

2023

## Organizational Leadership Culture and Gender Inequality in the C-Suite

Rocelia Hornbuckle  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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Rocelia Hornbuckle

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Review Committee

Dr. Stephanie Hoon, Committee Chairperson, Management Faculty

Dr. Richard Dool, Committee Member, Management Faculty

Dr. Teresa Lao, University Reviewer, Management Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost

Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University

2023

Abstract

Organizational Leadership Culture and Gender Inequality in the C-Suite

by

Rocelia Hornbuckle

MA, Davenport University, 2002

BS, Davenport University, 2001

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Management

Walden University

May 2023

## Abstract

Women in the automotive industry often struggle to advance into top leadership positions. More specifically, culture and gender inequality affect senior-level and higher women leaders trying to achieve a position in the C-Suite in automotive manufacturing organizations. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of senior-level and higher women seeking a C-Suite position. The research questions addressed the lived experiences of women who strive to be promoted to C-Suites positions. Three sub-questions were used to evaluate participants' perceptions, leveraging them to increase awareness of the cultural and gender inequality affecting the representation of women in C-Suites. Semi-structured interviews were used with a sample of 15 women participants from Michigan's automotive industry using audio recording and verbatim transcription of the interviews. Through a conceptual lens, the gender gap in inequality was examined using Blumberg's theory of gender stratification and grounded on Geist and Myer's concepts of gender inequality, aided in revealing three emergent themes. The findings of this study confirmed that cultural and gender inequality challenges influence women getting C-suites positions in the automotive industry. The finding shows practical implications that there is a need to provide equal advancement opportunities to more senior-level and higher women leaders, regardless of their culture and gender. This study promotes positive social change by educating the automotive industry about the challenges and the needs of women in the automotive industry aiding in decreasing cultural and gender inequality so more women can reach their career goals.

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## Dedication

I first dedicate this Ph.D. study to God, who has given me the strength to endure the challenges during this journey. Without my family, I would not have finished my study. I thank my 97 years young mother, my sons, daughter, grandchildren, my heartbeat, brothers, sisters, extended children, my entire family, and friends. Your prayers, encouragement, and tolerance of my shortness have motivated me to complete this phase of life's trials. I am forever grateful for your putting up with me and my inability always to be available. Love you all!

## Acknowledgments

I want to acknowledge and thank my dissertations committee members, including Dr. Roger Wells (former committee chair), and Dr. Stephanie Hoon (current chair), who stepped in during the last phase of my dissertation. I appreciate your commitment to seeing me through this journey. I want to acknowledge Dr. Richard Dool (committee member), who supported me in my study and graciously agreed to join a project that had already begun. I cannot express my gratitude and appreciation for Dr. Roger Wells, who has endured most of my challenges and never stopped believing in me, and who continues to push to get me through this trying-to journey, which helped me complete another quest in my life before he retired. I want to thank my entire committee for their reviews and feedback.

I am immensely grateful to all the participants in this study and thank them warmly for taking the time to fill in our questionnaire or participate in our interviews. I also thank all the Participants sincerely for speaking with great courage and honesty about (sometimes) deeply personal issues. I hope this research will convey the personal emotions and feelings attached to the challenging issues I set out to explore. I hope to do justice to the testimonies shared by those who trusted their stories.

I want to acknowledge two young ladies, Natalie, and Jasmine, whom I had the pleasure of meeting while authoring this dissertation. Both ladies have chosen careers in the automotive industry and are experiencing biases at the young ages of 20 and 22. I hope they can use the strategies shared by the participants in this study to overcome those challenges and continue to break barriers leading to a path for other women.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Gender ratios in leadership roles are changing as women continue to enter the workplace and contribute substantial improvement with growth, development, and cost-effective measures (Glass et al., 2016). Women in leadership roles have influenced corporate strategies and altered the workplace (Glass et al., 2016). However, statistical data have shown that the education levels between men and women in the workplace are unequal. There are more college-educated women in the workplace than college-educated men. (Elsesser, 2019). More specially, Warner et al. (2018) stated that “women earn over 57% of undergraduate degrees and 59% of all master's degrees.”

