campbell-Monroe (2023) noted the United States (U.S.) Supreme Court had a significant impact on Affirmative Action by undermining the advancements made in fostering genuine diversity and inclusivity among the healthcare professions and society as a whole. The Supreme Court's decision was a regressive movement toward complete economic marginalization, and its verdict removed the principal safeguards to preserve DEI by prohibiting the use of race as a factor. Campbell-Monroe (2023) confirmed that to preserve DEI, we must persistently educate ourselves and others regarding the significance of these principles to

understand diverse cultures, perspectives, and experiences to cultivate empathy and a receptive mindset to increase awareness of unconscious biases to continue inclusivity. Arsel et al. (2022), Esparza et al. (2024), and Hayvon (2024) revealed gains regarding women's representation in the C-suite. However, the report mentioned a lag in the pipeline where C-suite leaders are selected resulting in underrepresentation of Black women in the C-suite as compared with white women (Belingheri et al., 2021; Gander & Sharafizad, 2025; Platania, 2025; Son et al., 2023; Tricco et al., 2024).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem addressed in this study was the underrepresentation of Black women in the C-suite, which may often lead to a lack of diverse perspectives in decision-making, reduced innovation, and missed opportunities for equitable organizational growth (Arsel et al., 2022; Esparza et al., 2024; Hayvon, 2024). Black women often face systemic barriers such as limited access to mentorship, sponsorship, and professional networks, as well as intersecting racial and gender biases that hinder their progression into executive leadership roles (Barkid & Kimmitt, 2025; Bishop, 2024; Cubeddu & Martini, 2025; Hong et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2025; Pogrebna et al., 2024; White et al., 2024). These barriers contribute to persistent inequalities in the workplace, making it difficult for Black women to break into the C-suite (Branch & Kasztelnik, 2023). Branch and Kasztelnik (2023) suggested that Black women lack the necessary resources or opportunity equity within a corporate environment, such as managerial support and access to informal networks to secure higher roles. Organizations that fail to address this disparity risk stifling innovation and reducing their competitiveness (Ciappei et al, 2023; Gomez & Bernet, 2019; Roberts et al., 2024). Diverse leadership teams foster better decision-making, innovation, and financial performance (Roberts et al., 2024).

The underrepresentation of Black women in the C-suite may impact an organization's ability to recruit other Black women. Without visible Black women in C-suite positions, aspiring Black women may not see a clear path to leadership, impacting their motivation to pursue higher roles (Dawuni & Frazier, 2022). If the problem of underrepresentation of Black women in the C-suite persists, organizations risk perpetuating inequality, limiting diverse perspectives in leadership, and missing opportunities for innovation.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative pilot case study was to explore the perceptions of CEOs regarding the underrepresentation of Black women in the C-suite. The study is a logical response to the problem because by exploring the perceptions of C-suite, may provide a deeper understanding of the factors that have either hindered or facilitated their advancement. These insights can shed light on why Black women are underrepresented in the C-suite.

The population for this study included current and former male and female CEOs and C-suite leaders from Fortune 1500 organizations. This population directly aligned with the study's problem, purpose, and research questions designed to better understand the perceptions of systemic factors influencing the underrepresentation of Black women in the C-suite. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit five participants through professional networks and organizational DEI directors, who facilitated introductions to eligible participants with a minimum of three years' experience in the C-suite with a Fortune 1500 company. Data were collected through one-to-one semi-structured interviews in Zoom with five CEOs lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes guided by an interview protocol containing five open-ended questions. The collected data were thematically analyzed, following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022).

## **Introduction to Framework**

The conceptual framework that guided this study was Bourdieu's theory of practice model, informed by the insights of philosophers of science and historical epistemologists such as Canguilhem (Craike et al., 2023). The Bourdieusian model is a sociological theory that uses the concept of capital, along with the concepts of habitus and field, to explain how individuals are positioned in society and how social behaviors are influenced (Grenfell, 2024). Bourdieu's conceptual and empirical model includes space of struggle for organizational power which is an internal field of power (Fowler, 2020). Bourdieu uses the term field of power to designate the ruling class as described in *The State of Nobility* (Bourdieu, 1996) where some individuals and groups have considerable capital in the intellectual field, economic field, religious field, and cultural field. In these fields the leading agents attempt to impose their particular capital, especially in the field of cultural and economic social order (Fowler, 2020). Research into the Bourdieu model by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) includes the intersection of habitus. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) described habitus as those attuned to learned social tendencies and norms that guide their behavior and thinking which only can exist with field and capital.

## **Introduction to Research Methodology and Design**

A qualitative pilot case study approach was used in this study to explore the underrepresentation of Black women in C-suite roles. Kan and Parry (2004) emphasized that qualitative methods are crucial for studying stable human behaviors and that protocols can strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings. Using the qualitative methodology, particularly when used to conduct exploratory research, offers valuable insights into topics with existing research gaps and clarify complex issues related to leadership and organizational decision-making (Stake, 1995; Ahmed, 2024; Nazar et al., 2023; Rashid, 2025). The qualitative method

was the appropriate choice to explore the underrepresentation of Black women in the C-suite by collecting data through in-depth interviews that captured CEOs' and non CEO's personal experiences, perceptions, and challenges.

Case studies are employed to explore key factors of issues, providing clarity and insight into specific topics by utilizing exploratory approaches to uncover and address a particular phenomenon (Stake, 1995). Descriptive in nature, case studies support research criteria by identifying thematic patterns and aligning data with contextual interpretations from various perspectives (Ahmed, 2024; Coker, 2022; Nazar et al., 2023; Rashid, 2025). In this study, the case design was effective for examining how capital, habitus, and field, based on Bourdieu's theory of practice, influenced organizational promotion decisions related to the C-suite and provided insight into the perceptions of Black women in their ascent to these roles (Bourdieu, 1996; Halkias & Neubert, 2020). The case study design enabled the documentation of C-suite leaders' experiences, offering a detailed understanding of the nuances of their roles. It also provided a pathway to examine cultural perspectives and uncover the systemic barriers contributing to the underrepresentation of Black women in the C-suite. This design facilitated an in-depth exploration of participants' viewpoints, directly addressing the problem, purpose, and research questions of the study.

The qualitative methodology and case study design were the best choices in response to the problem, purpose, and questions to provide a deeper understanding of the underrepresentation of Black women in the C-suite. Aligned with Stake's (1995) seminal work on qualitative research, this approach facilitated data collection through in-depth interviews and analysis of the factors influencing Black women's advancement to C-suite leadership (Ahmed, 2024; Nazar et al., 2023; Rashid, 2025). This method and design allowed for rich, firsthand

insights into the barriers and opportunities shaping the career trajectories of Black women to the C-suite.

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by the following research questions.

#### ***RQ1***

How do CEOs perceive Black women regarding the selection criteria for the C-suite level?

#### ***RQ2***

What barriers or challenges do CEOs perceive contribute to the underrepresentation of do Black women in C-suite roles?

### **Significance of the Study**

The findings from this study may help organizations build a greater multicultural workforce, empowering them to better meet the evolving needs of their employees and their community. This in turn may lead to stronger financial performance and help businesses attract and retain top talent by providing clear career paths. Organizations may use the findings to communicate the need for selection of Black women by creating a deeper understanding of the selection process and how the process may impact current relationships.

Based on study findings, C-suite leaders and Board members may become better aware of how to develop a career path to the C-suite and recognize that some employees require more support and resources. This study could also benefit society as individuals may be given purpose and a career in which to create a better life. There have been numerous organizations such as the African American Directors Forum (AADF), formed in 2017, with an objective of achieving measurable progress in the areas of boardroom and the C-suite for African Americans. The study

may help to build an inclusive community within an organization and build a level of comfort working directly with multicultural employees and promote and sustain the welfare of organizations (KPMG & African American Directors Forum, 2023; James & Desormeaux, 2023).

## **Definitions of Key Terms**

### ***Affirmative Action***

Affirmative Action is a policy initiative in which a person's nationality, sex, religion, and caste are considered by a company or government organization to extend employment or education opportunities (Gururaj et al., 2021).

### ***Agent***

In the study of behavioral psychology, "agents" refers to individuals who are the focus of research (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2025).

### ***Capital***

Capital is extended to all forms of power whether material, cultural, social or symbolic that can be drawn upon to maintain or enhance a position in the social hierarchy or, in this case, the appointment to executive roles (Neveu, 2023).

### ***Concrete Ceiling***

The concrete ceiling is a metaphor used to describe the systemic and deeply entrenched barriers that prevent women of color from advancing to the highest levels of leadership and professional success (Otake-Ebede & Shaffkat, 2024).

### ***Corporate Social Performance***

Corporate social performance (CSP) refers to a methodology that companies use to evaluate how well they meet the needs of their stakeholders through social responsibility and corporate citizenry. (Carroll, 2025).

### ***Dialectical Relationship***

A dialectical relationship implies a two-way interaction where each element influences and transforms the others over time. It's not a linear cause-and-effect but a process of ongoing negotiation and adaptation (Rawolle & Lingard, 2008).

### ***Diversity***

The practice or quality of including or involving people from a range of different social and ethnic backgrounds and of different genders, sexual orientations, or other characteristics (Leslie et al., 2024).

### ***Inclusion***

The act of including someone or something as part of a group, list, etc., or a person or thing that is included. Inclusion prompts answers about creating environments conducive to feedback, supporting diversity, and being open (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021).

### ***Equity***

Equity is described as fairness, sameness, and valuing diversity and inclusion in the way people are treated. This definition is shaped by an individual's worldviews and experiences (Merriam-Webster, 2024).

### ***Field***

Field addresses the structure of the social setting in which an individual such as the corporate field, can be seen as arenas where the struggle for legitimation of volumes and

structures of capital occurs (Schirone, 2023; Fowler, 2020; Webb et al., 2002).

### ***Glass Ceiling***

The glass ceiling is a metaphor used to describe invisible barriers that prevent women and minorities from advancing to higher levels of leadership and professional success, despite having the qualifications and capabilities (Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2009).

### ***Habitus***

Habitus describes the sum of the ways in which we act, feel, think, and hold ourselves out to the world and captures the notion of embodied history or the socially produced self (Lawler, 1999, 2004; Schirone, 2023).

### ***Title VII***

Title VII is a United States federal law that prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin. It is applicable for employers with 15 or more employees and includes federal, state, and local governments. It also includes employment agencies and labor organizations (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.).

### **Summary**

The problem addressed in this study was the underrepresentation of Black women in the C-suite, which may often lead to a lack of diverse perspectives in decision-making, reduced innovation, and missed opportunities for equitable organizational growth (Arsel et al., 2022; Esparza et al., 2024; Hayvon, 2024; Sitzmann et al., 2024). The purpose of this qualitative pilot case study was to explore the perceptions of CEOs regarding the underrepresentation of Black women in the C-suite. The conceptual framework that guided this study was Bourdieu's theory of practice model, informed by the insights of philosophers of science and historical epistemologists such as Canguilhem (Craike et al., 2023). Two research questions guided data

collection focused on the perceptions of Black women relative to barriers or challenges they experienced in advancement to the C-suite. The population included C-suite leaders from professional social media sites. Convenience sampling was used to recruit 15 participants from this population with a minimum of three years' experience in the C-suite with a Fortune 1500 company. Data were collected through one-to-one interviews in Zoom lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Collected data were coded and analyzed. Chapter 2 presents an in-depth discussion of Bourdieu's theory of practice model as the guiding framework in this study, and a literature review of the existing body of knowledge.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

There is an underrepresentation of Black women in the C-suite, which can result in a lack of perspectives in decision-making, reduced innovation, and missed opportunities for organizational growth (Arsel et al., 2022; Esparza et al., 2024; Hayvon, 2024; Sitzmann et al., 2024). The problem addressed in this study is the underrepresentation of Black women in the C-suite, which may lead to a lack of diverse perspectives in decision-making, reduced innovation, and missed opportunities for equitable organizational growth (Arsel et al., 2022; Esparza et al., 2024; Hayvon, 2024; Sitzmann et al., 2024). The purpose of this qualitative pilot case study was to explore the perceptions of CEOs regarding the underrepresentation of Black women in the C-suite. This study provided a deeper understanding of the factors that have either hindered or facilitated Black women's advancement to the C-suite.

Sources for the literature review were accessed from multiple databases in the National University (NU) Library and included EBSCOhost, JSTOR, Sage Journals Online, ScienceDirect Assets Online, Springhill Public Library, and Wiley Online Library. EBSCOhost and Google Scholar were used to refine the research results from scholarly articles between 2021 and 2025. Search terms used to identify scholarly sources included affirmative action, Black women leadership, CEO, C-suite, creed, color, diversity, equity, inclusion, national origin, and race.

### Conceptual Framework

Bourdieu's (1996) theory of practice offered a lens for analyzing how Black women navigate corporate leadership. Bourdieu concepts of habitus, field, and capital illuminate the reproduction of social inequality through non-economic means (Schirone, 2023; Zhang, 2025; Zipin, 2025). Habitus refers to ingrained dispositions shaped by cultural and life experiences, guiding behavior unconsciously (Akram, 2023; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Field denotes

structured social arenas such as corporate settings, where success depends on the volume and type of capital a person holds, including economic, cultural, social, and symbolic forms

(Schirone, 2023; Zhang, 2025; Akram, 2023; Farkas, 2023; Verwiebe & Hagemann, 2024).

Capital refers to resources, economic, cultural, social, and symbolic that confer power and status within a given field (Bourdieu, 1986). Devine-Eller (2012) and Fitzsimmons and Callan (2020) extended Bourdieu's framework to highlight the racialized and gendered dimensions of habitus and capital. Each form of capital is valued differently depending on the field. For instance, symbolic capital such as a prestigious award may carry significant weight in the cultural field but may be less relevant in the financial sector. Moreover, capital can be converted across fields, such as using cultural capital (e.g., an MBA) to gain economic capital (e.g., a high-paying job), but the rules of conversion are governed by the field's structure and norms (Merisalo & Makkonen, 2022).

