

The Cost of Conformity: How workplace Grooming Policies Shape Black Hair Identity

**UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS LONDON**

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**The Cost of Conformity: How Workplace Grooming Policies Shape Black Hair Identity**

By

Shey Kya Peak Jeffers

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Supervisor: Ameerah Khadaroo

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## ABSTRACT

### Background

Throughout history, black women's hair has been politicised stigmatised and regulated through formal and informal means, from colonial era bans on Afrocentric hair choices to modern day workplace grooming policies, black women have faced pressure to conform to Eurocentric beauty and professionalism standards for centuries. This study explores the lived experiences of black women in relation to hair grooming and professionalism in corporate workspaces. It aims to understand how grooming expectations are communicated and internalised and how this effects self- identity and perceptions.

### Methods

8 black women who lived in the UK and worked in corporate office environments were recruited for this study. Participants were recruited via voluntary sampling with an advert (see appendix D) posted via social media platforms such as LinkedIn and Instagram. Convenience sampling was also used to recruit participants via the researcher's personal network. A qualitative design was employed using semi structured interviews (see appendix D) Participants were asked questions regarding their perceptions and experiences of hair grooming policies and the impact this has had on their personal and professional identities. Due to the interviews being semi-structured, some questions were adapted to ensure that they was the right amount of depth.

**Results**

The results of this study revealed 4 main themes, workplace microaggressions, managing appearance under scrutiny, strategic styling for workplace acceptance and workplace evolution: inclusion and fairness. Participants described navigating Eurocentric standards through emotional labour, code switching and self-policing to maintain professional acceptance.

**Discussion and conclusion**

The findings shed light on the ongoing challenges black women face in navigating Eurocentric grooming norms at work. The study underscores the need for inclusive workplace policies that recognise and support diverse expressions of professionalism.

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**Study recruitment poster**

**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

UAL- University of the arts London

BPS- British Psychological society

APA- American Psychological Association

CROWN- Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair

**STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY**

I, *Shey Kya peak Jeffers*, certify that:

- This is an original and individual piece of work and no part of this has been written by anyone else.
- I have acknowledged (appropriately referenced using the APA referencing system) all sources and citations.
- No section of this assignment has been plagiarised.
- This work has not been submitted for any other assessment.



28/05/2025

**AI USE DISCLOSURE****Acknowledgement Statement**

*"I acknowledge the use of Chat GPT <https://chatgpt.com>. 20/05/2025 and 28/05/2025 Aid in proofreading work and for reference checking*

*The prompt used was 'can you check my references are APA 7 formatted...' And 'can you proofread this section for me please'*

*The output from these prompts was make sure they were no grammatical errors and also my references were APA formatted*

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the initials 'SJA' followed by a long horizontal stroke.

28-05-2025

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your business brain is something that you have passed onto me and I hope to use in years to come to make you proud. I wish you could see me graduate and walk across that stage, but I also trust that God has a plan for everything and your still with me in spirit

Finally I want to thank all my participants for being comfortable enough to share their stories with me.

## INTRODUCTION

### **Background/rationale**

For black women hair is more than a personal or aesthetic choice (Lawrence, 2017) it is instead a site of cultural identity, resistance, and negotiation (Fox, 2021) politicisation of black hair is deeply embedded in colonial histories where African hair textures and styles were significantly devalued (Wilson, 2022). Enslaved Africans were forced to shave their heads stripping them of their cultural identity and heritage. The 1786 Tignon law also further exacerbated this dehumanisation as it said that black women both free and enslaved needed to cover their hair to signify their inferior status (Cole Leonard, 2005)

Despite the cultural significance, it has become the subject of scrutiny in the post-colonial era where Eurocentric aesthetics have been upheld (Weatherley, 2023). Workplaces that often privilege Eurocentric beauty and grooming standards often position natural black hair styles such as locs, braids and afros as unprofessional or inappropriate (Machell, 2023). In this context professionalism is often defined as how closely an individual aligns with white western beauty norms. These norms then reinforce the idea that Eurocentric hairstyles typically characterised by long and straight hair are the standard for a 'professional' appearance while natural black hair textures and styles are viewed as less acceptable or even deviant (Tola Olupona, 2022).

In recognition of the widespread discrimination black individuals face due to natural hairstyles, legislations and organisation efforts have emerged to combat such biases. In America the Crown act was created which protects black people within corporate and

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educational fields against any form of race-based hair discrimination (The Crown Act, 2019) it specifically protects against styles such as afros, locs braids and twists. This act therefore acknowledges that these styles are often policed in ways that reinforce racial bias.

While there is currently no legislation equivalent to the crown act in the UK an organisation was created called the halo collective who created a pledge called the halo code. This pledge provides a framework for schools and workplaces to be able to create an inclusive policy that asserts the right that black people can wear their natural hair and protective styles without facing any discrimination (BBC, 2020). The code has been adopted by numerous institutions across the UK and continues to grow in visibility and influence.

### **Aims and objectives**

This research aimed to investigate how workplace grooming policies can be perceived among black women and if this is linked to internalised racism, specifically in relation to their self-perception of their hair. This will be done by focusing on the lived experiences of black women through qualitative research.

### **Methodology**

To explore black women's lived experiences of hair grooming and professionalism this study employed a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews. A total of 8 participants which included black women who were all over the age of 18 were recruited through volunteering sampling using Instagram and LinkedIn. Although the initial aim was to

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recruit 10-12 participants thematic saturation was reached after eight interviews which provided sufficient depth and richness to address the research questions. The interview began with a list of demographic questions, followed by questions related to the participants perceptions and experiences of hair grooming policies in their workplace environment and lastly finished with questions related to how these influence self-perceptions of their hair and identity. The results were then analysed thematically following Braun and Clarkes (2006) six step framework to identify recurring themes and patterns in the narratives, this approach was chosen to allow for rich in-depth insights into participants personal and professional experiences.

### **Overview of dissertation structure**

This dissertation's structure was split into 5 chapters to provide a clear and logical progression. The introduction of the study is stated in chapter 1 and provides the rationale of the study while also briefly describing the objective. Background information on the topic is also included within this section. Chapter 2 consists of relevant literature which provides further understanding of the research topic and also outlines areas where there are gaps within research. The methods and procedures were then clearly stated in Chapter 3 which provided information on the participant sample and a detailed description of the materials used in order to investigate and analyse. The qualitative findings were then written up within the results section and interpreted in Chapter 4, they were displayed through an APA formatted thematic table. Finally, the discussion was carried on in chapter 5 which summarised and reflected on the outcomes of the study in line with the outcomes that were found in the literature by comparing them to previous literature. The strengths and weaknesses of the study will also be discussed so that a further understanding can be given on what could improve the study in the

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future. The dissertation then concludes by emphasising again the rationale and aims of the study and implications.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

This literature review explores black women's experiences of workplace hair grooming policies and how these policies can influence their self-perceptions and identity. Research that has previously been done highlights racial inequalities in professional environments where Eurocentric grooming standards often marginalise natural black hair. The review begins by first examining systemic racial inequalities in the workplace, before focusing on the historical and political significance of black hair. Contemporary workplace grooming standards, Internalised racism and the psychological impacts of hair discrimination will then be discussed. Finally the review identifies the gaps in UK based research, emphasising the need to understand Black British women's lived experiences within these contexts.

### Racial inequalities in the workplace

(Waugh, 2022) defines racial inequality as the uneven distribution of opportunities and difference in treatment because of someone's race. Racial inequality remains a persistent issue deeply rooted in historical systems of oppression such as slavery, colonialism and segregation which have shaped modern institutions and social hierarchies (Rincon, 2020), these legacies continue to inform contemporary disparities across key societal sectors (Pyke,2010) including education, healthcare, criminal justice and employment (Runnymede trust, 2020).

Despite growing advocacy for social equality- defined as the fair and equitable distribution of resources, opportunities and rights across all racial and ethnic groups (Toke,2023), Deep structural barriers continue to marginalise racial minorities. In the workplace, this inequality is particularly evident through both overt racism namely

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discriminatory hiring practices and covert forms such as unconscious bias and microaggressions (Rowe, 1990; Ahmed, 2012). Research has shown that Black and ethnic minority employees often encounter limited career progression, heightened scrutiny, and pressure to conform to dominant (often Eurocentric) professional norms. These experiences can contribute to racialised stress, feelings of exclusion and diminished wellbeing (Fawcett Society, 2020; Joseph- Salisbury, 2018). Therefore, understanding how systemic and cultural forms of racial inequality operate within professional settings is essential for promoting genuine equity and inclusion.

Research by (Miller et al., 2025) looked at institutional racism within UK higher education institutions, the findings from this study revealed a striking link with the challenges black women face in corporate environment. This study examined the lived experiences of both BAME and white academic and non- academic staff using critical race theory as a framework (Delgado & Stefancic, 2010). The findings from this study highlighted systemic issues such as white privilege, racial stereotyping and exclusion from decision making processes which contributed to BAME staff experiencing feelings of isolation, limited career progression and identity conflict. Although the focus of this study was on higher education institutions, its insights relate to the professional realities of black women in the wider workplace; therefore by emphasizing the role of systemic bias and institutional culture, the study strengthens the argument that black women's workplace experiences are not isolated but deeply embedded in wider societal structures that favour whiteness. This study also outlines the importance of examining not only policy but also how unspoken norms and practices continue to marginalise minorities in professional settings.

One of the more subtle yet powerful ways racial inequality is perpetuated in the workplace, is through workplace grooming policies that favour Eurocentric aesthetics, these policies often disproportionately affect black women as their natural hair typically viewed as unkempt

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unprofessional (Byrd & Tharps, 2014). A study conducted by (Opie & Phillips, 2015) wanted to examine how both black and white evaluators perceive black women based on their hairstyle choices, specifically relating to them wearing either Afrocentric (Natural) or Eurocentric (straightened or relaxed) and how those choices are interpreted as expressions of dominance or agency. The study found that black evaluators compared to white evaluators were more likely to Penalise black women candidates who wore Afro centric hairstyles, as they were perceived as having higher perceptions of dominance but lower perceptions of professionalism. These findings revealed that even the black evaluators sometimes viewed natural black hair styles as signalling dominance in a way that led to a negative professional judgement, reflecting internalised biases of complex cultural dynamics. This demonstrates how racial inequality in the workplace is not only maintained through external prejudice, but it is also reinforced by internalised standards of professionalism that often align with Eurocentric Norms contributing to feelings of exclusion, psychological stress and limitations in career advancement (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014; Ahmed, 2012). The findings therefore examine the challenges that black women face due to racialised expectations which puts constraints on their identity and agency in the workplace (Rudman & Glick, 1999).

### **Black hair politics and history**

Throughout history, black women's image has been subjected to high scrutinisation that has influenced every choice they make for both their body and hair and have therefore determined their hair choices (King & Niabaly, 2014). This historical scrutiny is rooted in colonial and Eurocentric beauty standards that deemed Afro textured hair as undesirable or unprofessional and not the normative ideal (Byrd & Tharp, 2014). As a result of this black women have begun to internalise these ideals as a result of having to navigate complex

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terrain where natural hairstyles can be perceived as politically inappropriate or unprofessional within workplace environments (Johnson and Bankhead, 2014; Opie & Phillips, 2015).