The topic of this study is organizational leadership culture and gender inequality in the C-suite. The topic concerns supporting organizations in diverse societies where women experience inequality even in top leadership positions. This study helps expose the challenges women experience trying to achieve top leadership positions and reveals ways to help women overcome the barriers that might prevent some women from achieving C-suite positions.

Despite the number of educated women in the work environment, women continue to lag behind men regarding their representation in top leadership positions. Women have a long way to go for equality to be balanced in the workplace (Elsesser, 2019). Stadler (2015) asserted that women wanting to climb the corporate ladder and achieve a C-suite position should have a graduate degree and a few years of work experience before going for an MBA. However, no known literature states that an MBA is necessary for C-suite positions. That said, unless they are a creator or owner

of the business, chances of achieving a top position without a degree are unlikely (Stadler, 2015) even though women comprise 57.4 % of the Michigan workforce women in the Michigan auto industry occupy only 13% of C-suite positions, 26 out of 500 women (Bomey, 2019).

Women in male-dominated industries deal with significant diversity and gender inequality (Dresden et al., 2018). However, Dresden et al. (2018) commented, "Little is known regarding the experiences of women in male-dominated positions" (p.458). Women continue to struggle as they strive to advance into top leadership positions in automotive organizations in Michigan. Gender inequality affects senior-level and higher women leaders trying to achieve C-suite positions (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016). A "C-suite" position refers to top leaders with executive-level titles that start with the letter C, for example, as chief executive officer (CEO), chief financial officer (CFO), and chief operating officer (COO). Senior-level women continue to face obstacles when advancing to top leadership positions in the C-suite (Haile et al., 2016).

Researchers have investigated gender inequality, and there is little to no literature on the continuing gender disparity affecting the number of senior-level and above women's ability to advance into C-suite positions in Michigan's automotive organizations. Statistics have shown trends toward equality, with a 25% increase in senior-level women leaders in C-suite positions (Huang et al., 2019). However, persistent inequality and discriminatory behavior hinder some women from achieving C-suite positions in automotive organizations (Huang et al., 2019). Although some women have achieved top leadership positions, endemic bias and inequality may affect the percentage of senior-

level and above women leaders in the C-suite. An inequality gap suggests that growth and development are necessary for more women represented in Michigan automotive C-suites. Opinions vary on why women are underrepresented in C-suites, saying that women opt out because of family, want more work-life balance, and ignore the long history of gender discrimination in the work environment. Furthermore, some researchers have asserted that the business atmosphere turns women off as they work twice as hard as their male counterparts; always fighting for recognition and advancement is not appealing (Meck, 2019).

### **Background of the Study**

Although many women have entered the workforce and embraced the challenges to their progress. Comparatively, only a few women can advance beyond the glass ceiling into C-suite positions (Amakye et al., 2022; Seo et al., 2017). Extant literature generates insight into senior women leaders' experiences as they move up the corporate ladder. For example, Alim and Paris (2017) and Fernando et al. (2018) discussed how only some scholars search for best practices to advance, sustain, and mentor aspiring women seeking C-suite positions. They noted that what they studied was social and educational inequality. These scholars concluded that discovering injustice began with teaching and education and stated that providing in-depth knowledge of how inequality affects women's advancement in society.

Moreover, Downes et al. (2014) explored the impact of perceiving the glass ceiling and studied the situation's impact on career planning and decision-making processes. They examined women's perception of the glass ceiling and its effects on their



careers, concluding that situations are vital to know how women feel about a phenomenon that affects their ability to advance.

The gap in this study is based on the finding presented in Pritchett's (2019) research, which explored the absence of women as senior leaders in the automotive manufacturing industry. My study helps fill the gap by exploring and focusing on the lived experiences and perceptions of female senior managers in Michigan automotive industries by identifying cultural and gender inequality in trying to advance to the C-suite. Pritchett showed that women as senior leaders are underrepresented in US automotive industry, believing that there is a need to provide an understanding of the obstacles to advancement women face in the automotive industry.