Bourdieu's framework of habitus, field, and capital emerged in the late 20th century as part of his broader theory of practice (Topper, 2023). Bourdieu's goal was to reconcile the long-standing tension in social theory between *structure* and *agency* by offering a model that explains how social order is maintained and reproduced through everyday practices (Akram, 2023).

Bourdieu developed habitus in response to the limitations of Saussure's structuralism and rational choice theory (Lizardo, 2004). Bourdieu argued that individuals do not act solely based on external constraints or calculated decisions; rather, their actions are shaped by internalized dispositions acquired through socialization (Rafanell, 2024). The internalized dispositions are both durable and adaptable, allowing individuals to respond to changing contexts while remaining anchored in their social history (Akram, 2023; Asimaki & Koustourakis, 2014).

To complement habitus, Bourdieu introduced the concept of field, semi-autonomous domains of social life such as academia, law, or business (Schirone, 2023; Ndu, 2022). Each semi-autonomous is governed by logic, rules, and power dynamics. Within these fields, individuals compete for various forms of capital, which Bourdieu identified as central to understanding social stratification and mobility (Schirone, 2023). The relationship between habitus, field, and capital is dialectical and mutually constitutive and each element influences and transforms the others over time in a dynamic, non-linear process of negotiation and adaptation (Akram, 2023; De la Hoz-Ruiz et al., 2025; Gordillo-Rodríguez et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2021). Habitus shapes how individuals perceive and act within a field, while the field itself influences the development of habitus. This interaction produces social practices that often reinforce existing power structures (Schirone, 2023). Wolinak and Houston (2022) observed that in corporate settings, individuals who naturally act professionally think strategically, and build strong networks are more likely to gain valuable resources and advance. The individual's success, in turn, reinforces the norms and expectations of the organizational field (culture).

Bourdieu's framework is grounded in key assumptions. First, social practices are shaped by both structure and agency (Bourdieu, 1990; Warf, 2025; Schirone, 2023). For instance, a student from a working-class background may approach higher education with different expectations and strategies than a student from an elite background, even within the same institutional setting (Zipin, 2025). Second, fields are competitive arenas where success depends on the volume and type of capital possessed (Schirone, 2023). In the corporate field, individuals with strong professional networks (social capital) and advanced degrees (cultural capital) are more likely to secure leadership roles (Schirone, 2023). Third, habitus is socially and historically situated, reflecting the cumulative experiences of individuals shaped by their class, upbringing,

and education (Rafanell, 2024). Zhang (2025) provided an example of someone raised in a family that values academic achievement, who may develop a habitus that aligns well with the norms of the educational field. Fourth, capital is multifaceted and convertible. Different forms of capital can be exchanged, but the rules of conversion vary depending on the field's structure and norms, such as an MBA (cultural capital) may be converted into a high-paying job (economic capital) in the business field but may hold less value in artistic or activist spaces (Merisalo & Makkonen, 2022). Finally, symbolic power sustains inequality, as dominant actors use symbolic capital to legitimize their position and reproduce the field's structure. Prestigious awards or elite affiliations can reinforce authority and marginalize alternative voices in academia or media (Schirone, 2023).

Bourdieu's theory of practice deepened this analysis by explaining how inequality is reproduced through institutional norms using concepts of habitus, capital, and symbolic domination to illuminate how leadership pipelines are shaped by social reproduction. James and Desormeaux (2023) argued that amplifying Black role models within these systems can disrupt dominant norms and foster more equitable succession planning. Empirical studies by Pogrebna et al. (2024) and Motro et al. (2021) showed that Black women are disproportionately penalized in leadership evaluations due to stereotypes such as the angry Black woman, while Arsel et al. (2022), Esparza et al. (2024), and Hayvon (2024) reported persistent underrepresentation despite comparable qualifications and ambition.

In addition to these assumptions, Bourdieu's framework was built on several key propositions that explain how individuals interact with social structures. First, social practices result from the interaction between habitus, capital, and field, meaning behavior is shaped by both internal dispositions and external conditions (Akram, 2023). Fitzsimmons and Callan

(2020) illustrated this in their study of leadership diversity, noting that organizational management reflects leaders' personal beliefs (*habitus*), professional training (*cultural capital*), and the expectations of the organizational environment (*field*). Second, fields are structured spaces of competition where individuals strive for dominance using various forms of capital (Schirone, 2023). Third, capital is unequally distributed and valued differently across fields, and its convertibility depends on the field's structure. For instance, an MBA may translate into economic capital in business but holds less value in artistic fields (Merisalo & Makkonen, 2022).

Fourth, *habitus* is shaped by social origin and tend to reproduce inequality, as individuals internalize dispositions aligned with their upbringing and class position (Zhang, 2025). A person from a privileged background may feel more confident navigating elite institutions, reinforcing existing hierarchies. Finally, symbolic power legitimizes dominance; those with symbolic capital, such as prestigious awards or affiliations, reinforce their authority and marginalize alternative voices (Schirone, 2023). Together, these assumptions and propositions form a relational model for understanding how individuals navigate social spaces, how power is distributed, and how inequality is reproduced. Bourdieu's theory has been widely applied across disciplines, including education, organizational studies, cultural analysis, and social mobility research (Zhang, 2025).

The inequality of Black women in the C-suite reflects how race and gender intersect to shape access to leadership within structured professional fields. Bourabain (2024) demonstrated that dominant corporate environments often misrecognize the cultural capital of Black women, such as their communication styles, leadership approaches, and lived experiences, because these do not align with the norms of the dominant *habitus* within the field. This misrecognition contributes to symbolic exclusion, limiting their professional identity formation and upward

mobility (Goudeau et al., 2024). Chakuzira et al. (2024) highlighted the role of kinship-based networks as alternative sources of social capital that can support leadership development. However, as Turnbull et al. (2024) and Pierre et al. (2023) argued, access to these networks is uneven and can reinforce exclusion when they are not institutionally recognized or when gatekeeping occurs within marginalized communities. These dynamics underscore Bourdieu's notion that fields are competitive arenas where different forms of capital are unequally valued, and where individuals must navigate complex power structures to gain legitimacy.

African American entrepreneurs strategically draw on resilience, cultural pride, and community networks to navigate institutional barriers, reflecting Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, cultural capital, and field (Santos et al., 2024). Hong, et al. (2023) demonstrated how resilience and cultural pride function as embodied dispositions (habitus) that empower entrepreneurs to persist despite systemic exclusion. Similarly, Ige (2025) introduced the concept of Black cultural capital as a culturally specific knowledge and pride operate within and against dominant corporate fields, often challenging norms of legitimacy and recognition. Singh and Miller (2025) expanded this analysis by identifying culturally grounded strategies, identity affirmation, and community networking as forms of social capital that promote mobility, even when unrecognized by mainstream institutions. These insights enrich Bourdieu's framework by illustrating how marginalized groups not only adapt to but also reshape the fields they inhabit.

Empirical studies affirmed the relevance of Bourdieu's framework in explaining the underrepresentation of Black women in executive roles. Bishop (2024) identified invisible barriers such as biased evaluations, lack of sponsorship, and exclusion from informal networks. Johnson and Jackson (2024) conceptualized Black cultural capital through refuge, mediation, and navigation, offering strategies to counter institutional constraints. Grenfell (2024), Bashi (2024),

and Zipin (2025) reaffirmed the utility of habitus, field, and capital in analyzing racial inequality, while Stahl and Mu (2024) highlighted how symbolic power sustains dominant norms and marginalized alternative cultural expressions. Butler (2006) emphasized the subversion of norms and the fluidity of identity through the theory of performativity. His work underscored the potential for transformation through discourse and representation, aligning with the strategic use of role models who challenge dominant narratives and expand the possibilities of who can lead. Butler (2018) argued that norms both constrain and enable identity formation, suggesting that inclusive leadership practices can disrupt entrenched patterns and foster new forms of belonging.

### **Alternative Frameworks**

The theoretical frameworks considered to explore Black women's access to executive leadership roles included Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach, and Butler's post-structuralist model (Caza & Creary, 2023). Giddens' (1984) structuration theory bridged the divide between structure and agency through the concept of the duality of structure, emphasizing reflexivity and the recursive nature of social practices (Whittington et al., 2022). Whittington et al. (2022) added that structuration theory provides a valuable framework for connecting micro-level strategic actions with macro-level institutional structures and offered insight into how actors such as managers and consultants operate within and reshape organizational fields, reinforcing or disrupting existing power dynamics. While valuable, structuration theory is focused on general social dynamics and is less effective for analyzing institutional power and systemic barriers.

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach conceptualized social life as performance, offering insight into identity management through concepts like front stage, backstage, and impression management (Scott, 2025). Though useful for understanding symbolic interaction,

this approach lacked the structural depth needed for analyzing institutional exclusion. Butler (2006) and Bourdieu (2018) both explored identity formation through repeated practices (Draz, 2022; Fix & Cooper, 2024; Crews & Lennox, 2020).

Bourdieu's empirically grounded concepts of habitus, field, and capital provided a comprehensive lens for analyzing how institutional structures shape professional trajectories and reinforce exclusionary practices (Bishop, 2024). This framework was selected because it offers a nuanced understanding of how systemic forces such as race, gender, and class interact within professional environments to influence access to executive leadership. The concept of habitus informed the problem statement by highlighting how Black women's dispositions, shaped by lived experiences and cultural contexts, may conflict with dominant norms in corporate fields. This misalignment may lead to misrecognition and symbolic exclusion, which contribute to their underrepresentation in the C-suite (Schirone, 2023).

The notion of field guided the purpose statement by framing corporate leadership as a structured social space where actors compete for legitimacy and power. Within this field, dominant norms and expectations privilege certain forms of behavior, communication, and leadership often excluding those whose habitus does not align with these standards (Bishop, 2024). Finally, Bourdieu's concept of capital shaped the research questions by directing attention to the resources Black women draw upon to access leadership roles. Bourdieu's framework provided a critical lens for understanding how leadership pipelines are shaped by institutionalized capital and how inclusive succession planning must address these embedded dynamics. By recognizing and amplifying Black role models within organizational systems, institutions can begin to reshape the habitus of leadership, creating space for new dispositions,

inclusive narratives, and more equitable futures (Muñoz et al., 2025; Hong et al, 2023; Cubeddu & Martini, 2025)

### **Systemic Barriers and Pathways to Executive Leadership for Black Women**

Despite a growing organizational emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), Black women remain persistently underrepresented in executive leadership roles. Iheduru-Anderson (2025), Sitzmann et al. (2024), and Dawuni and Frazier (2022) emphasized that this leadership gap is not due to a lack of talent or ambition, but rather to entrenched systemic and structural barriers that hinder advancement. Black women are frequently excluded from pivotal C-suite roles such as chief operating officer (COO) and chief financial officer (CFO), which are commonly regarded as critical pathways to chief executive officer (CEO) positions (Gómez & Gobin, 2024). Their exclusion from these roles significantly limits visibility, influence, and access to succession pipelines (Gichane et al., 2024).

Underrepresentation in executive leadership is not due to a lack of talent but to entrenched institutional biases. Sitzmann et al. (2024) and Kea-Edwards et al. (2023) highlighted that biased assessments and feedback mechanisms distort leadership evaluations. Dawuni and Frazier (2022) and Coats et al. (2022) revealed that occupational segregation and undervaluation in strategic roles limit advancement. Sponsorship and mentorship, critical for career mobility, remain largely inaccessible (Gichane et al., 2024; Gröschl et al., 2024), and emotional labor further compounds these challenges.

### **Structural and Cultural Barriers**

Klettner (2024) identified several invisible obstacles that impede Black women's progression into executive roles, including biased leadership evaluations, limited access to sponsorship, and exclusion from informal networks. These challenges are compounded by

racialized gender stereotypes, where assertiveness in Black women is frequently misinterpreted as aggression, leading to increased scrutiny and fewer leadership opportunities (Arsel et al., 2022; Esparza et al., 2024; Hayvon, 2024). Kea-Edwards et al. (2023) found that Black women often receive feedback that is racialized and gendered, focusing more on personality traits than leadership competencies, which undermines their credibility and development. Similarly, Pogrebna et al. (2024) demonstrated that intersectional biases perpetuate behavioral stereotypes that hinder Black women's leadership advancement across sectors. Moreover, Aplin-Houtz (2025) revealed that exclusion from informal networks significantly limits access to critical information, mentorship, and trust-building opportunities which factors into career mobility. These networks often serve as gatekeepers to leadership roles, and their absence disproportionately affects women of color.

Akinola and Naidoo (2024) and Mekawi et al. (2021) explored how Black women are disproportionately appointed to leadership roles during times of crisis. This phenomenon is known as the glass cliff effect and Black women are rarely given the institutional support needed to succeed (Li et al., 2024). The glass cliff effect reinforces the perception that Black women are only suited for high-stress, transitional roles, rather than long-term strategic leadership (Akinola & Naidoo, 2024; Mekawi et al., 2021). Similarly, the glass ceiling effect refers to the invisible, systemic barriers that prevent women, particularly women of color, from advancing to top-tier leadership positions, despite having the qualifications and experience to do so (Sharma & Sharma 2021; Taparia & Lenka, 2024). These barriers are often rooted in attitudinal biases, organizational practices, and cultural stereotypes that subtly but powerfully limit upward mobility (Albarracin & Shavitt, 2018). The TIAA Institute Report (2022) further underscored the scarcity of Black women in CEO roles, noting that only two Black women led Fortune 500

companies as of 2022, representing just 0.4% of all CEOs (Dawuni & Frazier, 2022). Primecz and Mahadevan (2024) found that although Black women make up 7.4% of the U.S. workforce, they hold only 1.6% of executive roles; a disparity driven by “double jeopardy” and exclusion from informal leadership networks. This underrepresentation persists even though 59% of Black women leaders aspire to top executive roles, as shown in the Arsel et al. (2022), Esparza et al., 2024, and Hayvon (2024).