Although these studies are able to offer valuable insights, the majority of the literature emerges from a US context, where race relations, legal protections and workplace norms can differ significantly from those in the UK. This therefore presents a very critical gaps as the specific experiences of black British women who navigate similar but distinct pressures in relation to professionalism, grooming expectations and internalised racisms are often overlooked. Consequently, this research seeks to address that gap by exploring how black British women experience and interpret workplace grooming standards and how these experiences interact with broader narratives of identity, respectability and resistance.

Building on this historical context, contemporary studies continue to show how these deeply embedded ideals influence black women's self-perceptions and professional experiences. For instance, Johnson & Bankhead, 2014 conducted a quantitative study which examined the relationship between hair esteem, self-esteem and discriminatory practices. Rooted in a legacy where Eurocentric beauty ideals have historically marginalised Afro-textured hair (Montle, 2020), the study sought to challenge the dominant that black women must adopt straightened or otherwise "tamed" hairstyles to be perceived as professional or successful. The study assessed how Black women experienced acceptance across different environments, identifying discriminatory grooming practices and analysing social group responses to natural hair. This therefore contributes to an ongoing dialogue around respectability politics and the psychological impact of hair-based stigma. 529 black women were recruited via convenience sampling which included the researchers personal and professional networks. While this approach may limit the generalisability of the findings, the study offers valuable insights into how internalised racism and external discrimination intersect to shape black women's self-perceptions. Although this study uses a quantitative

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approach, its findings offer important context to be able to understand the broader psychological and social implications of hair-based discrimination. This study therefore explores this in much more depth through a qualitative lens where the lived experience of each participant is at the centre of the research.

This study aligns with broader historical analyses such as *Hair story* by Byrd & Tharps (2014) which traces the socio-political significance of black hair from slavery through to the natural hair movement. This book outlines how hair has functioned not only as a marker of beauty but also a site of cultural resistance and assimilation. The author argues that black women's hair has always been looked at through a political lens, where it is often used to police black people in both private and also professional spaces. Together these perspectives underscore the significance of hair as both a personal and political site of identity negotiation which are both issues that are central to the present study's exploration of grooming standards, professionalism and the lived experiences of black women within the workplace.

### **Workplace grooming policies and professionalism**

Workplace grooming policies are the rules or guidelines that dictate how an employee should present themselves in terms of personal appearance, which includes dress codes, hairstyles and overall grooming standards (Paschal, 2017). These policies are intended to promote a certain professional image, but they can also be discriminatory if they prioritize Eurocentric ideals of beauty, which emphasizes straight hair, lighter skin tones and specific body types (Mona, 2024b). Black women are often required to conform to these standards which fail to account for the cultural and historical significance of their natural hairstyles, such as afros, braids and locs (Mona, 2024). Research by Byrd and Tharps (2014) highlights

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how grooming rules often function as mechanisms of control, policing black hair to conform to white normative standards. Furthermore, these policies have prompted racial discrimination claims which have recently gained increasing attention over the years leading to legal initiatives such as the crown act in the USA which is a law that makes it illegal to discriminate against natural black hairstyles in the workplace and public schools. In the UK, the halo code was created, it acts as a pledge encouraging schools and workplaces to allow Afro hairstyles without any restriction, though it is not legally binding (Tharps, 2022). These initiatives represent important steps towards addressing the systemic biases embedded in workplace grooming standards and promoting equity for black employees (Tharps, 2022)

Professionalism in the workplace is a concept that often centers on behaviors and attitudes deemed appropriate for a professional setting (Miles,2022). However, some interpretations of professionalism can also emphasize the role of physical appearance such as hair. While appearance can be seen as an essential component in some industries, this can be problematic, especially when they are informed by narrow Eurocentric notions of beauty and appearance. As a result, black women who wear natural hairstyles or have textured hair may be unfairly judged as “unprofessional” (Trusty et al., 2022, p. 9). This leads to a form of incongruence where individuals feel internal conflict between their self-perceptions and the external pressure placed upon them by societal standards (Team, 2024).

Moreover, these grooming policies can have real life implications. Research by (Dove, 2024) outlined that over 20% of black women between the ages of 25-34 have been sent home from work because of their hair. This disparity underscores the systemic nature of hair-based discrimination and its Impact on professional experiences including career progression and workplace exclusion (Included, 2024).

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In conclusion, workplaces that favour Eurocentric beauty standards, not only marginalise black women, but also perpetuate systemic inequalities, recognising and challenging these policies is crucial for fostering inclusive and equitable professional environments.

### **Effects of grooming polices on identity and wellbeing**

Internalized racism is a process by which individuals from marginalized groups adopt negative societal stereotypes and beliefs about their own racial identity (David et al, 2019). For black women, this internalisation can be particularly harmful when It comes to hair. Historically black hair has been a symbol of cultural heritage, identity and resistance (Dash,2006). However, workplace grooming policies that prioritise Eurocentric beauty such as straight hair can create a tension between cultural identity and the desire to conform to narrow professional norms (Lawrence, 2025). This tension often lead to feelings of inadequacy. As a result, black women may internalize these societal biases, leading to a negative self-perceptions and diminished self- esteem related to their natural hair (Hwang,2021).

Moreover, grooming policies disproportionately effect black women who are 30% more likely than other groups to face discrimination during hiring or employment processes based on hair appearance (Crown, coalition, 2019). These do not merely support appearance standards but actively reinforce systemic racism by actively invalidating the natural expressions of black identity. Despite growing awareness, many organisations still frame grooming expectations as “neutral,” not acknowledging their racial bias and cultural impact (Humphrey et al., 2023).The lack of accountability highlights a broader reluctance within professional environments to underline the power structures that shape these norms.

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Consequently, the internalization of these standards can perpetuate a harmful cycle for black women (Humphrey et al., 2023) as they may feel pressure to alter or hide their hair to avoid negative judgements, professional exclusion or microaggressions. A critical review by (Williams, 2008) identified that internalised racism can manifest in modern times for women of colour especially those of African descent, partially as a by product of the history of enslavement in the United States. This review also highlights how people of colour may internalise oppressive images held by mainstream culture and carry these images into interpersonal relationships influencing racial identity development. (Williams,2008) is included as it offers a historical grounded and psychologically insightful understanding of internalised racism particularly among women of African descent. The source helps to contextualise how contemporary grooming policies can affect the self-perception and identity of black women (Manka Nkimbeng et al., 2023), linking these issues to a broader legacy of racial oppression which supports the research aim of how workplace grooming policies are perceived by black women and examining whether these perceptions are connected to internalised racism particularly in relation to their hair and identity. By focusing on the lived experiences of black women, this study seeks to deepen the understanding of the psychological and professional impacts of grooming standards on their sense of self and career progression.

### **Gaps in literature**

Despite growing academic literature and public attention towards discriminatory grooming practices, most of the existing literature is predominately based in the United States where American legal frameworks such as the CROWN Act and cultural experiences are

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shaped by US history (Byrd & Tharps, 2014; The crown coalition, 2019). There is a noticeable lack of UK specific research which explores how black women navigate workplace grooming policies within professional contexts. Although initiatives such as the halo code have been put in place, academic engagement with these developments remains limited.

While existing studies have addressed Eurocentric beauty standards and their workplace in shaping workplace norms (Mona, 2024; Trust et al, 2022), few have examined how these standards are internalised by black women particularly in relation to their hair and identity. The psychological implications such as internalised racism and diminished self-esteem are often mentioned in passing throughout literature, but it is rarely the main focus of most empirical studies.

Current literature also tends to generalise the experiences of black women without recognising the amount of diversity they are and the intersectionality of their identities including age and professionalism. Furthermore, much of the discourse remains theoretical or policy driven lacking qualitative data which explores the lived experiences of black women. This study therefore seeks to address these gaps by exploring how black women in the UK perceive and experience UK grooming policies and whether these experiences relate to internalised racism and self-perception of hair. Through qualitative research this study aims to provide a nuanced and context specific understanding that contributes to more inclusive and equitable workplace practices.

This study aims to fill these gaps by investigating how workplace grooming policies can be perceived among black women and if this is linked to internalized racism. Specifically in relation to their self-perception of their hair. This will be done by focusing on the lived experiences of black women through qualitative research. This research will offer valuable

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insights into the psychological impact of grooming policies and how they shape the professional and personal identities of black women.

### **Research questions**

- 1- What are black women's perceptions and experiences of hair grooming policies in their workplace environment?
- 2- How do these influence self-perceptions of their hair and identity?

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## METHODS

### Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore Black women's hair within corporate workplaces and their different perceptions and experiences navigating this and how they perceive their hair and identity. Qualitative methods were used to be able to gain a deeper understanding of the importance of understanding how black women's hair can influence their perceptions and identity. The interpretivism paradigm underpinned the research, focusing on the subjective experiences and meanings that black women assign to their hair within professional workplace settings. This paradigm was selected as it was able to acknowledge that reality is constructed through the lived experiences of individuals (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). This is particularly important when exploring how identity, culture and professionalism intersect. Thematic analysis was used to explore how black women experience and interpret grooming expectations in professional environments. This approach aligned with the studies aims of understanding how participants interpret and navigate professional grooming standards that are shaped by Eurocentric norms. Thematic analysis was appropriate as it is able to centre the voices of individuals and seeks to uncover the meaning behind their everyday experiences, making it well suited to examine how notions of professionalism intersect with personal identity, cultural expression and institutional expectations.

### Research context

The study focused on black women working in professional corporate environments across the UK. The study took place at a time when corporate environments were beginning

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to show improvements in how they addressed hair- based discrimination. This included legislations such as the crown act in the US and the halo code pledge in the uk.

While progress has been made in some sectors, the lived experiences of black women in corporate which has been captured throughout this study reveal that many black women continued to face subtle and overt pressures to conform to Eurocentric Grooming standards. These pressures often manifest in the form of unspoken expectations, microaggressions or grooming codes that implicitly favour hairstyles that align with Eurocentric standards (Kramer, 2020). This shift in the professional landscape offered a timely opportunity to explore how black women perceive and experience hair grooming policies in the workplace.

### **Population and study sample**

Participants were recruited via a combination of voluntary and convenience sampling methods. This enabled the recruitment process to be a lot easier due to the target audience being so specific (Williams, 2023). A recruitment advert was posted via social media platforms such as Instagram and LinkedIn, to attract individuals who were willing to participate in the study. Additionally, the researcher leveraged their personal networks to identify potential participants who met the study criteria. To be eligible for inclusion, participants were required to be black women aged 18 or over who reside in the United Kingdom and are currently employed in a corporate office setting. 8 participants were recruited for this study. Each participant had experiences or reflected on workplace grooming expectations related to their hair, making them well positioned to contribute their insights into how professionalism is perceived and enacted through grooming policies.