Fitzsimmons and Callan (2016) also provided insight into women's experiences who continued to struggle as they strived to advance into top leadership positions. The researchers discussed gender inequality and how their experiences affect senior-level women leaders trying to achieve a C-suite position. They discovered that gender inequality continued in the C-suite and concluded that problems are essential to gain insight into women's struggles.

Furthermore, Glass and Cook (2015) offered insight into the corporate environment under female leadership. They addressed women's contributions, and the potential growth women bring to an organization. They discovered that women's challenges need to be sufficiently understood and concluded that the issues are essential to understand the potential values women bring to the workplace. They also provided evidence of their ability to strengthen and grow the business by bringing new leadership

styles and increasing gender equality and diversity. Companies with women in top positions are more profitable, socially dependable, and provide better-quality customer experiences (Post et al., 2021; Ragas & Culp, 2021) than those that only employ men in top positions.

Jones and Solomon (2019) examined women's obstacles in top management roles. They found that even though women's presence has increased in the workplace, women remain underrepresented at the top. These researchers discovered that the challenges still exist and stated that the issues are essential to show evidence of the challenges women continue to combat in advancing in the workplace. In addition, Howe-Walsh and Turnbull (2016) focused on the increasing concerns about the underrepresentation of senior-level women in top leadership positions, discussing prior studies that increased our knowledge regarding the challenges women face when advancing in their careers. However, there needs to be more information on why so few women reach top leadership positions. It is essential to know what has already been researched, expand on the knowledge, and provide additional insight into the research. Women have searched for techniques or strategies to increase the representation of women in C-suites.

Additionally, more significant barriers block African American females; they endure unique challenges. Regardless of the changes in the workforce, the underrepresentation of African American women variable has stayed the same; there is inconsistent behavior toward African American groups (Becker, 2016). This information alone warrants a need for further research.

Huang et al. (2019) examined statistics showing trends toward equality. They highlighted continued inequality and bias that hinder some women from achieving C-suite positions. Huang et al. discovered a 25% increase in senior-level women leaders in the C-suite position, stressing that the situation is vital to expose inequalities to find solutions that could mitigate the issues and close the inequality gap.

Similarly, Hurley and Choudhary (2016) addressed factors influencing women who get CEO positions—discovering that they examined different specific abilities between genders from those who have achieved a position in the C-suite. They found that barriers not only hinder women's advancement but also affect the progress of society. Thus, identifying the factors hindering women's ability to affect society's development is essential. There has been slow and stalling progress toward gender equality; between 1970 and 2018, the trend showed improvement toward gender equality, but this has slowed down and, in some situations, has stopped (England et al., 2020).

Johns (2013) explored the reasons for the persistent gender gap in women's and men's salaries in senior leadership positions and discussed remedies. They studied the structural, cultural, and organizational barriers that hinder women from advancing and discovered more than just gender inequality that prevents women from advancing. They concluded that the subject is essential to identify factors of inequality that women face when trying to advance in their careers. Women aspiring to top leadership must deal with unexpected and expected challenges. Because all labyrinths have a viable route to the center, I understand that goals are attainable. The metaphor acknowledges obstacles but is not discouraging. For many women, family responsibilities pressure the most fateful

turns in the labyrinth. Women continue to be the ones who interrupt their careers, take more days off, and work part-time. As a result, they have fewer years of job experience and fewer hours of employment per year, which slows their career progress and reduces their earnings. Eagly and Carli (2018) said, "Dangers lurk in family-friendly benefits used only by women." (p. 147).

Women are dealing with the expected and unexpected challenges of getting top leadership positions, trying to avoid the twists and turns of obstacles. Some deal with career interruptions, which hamper their career development (Eagly & Carli, 2018). A situation where women are balancing work and family may be a situation for some women. However, the question remains if females who do not have children combat the same challenges. Organizations use the topic of parenthood as a crunch for all women, an avoidance of not addressing the inequality that affects women's ability to progress in their careers (Dias et al., 2020). In addition, Dias mentioned that women who have children are penalized, yet men who are fathers receive excellent job opportunities.