### **Glass Cliff**

The glass cliff phenomenon is particularly relevant for Black women, who are disproportionately placed in unstable organizations or departments (Li et al., 2024). Black women in leadership roles are often placed in positions without adequate resources, mentorship, or institutional support. This lack of structural backing can hinder their ability to succeed, regardless of their skills, experience, or leadership capabilities (Pogrebna et al., 2024). When outcomes fall short, Black leaders are more likely to be blamed, reinforcing negative stereotypes and discouraging future opportunities (Pogrebna et al., 2024). The risk tax concept, described by Li et al. (2024), highlighted how women and minority leaders often must accept higher-risk roles to advance professionally. This aligns with the glass cliff phenomenon, which is especially relevant for Black women, who are disproportionately placed in unstable organizations or departments (Li et al., 2024). These placements frequently lack adequate resources and support, making success difficult regardless of the leader’s capabilities. When outcomes fall short, these leaders are more likely to be blamed, reinforcing negative stereotypes and discouraging future leadership opportunities (Pogrebna et al., 2024). This cycle not only undermines individual advancement but also perpetuates systemic exclusion from executive leadership. Black women

interview with senior leaders revealed that glass cliff appointments are often the result of long-term career strategies shaped by systemic bias (Suggs Mason & Roegman, 2025).

### **Glass Ceiling**

Despite growing awareness of diversity and inclusion, Black women continue to face persistent and often invisible barriers to executive leadership (Sims & Carter, 2022). These barriers are deeply rooted in structural inequities and cultural norms that shape perceptions of competence and leadership potential. In a systematic literature review, Ciappei et al. (2023) identified the glass ceiling and glass cliff as two major structural phenomena that hinder women, especially women of color, from ascending to and thriving in top leadership roles. The glass ceiling refers to invisible yet impenetrable barriers that prevent women from reaching senior leadership positions, while the glass cliff describes the tendency for women to be appointed to leadership roles during times of organizational crisis, where the risk of failure is significantly heightened (Taparia & Lenka, 2024). The glass ceiling and glass cliff phenomena are reinforced by biased perceptions of leadership, which often align with white, male norms. As a result, Black women are frequently perceived as less competent or overly assertive, leading to harsher evaluations and reduced access to advancement opportunities (Sun et al., 2025); therefore when Black women do reach executive roles, they are often placed in precarious positions with minimal support, facing heightened scrutiny and aggression due to the intersection of racism and sexism that is commonly referred to as misogynoir.

Timmer and Woo (2023) found the glass ceiling and glass cliff creates a double bind for Black women in leadership. Timmer and Woo (2023) described this as a situation where Black women must overcome systemic exclusion to reach executive roles, only to find themselves in positions that are inherently unstable and subject to heightened scrutiny. This double bind is

echoed in Fix and Cooper (2024) application of Bourdieu's theory, which emphasized that while individuals possess agency, it is situated within the constraints of habitus and field are structures that often unconsciously reproduce the very barriers they seek to overcome. Fix and Cooper (2024) underscored the urgent need for intentional, equity-focused leadership development strategies. Strategies that not only open doors but also ensure Black women are positioned to succeed once they enter executive roles (Dawuni & Frazier, 2022).

Organizations' leaders have implemented DEI policies; these efforts often fail to address the intersectional nature of race and gender (Klettner, 2024). Consequently, leadership diversity initiatives have disproportionately benefited white women, leaving women of color, particularly Black women, behind. The absence of inclusive succession planning and the lack of visible role models further reinforce narrow, Eurocentric definitions of leadership (Sitzmann et al., 2024), thereby perpetuating the underrepresentation of Black women at the highest levels of corporate leadership.

Mentorship and sponsorship remain critical yet underdeveloped pathways for Black women's advancement. Virga et al. (2025) found that while mentorship offers guidance, sponsorship is the decisive factor in overcoming racial barriers to executive leadership. Sponsorship provides access to social capital and advocacy, which are essential for navigating exclusionary corporate cultures deeply embedded in corporate norms and expectations. Javalagi et al. (2024) described how Black women leaders face a double bind, showing vulnerability is seen as weakness, while assertiveness is misread as aggression. This dynamic forces Black women to perform emotional labor and self-monitoring that undermines authenticity and leadership credibility (Chaudhary, 2025; Hur & Shin, 2023; Pinkawa & Dörfel, 2024). Moreover, Makore et al. (2022), O'Hagan (2023), and Wright (2022) critiqued the concept of

“executive presence,” arguing that it is often coded in Eurocentric terms that exclude Black women’s cultural expressions and leadership styles.

### **Inequality of Executive Power**

Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic power offered a compelling framework for understanding these dynamics. Schirone (2023) applied Bourdieu’s relational theory of social inequality to explain how symbolic power and social positioning shape access to leadership and institutional legitimacy. Hoffman (2025) further emphasized how symbolic power legitimizes dominant norms and marginalizes alternative leadership identities. This is particularly relevant in corporate contexts where Eurocentric standards of professionalism and leadership persist.

Primecz and Mahadevan (2024) emphasized that inclusive leadership must go beyond general notions of diversity to actively foster both uniqueness and belongingness. Their systematic review found that many DEI efforts fell short because of inadequately addressing the intersectional experiences of marginalized groups, including Black women. To be effective, leadership development, succession planning, and organizational culture must center intersectionality as a core principle, ensuring that individuals are recognized for their distinct identities while feeling fully integrated into the organizational fabric (Derry, 2023).

### **Executive Presence**

A persistent challenge Black women face in leadership is the expectation to suppress aspects of their identity to conform to white-dominated workplace norms (Showunmi, 2023). Roberts et al. (2024) redefined *executive presence*, arguing that traditional standards are outdated and exclusionary. Roberts et al. (2024) called for a broader understanding of leadership traits that includes authenticity, emotional intelligence, and cultural expression and qualities often embodied by Black women leaders. Research from Harvard Business School’s Race, Gender &

Equity (2024) initiative revealed that Black women are often expected to prioritize the comfort of non-Black colleagues, leading to self-censorship, code-switching, and emotional labor that detracts from their authenticity and leadership potential (Showunmi, 2023). These pressures diminish individual well-being, resulting in underutilization of talent, as organizations fail to benefit from the full contributions of Black women leaders (Sims & Carter, 2022).

The concept of “executive presence” continues to be a gatekeeping mechanism in corporate leadership (Chukwuma & Okonkwo, 2023). Traditionally defined by gravitas, communication skills, appearance, and executive presence have been reshaped by Eurocentric standards that exclude diverse expressions of leadership (Bush, 2025). Roberts et al. (2024) argued that expectations around executive presence are evolving, yet still disproportionately disadvantage Black women, whose leadership styles may not align with the dominant norms. Redefining executive presence to include emotional intelligence, authenticity, and agility as demonstrated by Black women executives in recent studies can help shift perceptions and open pathways to leadership (Roberts et al., 2024).

Intersectional DEI strategies are essential for dismantling systemic barriers. Hayvon (2024) synthesized multiple social justice frameworks, including critical race theory, postcolonial theory, and reflexivity, to propose a model that addressed the inequitable distribution of risks and benefits in organizational systems. Hayvon (2024) emphasized that DEI efforts must move beyond tokenistic inclusion and instead center marginalized identities in policy design, implementation, and evaluation. This approach is particularly relevant for Black women, whose experiences are shaped by the intersection of race, gender, and organizational culture (Gröschl et al., 2024).

## **Systemic Barriers and Leadership Pathways for Black Women**

Sitzmann et al. (2024) challenged the assumption that the underrepresentation of Black women in the C-suite stems from a lack of qualified candidates. Instead, the authors highlighted systemic inequities in how leadership potential is assessed, developed, and promoted. Black women are disproportionately placed in roles such as chief human resources officer (CHRO) or chief diversity officer (CDO), which, while important, are often perceived as peripheral to core business strategy and carry limited influence in board-level decision-making (Dawuni & Frazier, 2022). These roles rarely serve as steppingstones to CEO appointments, narrowing the leadership pipeline for Black women (Kea-Edwards et al., 2023; Sharma et al., 2024; Williams et al., 2024). Although women hold 67% of CHRO roles in the S&P 100, only 1% of CHROs surveyed expressed aspirations to become CEOs, reflecting both structural limitations and internalized barriers associated with these positions (Dawuni & Frazier, 2022). This occupational clustering reinforces a segregated leadership structure in which Black women are expected to lead on equity and culture but are excluded from financial oversight and strategic decision-making (Pogrebna et al., 2024).

## **Mentorship and Sponsorship**

Mentorship and sponsorship are particularly vital. Gichane et al. (2024) found that mentoring relationships are essential for career advancement, especially in environments where Black women are underrepresented in leadership. Gichane et al. (2024) revealed that Black women often lack access to high-quality mentorship and sponsorship, which are crucial for navigating institutional barriers and gaining visibility in leadership pipelines.

The Conservation of Resources theory (2024) further emphasized that Black women and Asian women face a *concrete ceiling* (Otake-Ebede & Shaffakat, 2024). The concrete ceiling is a

barrier more rigid than the glass ceiling due to compounded racial and gender biases and is reinforced by limited access to informal networks, biased performance evaluations, and a lack of trust from colleagues and superiors (Adisa et al., 2025). To dismantle these barriers, organizations must adopt intersectional approaches to leadership development (Otake-Ebede & Shaffkat, 2024). Primecz and Mahadevan (2024) argued that inclusive leadership must go beyond surface-level diversity to foster both uniqueness and belongingness.

From limited access to strategic positions and capital to exclusion from influential networks and biased feedback systems, systemic barriers restrict upward mobility (Bishop, 2024). Traditional DEI efforts often overlook the intersectional realities Black women face, reinforcing a rigid, *concrete ceiling* (Otake-Ebede & Shaffkat, 2024). Advancing leadership of Black women requires redesigning development pathways to reflect lived experiences and recognizing their inclusion as a strategic advantage (Bishop, 2024).

The concept of the “concrete ceiling” (Otake-Ebede & Shaffkat, 2024) captures the compounded racial and gender barriers Black women face, often overlooked by DEI efforts that lack intersectional frameworks (Primecz & Mahadevan, 2024; Sim & Bierema, 2025). Pogrebna et al. (2024) and Cunningham (2022) provide empirical evidence that implicit bias among managers and the glass cliff phenomenon disproportionately affect Black women, placing them in high-risk roles with minimal support. Stereotypes such as the “angry Black woman” trope Motro et al. (2021) and the double bind described by Sims and Carter (2022) illustrated how Black women must constantly manage impressions, often at the expense of authenticity and psychological safety.

## **Intersectional Bias and Leadership Challenges**

Organizations' leaders seeking to build inclusive leadership pipelines must first understand the performative pressures placed on aspiring leaders. By integrating Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical lens, leadership development strategies can better account for the symbolic and behavioral expectations that shape professional identity (Caza & Creary, 2023). The dramaturgical approach helped organizations' leaders design support systems that foster authenticity rather than conformity, enhancing individual confidence and belonging (Gray et al., 2024). Leadership strategies opened space for a broader range of leadership styles and identities, challenging the dominant "think leader, think male" mindset (Sitzmann et al., 2024). However, the effectiveness of such strategies was undermined by racialized bias and gender stereotypes.

Cunningham (2022) found that managers express higher levels of implicit bias than professionals in other occupations, particularly in evaluating leadership potential among minoritized groups. These biases contribute to occupational segregation and limit advancement opportunities for Black women (Serrano-Diaz et al., 2025). Arsel et al. (2022), Esparza et al. (2024), and Hayvon (2024) revealed that women of color hold only 7% of C-suite positions, with Black women representing an even smaller fraction. Pogrebna et al. (2024) confirmed that this underrepresentation is not due to a lack of qualifications or ambition, but rather to compounded racial and gender biases that shape how leadership potential is perceived and evaluated. Pogrebna et al. (2024) revealed that Black women are more likely to be placed in high-risk leadership roles known as the glass cliff and are held to higher standards than their peers.

Efforts to enhance gender diversity in leadership have gained scholarly momentum, particularly in relation to governance, innovation, and cultural transformation. Liberatore and Manetti (2023) conducted a bibliometric review of 532 studies, identifying key research clusters

and theoretical frameworks, including agency theory, resource dependence theory, and institutional theory. Law and Tan (2025) emphasized the distinction between demographic and cognitive diversity, noting that while diversity fosters innovation and legitimacy, it also introduces challenges like tokenism and communication breakdowns. Pillay (2025) argued for reframing gender diversity as a strategic asset, especially in internal control and sustainability contexts.

Stereotypes such as the “*angry Black woman*” trope further distort perceptions of Black women’s leadership. A study by the Pogrebna et al. (2024) showed that Black women expressing disagreement or emotion were rated lower in leadership potential than their white counterparts, even when following identical scripts. Sims and Carter (2022) described this dynamic as a “double bind,” meaning Black women who display confidence risk being labeled hostile, while those who adopt a more collaborative style may be seen as lacking authority. This forces them to constantly manage impressions, often at the expense of authenticity and psychological safety (Gupta & Sagadevan, 2024).