## **Procedure**

Data was collected through online semi-structured interviews which allowed for in depth exploration of participants personal experiences and perceptions. This method also gave participants the freedom to express their thoughts in their own words without any outside influence, while still providing enough structure to ensure consistency across interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes and was audio recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interviews were stored securely under pseudonyms to protect participant identities. An interview guide was developed which was designed to uncover how grooming expectations influenced participants professional experiences, self- perceptions and sense of identity. Topics included personal grooming choices, experiences with workplace policies, perceived pressures to conform to Eurocentric beauty standards and the emotional and cultural significance of hair. All data collection procedures adhered to ethical guidelines outlined by the 'University of the arts codes of practice on research ethics and the BPS code of human research ethics see ethics approval form in appendix C

Data was analysed using thematic analysis six- step process outlined by (Braun and Clarke 2006). Initial codes were generated based on repeated ideas, phrases and emotions that were expressed by participants, particularly those related to professionalism, identity and conformity. Codes were then reviewed and grouped into broader themes and subthemes that captured shared meanings and experiences across the data. The use of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) allowed for deeper engagement with the data and ensured that the analysis remained grounded in the participants voices (Nowell et al., 2017).

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- 1- What is your age?
- 2- What industry or field do you currently work in?
- 3- How long have you been working in your current workplace/industry?

Research Question 1: What are black women's perceptions and experiences of hair grooming policies in their workplace environment?

- 1- Can you maybe describe your hair and how you usually like to style it?
- 2- Have your styling choices changed over time, especially in professional settings?
- 3- How would you describe your relationship with your hair?
- 4- How do you think the beauty and professionalism standards in the fashion industry influence workplace expectations for black hair?
- 5- Does your workplace have any hair grooming policies? If so, can you describe them?
- 6- If they are no official policies; have you noticed or experienced any unspoken expectations about how you should wear your hair at work?
- 7- Have you ever felt any pressure- spoken or unspoken- to wear your hair in a certain way for work? If yes, can you share an experience?
- 8- How have your supervisors or colleagues responded to different Afro centric hairstyles such as braids and locs?
- 9- Do you think there are varying levels of acceptability for different hairstyles, such as curls or locs?
- 10- Have you ever received comments- positive or negative- about your hair in the workplace? How did these make you feel?

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- 11- Have you ever experienced yourself or maybe witnessed or heard of workplace discrimination related to black hairstyles? If so, can you tell me a bit about this and how it was dealt with?

### **Research Question 2:** How does these influence self-perceptions of their hair and identity?

- 1- Have your workplace experiences shaped how you choose to style your hair outside of work?  
Have these experiences impacted your sense of identity in any way? If so, in what ways?
- 2- Do you feel that workplace grooming expectations (at your job) align with or challenge your cultural identity? Why so or why not?
- 3- Have you developed any personal strategies to navigate workplace expectations around hair? If so, can you tell me about them?
- 4- what do you think workplaces can do to create a more inclusive environment for black women's hair?
- 5- What changes would you like to see in corporate (workplaces regarding hair acceptance and any related policies?

### Closing

- 1- Is there anything more you would like to add about your experience or thoughts on this topic?

**Research ethics**

Ethical approval was obtained prior to recruitment, and all participants received an information sheet which explained the purpose of the study, their rights and how their data would be used. Informed consent was obtained via an emailed consent form before each interview and participants were reminded of their rights, including confidentiality and the option to withdraw at any time. The research adhered to the university of the arts code of practice on research ethics and also the BPS code of human research ethics (see ethics approval form in appendix C)

**Reflexivity**

As a black woman who is soon to be navigating professional spaces, I approached this research with both personal interest and insights and also with a commitment to centering participants voices over my own assumptions or beliefs. While my lived experiences informed my sensitivity to this topic, I remained mindful of how my position could influence the framing of questions or interpretation of the data. While I did not keep a formal reflective journal, I remained conscious of my positionality through the research process. I regularly reflected on how my background might influence the questions I asked and how I engaged with the data. I discussed this with peers so that I could check for any bias that may have arisen to ensure that any findings were grounded in participants voice rather than shaped by my personal assumptions or expectations.



## RESULTS

**Two research questions were outlined at the beginning of the research study:**

- 1) What are black women's perceptions and experiences of hair grooming policies in their workplace environment?
- 2) How do these influence self- perceptions of their hair and identity?

This chapter presents the findings from eight semi- structured interviews with black women; these interviews were then analysed using thematic analysis. Four overarching themes were identified with some also including sub themes (see figure 1). These themes reflect the participants lived experiences navigating professional spaces that often enforce Eurocentric grooming standards. While there is some overlap, each theme is presented in relation to the research questions and offers insights into how black women perceive, experience, and respond to grooming expectations in the workplace. The illustrative quotes from participants are used throughout to supporting the findings.

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**Table 1**

*Main themes and corresponding sub-themes from the Thematic analysis*

Main themes	Corresponding sub-themes
1- Workplace Micro-aggressions	1.1- Racialised curiosity and boundary violations
2- Managing appearance under scrutiny	2.1- The psychological cost of styling to conform
3-Strategic styling for workplace acceptance	3.1 Internalised expectations and strategic styling  3.2- Empowered expression and self-expression
4-Workplace evolution: inclusion and fairness	No sub-themes

**Theme 1: Workplace Microaggressions**

Most of the participants reported microaggressions which were centred around their hair, appearance, or identity. While not always overt, these interactions cumulatively shaped the participants sense of belonging and comfort in professional environments. Participants also reported a lack of understanding about natural black hair which reinforced Eurocentric beauty norms, though these comments were not overtly offensive, remarks like this revealed how black women's hair is often treated as unfamiliar or unprofessional, adding to the emotional labour of navigating the workplace. Participants described how these interactions became so expected that they adapted their appearance and behaviour in anticipation of them.

This is illustrated below:

“You kind of just mentally prepare yourself for the comments or questions that are going to when you change your hair.” (participant A)

“Sometimes I'll wash my hair and people ask me, did you cut your hair? No, it's shrinkage.” (Participant B)

The data also revealed one sub theme which illustrates the way in which microaggressions were experienced and interpreted.

**Sub theme 1.1: Racialised curiosity and boundary violations**

Participants described feeling hyper-visible in the workplace, particularly when wearing or changing to Afro centric hairstyles, this attention often came through stares,

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unsolicited comments or assumptions that marked their hair as unusual or unprofessional. Such scrutiny created discomfort and reinforced feelings of being othered. This sub theme refers to the inappropriate and often racialised intrusion into black women's autonomy and identity in the workplace. These can manifest through unsolicited comments, invasive questions, or uninvited physical contact. Building on this many participants also described frequent experiences of racialised curiosity nonphysical but equally invasive behaviours such as persistent questioning, unsolicited opinions and fascination with their natural hairstyles and textures. Unlike physical touch these moments often masquerade as benign interest but nonetheless reinforce feelings of hyper-visibility and otherness. Participants reported also being subjected to persistent and often inappropriate questions about their hair and racialised comments disguised as compliments.

“Your hairs quite long isn't t it, but black hair doesn't grow that long.” (Participant F)

He didn't realise I could see his reflection... Basically he called my hair an explosion.”  
(Participant D)

The use of the word “explosion” to describe her hair suggests it was viewed as chaotic or unruly, reflecting how natural black hairstyle are often mischaracterised.

There always going to say how long did this take” (Participant G)

These recurring comments were reported across multiple participants and reflect a shared experience of having to emotionally brace themselves for unwanted attention.

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Participants described feeling hyper-visible in the workplace, particularly when wearing or changing to Afro centric hairstyles, this attention often came through stares, unsolicited comments or assumptions that marked their hair as unusual or unprofessional. Such scrutiny created discomfort and reinforced feelings of being othered.

### **Theme 2: Managing appearance under scrutiny**

Majority of Participants spoke about the constant self-monitoring that was involved in them being able to manage their hairstyles to avoid negative attention or any discomfort within the workplace. The pressure to conform was also seen through the participants comments as they expressed how it influences how they presented themselves with many of them choosing styles that feel “safe” neutral or less likely to attract comments.

Participants also expressed the need to change their current appearance in order to make sure that they conform to the workplace grooming standards both spoken of unspoken regarding their hairstyle, they also expressed a need to carry out certain rituals in regards to their hair before entering a professional environments or somewhere they are likely to be Judged not only on their work performance but also their appearance,

“I’ve been in the office, but I’ve made sure to straighten my edges every day, I’ve made sure to gel my edges every day.” (Participant D)

‘If I’m interviewing or stuff, I prefer to have it hair like in a slick back or have a sew-in because I just feel like it’s more receptive for them.’ (Participant G).

**Sub-theme 2:1: The psychological cost of styling to conform**

Majority of participants expressed how the upkeep of maintenance can have an emotional and psychological toll as scrutiny can cause fatigue due to the pressures of maintaining certain look which can heighten their emotional discomfort.

This comment demonstrates how participants deliberately styled their hair to align with perceived professional standards.

Participants described intentionally avoiding certain hairstyles or modifying how they presented their hair at work to avoid drawing attention or experimenting judgment. This sub theme reflects how black women in professional environments may feel the need to censor aspects of their identity to navigate Eurocentric beauty norms and minimised racial scrutiny

A few participants also expressed their internal negotiation between personal expression and professional acceptability. While the participant frames reasoning partially in practical terms, it is also clear that external perception plays a significant role in how she decides to wear her hair.

“Last week it was just a big poof because I was just tired.” (Participant D)

“It’s just so much effort.” (Participant G)

“I don’t have it out much A because I’m not good enough at styling but B because I do think about what people are going to think about it at work.” (Participant D)

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A few participants also expressed their internal negotiation between personal expression and professional acceptability. While the participant frames her reasoning partially in practical terms, it is also clear that external perception plays a significant role in how she decides to wear her hair.

“I’ll always try and put it away.” (Participant A)

### **Main theme 3: strategic styling for workplace acceptance**

This theme captures the strategic decisions black women make to manage impressions, avoid scrutiny, and navigate workplace expectations shaped by Eurocentric grooming norms. The pressure to conform often resulted in participants opting for styles deemed more palatable within professional settings.

Majority of participant also expressed the strategic negotiation they undertook in response to formal workplace environment, revealing how styling choices are shaped by a desire to be perceived as “professional” within white institutional cultures.

“At the beginning when I was a-bit more conscious of how my hair was presented because I was like in quite a formal environment I would do it had up half down because I felt like it looked more presentable.” (Participant C)

#### **Sub theme 3.1) internalised expectations and strategic styling**

This theme was widely reported across participants; some described a pervasive need to moderate or “tone down” aspects of themselves to conform to workplace expectations. This internalised conformity often involved suppressing authentic suppressions of identity, including hair choices to fit the dominant professional culture

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“I feel like I have to tone down certain aspects of myself just to make it easier for my work personality.” (Participant H)

Participant H captures perfectly the emotional and psychological labour of code switching that many participants navigated daily, highlighting the pressures black women face to adjust their presentation in ways that align with Eurocentric norms and ease social acceptance at work.