Furthermore, Williams (2017) examined women's paths into the C-suite, identifying the challenges women endured as they advanced in their careers. They discovered that some qualified women needed help to achieve a position in the C-suite. The situation is thus essential to understand how women view why they cannot advance in the workplace. This study contributed insight into the barriers that hinder some women from advancing in the workplace. Women's journey into the C-suite has been challenging, and their excursion has been emotional and challenging (Rowlands, 2019). Women have held their tongues, hoping their challenging work would provide them with

more opportunities. However, they soon discovered that the obstacles and challenges they endure are profoundly rooted and continuing regardless of their effects (Chira, 2017).

Women have yet to see many changes to the obstacles that have hindered their ability to advance. This study is needed to understand the challenges senior-level and higher women leaders experience in the automotive industry and to expose strategies other women could use to advance in top leadership positions. This research attempts to close the gaps and strengthen cultural and gender equality in C-suites of automotive industries.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem is that there are not enough senior-level and higher women leaders in the C-suites of the automotive industry. Women's education levels at the undergraduate and graduate levels have matched the educational level of men (Hill, 2013). However, women have the smallest percentage of top positions in the C-suite; only 6% of women serve as CEOs (Stych, 2019). Few scholars have searched for best practices to advance, sustain, and mentor women who aspire to top leadership positions (Alim & Paris, 2017; Svejenova & Alvarez, 2017). The social management problem is that workplace inequality affects the culture and the number of senior-level and higher women leaders who advance to C-Suite positions in automotive organizations in Michigan (see Huang et al., 2019).

Women are concerned about the underrepresentation of senior-level women in top leadership positions (Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016; Saunders, 2020). King (2020) discussed that diversity training and anti-harassment efforts are addressed in the organization but fall short of creating gender equality. Howe-Walsh and Turnbull (2016)

said, "The lack of women in senior positions in itself acts as a barrier to more women reaching higher levels" (p 415). More women in top leadership roles would inspire other women to aspire to top-level positions (Howe-Walsh & Turnbull, 2016).

The number of women in CEO positions was only 1% higher at the start of 2019, up from the previous year (Keloharju et al., 2019). A few qualified senior-level women leaders in executive roles hover at about 23% of the openings (Korn, 2019). Although researchers have investigated similar issues, I searched for scholarly literature on the subject using Google scholar and Walden's library database. I discovered insufficient literature supporting culture and equal advancement opportunities, limiting many senior-level or higher women leaders from advancing into C-suite positions.

Thus, there is a need to examine how diversity and advancement opportunities connect to women's underrepresentation in the C-suite. The inequality with the lack of diversity and career development beyond the glass ceiling for females has hindered and limited women's advancement to C-suite positions in automotive manufacturing. A more inclusive, diverse organization could improve the company's ability to benefit from every employee's talent with different social classes (Hunt et al., 2018).

Little to no literature exists examining the lived experiences of senior-level and higher-level women leaders advancing to C-Suite positions. Describing the lived experiences and perceptions of senior-level and higher women leaders could influence automotive industries to create strategies. This could help eliminate the gender-specific roadblock that senior-level and higher women leaders face in climbing the corporate

ladder to get a C-suite position for the next generation of women entering the automotive industry.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This qualitative phenomenology study aimed to explore and describe the experiences of senior-level and higher women leaders experiences as it relates to the advancement of women in the automotive industry achieving C-suite positions and how work-life balance impacts career development. This phenomenological study aimed to describe the lived experiences and perceptions of senior-level and higher women leaders.

I look forward to exploring the lived experience of women who have pursued and achieved and those who have not achieved a C-suite position to find ways to help more women overcome the invisible barriers that have held women back in the work environment.

The situation or issue prompting the research was that the gender ratios in C-suites leadership are slowly changing. Women enter the workplace contributing substantial improvement and cost-effective measures (Glass et al., 2016). Furthermore, women in leadership influence corporate strategies and positively alter the workplace (Glass et al., 2016). The progression of gender equality has been slow as women in senior-level, and higher positions have grown to 28 %, up from 23 %t and representation in the C-suite grew to 22 from 21 percent (McKinsey & Company, 2020).