The glass cliff effect compounds the challenges for Black women disproportionately appointed to leadership roles during times of crisis, where the risk of failure is high and support is minimal (Li et al., 2024). Black women appointments often reflect organizational bias rather than genuine inclusion (Pogrebna et al., 2024). Deng et al. (2023) found that Black women face disproportionate scrutiny and failure risk when stepping into leadership roles, especially in turbulent environments. Crenshaw’s (1991) theory of intersectionality explains how overlapping systems of oppression, such as racism and sexism, interact to shape the lived experiences of Black women. This framework is essential for understanding the compounded challenges they face in leadership contexts. One manifestation of these intersecting oppressions is the glass cliff

effect, where Black women are disproportionately appointed to leadership roles during times of organizational crisis, often with minimal support and high risk of failure (Li et al., 2024).

success.

Arsel et al. (2022), Esparza et al. (2024), and Hayvon (2024) reported that Black women in executive roles face a narrow behavioral bandwidth, where vulnerability is seen as weakness and strength is mischaracterized as aggression. These compounded biases not only hinder advancement but also contribute to burnout and turnover (Sim & Bierema, 2025). Without intersectional leadership frameworks, organizations risk reinforcing existing hierarchies and overlooking the unique challenges faced by employees with multiple marginalized identities (Sim & Bierema, 2025). Organizations committed to inclusive leadership must first confront the performative pressures and identity constraints placed on Black women leaders. Drawing on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical lens, Cunningham (2022) showed how leadership development often demands conformity to dominant norms, undermining authenticity and reinforcing symbolic expectations and such pressures are compounded by systemic bias, Cunningham (2022) found that managers exhibit higher levels of implicit bias than professionals in other fields, particularly in evaluating leadership potential among minoritized groups.

Intersectionality further complicates advancement, as Black women face compounded scrutiny and lower trust ratings compared to other demographic groups (Piatak et al., 2025). The glass cliff phenomenon where Black women are appointed to high-risk leadership roles during crises remains a persistent barrier, often reflecting tokenism rather than genuine inclusion (Laramore, 2024). Pogrebna et al. (2024) confirmed that these challenges are not due to lack of ambition or skill, but to enduring racial and gender biases that distort perceptions of leadership and limit access to power. Without intersectional frameworks and structural reform, leadership

pipelines will continue to exclude those most capable of driving transformative change (Pogrebna et al., 2024).

Using behavioral data science, Pogrebna et al. (2024) showed how racial and gender biases perpetuate stereotypical schemas created structural and cultural barriers that hindered Black women's leadership development. Pogrebna et al. (2024) revealed that Black women often face a double jeopardy of racism and sexism, which not only limits their access to leadership roles but also subjects them to greater scrutiny once they attain them. Exclusion from informal networks and sponsorship relationships further compounds these challenges (Horak & Suseno, 2023). Without access to these critical career pathways, Black women are less likely to be considered for high-stakes, high-visibility roles that serve as pipelines to CEO appointments (Del Priore, 2022). This exclusion is not limited to corporate environments. In education, for example, women superintendents are more likely to lead under-resourced districts with high proportions of minoritized students, suggesting that even when women attain top roles, they are often placed in more challenging contexts (Suggs Mason & Roegman, 2025). Intersectionality theory helps explain these compounded challenges.

### **Inclusive Succession Planning and the Power of Representation**

In the literature, there is emphasis on the importance of inclusive succession planning in addressing systemic barriers that limit leadership opportunities for Black individuals, particularly women. Lull (2025) introduced a recursive model of leadership development grounded in structuration theory, which highlighted how individuals both shape and are shaped by the social systems they inhabit. This dynamic understanding is central to inclusive succession planning, as leadership identities are not formed in isolation but through ongoing interaction with institutional narratives and symbolic structures (Sunderman & Orsini, 2024). While structural constraints

persist, Lull (2025) argued that individuals retain agency to navigate and reshape these systems, underscoring the importance of role models who visibly challenge norms and expand the boundaries of what leadership can look like.

In succession planning, it is essential to recognize not only the competencies of potential leaders but also the environments that enable their authentic expression. Lux and Lowe (2025) highlighted the importance of role models in modeling how to manage impressions while remaining true to one's identity, especially in spaces where leadership norms have historically excluded diverse voices. Goffman's (1959) ideas on self-presentation have since evolved in digital contexts, shaping how leaders navigate visibility and authenticity (Bolino & Turnley, 2016). Gupta and Sagadevan (2024) revealed how individuals curate their leadership personas online using digital "props" and identity tags, further shaping perceptions of authenticity and competence. The influence of Goffman's (1959) work in management studies has grown significantly, particularly in areas concerned with authenticity, leadership image, and workplace identity. Sun et al. (2025) conducted a citation context analysis showing that Goffman's (1959) concepts of impression management and stigma are increasingly cited in organizational research, though often with limited empirical scrutiny.

### **Career Development**

Rutledge and Gnilka (2022) further supported Goffman's view through a culturally responsive career development intervention with racially minoritized girls of color, demonstrating how exposure to diverse role models enhances career self-efficacy and leadership aspirations. Their findings reinforced the importance of representation and mentorship in shaping leadership identity and succession pathways. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory can be used to complement this perspective by framing leadership as a performance shaped by both

frontstage and backstage dynamics (Inglis & Thorpe, 2023). Gray et al. (2024) demonstrated that backstage processes such as team coordination and infrastructure support are essential to the frontstage performances that influence public perceptions of leadership. Dramaturgical Theory is particularly relevant for Black leaders, who often navigate heightened scrutiny and stereotype-driven expectations in their public-facing roles. Showunmi (2023) emphasized that Black role models play a critical role in this dynamic by managing impressions while remaining authentic, thereby challenging dominant narratives about who can lead and how leadership should be performed. Black role models' presence on the frontstage disrupts traditional scripts and expands the repertoire of leadership styles available to future generations (Caza & Creary, 2023).

Research from 2022 to 2025 continued to highlight the critical role of visibility, informal networks, and structural support in the career progression of African American managers, particularly Black women. Mumford (2022) found that organizations with higher representation of racial minority managers, especially in visible leadership roles, experienced stronger financial performance, reinforcing the value of elevating diverse leaders not only for equity but also for business outcomes. Linos et al. (2024) expanded this by showing that Black women who began their careers in teams with a higher proportion of White colleagues were less likely to be promoted and more likely to leave their roles. This underscores how informal networks and early exposure to influential decision-makers can shape long-term career trajectories.

### **Role of Organizational Leaders**

The growing interest in management studies underscores the relevance of Goffman's (1959) work in understanding how leaders perform roles and manage perceptions within institutional settings (Caza & Creary, 2023). In the context of inclusive succession planning, Goffman's dramaturgical framework offers critical insights into how emerging leaders,

especially those from underrepresented backgrounds, navigate visibility, credibility, and authenticity (Caza & Creary, 2023). By integrating this lens into leadership development strategies, organizational leaders can better understand the performance pressures placed on aspiring leaders and design support systems that foster authenticity rather than conformity. Gray et al. (2024) argue that this approach enhances individual confidence and belonging while strengthening the pipeline for inclusive leadership by making space for a broader range of identities and leadership styles.

Complementing Goffman's interpersonal focus, Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice provides a structural perspective on leadership development (Caza & Creary, 2023). His concepts of habitus, field, and symbolic capital reveal how leadership norms are shaped by internalized dispositions and institutional power dynamics. Unless inclusive values are embedded within the organizational habitus, leadership development efforts risk reinforcing existing hierarchies. Role models, through their symbolic presence and visible actions, help shape the expectations and norms of leadership, offering aspirational pathways for underrepresented individuals (Sun et al., 2025).

### **Theories, Evidence, and Strategies for Advancing Leadership Diversity**

Efforts to enhance gender diversity in corporate leadership have gained significant scholarly attention, particularly in the context of organizational performance, governance, and cultural transformation. Liberatore and Manetti (2023) conducted a comprehensive bibliometric review of 532 peer-reviewed articles published between 2010 and 2022. Their analysis revealed three dominant research clusters: (a) the behavioral traits of women in decision-making, especially in finance and accounting; (b) the role of female directors in promoting sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR); and (c) structural and cultural barriers such as the

glass ceiling and glass cliff that hinder women's advancement. Liberatore and Manetti (2023) highlighted the inconsistent findings regarding the impact of gender diversity on firm performance. Zagorchev (2024) and Zharfpeykan and Bai (2025) reported that increased gender diversity on corporate boards is associated with improved oversight and ethical governance. However, other researchers, such as Kabir et al., (2023), have found that the effects of gender diversity can be neutral or even adverse, indicating that outcomes may vary depending on contextual and organizational factors. Liberatore and Manetti's (2023) contradictions suggested that contextual variables like industry, firm size, and national culture may moderate the relationship between gender diversity and organizational outcomes. Their review also mapped key theoretical frameworks, including agency, resource dependence, and institutional theories, noting a shift toward multi-theoretical approaches to better capture the complexity of diversity (Das & Jha, 2024).

Law and Tan (2025) confirmed the persistence of contradictory findings in their review of gender diversity in top management teams. Law and Tan (2025) emphasized the need to distinguish between demographic diversity (e.g., gender, race) and cognitive diversity (e.g., perspectives, problem-solving styles). While diversity was linked to innovation and legitimacy, Law and Tan (2025) also identified challenges such as communication breakdowns and tokenism issues that diversity plans must address to be effective. Ciappei et al. (2023) expanded the scope of inquiry beyond board membership, arguing that women's contributions to internal control systems and sustainability are often undervalued. Ciappei et al. (2023) advocated viewing gender diversity not as a compliance obligation but as a strategic asset that enhances both financial and non-financial performance.

Goffman's (1959) micro-level focus contrasted with Bourdieu's macro-level theory of practice, which emphasized structures like class, field, and capital. Bonini et al. (2024) noted this distinction is crucial for understanding how leadership habitus is shaped. While Bourdieu explained systemic barriers to diversity, and Goffman offered insight into interpersonal dynamics and the reflexive adaptation of social actors, both essential for designing effective diversity plans (Zhang, 2025). Together, these studies illustrated that intentional interventions, such as elevating diverse role models and creating equitable development pathways, are vital for reshaping the habitus of leadership.

Recent scholarship underscores the critical need to integrate social theory into leadership development, particularly to address the systemic barriers faced by Black women in executive roles. Foundational frameworks such as Giddens' (1984) structuration theory illuminate the dynamic interplay between individual agency and institutional structures, offering a lens through which leaders can be seen not only as products of their environments but also as active agents capable of reshaping them. Building on this, Lull (2025) extends structuration theory into organizational contexts, demonstrating how leaders navigate and transform structural constraints, an essential insight for designing inclusive leadership development programs. Complementing this macro-level perspective, Goffman's dramaturgical theory provides a micro-level view of leadership as a performative act, shaped by symbolic expectations and social scripts.

Empirical evidence from Gray et al. (2024) reveals how backstage organizational processes such as informal norms, hidden biases, and unspoken expectations influence frontstage leadership performances. This dynamic is especially salient for Black leaders, who often engage in impression management under the pressure of stereotype-driven scrutiny, potentially compromising authenticity and psychological safety.

## **Leadership Commitment as a Socially Embedded Practice**

Leadership commitment is framed as a personal or strategic alignment with organizational goals (Singh & Miller, 2025). However, Frackenpohl et al. (2025) argued this perspective overlooks the broader institutional and social forces that shape leadership behavior. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) theory of practice, leadership is conceptualized not merely as a role or a set of actions, but as a socially constructed position within a structured field. This field is shaped by power dynamics and norms, while leaders' behaviors are influenced by their habitus internalized dispositions formed through experience and sustained by various forms of capital, including economic, social, cultural, and symbolic (Schirone, 2023). Within organizational contexts, field represents the competitive and hierarchical space where leadership norms are defined and Bourdieu's framework revealed how leadership is embedded in and reproduced by institutional structures, offering a deeper understanding of how commitment is enacted and perceived within organizations (Werhane, 2022). Leaders must navigate this space by leveraging their capital such as professional credentials, networks, and symbolic authority to maintain or enhance their position (Deng et al., 2023). Their habitus, shaped by prior experiences and social conditioning, influence how they interpret and respond to institutional expectations (Syamsira et al., 2025).

Schirone (2023) emphasized that leadership commitment involves both navigating existing norms and, potentially, reshaping them through strategic use of capital and reflexive engagement with the field. This perspective is particularly relevant in discussions of equity and inclusion, where leadership commitment must extend beyond compliance to actively challenging exclusionary norms. Leaders who possess the cultural and symbolic capital to elevate marginalized voices play a critical role in transforming organizational habitus (Bals, Laugwitz, &

Lischka, 2024). Leadership development programs must go beyond technical skill-building to address the social positioning and structural awareness necessary for sustained, inclusive impact (Sunderman & Orsini, 2024). This requires leaders to actively commit to shaping organizational culture through intentional practices that promote equity, diversity, and inclusion. As Nishii et al. (2022) emphasize, leaders play a critical role in cultivating a climate where diverse experiences are not only acknowledged but valued. When leaders embed inclusive norms into the organizational habitus, the internalized dispositions and cultural expectations they help dismantle structural barriers and create pathways for underrepresented groups, including Black women, to ascend into executive roles. This commitment is reflected in the allocation of resources toward CSR and DEI initiatives, signaling that diversity is not just a value but a strategic imperative for innovation and excellence (Hinton & Lambert, 2022).

Efforts to enhance gender diversity in leadership have gained significant scholarly traction, particularly in relation to governance, innovation, and organizational culture. This body of work reveals that leadership commitment is not merely an individual trait but a socially embedded practice, shaped by institutional norms, stakeholder expectations, and evolving understandings of equity. A bibliometric review by Liberatore and Manetti (2023) maps the intellectual terrain of gender diversity research, identifying key theoretical anchors such as agency theory, resource dependence theory, and institutional theory. These frameworks highlight how leadership decisions are influenced by both internal motivations and external pressures, reinforcing the idea that commitment to diversity is embedded in broader governance ecosystems. Yagi, Iida, and Fuji (2024) deepened this perspective by distinguishing between demographic and cognitive diversity, noting that while diversity enhances innovation and legitimacy, it also introduces challenges such as tokenism and communication breakdowns. These tensions underscore the

need for leadership commitment that is reflexive, relational, and attuned to the complexities of inclusion.