Most participants highlighted how they often adopted ambiguous or “safe” hairstyles to avoid negative attention, judgement or being perceived as unprofessional. This involved internal constraints on how expressive or bold they felt they could be with their hair choices particularly in relation to colour, volume, or cultural significance. Participants also expressed how double standards can also come into play regarding what is acceptable for white people and what is acceptable for black women.

“People can wear their hair however they like, however as a black person I wouldn’t necessarily do that.” (Participant B)

“I’ll tailor my hair around what’s going on” (Participant D)

“If I’m having braids, they have to be black and if I have coloured braids, it will be in a time where I’m not working.” (Participant A)

I’m not ready yet to go in with my natural hair and I was like as crap as it sounds and it makes you feel rubbish... I’m not there yet.” (Participant D)

Majority of the participants expressed some form of shame and conformity. Participants felt the pressure to tone down or alter their appearance to feel accepted in professional work environments where Eurocentric standards are the norm. Participants also expressed how they

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did not feel comfortable enough within themselves to come in to work with their natural hair out which therefore can reflect the aspect of internalised shame.

### **Sub theme 3.2: empowered expression and self-acceptance**

This sub theme captures participants who expressed confidence, pride, and authenticity in wearing their natural hair. It includes sentiments of comfort, resistance to conformity and positive identity affirmation

“I like having my natural hair out, it feels nice. (Participant D)

“I change my hair all the time I would say.” (Participant G)

“I tried to be myself regardless to be honest, I’ll come in whatever my hair is the weekend I decided to go out.” (Participant G)

“I’ve always ben accepting only type of hair, so I’ve never really felt ashamed of it.”  
(Participant C)

While this experience was less common than strategic conformity several participants described moments of agency through their hair choices, these women challenged workplace norms by embracing their natural hair or frequently changing their styles without apology. This resistance represents a form of reclaiming identity and pushing back against the Eurocentric standards that dominate professional environments.

### **Main theme 4: workplace evolution: inclusion and fairness**

All participants also expressed the need for change within the workplace, through the introduction of different training initiatives, more diverse workplaces and more awareness

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and conversations surrounding different hair styles, textures, race, and professionalism. They was also a shared view that more systemic and visible change is needed. Suggestions included the implementation of workplace training for example unconscious bias, more open conversations around race and professionalism and greater representation of black hairstyles in professional contexts.

This theme reflects an acknowledgment that while progress is being made, many black women still navigate environments where Eurocentric norms dominate, and inclusivity is yet to be fully realised.

“We are moving towards the right direction, it is a slow process, but it is in the works.”

(Participant H)

“So, I think being aware and doing a training course like unconscious bias to make you aware of things that you’re asking.” (Participant A

“Better representation of different types of hairstyles so that people who are not black can understand that black hair can take different shapes.” (Participant B)

## DISCUSSION

This study set out to explore black women's experiences of black of hair grooming and professionalism standards within the workplace. It also aimed to understand whether these experiences and perceptions influence an individual's self-identity. This chapter aims to discuss and evaluate each research question with the relevant findings. The findings are explored in relation to existing literature, the studies research questions, and broader and social professional implications.

Research Question 1- What are black women's perceptions and experiences of hair grooming policies in their workplace environment?

Research Question 2- How do these influence self- perceptions of their hair and identity?

### **Researching questions and matching themes**

Four themes were identified from this analysis, which consisted of workplace microaggressions, managing appearance under scrutiny, strategic styling for workplace acceptance and workplace evolution: inclusion and fairness. each of these themes answers research question 1 and two but in separate ways, RQ1 is answered by these themes in relation to the external experiences of the participants, while for RQ2 It relates to the internal impact of these experiences on the participants. Overall, these themes show that black women's experiences of grooming policies are not just about the policies themselves but about the everyday reality of how these policies can be interpreted, enforced, and felt.

## INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS BY MAIN THEMES AND SUB THEMES

### Workplace Microaggressions

One of the most prominent themes that arose from the interviews was workplace microaggressions directed at black women in relation to their hair. Participants shared their accounts of subtle yet persistent comments, behaviours and assumptions that positioned their natural or protective hairstyles as unprofessional or unusual. These comments highlight how workplace environments continue to marginalise Afro centric hairstyles. Several participants described being asked intrusive questions or receiving back handed compliments such as “Your hairs quite long isn’t it, but black hair doesn’t grow that long.” While this comment is not overtly hostile, it reveals a harmful stereotype rooted in Eurocentric assumptions about black hair. Comment like these perpetuate the myth that black is inherently limited or unhealthy reinforcing ideas that Afro centric hair is less desirable or abnormal. These Microaggressions can single underlying racial biases that inform workplace perceptions, subtly questioning the legitimacy and normalcy of black identity and physical traits. These findings echoed the work of (Rosette & Dumas, 2007) who explored the workplace experiences of black women, and the assumptions others make about their hair. Bias such as this one which are quite subtle can result in black women developing low self-esteem and result in identity suppression as women may alter their appearance in order to avoid scrutiny or rejection (Opie & Phillips, 2015). Across the interviews participants shared similar experiences of curiosity or Judgement which was tied to their natural hair.

The sub theme of racialised curiosity and boundary violations, captures how black women are often made to feel like spectacles in the workplace. It also refers to the inappropriate and often racialised intrusion into black women’s autonomy and identity in the workplace, which can manifest through unsolicited comment, invasive questions, or

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uninvited physical contact. It reflects the perception that black hair is unusual or unprofessional. Such actions although frequently dismissed as curiosity or compliments, communicate underlying messages of exclusion and difference. As a result, black women are subjected to increased emotional labour, navigating spaces where their hair becomes a focal point of scrutiny rather than being accepted as a normal expression of identity. These micro level experiences reflect a broader institutional where workplace grooming policies are framed around Eurocentric standards that exclude or penalise natural black hairstyles. Such policies reinforce an environment where difference is criticised, limiting black women's freedom to be able to express their cultural identity without fear or judgement. (Byrd and Tharps 2014) emphasises the need for structural changes to address these inequalities.

### **Managing appearance under scrutiny**

This theme was also widely reported on in the interviews, with participants making references to calculated decision making prior to enter their corporate work environment in order for them to avoid unwanted questions and be able to navigate predominantly white professional environments. Participants described an implicit expectation to maintain hairstyles that align with Eurocentric beauty which often equate "neat" and "professional" with straightened "sleek" hair. Participants on many occasions expressed the need to change their grooming routines in order to feel as if they are "professional." One participant expressed the added labour involved in conforming to appearance expectations in corporate settings "I have made sure to straighten my edges every day, I've made sure to gel my edges every day." This daily routine illustrates the pressure that is felt by many black women to conform to Eurocentric standards of professionalism, highlighting how

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This pressure reflects what (Ahmed,2012) refers to as institutional whiteness where unspoken norms shape who is seen as fitting in and who must adapt.

Constant self-monitoring and strategic decision making, speaks to a broader issue of racialised professionalism as reported in earlier literature by (Rosette & Dumas, 2007; Johnson and Bankhead, 2014).

The corresponding sub theme for managing appearance under scrutiny was the psychological cost of styling to conform. This theme highlights the emotional and cognitive burden many black women working in corporate settings feel due to the pressure to align their hair with workplace expectations. Participants spoke about the internalised pressure that they feel to maintain hairstyles that are considered to be “acceptable” often at the expense of their own comfort and authenticity.

This constant need to assess and modify one's appearance can result in heightened levels of anxiety and inauthenticity. Many participants expressed how this perceived conformity was not a matter of preference but instead a necessity to be taken seriously, avoid negative comments and guarantee Job security. One participant reflected on their experience by expressing how they don't have their hair “out much because A I'm not good enough at styling and B because I do think about what people will think about it at work.” This comment perfectly sums up both the need to be able to “style” hair for work which this participant struggles with and the added stress of whether they will receive judgement due to their styling choices. This emotional toll reflects previous literature by (team, 2024) which outlined the effects Incongruence which refer to a misalignment between and individuals' outward presentation and internal identity and how it can manifest as anxiety and low self-esteem. This literature aligns with this study as participants described inauthentic and

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emotional exhaustion when adhering to workplace norms which conflict with their cultural identity.

### **Strategic styling for workplace acceptance**

This theme highlights how black women actively modify their appearance and engage in deliberate styling choices in order to navigate and negotiate professional environments. Participants express the need to adopt hairstyles that would be seen as more “acceptable” or “professional” to align with workplace expectations and reduce scrutiny. Such strategic stylings reflects a form of code switching, where appearance is adapted to fit dominant cultural norms to gain acceptance and avoid discrimination. This performative act of hair management enabled some degree of workplace inclusion but at the cost of the continued pressure to conform resulting in a decrease in self-expression. These findings support previous research which was carried out by (Johnson & Joseph-Salisbury, 2018) which revealed the ways in that black women are policed in professional settings which requires them to invest time, emotional energy and resources into managing their appearance strategically. Due to the amount of constant vigilance and adaptations, It can result in feeling of alienation and reinforce the perception that natural black hairstyles are inherently unprofessional. To conclude, even though strategic styling may serve as a coping mechanism, it simultaneously perpetuates Eurocentric beauty standards and limits genuine inclusivity in the workplace.

This theme consisted of two sub themes which were Internalised expectations and strategic styling and empowered expression and self-acceptance.

### **Workplace evolution: Inclusion and Fairness**

This theme captures participants recognition of slow progress within corporate workplaces in regard to addressing race-based hair discrimination but also expresses the need to for more impactful change. Majority of the participants acknowledged that conversations around inclusion are becoming more visible with one participant expressing that workplaces are “moving towards the right direction.... but it’s a slow process.” This comment indicates cautious optimism which is couples with frustration surrounding the pace that the change is taking place, the slow nature of change surrounding such an important topic reiterates why this study is so important as it opens up conversations surrounding the experiences of black women who are experiencing these bias at this present time.

one participant suggested the implementation of training courses on topics such as “unconscious bias” so that dominant groups can be aware of the things they are asking. These potential developments were seen as steps towards more inclusive fairer workplaces and increased comfort for black women in professional environments. Research carried out by (included, 2024) supports this theme as it found that black women over the age of 35 experiences significantly higher levels of exclusion across key dimensions of workplace experiences which effected their chances of career progression. These findings align with the concerns of the participants and highlight the structural barriers that must be addressed to ensure fairness and representation at all levels of an organisation.

### **Strengths and weakness of the study**

Following the presentation of key findings, this section considers the strengths which support the credibility of the study, and also the limitations that may influence the scope and transferability of the results.

One of the strengths of this study is that this study focused on marginalised and under researched groups as the study looked at black women navigating workplace grooming policies, this is a strength as marginalised groups are usually overlooked so this study provides research and knowledge on a under researched area. Furthermore, this increases social relevance and impact which can have real world implications for social justice, equity and inclusion and therefore provide a richer understanding of how intersecting identities such as race and professionalism effect experiences.

The use of in depth semi-structured interviews was also a strength because it allowed for the interviews to flow like a conversation which resulted in a deeper exploration of unexpected but relevant topics it also meant that the questions asked could be adapted to improve the depth of the responses. Also, semi structured interviews allowed participants to share their experiences and stories a lot more freely without any constraints which meant the interviews were very participant centred as open dialogue was encouraged resulting rich and nuanced data.

Thematic analysis was used in order analyse the data after it had been collected. This method of analysis was a strength because it enables the identification of patterns across diverse data. This is a strength because after carrying out 8 interviews it was able to handle data from multiple participants at once and highlight any commonalities and variations

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between all the interviews which can help to understand collective as well as individual perspectives.

On the other hand, this research was also met with some limitations. Even-though the use of semi structured interviews allowed for more in-depth answers and adaptability, this could also be seen as a weakness in regard to analysing the data after the interviews were conducted. The data from each interview didn't fit neat and standard categories where the data could be organised systematically, but instead each interview was different which therefore limits comparability and makes the process of thematic analysis a lot harder.

Although the goal of qualitative research is not to generalise but to gain depth and insight, the small non-random sample means the experiences shared may not reflect the broader population of black women in the UK workplaces.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to explore how workplace grooming policies regarding hair can be perceived by black women and whether this is linked to internalised racism. The aims were achieved by focusing on the lived experiences of black women in corporate workplaces through qualitative research. Through the thematic analysis of interviews with eight black women who work in corporate workplaces, four overarching themes emerged. These themes included workplace microaggressions, managing appearance under scrutiny, strategic styling for workplace acceptance and Workplace evolution: Inclusion and fairness.

The findings highlighted overall the consistent pressure that black women face to conform to euro centric beauty norms and the emotional labour that is involved in hair presentation, and the ongoing struggles for authenticity and inclusion in professional spaces. These insights align with and expand upon existing literature on hair politics, microaggressions and identity

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within the workplace. For example, the works of (Rosette & Dumas, 2007) who similarly observed the tensions between authenticity and professionalism for black women. The outcome of this underscores the urgent need for change within corporate workplaces whether that be in regards to structural change, critical assessment of grooming standards or more training for the majority groups surrounding inclusive training on racialised experiences. Through the encouragement of authenticity and increase in the expression of cultural identity, workplaces can foster a more inclusive, comfortable environments for black individuals.

While this study offers important insights into the lived experiences of black women, the smaller sample size would be a limitation as it affects generalisability due to it not being reflective of a large population, and the focus being mainly on one professional context was also a limitation. If future research was to be done regarding this study, the experiences of black women in non-corporate professions could be researched a lot more and also how intersecting identities such as age, class and religion further influence hair related workplace experiences.

Overall this research is powerful in being able to contribute to a growing area of literature on race, identity and professionalism. Emphasising the need for cultural competence, empathy and institutional change to ensure black women's hair is no longer a sight of controversy but instead a sight of pride and power.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Reflective statement

#### Introduction

## The Cost of Conformity: How workplace Grooming Policies Shape Black Hair Identity

The topic that I desired to choose for my dissertation centred around how black women navigate professional environments in regards to hair grooming policies and how this has shaped their perceptions and identity. This topic was of interest to me because as a black woman there is a chance that I may go into a field where there are strict grooming policies. Because of this I found it interesting being able to understand the lived experiences of black women of a similar age range to me and also much older and being able to uncover how they have been impacted by these policies. I also found that due to me also being a black woman my participants were comfortable enough to open up about their personal experiences and share details that some people said they never get to talk about, I was also told by many participants that this is a topic that they have never really delved into before and they thanked me for giving them a space to be as open as they want to. As it gave me an outlook on what could be a part of my future, furthermore from carrying out my interviews I am now aware that we are starting to see societal and workplace changes in regards to professionalism and grooming policies and they have definitely been a turning point in the attitudes of non-black individuals; but there is still a long way to go and I hope by the time I enter these types of workplaces the change will be much more significant.

### **Reflective insights**

As a black woman conducting research on the experiences of black women navigating hair grooming policies in professional settings, I was both the researcher and also an insider. This dual role influenced various stages of the research process, from data collection to analysis, my shared cultural background fostered rapport with participants encouraging openness and detailed sharing. However, I did remain conscious of how my perspectives and assumptions could shape the framing of data and interpretation of data. At some points it was hard to take on the researcher role while completing the interviews as the conversations in which took place between me and the participants were on a much deeper level than me just

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wanting to get answers for my study due to a lot of experiences mirroring stuff that I have experienced also in my life. I feel that when it came to analysing the data this was when I was much more able to interpret it through the lens of just the participant and focus on their opinions.

### **Methodological reflections**

In one interview that I carried out, the participant was a bit more hesitant to open up and share more about their experiences, I realised that maybe the way the questions were worded may have created a barrier, I therefore decided to adjust my tone to be a lot more conversational. This was one aspect of conducting semi structured interviews I enjoyed as it made each interview that I conducted feel a lot more personal which made it easier for me to understand which person said this quote and the context in which it was said in.

The process of completing this dissertation has been a process that I will say has had its challenges, but I am very proud of all the progress that I have made which has led me to be able to reach this point. I have had quite a few setbacks through my university journey, from having to retake my 1<sup>st</sup> year of uni again to finding out that I have ADHD and dyslexia, this has all been apart of the process that has enabled me to finally be at the finish line of university. So even though I have faced and am facing these challenges within my university journey I feel that it has shaped me into the person that I am today and helped me to be a lot more resilient in everything that I do. I have also found it challenging to be able to juggle both completing my dissertation and also working a part time job, I think this was definitely something that affected my time management and the result of my first created time plan changing.

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At some stages of me carrying out my interviews I did find it emotionally challenging because I was aware of how it could be me in the positions that they are in because we share the commonality of having black skin. The stories that I heard were also very eye opening to hear about and at some points during interviews the reaction that I gave to some of the answers were very telling. Some of the answers that I received resonated with me a lot more than I thought they would as some of the experiences shared I experienced in school when I was younger which made me also think about how these opinions and comments regarding black women's hair doesn't get better as you get older but instead it gets worse. It shows how adults can still be very judgemental even in workplace settings and that discrimination and bias doesn't have an age limit.

### **Conclusion**

For me as a person I feel that completing this study through the use of qualitative research has definitely made me more confident as a person regarding being able to communicate and conduct interviews, as this was a major part of the completion of my dissertation. It was also a learning experience for me as a researcher as it is something I had never done previously, I enjoyed being able to carry out the interviews and get an understanding of people's experiences working in corporate workplaces as a black person. I did struggle with the analysis section of my research as it was very tedious and required a lot of time and also patience, I also wanted to make sure that I was expressing everyone's views and experiences properly through my results so that everyone who took part in my research could be represented in some way.

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Regarding moving forward, I would love to see many changes within corporate workplaces and society. I hope for an environment where black women and men as well can fully express themselves in professional environments without any fear of judgement or discrimination. I'm not sure I will be conducting another study any time soon, but it was definitely an experience that can be ticked off.

### **Appendix B: Dissertation Time plan**

#### **Research Timeline**

##### **January 2024**

- Drafted the initial ethics application form for the research project.

##### **February 2024**

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- Reviewed the ethics application with the dissertation supervisor and incorporated feedback.
- Submitted the revised ethics form for approval.
- Received full ethics approval.

### **March 2024**

- Reconfirmed ethics approval prior to data collection.
- Recruited participants through social media platforms and personal networks.
- Conducted semi-structured interviews with participants.
- Began transcription of interview recordings.
- Initiated literature collection and review for the literature review chapter.

### **April 2024**

- Completed all interviews with selected participants.
- Finalised the transcription of all interview data.
- Commenced initial coding of qualitative data using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis approach.

### **May 2024**

- Completed the first full draft of the thematic analysis.
- Discussed emerging themes and analytical insights with the dissertation supervisor for feedback and refinement.
- Submitted the final major project.

## Appendix C: Approved Ethics Application

Research Ethics Approval Form – Student Research

Psychology Research Ethics Panel (PREP)

### Guidance:

- Please ensure that you have read the UAL Code of Practice on Research Ethics, UAL Code of Practice on Educational Ethics, and the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics before completing this form.
- Please complete this form electronically. While completing it, delete all the text in green font, which is meant to guide you.
- Section A is to be completed by the student and Supervisor / Unit Leader.

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- Section B is for PREP and UAL Sub-Committee use only.
- Once Section A has been completed, the form should be submitted to the relevant staff member (e.g., Unit Leader, Course Leader) by the student. Instructions on who to submit the form to will be given in each unit.
- Incomplete applications which are missing question responses, signatures, documents for the participants (Participant Information Sheet, Consent Form, Debriefing Sheet), or relevant appendices (e.g., study advertisement, questionnaires, instructions, interview questions, tasks, stimuli such as images) will be returned to the student for completion. This will delay the review and approval process.

## SECTION A

TO BE COMPLETED BY THE STUDENT

Name:	Shey peak Jeffers
College:	London college of Fashion
Course and year (if applicable)	Psychology of fashion, 3 <sup>rd</sup> year
Unit for which the study is being conducted:	Final major project
Study title:	Professionalism and Black Women's hair: A qualitative study on perceptions and experiences of hair grooming policies in the workplace.

The UAL codes of practice set out four key areas for ethical consideration. Which one or more of these ethical principles does this application for ethical consideration relate to?

a. An ethics of care is supported by the Educational Ethics Sub-Committee as a positive ethic that is the University's responsibility to foster in relation to students, educational content,	Yes
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<p>educational process including material resources, and in students' relations with anyone who participates or interacts with their work.</p>	
<p>b. The principle of social justice obliges the student to identify the risks and benefits of participation in creative or investigative practice. Any risks to persons participating should be weighed against any potential benefits – to the participants or the student, and also the wider benefits to society of the knowledge gained. As with the principle of respect for persons, there is a need to promote equality and racial justice and protect vulnerable groups.</p>	Yes
<p>c. Respect for persons recognises the capacity and rights of all individuals to make their own choices and decisions. It refers to the autonomy and rights to self-determination of all human beings, acknowledges their equality, dignity, freedom, and rights. An important component of this principle is the need to provide special protection to vulnerable persons, both students and in student activity involving others.</p>	Yes
<p>d. Beneficence is the principle of acting for the good and well-being of others. It requires students to serve the interests of others. In so doing, students comply with the principle of neither doing, nor permitting, any foreseeable harm as a consequence of creative or investigative practice. This is the principle of non-maleficence; it is the principle of doing no harm.</p> <p>The specific duties of promoting equality and good relations are assumed under these principles, as defined by the Equality Act 2010.</p>	Yes

1. Please provide the rationale behind your study, including a brief literature review, the gap in the existing literature that the study will address, study aims / research questions, and hypotheses (if the study has a

quantitative component). Indicate whether the study is qualitative or quantitative and what design it will use. (600 words max, excluding references)

### The persistence of racial equality in society

Racial inequality has been a persistent issue across societies, with its roots deeply embedded in historical systems of oppression, such as slavery, colonialism and segregation (Rincon,2020). These inequities continue to manifest in various aspects of society, including education, healthcare and the workplace (Pyke, 2010). Social equality, which refers to equal access to resources, opportunities and rights (Toke, 2023), is crucial for promoting fairness and justice. However, racial inequality persists, particularly in the workplace, where both overt and subtle forms of discrimination hinder the opportunities and success of marginalized racial groups (Rowe, 1990).