## **Summary**

Bourdieu's (1996) theory of practice guided the exploration of how internalized dispositions (habitus), institutional norms (field), and access to various forms of capital shape leadership trajectories. Leadership is revealed as a socially constructed phenomenon, often governed by exclusionary norms that restrict access to strategic roles. Additionally, Giddens' (1984) structuration theory and Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical lens provided theoretical insights into key challenges, including the glass ceiling, glass cliff, and occupational clustering, which reinforce a segregated leadership structure (Caza & Creary, 2023). Black women are frequently steered into roles centered on equity and culture, while being excluded from financial and strategic decision-making. In Chapter 3, the study's methodology and design are presented in detail, along with the population and sample, instrumentation, study procedures, and data analysis processes. The chapter also outlines the assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and ethical assurances that shaped the research, thereby reinforcing the study's credibility, scope, and adherence to ethical standards.

### **Chapter 3: Research Method**

The problem addressed in this study was the underrepresentation of Black women in the C-suite, which may often lead to a lack of diverse perspectives in decision-making, reduced innovation, and missed opportunities for equitable organizational growth (Arsel et al., 2022; Esparza et al., 2024; Hayvon, 2024). The purpose of this qualitative pilot case study was to explore the perceptions of CEOs regarding the underrepresentation of Black women in the C-suite. This chapter presents the research methodology and design used to explore the underrepresentation of Black women in C-suite. The population and sample, and instrumentation are described, followed by study procedures. The assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and ethical assurances are described in detail, and the chapter closes with a summary.

#### **Research Methodology and Design (Nature of the Study)**

A qualitative pilot case study approach was used to explore the underrepresentation of Black women in the C-suite. This approach was selected because it aligned closely with the problem centered on the underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership, and the purpose, which is to better understand the perceptions and systemic barriers that contribute to this disparity. The qualitative methodology was most appropriate because it allowed for the exploration of complex social phenomena through the collection and interpretation of rich, narrative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This method supported the sociological perspective that individuals construct their own realities, making it particularly suitable for exploring issues of race, gender, and leadership in corporate America.

The case study design was selected to facilitate an in-depth exploration of the perceptions of C-suite leaders regarding the selection of CEOs (Ahmed, 2024; Nazar et al., 2023; Rashid, 2025). This design was ideal for exploring contemporary issues within real-life contexts,

especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined (Ahmed, 2024; Nazar et al., 2023; Rashid, 2025). It allows for a comprehensive understanding of complex decision-making processes by capturing the subtle details and context-specific behaviors of leadership as they occur in real-world settings (Yin, 2018). The flexibility of the case study approach supported the exploration of both individual and organizational dynamics that influence executive selection. The case study design enabled data collection from multiple sources including semi-structured interviews and peer-reviewed journals to achieve data triangulation. Data triangulation strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings by incorporating diverse perspectives and reducing potential bias (Schlunegger, 2024). Ultimately, the case study method provided a robust framework for exploring the multifaceted nature of C-suite leadership within its operational context.

A quantitative approach was considered but determined inappropriate since it would not have captured the nuanced perspectives of Black women or the complex social dynamics within executive hiring processes. While the quantitative method could have been used to identify correlations, it would not have been appropriate for explaining the underlying causes or contextual factors that contributed to those patterns (Pilcher & Cortazzi, 2023). Fitzsimmons et al. (2020) noted the presence of multiple confounding variables makes it difficult to establish causation between diversity and organizational performance.

Other qualitative designs were also considered for this study including phenomenology and grounded theory. Phenomenology is a qualitative approach in which the researcher seeks to understand the essence of individuals' lived experiences through in-depth interviews and reflective analysis (Wertz, 2023). However, the aim of this study was not to explore lived experiences; rather, it was focused on exploring a specific process within its real-world context,

making phenomenology an unsuitable choice. Grounded theory was designed to develop new theories from data through systematic procedures such as coding and memo-writing (Charmaz, 2006; Locke, 2002). While grounded theory is valuable when little is known about a phenomenon, it was not appropriate for this study since the focus was not to develop new theory but to understand an existing case (Dahwa, 2024). A qualitative pilot case study design was the most suitable approach, allowing for an in-depth exploration of a bounded system within its natural context (Larvarda & Belluci, 2022).

### **Population and Sample**

The population for this qualitative pilot case study research consisted of both male and female current and former CEOs of Fortune 1500 organizations. This population was deemed appropriate because it directly aligned with the problem, purpose, and research questions, which were designed to better understand the perceptions of systemic factors influencing the underrepresentation of Black women in the C-suite. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit five participants through professional networks and organizational DEI directors, who facilitated introductions to eligible CEOs. Participant inclusion criteria included a minimum of three years of experience in the C-suite, and employment at an organization listed on the Fortune 1500, which included both public and private United States (U.S.) companies.

### **Instrumentation**

A semi-structured interview guide (Appendix C), consisting of five open-ended questions, was used to facilitate in-depth conversations with five current and former CEOs. The qualitative pilot case study design was selected as the most appropriate methodological approach, consistent with Yin (2018) defined a case study as a data-driven investigation that explores a current issue within its natural environment, particularly when the distinction between

the issue itself and its surrounding context is ambiguous. The bounded system in this study of CEOs was explored within the operational environments of Fortune 1500 companies, both public and private.

The interview guide (Appendix C) was designed to align with the study's purpose to explore the perceptions of current and former CEOs regarding factors influencing the underrepresentation of Black women in the C-suite. The open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to share nuanced insights and personal reflections on strategic decision-making, organizational culture, and stakeholder expectations. This approach reflected Stake's (1995) emphasis on understanding the "complexity and uniqueness" of cases through a constructivist lens, where multiple realities are acknowledged and explored within their natural settings.

The flexibility of semi-structured interviews supported a conversational tone, essential for building rapport and trust, especially with high-level executives whose time is limited. Participants' diverse backgrounds and leadership experiences provided rich, contextual data that contributed to a deeper understanding of executive decision-making and organizational dynamics at the highest levels. Ultimately, the case study method, guided by Yin's (2018) and Stake's (1995) principles, provided a robust framework for capturing the depth and complexity of CEO leadership in context.

### **Study Procedures**

Upon receiving approval from National University's (NU) Institutional Review Board (IRB), a recruitment notice was posted on professional networking platforms including LinkedIn and the Virginia Chamber of Commerce and sent to organizational DEI directors who facilitated introductions to eligible participants who met the inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria

required a minimum of three years of experience as a CEO and employment at an organization listed on the Fortune 1500, including both public and private U.S. companies. The recruitment notice included the purpose of the study, eligibility criteria, and contact information for the researcher. Interested individuals were asked to contact the researcher and confirm their eligibility. A letter of consent was then sent to eligible participants for review before data collection began. Interviews in Zoom and Teams were scheduled with each participant who met the inclusion criteria. The informed consent letter was reviewed with each participant at the beginning of the interview. With participants' permission, each interview was recorded and lasted approximately 45-60 minutes.

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected through participant interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). Each participant was assigned a unique numeric identifier to maintain confidentiality and all data were securely stored on the researcher's password-protected personal computer. The analyzed data directly informed the study's findings by highlighting patterns and insights that addressed the central research questions and the identified problem. Data triangulation was achieved by integrating data from interviews and existing literature. Data triangulation in qualitative research involves using multiple data sources to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of findings (Ide & Beddoe, 2024; Mantula et al., 2024).

The role of the researcher in this study was to collect data through semi-structured interviews and analyze the data for emerging themes and patterns. The researcher in qualitative research is a human instrument for data collection (Mantula, et al., 2024). Reflective practice

enables researchers to use reflexivity as an essential perspective for examining the dynamics of power within the researcher–participant relationship (Ide, et al., 2024).

### **Assumptions**

In qualitative research, assumptions are foundational beliefs that guide the research process, often rooted in the researcher’s philosophical stance and worldview (Levitt, 2022). Assumptions influence how researchers frame their questions, collect and interpret data, and understand the phenomena under study (Clark et al., 2025). They are shaped by the researcher’s training, experiences, and theoretical orientation, and while often implicit, making them explicit enhances the transparency and credibility of the research (Caine et al., 2022). The first assumption was that participants would respond honestly to interview questions. Participants were supported by assurances of confidentiality and voluntary participation. The second assumption was participants had a basic understanding of the study’s key terms and to articulate their experiences meaningfully. This assumption was based on participants’ professional roles as CEOs, which typically require advanced communication skills, strategic thinking, and familiarity with organizational dynamics relevant to the study’s focus.

### **Limitations**

Limitations are the potential weaknesses or constraints in a study that may affect the interpretation, generalizability, or validity of the findings (Noble & Smith, 2024). These are factors beyond the researcher’s control, such as sample size, time constraints, access to data, or methodological choices (Saraswati, 2025). Identifying limitations is essential for maintaining transparency and credibility in the research process (Hassan, 2025). The first limitation was related to participant transparency, which may have affected the depth of responses. To mitigate this limitation, participant CEOs were assured of confidentiality, and the importance of honest,

unfiltered feedback was emphasized. These measures were intended to foster a more open dialogue and encourage richer contributions. Another limitation was the time required for completing the interview which may have negatively affected the sample size. To minimize this limitation, flexible scheduling options were offered. The case study approach was also a limitation because the design is tailored to a specific context and may not be generalizable to organizations with different circumstances (Yin, 2018). The mitigation strategy for this limitation included data triangulation, achieved by interviewing both current and past CEOs from various organizations, and a review of the literature to increase trustworthiness of the study.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations define the boundaries of a study and help maintain focus on the research questions and are intentional choices made by the researcher to narrow the scope and make the study manageable (Coker, 2022). Several key delimitations were established to ensure a focused and meaningful exploration of the underrepresentation of Black women in C-suite roles. First, the study was delimited to CEOs from organizations listed on the Fortune 1500. This decision was made to ensure that participants had experience operating at the highest level of corporate leadership where strategic decision-making and organizational influence take place. Second, participants were required to have a minimum of three years of experience in their current or past CEO role. This criterion was established to ensure that participants had sufficient tenure to reflect meaningfully on organizational culture, leadership pathways, and systemic challenges. The literature supports the importance of experience in shaping leadership perspectives and understanding institutional dynamics (Coker, 2022). Third, the study was delimited to CEOs within U.S. based companies. This geographic focus was chosen to account for the unique socio-cultural, legal, and organizational contexts of the U.S., particularly regarding race, gender, and

corporate governance. Limiting the study to the U.S. ensured consistency in contextual factors and aligned with the research problem centered on the underrepresentation of Black women in American corporate leadership.

### **Ethical Assurances**

Approval from NU's IRB was received prior to data collection. Participants were informed of the minimal risk involved and received a letter of informed consent before participating. The letter of consent was reviewed with each participant before the interview. Confidentiality and privacy were emphasized throughout the study, and participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time. To protect participant identity, all data were securely stored on a password-protected device and in a physical notebook accessible only to the researcher, in accordance with IRB guidelines. Data will be stored for a period of 3 years after which it will be destroyed. This approach aligned with best practices for ethical data management in qualitative research, which emphasized the importance of safeguarding sensitive information through secure storage and restricted access (Clark et al., 2019). Additionally, participants were assigned unique numeric identifiers to ensure confidentiality and prevent the disclosure of personal identities, a practice supported by ethical guidelines for human subjects research (Taquette & Souza, 2022).

The researcher also acknowledged potential personal and professional biases related to the topic and took deliberate steps to minimize their influence during data collection and analysis. This included engaging in reflexive journaling and maintaining awareness of positionality throughout the research process. Reflexivity is a recognized strategy in qualitative research to enhance transparency and reduce bias, thereby strengthening the credibility and trustworthiness of findings (Taquette & Souza, 2022).

## Summary

A qualitative pilot case study approach was most appropriate for this study, as it allowed for the exploration of complex social phenomena through the collection and interpretation of rich, narrative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The population sample included five purposefully selected current and former Fortune 1500 CEOs with at least three years of experience. A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect data. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase approach that enabled identification of key themes and that aligned the findings with the research questions. Ethical assurances were addressed and included details of how the researcher followed NU's IRB practices. Chapter 4 presents the results and includes a discussion of how trustworthiness was established, followed by a detailed presentation of the findings and an analysis comparing these results to the existing literature.

## Chapter 4: Findings

The problem addressed in this study was the underrepresentation of Black women in the C-suite, which may often lead to a lack of diverse perspectives in decision-making, reduced innovation, and missed opportunities for equitable organizational growth (Arsel et al., 2022; Esparza et al., 2024; Hayvon, 2024). The purpose of this qualitative pilot case study was to explore the perceptions of CEOs regarding the underrepresentation of Black women in the C-suite. Data was collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with five current or past CEOs to capture their perceptions of barriers and challenges faced by Black women in advancement to C-suite positions. This chapter includes discussions of the study results and a detailed evaluation of the findings. Manual coding and Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase approach were used to identify key themes, and ensured the findings were aligned with the research questions. Themes and subthemes are discussed, including unique responses.

### Trustworthiness of the Data

Trustworthiness in qualitative research describes the extent to which the analysis of data can be considered accurate and dependable, acknowledging the subjective aspects of the research process (Ahmed, 2024). Ensuring trustworthiness requires the use of rigorous processes and clear strategies to verify the accuracy of qualitative research and to determine the credibility of its findings (Haq et al., 2023). Trustworthiness in this pilot study was established through detailed, analyzed responses from CEOs based on their perceptions of barriers and challenges Black women faced in career ascension to the C-suite. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified four components to establish trustworthiness in qualitative research and include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Rich, comprehensive responses from participants strengthened the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the

study, while a structured interview protocol ensured consistency, repeatability, and overall trustworthiness (Amankwaa, 2016).

### ***Credibility***

Credibility is a foundational element of trustworthiness in qualitative research and refers to the degree of confidence that can be placed in the truthfulness and accuracy of the study's findings (Ahmed, 2024). Lincoln and Guba (1985) conceptualized credibility as the qualitative counterpart to internal validity in quantitative research, emphasizing that it is achieved by conducting research in a manner that enhances the believability of findings and demonstrates their trustworthiness to external audiences. Credibility in qualitative inquiry is bolstered through strategies such as prolonged engagement, triangulation, and rapport-building (McLeod, 2024). Data triangulation was achieved through the integration of multiple sources and methods. Specifically, five participants who served as CEOs in various organizations were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse range of perspectives relevant to the research topic. Rapport was established with participants through sustained engagement in semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes. This extended interaction fostered a conversational tone, which is essential for building trust and encouraging openness, particularly when interviewing high-level executives. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in probing emerging themes while maintaining consistency across interviews, thereby supporting the development of authentic and nuanced responses.

### ***Transferability***

Transferability in qualitative research refers to the extent to which findings can be applied to other contexts or settings and is managed by providing rich, contextual detail that enables readers to determine whether the results are applicable to their own situations (McLeod,

2024; Younas et al., 2023). This detailed contextualization, often referred to as thick description, goes beyond merely recounting events or behaviors. It includes the surrounding environment, participants' emotions, intentions, and interpretations, offering a nuanced understanding of the social phenomenon under study (Younas et al., 2023). According to Drisko (2025), transferability in qualitative research is conceptually similar to generalizability and external validity in quantitative paradigms. Transferability is further strengthened by thorough descriptions of both the participants and the settings in which the research occurs. During the data collection phase, a semi-structured interview protocol was used to guide conversations with five CEOs.

### ***Dependability***

Dependability in qualitative research ensures that findings are not only credible but also reproducible under similar conditions (Noble & Smith, 2024). Achieving dependability requires transparent documentation of methodological decisions, data collection procedures, and analytical processes, enabling future researchers to replicate or audit the study (Christou, 2025; Coleman, 2023; Noble & Smith, 2024). To support dependability, a semi-structured interview guide was developed to standardize interviews conducted with five CEO participants.

Dependability was further established through notetaking during interviews and a systematic data analysis using Braun and Clark (2022) six-phase thematic analysis approach. Additionally, Bingham (2023) emphasized the importance of maintaining an audit trail, a detailed record of research decisions and activities, to enhance dependability and trustworthiness. This included documenting changes in methodology, data collection procedures, and analytical strategies, ensuring transparency and allowing others to evaluate the rigor of the study.

### ***Confirmability***

Confirmability in qualitative research refers to the extent to which findings are shaped by the participants' experiences and not researcher bias; it is supported through practices such as audit trails, reflexivity, and transparent methodological documentation. (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). To achieve confirmability in qualitative research, it is necessary to implement strategies that minimize the influence of researcher and participant bias, ensuring that findings are firmly grounded in the data (Korstjens, 2018; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). One approach is maintaining a comprehensive audit trail, which involves systematically documenting all research decisions, data collection procedures, and analytical steps and allows external reviewers to trace the research process and verify the consistency of findings (Christou, 2025; Noble & Smith, 2024). Confirmability was achieved by maintaining a structured log of methodological choices, including the use of semi-structured interviews for data collection and thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes in relation to the research context, existing literature, and theoretical framework. Additionally, content analysis was employed to systematically code and categorize data, ensuring that interpretations were grounded in the participants' responses rather than researcher assumptions.

### **Results**

A qualitative pilot case study, guided by Bourdieu's theory of practice, was employed to explore the underrepresentation of Black women in C-suite roles within U.S. Fortune 1500 companies. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit five CEOs from professional networking platforms, including LinkedIn and the Virginia Chamber of Commerce, and through organizational DEI directors who facilitated introductions to eligible participants. The recruitment flyer included the purpose of the study, eligibility criteria, and instructions to contact

the researcher for those interested in participating. Participation criteria included a minimum of three years of experience in the C-suite and employment at an organization listed on the Fortune 1500, which included both public and private U.S. companies. A letter of consent was sent to individuals who expressed interest in participating. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews on Zoom and Teams, lasting 45-60 minutes. Before each interview began, informed consent was reviewed and verbal consent obtained. Verbal consent was also requested and obtained to record the interviews. The researcher explained to each participant that their information would be kept confidential and they could skip any question or withdraw from the study at any time. To protect confidentiality, participants were assigned a pseudonym that began with P1 in the first interview. Demographic data for the five participants are provided in

Participant demographic data, as shown in Table 1, indicated that all five participants, including three men and two women, who were currently and formerly employed. The five participants met the criteria of at least three years as CEO. Two of the participants were between the age of 40 and 50, one was between 51 and 60, and two were greater than 60. Four participants had a master's degree, and one had a bachelor's degree. All were White. Four had worked for their organization prior to becoming CEO. Four had mentors as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

Participant	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5
Race	White	White	White	White	White
Gender	Male	Female	Male	Male	Female
Position	President	President	President	President	President
Time with organization	>20	>3	11-20	>3	11-20
Mentor or Sponsor	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Education	Masters	Bachelors	Masters	Masters	Masters
Citizenship	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Age	40-50	40-50	>60	51-60	>60

All interviews were transcribed within 24 hours of completion to ensure the accuracy and integrity of participant responses. Only one participant opted out of the transcript verification process. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase framework. Ethical procedures, including informed consent and confidentiality, were upheld throughout the study.

**Research Question 1**

How do CEOs perceive Black women regarding the selection criteria for C-suite level positions?

As reflected in Table 2, three major themes emerged for research question one: the influence of pipeline and sponsorship on selection, unconscious bias and limited awareness, and retrospective

recognition of diversity's value. Table 2 also shows the percentage of participants who addressed each theme.

**Table 2**

*Research Question 1 Themes*

Themes	Addressed by Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Pipeline and Sponsorship Influence Selection	5	100%
Unconscious Bias and Limited Awareness	2	40%
Retrospective Recognition of Diversity's Value	4	80%

***Theme 1: Pipeline and Sponsorship Influence Selection***

All five participants emphasized that selection for C-suite roles was largely influenced by individuals being *in the pipeline*, a process shaped by mentorship and sponsorship. Participants consistently emphasized that mentorship plays a critical role in preparing individuals for advancement to CEO and other C-suite positions. Mentorship was described not only as a source of guidance and professional development but also as a gateway to visibility and opportunity within the organization. Of the five C-suite leaders interviewed, four reported having benefited from mentorship during their career trajectory. For example, P2 stated, "The opportunity changed my life..." P4 noted "...especially since I am the first woman to hold the title of CEO in my organization.

These relationships were often pivotal in helping them navigate organizational culture, build strategic networks, and gain access to leadership opportunities. P3 stood out as an exception. Unlike the others, this individual did not receive formal mentorship but entered the organization through an internship facilitated by a university alumnus. P3 took the risk as an intern and started during the early stages of their organization. "No. Not really. I was expected to

take the lead position at some point because we were such a small organization, and I was one of the youngest. Others left for larger organizations. I was the last man standing.”

Five participants highlighted that being in the pipeline for C-suite roles often hinges on visibility to those in positions of influence and explained that this visibility is typically cultivated through consistent exposure to senior leadership, participation in high-profile projects, and inclusion in strategic conversations. All five participants acknowledged that individuals who are regularly seen and recognized by decision-makers are more likely to be considered for advancement. This recognition often stems from mentorship, sponsorship, or proximity to influential leaders and resources that are not equally distributed across all demographics. P1 explained the importance of visibility and intentional inclusion in leadership development pipelines:

Visibility in the workplace is not solely determined by performance, it is also shaped by perception and relationships. Without deliberate efforts to include diverse talent in leadership pipelines, even highly capable individuals may remain unseen. This underscores the critical role of organizational culture and leadership accountability in ensuring that sponsorship and advancement opportunities are equitably distributed, rather than limited to those already within familiar networks.

P5 emphasized the critical role of sponsorship and informal networks in shaping access to C-suite opportunities:

Advancement to executive roles is influenced not only by formal qualifications and performance, but also by access to informal networks. These networks comprised of social connections, mentorship circles, and off-the-record interactions—serve as key pipelines for leadership development. They provide insider information, strategic

opportunities, and personal endorsements that significantly impact who is considered for top roles. Without access to these networks, qualified individuals may be overlooked, highlighting the importance of intentional sponsorship in diversifying leadership pathways.

Two participants acknowledged that informal relationships often develop through shared backgrounds, social affiliations, or cultural commonalities factors that may inadvertently exclude those who do not fit the dominant demographic profile of current leadership. P3 stated, “I played golf with others in leadership. I was invited to cocktail parties and other gatherings. I never noticed, as I can recall, a Black woman at any of the events.” P5 remembered, “I was selected while attending school. Later, the leadership team at another organization recognized my dedication.” P5 also stated, “I feel it was just the culture. Normally, for the C-suite, you are recommended.”

### ***Theme 2: Unconscious Bias and Limited Awareness***

Two of the participants noted they had not considered the lack of diversity in the C-suite. P1’s reflection illustrated the influence of unconscious bias and limited awareness in leadership advancement: “Early in my career, I had a mentor who played a pivotal role in sponsoring me for a C-suite position. Interestingly, most of the leadership at the time had attended my alma mater, which likely contributed to my selection.” When asked whether the lack of diversity in leadership might be due to everyone being chosen from the same pool, P1 responded, “Maybe, I really never thought about it.” P2 reflected on the impact of unconscious bias and limited awareness within professional spaces, and noted:

I am not immune to the title or stigma that comes with being a Black woman. Despite being in close contact with many Black women in management, I often found myself

wishing one would have approached me about an opportunity. I participated in leadership activities playing golf, attending cocktail parties, and other gatherings but, as I recall, I never noticed a Black woman at any of these events. It wasn't until later that I realized their absence, which speaks to a broader issue of visibility, inclusion, and the subtle ways bias and limited awareness shape who gets seen and supported.

### ***Theme 3: Retrospective Recognition of Diversity's Value***

All five participants recognized the value of diversity in leadership, with four explicitly noting that a more inclusive team could have improved decision-making and organizational performance. Participants indicated this acknowledgment often came after reflecting on past decisions and outcomes, reinforcing the belief that diverse leadership teams enhance organizational effectiveness. When asked about diversity in leadership, P3 acknowledged the presence of women but remembered that all the women in leadership at their organization were white. This prompted a moment of reflection, followed by recognition that while interviews are open to everyone, the organization has recently become more intentional about inclusion while still prioritizing excellence in recruitment. P1 expressed optimism, suggesting that upcoming changes would reflect greater diversity. When asked about the recruitment process, P1 shared,

... the organization is now focusing on candidates with military experience, particularly because their customer base includes veterans. This strategy is expected to expand the leadership pipeline to include more individuals of color, especially Black women, who bring both relevant experience and cultural alignment with the organization's environment.

P4 reflected on personal experiences and growth and acknowledged the importance of understanding diversity and its value.

I have often resisted stereotyping people, even when others described me as having masculine energy or being too forward—traits that I believe contributed to my later entry into the C-suite. My focus has always been on a person’s ability, aptitude, and character. Recognizing that bias is not easy to overcome, I committed to reading and learning about different concepts and theories to become more aware of my own biases. Through these readings and audiobooks, I have come to appreciate lived experiences, beliefs, and attitudes that highlight how differences can add value. Many people avoid those who are different because they fear having to monitor what they say, but I believe that being conscious of other cultures is not a burden, it is a strength.

### **Research Question 2**

What barriers or challenges do CEOs perceive contribute to the underrepresentation of do Black women in C-suite roles? Table 3 presents the key themes that emerged from the qualitative data analysis for Research Question 2. The three major themes included: exclusion from mentorship and sponsorship pipelines, lack of intentional diversity initiatives, and an organizational culture that overlooks contributions. Table 3 also reflects the percentage of participants who addressed each theme.

**Table 3**

*Research Question 2 Themes*

Themes	Addressed by Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Exclusion from Mentorship and Sponsorship Pipelines	3	60%
Lack of Intentional Diversity Initiatives	2	40%
Organizational Culture of Overlooked Contributions	2	40%

***Theme 1: Exclusion from Mentorship and Sponsorship Pipelines.***

Three participants described barriers that included exclusion from mentorship pipelines, a lack of intentional diversity initiatives, organizational cultures that often overlook their contributions, and the presence of unconscious bias in leadership selection processes. Despite possessing the qualifications and leadership potential necessary for executive roles, these challenges significantly hinder their advancement and contribute to their continued underrepresentation in top leadership positions. P1 reflected on how leadership advancement was influenced by access to mentorship and sponsorship rather than race: “I remember when the NAACP analyzed how many Black professionals were in or near the C-suite. I did not hire based on race; I hired individuals who were already in the pipeline through their mentors and sponsors.”

P2 reflected on efforts to support Black women in the organization while acknowledging a lack of awareness about leadership representation: “I started a program and made myself available to Black women within the organization, but I never realized that the absence of a Black woman in the C-suite was an issue. P3 highlighted the transformative impact of mentorship and sponsorship while revealing how access to such opportunities often depends on exclusive networks.

No, I met the leadership during a program offered by (name redacted). That opportunity changed my life, and it was there that I met the person who sponsored and mentored me for the role. There were no Black women, Black men, or any person of color.