Racial inequality specifically addresses the disparities between racial and ethnic groups in terms of access to resources, power and opportunities. While race equality aims for fairness, racial inequality reflects the ongoing disparities in these areas (Bowdler & Harris, 2022). One of the areas where racial inequality is most visible is in the realm of grooming and professional appearance (Bennet- Alexander & Harrison, 2016). Workplace grooming policies, which often enforce Eurocentric beauty standards can contribute to systemic racial discrimination, particularly for black women.

### Workplace Grooming policies and Professionalism

Workplace grooming policies are the rules or guidelines that dictate how an employee should present themselves in terms of personal appearance, which includes dress codes, hairstyles and overall grooming standards (Paschal, 2017). These policies intended to promote a certain professional image, but they can also

discriminatory if they prioritize Eurocentric ideals of beauty, which emphasizes straight hair, lighter skin tones and specific body types (Mona, 2024b). Black women are often required to conform to these standards which do not account for the cultural and historical significance of their natural hairstyles, such as afros, braids and locs (Mona, 2024b).

Professionalism in the workplace is a concept that often centers on behaviors and attitudes deemed appropriate for a professional setting (Miles, 2022). However, some interpretations of professionalism can also emphasize the role of physical appearance such as hair. While appearance can be seen as an essential component in some industries, this can be problematic, especially when they are informed by narrow Eurocentric notions of beauty and appearance. As a result, black women who wear natural hairstyles or have textured hair may be unfairly judged as “unprofessional” (Trusty et al., 2022, p. 9). This leads to a form of incongruence where individuals feel internal conflict between their self-perceptions and the external pressure placed upon them by societal standards (Team, 2024).

#### Internalised Racism and Black Hair in the workplace

Internalised racism is a process by which individuals from marginalised groups adopt negative societal stereotypes and beliefs about their own racial identity (David et al, 2019). In the context of black women and their hair, this phenomenon is particularly damaging. Historically, Black hair has been a symbol of cultural heritage, identity and resistance (Dash, 2006). However, workplace grooming policies that favor Eurocentric beauty can create a tension between cultural identity and the desire to conform to workplace norms (Lawrence, 2025). As a result, black women may internalize these societal biases, leading to negative self-perceptions and diminished self-esteem related to their natural hair (Hwang, 2021).

The experience of internalised racism is compounded by grooming policies that disproportionately affect Black women. Studies show that Black women are often 30% more likely to face discrimination regarding their grooming and appearance during the hiring process, specifically around their hair (The Crown Coalition, 2019). These policies not only reinforce discriminatory beauty standards but also contribute to the internalization of those standards, making it more difficult for black women to feel comfortable in their natural appearance.

### Gaps in literature

While existing research on racial discrimination in the workplace has acknowledged the role of grooming policies and Eurocentric beauty standards, there are significant gaps in understanding the deeper impact of these policies on black women's self-perceptions. While the Crown Act (2022) in the U.S. and the Halo code in the UK (Pandey, 2020) have made strides in protecting black individuals from hair discrimination, the effectiveness of these initiatives in reducing internalised racism among Black women remains under-explored (Johnson, 2024). Although some studies focused on the broader impact of hair biases, they fail to address how these biases affect the self-esteem and professional outcomes of black women across different career stages.

While research on hair bias has gained attention in recent years, few studies examine the nuances of how grooming policies specifically impact Black women's psychological wellbeing and career development. There is a need for more in-depth research that explores how grooming policies contribute to the development of internalised racism and how these experiences vary based on individual and cultural factors.

### Current research

This study aims to fill these gaps by investigating how workplace grooming policies can be perceived among black women and if this is linked to internalised racism, specifically in relation to their self-perception of the

hair. This will be done by focusing on the lived experiences of black women through qualitative research. This research will offer valuable insights into the psychological impact of grooming policies and how they shape the professional and personal identities of black women.

The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

- 3- What are black women's perceptions and experiences of hair grooming policies in their workplace environment?
- 4- How do these influence self-perceptions of their hair and identity?

In this study, the gaps in the literature identified above will be addressed using semi-structured 1:1 interviews alongside thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2016).

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**2. Does your research involve participants?**

- |                                     |      |
|-------------------------------------|------|
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | No * |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Yes  |

**\*If you answer 'No', you do not need to complete Questions 3 to 11. Instead, please go to Question 12 and continue from there.**

**3. Who will the participants be? Please tick as appropriate.**

- |                          |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Students at University of the Arts London |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Staff at University of the Arts London    |



Other\*

**\*If you answered 'Other' please specify below.**

The sample will be made up of black women and participants will all be over the age of 18, so that full informed consent can be given. Participants will be based in the UK and work in corporate office environments such as PR professionals, editors, marketing managers and will include but not limited to those working in fashion workplaces.

#### **4. How will participants be recruited and how many will be involved?**

Participants will be recruited through volunteering sampling with an advert for the study posted via social media platforms such as LinkedIn and Instagram. Participants will also be recruited via the researcher's personal network and connections (convenience sampling). The requests for participants to take part in the study will either be made via social media or email.

A total of 10-12 participants will be recruited to take part in this study.

**5. What will participants be asked to do and for how long?** Describe the entire study procedure, including measures (e.g., questionnaires) or the interview questions that you will ask them to complete or answer.

The participants will first be invited to take part in the study if they fit into the demographic needed for the study, the participants will then be given an information sheet (see Appendix A), which will contain all the key

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information about the study, what their role is within the study, what they will be asked to do and the risks and benefits of taking part. A consent form will then be completed by them (see Appendix B) before taking part in the study. Participants will then be asked a set of demographic-related questions which will include their age and occupation.

The study will be qualitative, self-designed semi-structured interviews (see appendix D) which will be 1:1 with participants and conducted online via MS teams. At the start of the study, participants will be asked to share their experiences and perceptions of hair grooming policies in their workplace. The interviews will cover topics such as:

- Their workplaces official or unofficial grooming expectations/policies including regarding hair styling.
- How they think others perceive their hair.
- How they think workplace standards have influenced their hairstyle choices.
- Their perceptions of professionalism in relation to Black women's hair.
- How these experiences have shaped their self-perceptions of their hair and identity in professional settings.

As the interview is semi structured some of the questions may be adapted during the interview so that if more depth is needed on a question, more questions can be asked so that the topic can be better understood. After the interviews have been conducted the participants will then be thanked for their participation and then sent a debriefing sheet (see appendix C) which they can read through.

The intended amount of time for each Interview will be between 30-40 minutes.

**6. What potential risks to the interests of participants do you foresee and what steps will you take to minimise those risks? How will you inform participants of the risks and the steps you are taking to address them?** The BPS defines risk as the ‘potential physical or psychological harm, discomfort or stress to human participants that a research project may generate.’ It includes risks to participants’ well-being, self-esteem, social standing, values, privacy and reputation, beliefs, employment / livelihood, personal relationships, freedom, commercial interests (e.g., intellectual property), and so on.

This study is minimal risk as it involves the discussion of personal experiences and perceptions which can be comparable to everyday conversations. However, due to the study discussing grooming policies within the workplace which could be linked to perceptions of internalised racism, necessary safeguards will be implemented to mitigate the risks of any unexpected discomfort.

The participants are unlikely to have their psychological wellbeing affected due to the low-risk nature, however if they do, resources will be provided on the debriefing sheet to help them and they will be able to contact the researcher and supervisor, as their emails will be provided on the debriefing sheet. Informed consent would need to be given before the interviews taking place which would outline the purpose of the study, procedures and benefits before consent is given. They will also be informed that their participation is voluntary and that they can withdraw at any time.

If participants find answering one of the questions to be sensitive and distressing, they will be allowed to not answer this question and move on without any consequences. The researcher will then check that the participants are in a good mental state to continue.

The researcher will make sure that when conducting the interviews, non-judgmental and neutral language is used when discussing hair choices and workplace experiences. The researcher will also be culturally aware and

prepared to navigate sensitive topics with empathy and professionalism. Moreover, as the researcher is also from the Black community, this should help to ease some discomfort with discussing this topic.

The risks and benefits of the study will be clearly stated in the participant information sheet before the interview, the participants will be able to withdraw from the study at any point within the interview process without detriment. Once the interview is complete, they will have 1 week to opt out of their data being used, if they wish without detriment. Their right to withdraw from the study before, during and after will all be clearly stated in the participant information sheet. Each transcript will be given a code which will be shared with the participants just in case the participants do wish to withdraw from the study within **that week**. In this case they will be told to email the researcher the code to the transcript so that they can identify and delete the relevant data.

The following resources will be given on the debriefing sheet.

1. Mind charity support resources: <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support>
2. Samaritans' helpline 116 123
3. Accessing counselling or therapy through the NHS for UK- based participants:  
<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/pages/free-therapy-orcounselling.aspx>  
resources: <http://www.getselfhelp.co.uk>
5. EHRC (Equality and human rights commission): [Homepage | EHRC](#)

There are no presented physical risks for the study as the interviews will take place via MS teams in a quiet space where only the participant and researcher are present on the call. All data that is used in both the study and the write up of the report will be anonymous (Through the use of pseudonyms) so they will have no impact on the

participants reputation or right to privacy, and their commercial interests and livelihood. Participation is purely on a voluntary basis.

Compliance with the data protection Act 2018 and General Data Protection regulation (GDPR) is a legal obligation. The data such as recordings (audio only) and transcripts will be stored on One Drive, a UAL managed system, which is password protected. When the interview has finished these audio recordings will be transferred immediately to the UAL OneDrive of the researcher and permanently deleted from the recording device. Only the researcher and relevant staff members at London College of Fashion will have access to the data.

Non-personal anonymised data (such as the transcripts from the interviews) can be stored for long periods as they will contain no identifying data. They will be stored for at least 5 years. The interview audio and recordings and consent form, together with participant email addresses, will be deleted after the assignment has been marked and the mark has been confirmed by the Exam Board.

**7. What potential risks do you foresee to yourself as the researcher and what steps will you take to minimise those risks?** For example, does your research raise issues of personal safety for you or others involved in the project, especially if taking place outside working hours or off University premises?

The interviews will take place online only so there is minimal risks to the researcher's safety. No personal contact details will be shared with the participants (UAL email address will be used only). If anything, distressing or a risk to the researcher does arise (although unlikely) they will end the interview immediately and contact the UAL counseling service. Should this occur, steps will be taken to ensure that participants are still treated professionally as the interview concludes.

--

**8. Please attach a copy of the Participant Information Sheet, Consent Form, and Debriefing Sheet you plan to give participants.**

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Please tick here if the Participant Information Sheet, Consent Form, and Debriefing Sheet are attached in the appendix at the end of this form.
-------------------------------------	---

**9. Does your project involve children / minors (anyone under the age of 18) or vulnerable adults?** The E states that vulnerable populations include ‘children, persons lacking capacity, those in a dependent or unequal relationship, people with learning or communication difficulties, people in care, people in custody or on probation, people who have suffered physical or psychological trauma and people engaged in illegal activities such as drug abuse.’

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No. Go to Question 10
<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes*

**\*If you answer ‘Yes’, you may need to obtain a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check and seek ethical approval from the relevant UAL ethics sub-committee. Discuss this with your Supervisor, Unit Leader, or Course Leader. Please be aware that a DBS check normally takes 4 weeks, but can take longer.**


<input type="checkbox"/>	I confirm that I have obtained a DBS check.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I understand that I need to go through the PREP review and the UAL ethics review process.

**Please Note:**

## The Cost of Conformity: How workplace Grooming Policies Shape Black Hair Identity

It is a presumption of academic research that, wherever possible and feasible, the information on which the research is based should be preserved, so that it can be made available to future researchers. However, the privacy of participants must be respected. Please refer to the UAL and BPS ethics codes before answering Question 10.

**10. Will you be obtaining personal information (e.g., name; postal, email, or IP address; recorded image or audio; date of birth) from the participants?**

	No. Go to Question 11
	Yes*

**\*If you answer 'Yes', please give details. In your response, please indicate:** Why do you need to collect personal information from participants? How will you store and use this information during the course of your research in line with the Data Protection Act 2018 and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)? What parts of this information will need to be confidential? How will you ensure that no one can link participants' identities to the rest of their data? Will you exhibit or publish the information? Who will have access to the data? Will you retain information after the research is concluded? If yes, how? If information is to be destroyed, explain why this is appropriate.

Recorded audio will be obtained from participants so that transcripts can be collected for thematic analysis, but there will be no identifiable personal data. This will be stored on OneDrive which is managed by UAL and password protected. Only the relevant UAL staff members and researchers will have access to this, and the data will only be emailed through UAL email systems to the unit leader/ supervisor to archive after the researcher submitted their assignment on May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2025.

No data that is identifiable will be on the recording or connected to the recording. Everything will remain anonymous, and pseudonyms will also be used. Quotes from the transcript will appear in the write-up of the

## The Cost of Conformity: How workplace Grooming Policies Shape Black Hair Identity

thematic analysis but these quotes will be kept anonymous. The recordings will be deleted on completion of the dissertation and confirmation of the grade by the Exam Board. Communication will be through participants' personal email address; however, their email will not be shared with anyone else. These will be handled in the same way as outlined in section 6.

**11. Will payments to participants be made?**

No. Go to Question 12

Yes\*

**\*If you answer 'Yes', please state amount and whether payment is for out-of-pocket expenses or a fee.**

**13. Will any restrictions be placed on the publication of results?**

No. Go to Question 14

Yes\*

**\*If you answer 'Yes', please state the nature of the restrictions (e.g., details of any confidentiality agreement).**

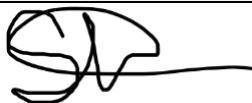
N/A

**Student Declaration:**

**15. I confirm my responsibility to deliver the project in accordance with the Code of Practice on Research Ethics and the Code of Practice on Educational Ethics of the University of the Arts London (University), as well as the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics. In signing this form, I am also confirming that:**

- a) The form is accurate to the best of my knowledge and belief.
- b) There is no potential material interest that may, or may appear to, impair the independence and objectivity of the researchers conducting this project.
- c) I understand that I cannot start data collection until I have received ethical approval from the relevant ethics body (e.g., PREP).
- d) I undertake to conduct the study as set out in this application unless deviation is agreed by the University and to comply with any conditions set out in the letter sent by the relevant ethics body (e.g., PREP).
- e) I understand that, if I decide to make substantial changes to the study method (e.g., the design, participant recruitment method, procedure), I will need to submit a revised ethics form.
- f) I will store data on UAL-managed systems and will follow the data protection principles at all times.
- g) I understand and accept that the ethical propriety of this project may be monitored by the relevant College Research body and/or Educational Ethics Sub-Committee.

**Signature of Student:**




**Date (dd/mm/yyyy):**

14/03/25

**Unit Leader or Supervisor Declaration:**

**16. I support this project and have reviewed and approved the current ethics application.**

## The Cost of Conformity: How workplace Grooming Policies Shape Black Hair Identity

<b>Name:</b>	Ameerah Khadaroo
<b>Signature of Unit Leader or Supervisor:</b>	14/03/2025
<b>Date (dd/mm/yyyy):</b>	

SECTION B

FOR UAL COMMITTEE USE ONLY


## Approval of Psychology Research Ethics Panel:

- The Psychology reviewers recommend that:

This student's Ethics Approval Form is approved as **minimal ethical risk**.

This student's Ethics Approval Form is approved as **more than minimal ethical risk** and so will be forwarded to the University's Educational Ethics Sub-Committee for final approval.

This student's Ethics Approval Form must be resubmitted after the student has made the **required** modifications indicated in the PREP's feedback.

Name of Reviewer 1 (Psychology Team Member / Unit Leader / Supervisor)		Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	
Name of Reviewer 2 (PREP Chair / Deputy Chair)	Dr Soljana Çili	Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	18.03.2025
Signature	Reviewer 1	Reviewer 2	

## The Cost of Conformity: How workplace Grooming Policies Shape Black Hair Identity

Approval of University's Educational Ethics Sub-Committee (EESC): <i>All 'more than minimal risk' documents will be sent to EESC.</i>							
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The Educational Ethics Subcommittee (EESC) recommends that: <table border="1" style="margin-left: 20px;"> <tr> <td style="width: 30px; height: 25px;"></td> <td>This student's Ethics Approval Form is approved as <b>minimal ethical risk</b></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="width: 30px; height: 25px;"></td> <td>This student's Ethics Approval Form is approved as <b>more than minimal ethical risk</b></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="width: 30px; height: 25px;"></td> <td>This student's Ethics Approval Form must be resubmitted, and the following modifications should be made (see below):</td> </tr> </table> </li> </ul>			This student's Ethics Approval Form is approved as <b>minimal ethical risk</b>		This student's Ethics Approval Form is approved as <b>more than minimal ethical risk</b>		This student's Ethics Approval Form must be resubmitted, and the following modifications should be made (see below):
	This student's Ethics Approval Form is approved as <b>minimal ethical risk</b>						
	This student's Ethics Approval Form is approved as <b>more than minimal ethical risk</b>						
	This student's Ethics Approval Form must be resubmitted, and the following modifications should be made (see below):						
Required Modifications List <i>(if applicable)</i>	1)						
Suggested Modifications List <i>(if applicable)</i>	1)						
Name		Date <i>(dd/mm/yyyy)</i>					
Signature <i>Chair of EESC</i>							

**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET****Version 1, Dated 03/02/24**

**Study title:** Professionalism and Black Women's hair: A qualitative study on perceptions and experiences of hair grooming policies in the workplace

**Introduction**

## The Cost of Conformity: How workplace Grooming Policies Shape Black Hair Identity

My name is shey peak Jeffers and I am a student at London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London (UAL) You are being invited to take part in the above research study. Before you decide whether you would like to take part or not, it is important that you understand what the study involves. Please read the information below carefully and ask questions if anything is not clear or you would like more information. If you are happy to take part, you will be asked to provide consent before engaging with the study.

### **What is the purpose of the study?**

The purpose of this study is to explore black women's perceptions and experiences of hair grooming policies in the workplace with a link to how they perceive their hair and identity.

### **Who can take part in this study?**

This study is open to female-identifying black individuals who are 18 years of age or older, are based in the UK, and work within a corporate environment which includes but is not limited to the fashion industry.

### **Do I have to take part?**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You do not have to take part if you do not wish to.

### **What will I be required to do if I take part?**

## The Cost of Conformity: How workplace Grooming Policies Shape Black Hair Identity

You will be required to first read the participant information sheet and complete a consent form prior to you taking part in the study if you choose to do so. You will then be asked a set of demographic related questions which will ask you to note your age and occupation.

A 1-1 interview will then be conducted online via MS teams (this is a team collaborative application developed by Microsoft). The interview will take 30-40 minutes. It will be audio recorded.

In this interview, you will be asked questions about your experience, thoughts and feelings regarding workplace grooming policies, specifically as they relate to Black hair. The interview will explore how these policies and these workplace expectations around hair have influenced your professional journey and identity.

After the set of questions is answered, you will be thanked for your participation and will be sent the debriefing sheet to read through.

### **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

This study is minimal risk as it involves the discussion of personal experiences and perceptions which can be comparable to everyday conversations. However, due to the study discussing topics such as grooming policies within the workplace and self-perceptions of hair, this may bring up negative feelings based on everyday experiences. Given the nature of this study with no sensitive interview questions, these feelings are likely to pass quickly with no lasting effect. If you do find answering any of the questions to be sensitive or distressing, you can skip that question without detriment, and the researcher will move on to the next.

## The Cost of Conformity: How workplace Grooming Policies Shape Black Hair Identity

You can also choose to stop taking part in the study at any time while the interview is being conducted without a reason having to be given, and any detriment. You can also ask for your data to be withdrawn and destroyed within 1 week after completing the study. This can be done by emailing the researcher at [s.peakjeffers0420211@arts.ac.uk](mailto:s.peakjeffers0420211@arts.ac.uk) and including the code you were given at the interview; the transcript that matched that code will then be deleted. If any distress is experienced during or at the end of the study, you will be provided with the relevant resources on the debriefing sheet.

### **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

This study has the potential to contribute to ongoing discussions about professionalism, racial bias and identity in workplace settings. By exploring black women's experiences with hair grooming policies, the findings may help inform broader conversation on workplace inclusivity and the perception of black hair in professional spaces.

### **How will my information be used?**

Any data obtained will be used solely for research purposes. This also applies to personal data, which will be used with your consent. You can stop taking part in the study at any time while completing it, without giving a reason, and without experiencing any detriment. You can ask for your data to be withdrawn and destroyed within 1 week after completing the study. You can do this by emailing the researcher at [s.peakjeffers0420211@arts.ac.uk](mailto:s.peakjeffers0420211@arts.ac.uk), the code you were given at the interview. The transcript matching the code will then be deleted.

## The Cost of Conformity: How workplace Grooming Policies Shape Black Hair Identity

All data will be accessible to the researcher and relevant staff at the London College of Fashion. The data will be analysed while stored on UAL-managed systems. The anonymised data (interview transcripts) will be stored on systems managed by UAL for at least 5 years after the end of the project. Interview recordings and personal data will also be stored on UAL-managed systems, separately from the rest of your data, and will be deleted after this research has been assessed and the grade has been confirmed by London College of Fashion. No one except the researcher and relevant staff at London College of Fashion will have access to the data or be able to link any identifying information to the rest of your responses.

You can find more information about UAL and your privacy rights at [www.arts.ac.uk/privacy-information](http://www.arts.ac.uk/privacy-information).

### **What will happen to the results of the study?**

The results of this study will be written up as part of my dissertation for the BSc (Hons) Psychology of Fashion at London College of Fashion. The report may be presented at an academic conference but will not contain any information that may lead to your identification.