***Theme 2: Lack of Intentional Diversity Initiatives***

Interviews revealed that participants view intentionality as moving beyond passive inclusion toward proactive strategies that ensure equity and representation. P4 emphasized “...

their awareness could only lead to inclusivity and stated that being conscious of other cultures and lived experiences is not a burden but a strength.” P5 emphasized that true diversity requires moving beyond stereotypes and creating opportunities for historically overlooked individuals by focusing on ability, aptitude, and character. They shared that reading, listening to stories, and learning about different cultures helps them recognize biases, appreciate differences, and view cultural awareness as essential. P5 stated,

When I started, there were no persons of color in the C-suite. I was intentional about asking recruiters to seek qualified candidates of color for interviews. There was a time when a Black person was not even part of the interview process, despite having other groups of color represented. My organization’s fiscal improvement can be attributed, in part, to our intentional focus on diversity because a broader perspective leads to better decisions, more innovative solutions, and improved profitability. A diverse workforce also reflects the diversity of our stakeholders.

### ***Theme 3: Organizational Culture of Overlooked Contributions***

Participants described organizational environments where the contributions of Black women were frequently undervalued or ignored and indicated the lack of recognition not only affects morale but also limits opportunities for advancement, as visibility and acknowledgment are key factors in leadership selection. P4 reflected on how organizational culture historically discouraged women from advocating for themselves, stating,

When I first started, speaking up was considered unacceptable, you waited until you were called on. I have noticed that women of all races are now advocating for themselves, which is a positive change. I try to focus on a person’s ability, aptitude, and character, and I have worked to become aware of my own biases by reading and learning about

different concepts and theories. Through these efforts, I have come to appreciate lived experiences and cultural differences as added value, even though many people avoid those who are different because they fear saying the wrong thing. I believe being conscious of other cultures is a good thing.

P1 also reflected on the lack of recognition and explained,

I was CEO for ten years until the merger, and although I contributed significantly, I felt there was more I could have offered. Looking back, I realize that a diverse leadership team brings different perspectives, which strengthens decision-making and organizational performance. Inclusion ensures that all voices are considered, but historically, many contributions were overlooked because the pipeline favored those with mentors and sponsors from similar backgrounds. If I could do it differently, I would have made a greater effort to seek out a more diverse team.

### **Comparison of Results to the Literature Review**

Data analysis for RQ1 and RQ2 identified barriers hindering Black women's representation in C-suite roles within Fortune 1500 companies. Three key themes emerged: exclusion from mentorship and sponsorship pipelines (Bishop, 2024; Johnson et al., 2025), lack of intentional diversity initiatives (Lewis & Shah, 2021), and organizational cultures that undervalue contributions (Onyeador et al., 2021; Clar et al., 2021). Participants explained that advancement often depends on visibility and social capital through mentorship and sponsorship, not equally available to all, which reinforces disparities (Bishop, 2024). CEOs emphasized that proactive recruitment, intentional inclusion strategies, and accountability are essential for dismantling systemic barriers and promoting equitable leadership pipelines (Johnson et al., 2025).

**RQ1**

How do CEOs perceive Black women regarding the selection criteria for C-suite level positions?

Four of the five participants reported meaningful benefits from mentorship throughout their career trajectories, reinforcing evidence that sponsorship and informal networks significantly shape executive selection and advancement (Johnson et al., 2025). These findings align with Bourdieu's theory of social capital as a resource embedded in durable relationship networks that can be converted into symbolic capital such as reputation and perceived leadership readiness thereby influencing who is considered "promotion-ready" (Bourdieu, 1986).

Goudeau et al. (2024) extended Bourdieu's concept by showing that leadership mismatches between individuals' social-class socialization and institutional expectations emphasize how misaligned organizational strategies create barriers. This helps explain why mentorship, sponsorship, and networking are vital. When underrepresented groups lack access to support their values, experiences, and project opportunities are misaligned with organizational norms and strategic priorities it creates obstacles to advancement and performance. Similarly, Goudeau et al. (2024) demonstrated that a lack of valued cultural and social capital creates disadvantages, which aligns with Bourdieu's idea that success depends on accumulating the right capital for the field. This form of capital often circulates within homophilous networks, privileging individuals who share cultural similarities with incumbent leadership and thereby reproducing hierarchy and limiting access for underrepresented groups.

Haq (2023) supports leadership's responsibility to move beyond homogeneity and challenge exclusionary norms and practices, as leaders who hold cultural and symbolic capital are uniquely positioned to elevate marginalized voices and reshape organizational habitus.

P5 emphasized the critical role of sponsorship and informal networks in shaping access to C-suite opportunities:

Advancement to executive roles is influenced not only by formal qualifications and performance, but also by access to informal networks. These networks comprised of social connections, mentorship circles, and off-the-record interactions—serve as key pipelines for leadership development. They provide insider information, strategic opportunities, and personal endorsements that significantly impact who is considered for top roles. Without access to these networks, qualified individuals may be overlooked, highlighting the importance of intentional sponsorship in diversifying leadership pathways.

The emphasis participants placed on visibility and relationship-building underscored the structural nature of advancement; without intentional interventions to democratize access to mentorship and sponsorship, leadership pipelines may continue to perpetuate inequities.

Mentorship and sponsorship are particularly vital for historically marginalized groups. Gichane et al. (2024) found that mentoring relationships are essential for career advancement, especially in environments where Black women are underrepresented in leadership and revealed that these women often lack access to high-quality mentorship and sponsorship, which are crucial for navigating institutional barriers and gaining visibility in leadership pipelines.

P1 explained the importance of visibility and intentional inclusion in leadership development pipelines:

Visibility in the workplace is not solely determined by performance; it is also shaped by perception and relationships. Without deliberate efforts to include diverse talent in leadership pipelines, even highly capable individuals may remain unseen. This

underscores the critical role of organizational culture and leadership accountability in ensuring that sponsorship and advancement opportunities are equitably distributed, rather than limited to those already within familiar networks.

Unconscious bias and limited awareness perpetuate homogeneity in leadership pipelines by reinforcing reliance on familiar networks and cultural similarity, which are often misinterpreted as indicators of competence or “fit” (Saunders & Midgette, 2023; Zhao, 2023). This dynamic aligns with Bourdieu’s theory of social capital, which posits that access to durable networks and the ability to convert social capital into symbolic capital such as reputation and perceived readiness shapes advancement opportunities (Bourdieu, 1986). Participant reflections illustrate this process: P1 acknowledged that shared alma mater connections likely influenced their promotion, while P2 highlighted the absence of Black women in informal leadership spaces, underscoring how exclusion from these networks limits visibility and sponsorship. These examples confirmed that leadership advancement is not solely merit-based but structurally mediated through cultural norms and network access, validating the need for intentional interventions to disrupt homophilous patterns and democratize access to mentorship and sponsorship (Goudeau et al., 2024).

Retrospective recognition of diversity’s value aligns with Bourdieu’s (1990) emphasis on strategic alignment, which argues that organizational success depends on aligning practices with broader goals. Inclusive leadership strategies such as equity scorecards, anonymized processes, and reflexive practices represent deliberate efforts to align recruitment and advancement processes with organizational objectives of innovation and performance (Garrick et al., 2024; Cho et al., 2025). Participants’ reflections reinforced this connection: P3 acknowledged that diversity was limited to white women in leadership, prompting recognition that intentional

inclusion improves decision-making. Similarly, P1 highlighted a new recruitment focus on candidates with military experience to better serve a veteran customer base, demonstrating how strategic priorities can expand leadership pipelines to include underrepresented groups. P4's commitment to learning about bias and valuing cultural differences illustrates the role of reflexivity in revaluing social and cultural capital, a concept central to Bourdieu's theory (see Bourdieu, 1986; Goudeau et al., 2024). Together, these insights confirm that diversity is not only an ethical imperative but a strategic resource that enhances organizational effectiveness when intentionally integrated into leadership development.

## **RQ2**

What barriers or challenges do CEOs perceive contribute to the underrepresentation of Black women in C-suite roles?

Exclusion from mentorship and sponsorship pipelines aligns with Bourdieu's (1996) emphasis on strategic alignment, which asserts that organizational success depends on aligning resources and processes with strategic objectives. When leadership advancement relies heavily on mentorship and sponsorship, yet these pipelines systematically exclude Black women, organizations fail to align their diversity and inclusion goals with actual practices. This misalignment creates structural barriers that hinder progression to executive roles, despite candidates possessing the necessary qualifications and leadership potential (Minnett et al., 2024; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2022; Schwartz et al., 2024). Participant reflections illustrated this dynamic: P1 noted that hiring decisions favored individuals already embedded in mentorship and sponsorship networks, while P2 acknowledged starting a program for Black women but admitted a lack of awareness about their absence in the C-suite. P3 emphasized the transformative impact of mentorship and sponsorship, revealing that access to these opportunities often depends on

exclusive networks lacking racial diversity. These insights reinforce Bourdieu's (1986) theory that social capital resources embedded in networks can be converted into symbolic capital, such as perceived readiness for leadership, and that exclusion from these networks perpetuates inequities (Goudeau et al., 2024).

The lack of intentional diversity initiatives aligns with Bourdeau et al.'s (2018) emphasis on strategic alignment, which asserts that organizational success depends on aligning practices with strategic objectives. When diversity efforts remain passive or tokenistic, organizations fail to integrate inclusion into their core strategy, creating misalignment that undermines performance goals. Research confirms that intentional practices and blind hiring are essential for dismantling systemic exclusion and increasing representation of Black women in leadership (Gündemir et al., 2024; Garrick et al., 2024; Weaver et al., 2025). Participant reflections reinforced this connection: P4 emphasized that cultural awareness is a strength, while P5 described actively requesting recruiters to seek qualified candidates of color and linked these efforts to fiscal improvements and innovation. These insights echoed Bourdieu's (1986) theory that cultural and social capital influence access to leadership opportunities and Goudeau et al.'s (2024) findings that misalignment between institutional norms and individual socialization perpetuates inequities. Together, the participants underscored that diversity is not only an ethical imperative but a strategic resource that enhanced organizational effectiveness when intentionally embedded in leadership development.

Organizational cultures that overlook contributions align with Bourdeau's (2018) emphasis on strategic alignment, which asserts that organizational success depends on aligning practices with strategic objectives. When contributions from Black women are undervalued, organizations fail to integrate equity and inclusion into their leadership strategies, creating

misalignment that undermines performance goals. Research confirmed that implicit cultural norms and intersectional biases perpetuate exclusion even in organizations with formal DEI policies (Onyeador, 2021; Pogrebna et al., 2024). Participant reflections illustrated this dynamic: P4 described how early organizational norms discouraged women from advocating for themselves and emphasized the importance of cultural awareness as a strength, while P1 acknowledged that overlooking diverse contributions historically limited decision-making and innovation. These insights echoed Bourdieu's (1986) theory that cultural and social capital influence visibility and advancement and Goudeau et al.'s (2024) findings that misalignment between institutional norms and individual socialization perpetuates inequities. Together, they underscored that inclusive leadership and intentional cultural awareness are critical for dismantling systemic barriers and ensuring that diverse voices are recognized and valued.

### **Summary**

Chapter four provided findings based on the participant CEOs' perceptions of Black women in relation to C-suite selection criteria and identified barriers contributing to their underrepresentation. Findings revealed that advancement was strongly influenced by access to mentorship and sponsorship networks, which often excluded Black women, reinforcing structural inequities. Participants emphasized that visibility and relationship-building are critical, yet unconscious bias and reliance on familiar networks perpetuate homogeneity in leadership pipelines. This pilot case study also highlighted the lack of intentional diversity initiatives and organizational cultures that undervalue contributions, creating misalignment between inclusion goals and strategic objectives. These insights aligned with Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural capital, Goudeau et al.'s findings on institutional misalignment, and Bourdeau's emphasis on strategic alignment, underscoring that diversity is an ethical imperative and a

strategic resource that enhances innovation and organizational performance when embedded intentionally. Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the key findings, recommendations, and summary of this pilot study.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations, and Study Summary

The problem addressed in this study was the underrepresentation of Black women in the C-suite, which may often lead to a lack of diverse perspectives in decision-making, reduced innovation, and missed opportunities for equitable organizational growth (Arsel et al., 2022; Esparza et al., 2024; Hayvon, 2024). The purpose of this qualitative pilot case study was to explore the perceptions of CEOs regarding the underrepresentation of Black women in the C-suite. Data was collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with five CEOs to capture their perceptions of barriers and challenges faced by Black women in advancement to C-suite positions. This methodology and design were selected for effectiveness in capturing complex social dynamics and nuanced perceptions through rich, narrative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2023); this design aligned with the study's objective to understand systemic barriers and leadership selection processes within real-world organizational contexts.

Data triangulation enhanced the credibility of findings by incorporating diverse perspectives and minimizing bias (Yin, 2018; Schlunegger et al., 2024). Data triangulation was achieved through data collection from five CEOs representing various organizations. Guided by Bourdieu's theory of practice, interviews with five White CEOs from Fortune 1500 companies revealed insights into leadership pathways, mentorship, and organizational dynamics (Bahadori & Ramjawan, 2025). All participants had advanced degrees, most were internally promoted, and four had mentors, highlighting patterns relevant to executive selection and diversity barriers. The context-specific nature of the case study limits generalizability, though triangulation and diverse participant selection strengthened trustworthiness (Noble & Smith, 2024).

This chapter is organized around the study's two research questions: How do CEOs perceive Black women regarding the selection criteria for C-suite level positions? And what barriers or challenges do CEOs perceive contribute to the underrepresentation of do Black women in C-suite roles? Additionally, there are recommendations for practice and for future research.

## **Discussion**

The key findings in this study highlighted systemic and organizational factors contributing to the underrepresentation of Black women in C-suite roles. Limited access to mentorship emerged as a significant barrier; four of the five CEOs interviewed reported having mentors who were instrumental in their advancement, reinforcing prior research on the critical role of mentorship in executive career trajectories (Esparza et al., 2024; Hayvon, 2024). This suggested that Black women, who often lack access to networks, face structural disadvantages in leadership development.

### ***Need for Internal Promotion***

Internal promotion patterns were another key finding. Most CEOs were promoted from within their organizations, aligning with existing literature that emphasizes internal pipelines as a major determinant of executive selection (Arsel et al., 2022). When Black women are underrepresented in mid-level leadership roles, their chances of internal promotion diminish, perpetuating inequities in C-suite representation (Glass & Cook, 2020).

### ***Removal of Systemic Barriers***

Participants revealed systemic barriers embedded in leadership selection processes, such as reliance on informal networks and perceptions of cultural fit. These findings support Bourdieu's (1996) theory of practice, which explained how social capital and organizational

habitus influence access to power. Participant CEOs acknowledged that these norms often favored candidates who fit established patterns, unintentionally disadvantaging Black women. While CEOs expressed a commitment to diversity, few described concrete accountability measures for achieving that goal. This gap between stated values and actionable strategies reflected a broader organizational challenge documented in recent literature by Schlunegger et al. (2024) and Noble and Smith (2024). Establishing measurable diversity goals and accountability frameworks is essential to translating commitment into tangible outcomes.

These findings directly addressed the study's purpose and research questions by uncovering patterns in leadership pathways, mentorship, and organizational dynamics that influenced executive selection. The findings extend existing research on intersectionality and leadership inequality, affirming that advancement is not solely merit-based but deeply embedded in social and cultural structures that privilege certain identities. An unexpected finding revealed that while CEOs acknowledged systemic barriers, none identified Black women as prominently represented in leadership pipelines, underscoring the persistence of exclusionary practices.

### ***Social Implications***

Participants emphasized that workplace visibility depends not only on performance but also on perceptions and relationships, noting that without deliberate inclusion, strong talent can remain unseen in leadership pipelines. Furthermore, participants highlighted how sponsorship and informal networks, social connections, mentorship circles, and off-the-record interactions serve as critical yet often inaccessible pathways to C-suite roles. Inclusive mentorship programs, intersectional leadership development, and transparent selection practices are organizational risks that perpetuate inequities, thereby missing the innovation and strategic advantage that diverse

leadership brings. These results reinforce the need for systemic change to achieve equitable representation in executive leadership.

The findings imply that leadership advancement systems remain structurally misaligned with organizational goals for equity because access to mentorship, sponsorship, and influential informal networks is unequally distributed, disproportionately limiting Black women's pathways to executive roles. Across interviews, participants emphasized that visibility, relationship-building, and inclusion within informal leadership circles were essential for advancement, yet these opportunities were often mediated by homophilous networks and unconscious bias, reinforcing exclusion despite high performance or qualifications. This dynamic reflects Bourdieu's (1986) assertion that social capital embedded in durable networks converts into symbolic capital such as perceived leadership readiness, shaping who was viewed as *promotion-ready*. Goudeau et al. (2024) further highlighted that when individuals' social class, socialization, and cultural capital do not align with organizational norms, they encounter structural barriers that inhibit advancement. Participant examples, including reliance on alma mater connections (P1) and exclusion from informal leadership spaces (P2), illustrated how these patterns reproduced inequity within leadership pipelines.

### ***Leaders' Actions***

The participants also implied that intentional leadership action is necessary to disrupt these inequitable structures. Participants described how sponsorship, culturally aware leadership, reflexive practices, and equity-driven recruitment strategies can revalue the social and cultural capital of underrepresented groups, aligning organizational processes with broader strategic goals (Haq, 2023; Garrick et al., 2024). As participants noted, democratizing access to mentorship and sponsorship, not simply offering formal programs, is essential for ensuring that

diverse leaders are visible, supported, and considered for advancement opportunities. Thus, the overarching implication is that organizational leaders must intentionally redesign mentorship and sponsorship systems, challenge exclusionary norms, and embed equity-focused practices into leadership development to align strategies with the goal of diversifying executive leadership.

### ***Reducing Exclusionary Barriers***

The combined interview findings imply that organizations experience a critical strategic misalignment when mentorship, sponsorship, diversity initiatives, and cultural recognition are not intentionally designed to support Black women's leadership advancement. Participants described exclusion from influential networks, passive or inconsistent diversity practices, and organizational cultures that undervalue their contributions, all of which reinforce systemic barriers despite professed commitments to equity. These patterns reflect Bourdieu's (1986, 1996) assertion that social, cultural, and symbolic capital shape access to leadership opportunities; when Black women are denied access to these forms of capital through limited mentorship, narrow recruitment practices, or culturally exclusive norms, inequities persist. The participants collectively suggested that achieving authentic inclusion requires organizations to intentionally embed equitable mentorship structures, proactive diversity practices, and culturally aware leadership norms into their strategic frameworks. Such alignment would enable Black women to fully leverage their expertise and leadership potential, while strengthening organizational performance and innovation.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

There are six recommendations for practice addressing the underrepresentation of Black women as CEOs. First, organizations' leaders should implement structured mentorship and sponsorship programs that intentionally support the advancement of Black women. These

programs must connect high-potential Black female professionals with senior leaders who can provide guidance, advocacy, and access to strategic opportunities often distributed through informal networks (Iheduru-Anderson & Shingles, 2023; Sharma et al., 2024).

Second, leadership development initiatives should embed intersectional frameworks that account for the combined effects of racial and gender biases. Incorporating these frameworks into organizational culture and succession planning will help create inclusive and equitable leadership pipelines (Sipondo, 2025). Third, executive selection criteria must be critically evaluated to eliminate implicit biases, including reliance on internal referrals, perceptions of cultural fit, and unstructured promotion pathways that may exclude qualified Black women (Whysall, 2017).

Fourth, organizational leaders should increase the visibility of Black women in leadership roles by highlighting their achievements through internal communications, leadership spotlights, and opportunities to lead high-impact initiatives. Visibility fosters aspiration among emerging leaders and signals a genuine commitment to diversity and inclusion (Sharma et al., 2024). Fifth, to ensure sustained progress, companies should establish accountability mechanisms such as tracking diversity metrics in executive hiring, setting measurable goals for representation, and regularly reviewing outcomes. Transparency reinforces trust and demonstrates organizational responsibility (Woods et al., 2024). The sixth recommendation is that organizations' leaders should foster an inclusive organizational culture. This includes valuing diverse perspectives, prioritizing psychological safety, and providing ongoing bias training. Inclusive cultures support retention and success for Black women in leadership while driving innovation and performance (Westover, 2024; Woods et al., 2024).

## Recommendations for Future Research

Building on the findings in this study, there are recommendations for future studies. The first recommendation is for researchers to further explore the underrepresentation of Black women in C-suite roles by broadening the scope of this study to include practices informed by Bourdieu's theory of practice. Specifically, how field dynamics, habitus, and capital shape leadership opportunities and gatekeeping. Branch and Kasztelnik (2023) emphasized the need for intersectional analyses and comparative studies across diverse corporate contexts. Additional qualitative studies that feature the voices of Black women who have attained or are pursuing executive leadership positions are essential. Their lived experiences can offer deeper insights into personal, organizational, and societal factors influencing advancement, complementing CEO perspectives and enriching understanding of leadership pathways (White et al., 2024).

Ethnographic research can be conducted within corporate environments to provide an immersive view of informal dynamics, power structures, and cultural expectations affecting executive selection (Jordan, 2016; Medrano, 2024). Observing real-time interactions and decision-making may uncover subtle barriers that are not evident in interviews (Arkesteijn et al., 2025). Future researchers should explore the role of organizational policies, leadership training programs, and performance evaluation systems in shaping access to executive roles. Combining qualitative content analysis of internal documents with interviews of HR leaders and board members could offer a holistic view of how institutional practices support or hinder advancement (Day et al., 2021; Geerts, 2024). Additionally, narrative inquiry and life history methods may capture the complex, longitudinal experiences of Black women navigating corporate leadership, highlighting how early career experiences, mentorship, sponsorship, and network access influence trajectories over time (White et al., 2024).

Another recommendation is to conduct quantitative comparative studies across multiple industries to identify patterns and variations in leadership selection practices. This recommendation aligns with Imtiaz (2025), who found that revealing how organizational culture, structure, and norms shape advancement opportunities was essential. Incorporating Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field, and capital into these analyses would deepen understanding of why inequities in executive advancement persist. For example, examining how leaders' habitus interacts with the field of corporate leadership can reveal how implicit norms and expectations shape perceptions of who is considered a "fit" for executive roles. Likewise, measuring disparities in the accumulation and conversion of social, cultural, and symbolic capital across groups can illuminate how unequal access to mentorship, elite networks, and reputational legitimacy influences promotion readiness at scale. This approach can offer a more comprehensive understanding of the structural barriers that affect advancement and support the development of more effective, evidence-based interventions to increase the representation of Black women in C-suite leadership.

### **Study Summary**

This qualitative pilot case study was an exploration of the persistent underrepresentation of Black women in C-suite roles within Fortune 1500 organizations, revealing how systemic barriers and informal practices limited access to executive leadership. Guided by Bourdieu's (1996) theory of practice, the findings demonstrated that advancement is shaped not only by merit but by organizational norms, cultural expectations, and access to social and cultural capital (Craike et al., 2023). Limited mentorship, sponsorship, and informal networks continue to reinforce exclusionary practices, constraining leadership opportunities for Black women. These insights extend existing research on intersectionality and leadership inequality, emphasizing that

racial and gender biases intersect to create unique challenges in corporate environments. The findings underscored the need for organizations to critically examine executive selection processes, dismantle implicit biases, and implement intentional strategies to foster equity in leadership pipelines. Without such efforts, companies risk perpetuating systemic exclusion and forfeiting the innovation and strategic advantage that diverse leadership brings. Future researchers should continue to center the experiences of Black women and investigate organizational structures and cultural dynamics that shape access to executive power. Advancing equity in leadership is not only a moral imperative but a strategic necessity for organizations committed to inclusive growth and sustainable success.

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**Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter**

**Project Title:** Is Diversity Equity and Inclusion the New Affirmative Action for White Women?

**NU IRB Number:** IRB-FY23-24-38

**Determination:** Exempt from further review 45 CFR 46.101 Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or

**Status: Active - Research activities may begin as of September 11, 2023**

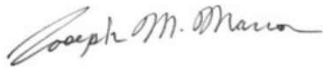
Dear Michelle Collins-Robinson:

The study referenced above has been reviewed by the National University IRB. The IRB has determined your research is exempt from further review under 45 CFR 46.104, which means you will not need to renew your study and may begin your study effective immediately. However, if you find the need to change your study in any way, you will need to submit a modification to the IRB prior to implementing the changes. This will allow the IRB to determine whether or not the study still meets exemption criteria.

Please review your Post Approval Responsibilities here: [Approved Documents Guidelines](#)

For any questions regarding your protocol, please reach out to the IRB at [irb@nu.edu](mailto:irb@nu.edu).

Sincerely,



Dr. Joseph Marron, IRB Chair



Dr. Brianne Mongeon, Director, HRPP & IRB



Jenessa Eberhardt, Associate Director, HRPP & IRB

## Appendix B: Recruitment Social Media Post CEO

My name is Michelle Collins - Robinson and I am a doctoral student at National University (NU). I am conducting a research study on the background and selection process to the c- level as CEO or President, and the intentionality in your selection of hiring women.

I am recruiting individuals who meet all these criteria:

1. You serve as CEO or President of a corporation board.

You will be asked to participate in a 45–60-minute interview in person or over Zoom.

During these activities, you will be asked questions about:

- Your mentor/sponsor/work prior to current position
- Your path of becoming a CEO
- Age, gender, race, and position/title

If you are interested in participating in this pilot study, please click this link:

<https://app.smartsheet.com/b/form/1688ffbae076458997c3d874474c5ea7>

If you have questions, please contact me at [mmcr007@gmail.com](mailto:mmcr007@gmail.com)/804.301.0243.

Thank you!

Michelle Collins-Robinson



## Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Michelle Collins-Robinson, Student Investigator

A Qualitative Exploration of Black Women's Leadership Journeys to the C-suite

**Introduction:** Hello, and thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview today. My name is Michelle Collins-Robinson, and I am a doctoral student at National University conducting my dissertation research. I appreciate your willingness to participate in this interview and provide critical insight into your trajectory to the C-suit.

This interview is expected to last 40-60 minutes. I may record our discussion and will take notes to ensure I have complete information. Your responses will be held in confidence.

**Sample consent:** I would like to review the consent letter with you before we begin the interview.

*Do you agree to participate in the study?*

Participant: Yes \_\_\_\_\_ or No \_\_\_\_\_

**Lead into the Interview:** Thank you for your consent to participate in this interview. My goal today is to gain insight into your trajectory to the C-suite. Please know that all information shared will remain confidential, and your responses will not be disclosed to anyone outside of this research. Your perspectives and experiences are invaluable in helping us understand how leaders like yourself achieve executive-level positions, as well as identifying common themes in leadership advancement.

1. Please confirm the name
2. How long have you been employed at this organization
3. How would you describe your racial identity
4. How would you describe your gender identity

5. What is your highest level of education
6. What is your role/title or position
7. How long have you been in that role
8. Did you work for the organization prior to your current role
9. What age range do you fit (less than 30, 30-39, 40-50, 51-60, greater than 60).
10. Were you mentored or did you have a sponsor
11. Do you feel diversity, equity, and inclusion are essential to your workplace?
12. Do you believe that DEI is essential to the success of your organization, and why

**Conclusion:** Thank you for meeting with me today and sharing your perspectives.

1. Do you have any questions or concerns
2. Do you want to add or clarify anything about our conversation

**Next Steps:** As I review your interview responses, I may need to contact you to clarify or expound on your answers. This may be done by phone, email, virtually, or in person.