### **Who should I contact for further information?**

If you have any questions, require more information about this study, or would like to receive a summary of the study results when they are ready, please email me, the researcher, at [s.peakjeffers0420211@arts.ac.uk](mailto:s.peakjeffers0420211@arts.ac.uk)

**What happens if there is a problem?**

This study has been approved by the Psychology Research Ethics Panel at London College of Fashion, UAL. If you have any concerns about the study, you can contact my supervisor, Dr Ameerah Khadaroo at [A.Khadaroo@fashion.arts.ac.uk](mailto:A.Khadaroo@fashion.arts.ac.uk) They will do their best to answer your query. If you have further concerns or wish to complain about the study, please contact [researchethics@arts.ac.uk](mailto:researchethics@arts.ac.uk).

**Thank you for reading this Information Sheet and for considering taking part in this research.**

**CONSENT FORM****Version 1 Dated 03/02/24**

**Study title:** Professionalism and Black Women's hair: A qualitative study on perceptions and experiences of hair grooming policies in the workplace.

**Researcher's name:** Shey Peak Jeffers

Please complete this form after you have read the Participant Information Sheet and/or listened to an explanation about the research. If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask the researcher before you decide whether to participate.

If you decide to participate, please tick each of the boxes below to consent to different elements of this study. Please note that you may be deemed ineligible to participate if you do not consent to any of the elements.

## The Cost of Conformity: How workplace Grooming Policies Shape Black Hair Identity

Item no.	Item	Tick
1.	I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and asked questions which have been answered satisfactorily.	
2.	I confirm that I am aged 18 or over and identify as female.	
3.	I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary.	
4.	I understand that I will be able to withdraw my data up to 1 week after my interview without giving a reason, and without suffering any adverse consequences or penalty.	
5.	I understand how my data will be stored and consent to the processing of all data for the purposes explained to me.	
7.	I understand the potential disadvantages and risks of participating and the support that will be available to me should I become distressed during the course of the research.	
8.	I understand that anonymity will be maintained, and it will not be possible to identify me in any reports or publications.	
9	I consent to my interview being audio recorded.	
10.	I consent to my data, including anonymised quotes, being used in written up or published work resulting from this research.	

## The Cost of Conformity: How workplace Grooming Policies Shape Black Hair Identity

11	I understand that honesty is important to the research and will do my best to answer the questions accurately and honestly	
12	I agree to take part in this study	

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Initials of Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Name of Researcher**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

**DEBRIEFING SHEET****Version 1 Dated 03/02/25**

**Study title:** Professionalism and Black Women's hair: A qualitative study on perceptions and experiences of hair grooming policies in the workplace.

**Researcher's name:** Shey peak Jeffers

**Researcher's email address:** s.peakjeffers0420211@arts.ac.uk

Thank you for taking part in this study! Below is some more information about the aims of the study and what happens next.

**What are the aims of this study and what are we expecting to find?**

This study aims to explore Black women's perceptions and experiences of workplace hair and grooming policies, focusing on how these policies impact their self-perceptions of hair and professional identity. It seeks to identify (if any) the challenges and biases that black women encounter in professional settings related to hair, shedding light on the often-overlooked obstacles they face. By examining these experiences in the black community, the

## The Cost of Conformity: How workplace Grooming Policies Shape Black Hair Identity

study will contribute to broader discussions on workplace inclusivity, highlighting the significant impact that grooming standards can have on an individuals' sense of belonging and their professional lives.

### **What are some of the benefits that may result from this study?**

Participating in this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of how workplace grooming policies affect black women's professional experiences and self-perceptions of hair. By sharing your insights, you will help to inform discussions on workplace inclusivity and the perception of black hair in professional settings. This research may also provide an opportunity for personal reflection on your own experiences in professional environments.

### **Where can you find more information about this research topic?**

[Hair Bias in the Workplace: A Critical Human Resource Development Perspective](#)

[Internalised Racism: A Systematic Review of the Psychological Literature on Racism's Most Insidious Consequence](#)

### **What should you do if you need support at the end of the study?**

If you need any support or have found any aspect of this study distressing, please contact your GP or family doctor who can direct you to local psychological services.

The following are other resources you can access to receive support or information about different issues you might be facing, including in the workplace:

## The Cost of Conformity: How workplace Grooming Policies Shape Black Hair Identity

- Mind charity support resources: <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support>
- Samaritans' helpline 116 123
- Accessing counselling or therapy through the NHS: <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/talking-therapies-medicine-treatments/talking-therapies-and-counselling/nhs-talking-therapies>
- Self help resources: <http://www.getselfhelp.co.uk>
- EHRC (Equality and Human Rights Commission): [Homepage](#) | [EHRC](#)

### **Contact details**

If you have more questions about the study or would like to request a summary of the findings when they are ready, please contact me using the email address provided above. If this study has harmed you in any way or you wish to make a complaint about the conduct of the study, you can contact [researchethics@arts.ac.uk](mailto:researchethics@arts.ac.uk).

Thank you once again for your contribution to the study!

## APPENDICES

### Appendix D, Interview schedule:

#### Demographic Questions

- 4- What is your age?
- 5- What industry or field do you currently work in?
- 6- How long have you been working in your current workplace/industry?

**Research Question 1:** What are black women's perceptions and experiences of hair grooming policies in their workplace environment?

- 12- Can you maybe describe your hair and how you usually like to style it?
- 13- Have your styling choices changed over time, especially in professional settings?
- 14- How would you describe your relationship with your hair?
- 15- How do you think the beauty and professionalism standards in the fashion industry influence workplace expectations for black hair?
- 16- Does your workplace have any hair grooming policies? If so, can you describe them?
- 17- If they are no official policies; have you noticed or experienced any unspoken expectations about how you should wear your hair at work?
- 18- Have you ever felt any pressure- spoken or unspoken- to wear your hair in a certain way for work? If yes, can you share an experience?

## The Cost of Conformity: How workplace Grooming Policies Shape Black Hair Identity

19- How have your supervisors or colleagues responded to different Afro centric hairstyles such as braids and locs?

20- Do you think there are varying levels of acceptability for different hairstyles, such as curls or locs?

21- Have you ever received comments- positive or negative- about your hair in the workplace? How did these make you feel?

22- Have you ever experienced yourself or maybe witnessed or heard of workplace discrimination related to black hairstyles? If so, can you tell me a bit about this and how it was dealt with?

### **Research Question 2:** How does these influence self-perceptions of their hair and identity?

6- Many fashion brands have a signature look or aesthetic. To what extent do you feel that your natural hair or protective hairstyles align with the brand's aesthetic? (If they work within the fashion industry)

7- Have your workplace experiences shaped how you choose to style your hair outside of work?

Have these experiences impacted your sense of identity in any way? If so, in what ways?

8- Do you feel that workplace grooming expectations (at your job) align with or challenge your cultural identity? Why so or why not?

9- Have you developed any personal strategies to navigate workplace expectations around hair? If so, can you tell me about them?

## The Cost of Conformity: How workplace Grooming Policies Shape Black Hair Identity

10- what do you think workplaces can do to create a more inclusive environment for black women's hair?

11- What changes would you like to see in corporate (fashion) workplaces regarding hair acceptance and any policies related to this? (If they work within the fashion industry)

### Closing

2- Is there anything more you would like to add about your experience or thoughts on this topic?

**Thank you for your time and participation!**

### **Appendix F, Study Advert**

Are you a black woman navigating workplace expectations around hair and professionalism?

We want to hear your story!

**I am looking for participants for my year 3 psychology of fashion, dissertation project at the University of the Arts London, which is titled “Professionalism and Black women's hair: A qualitative study on perceptions and experiences of hair grooming policies in the workplace”.**

## The Cost of Conformity: How workplace Grooming Policies Shape Black Hair Identity

I am looking to interview black women who are 18 years of age or older, who work in corporate office environments including but not limited to those working in fashion workplaces and live in the UK.

The study will involve a 1-1 online interview which will take approximately 30-40 minutes.

If you would like to take part, please contact me via email [s.peakjeffers0420211@arts.ac.uk](mailto:s.peakjeffers0420211@arts.ac.uk) and I will be able to send you more information about the study. Thank you.

### **Appendix D: Evaluative Commentary**

I think overall I prefer braids because I just think there are so many things you can do with braids, but I think and this probably is what this is about, but for my more grown professional kind of look. (Versatility of hairstyles)

## The Cost of Conformity: How workplace Grooming Policies Shape Black Hair Identity

1. **Preference for Braids** – participant expresses liking braids over other styles.
  2. **Versatility of Braids** – highlights braids as flexible and multifunctional.
  3. **Positive Hair Expression** – shows joy or empowerment in styling choices.
  4. **Agency in Hair Styling** – reflects control over one's appearance and style decisions.
- 

### **Potential Theme: Hair as Empowerment and Creative Expression**

This quote could support a broader theme like:

#### **Hair as Empowerment and Creative Expression**

- Captures the joy, freedom, and sense of identity that comes from choosing styles like braids.
- Counters narratives of conformity or regulation by showing hair as a source of pride and possibility.

[Interviewer] 2:18

Yeah.

Yeah.

[Participant B] 2:31

Sew in is nice.

## The Cost of Conformity: How workplace Grooming Policies Shape Black Hair Identity

[Interviewer] 2:34

OK.

So do you think that your styling choices have changed like over time, especially in like the professional setting that you're in? Do you think they've changed since you've worked in HR?

[Participant B] 2:44

I yeah, I do. When I had my part-time job, as a teen, I would go in with blonde braids.

I would have different patterns in my hair when I was in uni.

[Interviewer] 2:53

Yeah.

[Participant B] 2:58

I would do whatever I wanted with braids, but now I definitely think it's changed.

I think it's more if I'm having braids that be black or if I'm having coloured braids, it will be in a time where I'm not working. (Conformity, changing hair depending on when they are working.

### Initial Codes

1. **Past Hair Freedom** – previously felt free to wear any braids regardless of work.
2. **Shift Toward Conformity** – current behavior reflects more cautious choices.
3. **Work-Informed Styling Decisions** – hair decisions now depend on work schedule.

## The Cost of Conformity: How workplace Grooming Policies Shape Black Hair Identity

4. **Avoidance of Colored Braids at Work** – specific colors are avoided during work time.
  5. **Temporal Hair Management** – timing hair choices around work/non-work periods.
- 

### Potential Themes

#### 1. Conformity to Professional Norms

- Aligns with earlier data about moderating style based on perceived workplace appropriateness.

#### 2. Hair as a Site of Regulation

- Reflects internalised standards about what's “acceptable” even when not explicitly stated by an employer.

#### 3. Shifting Identity and Self-Censorship

- Shows a personal transformation from freedom to restraint, suggesting adaptation to professional pressure.

Recruitment poster

Study Advert

## The Cost of Conformity: How workplace Grooming Policies Shape Black Hair Identity

Are you a black woman navigating workplace expectations around hair and professionalism?

We want to hear your story!

**I am looking for participants for my year 3 psychology of fashion, dissertation project at the University of the Arts London, which is titled “Professionalism and Black women’s hair: A qualitative study on perceptions and experiences of hair grooming policies in the workplace”.**

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## The Cost of Conformity: How workplace Grooming Policies Shape Black Hair Identity