Women need help to advance into top leadership positions, remaining underrepresented in the C-suite. Literature has described the effect of gender inequality on senior-level and higher-women leaders trying to achieve C-suite positions

(Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016). Scholars have claimed that women should not have to adjust to working in a male-dominated environment, and it is time for the workplace to adjust and close the equality gap (King, 2020). Therefore, this study may contribute to positive social change by increasing awareness by describing the challenges of senior-level and higher-lived experiences advancing in the automotive industry and could also have social implications for other organizations' efforts to develop and improve every organization's initiative to develop more women leaders into C-suite positions.

### **Research Questions**

What are the lived experiences of women who strive to be promoted to C-suite positions?

### **Subquestions**

1. What barriers have you encountered as you advance in the workplace?
2. What is the perspective on the representation of women in the C-suite?
3. What are the perception of how has work-life balance impacted career development?

### **Conceptual Framework**

I geared the concepts that grounded this study towards understanding gender inequalities and their effects on senior-level women's ability to achieve C-suite positions. Blumberg's (1984) theory of gender stratification is an older theory focusing on the differences between men's and women's circumstances. Exposing the historical with the contemporary pieces of evidence reveals how women have taken a back seat to men's



progressions and development opportunities exposing gender inequality in the workplace today (Geist & Myers, 2016).

Today, women desire more opportunities for corporate and equality in the workplace, making a great sacrifice to climb the ladder. Women are getting higher education in their quest to advance further in the work environment as they fight the battles of gender inequalities and cultural challenges (Geist & Myers, 2016). Gender stratification theory on gender stratification served as the conceptual framework. It guided the study by addressing the unequal practices seen in the workplace, which are apparent with the underrepresentation of women in the C-Suite. Gender stratification is an unequal workplace practice, referring to an imbalance in the workplace with prosperity, authority, and opportunity, causing an uneven dissection between men and women (Danaj, 2016). Probing was used to identify and bring awareness to the inequality that limits women's development toward diversity in automotive manufacturers' C-suites. I gathered data based on the lived experiences of successful and unsuccessful women to understand if their experiences could influence social change.

The concept of gender stratification theory is noticeable in the unequal practices seen in the workplace, politics, salaries, and other areas (Danaj, 2016). The gender theory concept could expose the unequal division between men and women, causing an imbalance in the workforce (Bamberg & Vincent-Hoper, 2017; Danaj, 2016). Nabil (2017) argues that issues affect gender stratification distributing unequal power based on gender in family, school, media, religion, and peer pressure. More men than women hold public office, senators, congresspeople, governors, and mayors (Latta, 2016).

I used gender inequality theory as the social theory to guide the research to examine factors that could influence and hinder senior-level women's careers in the workplace (see Kalev & Deutsch, 2018). Inequality and biases toward women still exist, creating a division in the workplace where men and women experience unequal treatment, affecting the satisfaction, productivity, and enthusiasm of women employees (Arora & Malam, 2018; Arshad, 2020). Gender inequality theory is a theory that exposes the acceptance in society, blaming the progress of women stagnated progress on family conflict. Men experience some of the same struggles in family life but often sustain their ability to advance in the work environment (Padavic et al., 2020).

Gender stratification theory and gender inequality theory might help explore past and present imbalances in the work environment and provide insight into factors limiting senior-level women's inability to positions in the C-suite. Segregation in the workplace has stagnated women's growth, limited their development, and caused women to fall short of the glass ceiling (Padavic et al., 2020). Society has a growing desire for women to reach their potential within the workforce (Hart, 2018). Researchers have suggested that existing human resources development (HRD) interventions be reexamined to support women's career advancement (Seo et al., 2017).

This framework could help leaders better understand women's experiences and highlight disparities in advancing senior-level and higher women leaders to C-suite positions (see Huber, 2015). The findings in this study sought to provide more women with approaches and techniques used by women who have successfully achieved top leadership positions to develop their skills for advancing to top-level positions.

Encouraging more senior-level women to seek top-level positions might narrow the gap in inequality in the C-suite. I chose a phenomenological approach to explore senior-level or higher women's lived experiences to find a logical understanding that could provide greater insight into senior-level women leaders' challenges with advancing beyond the glass ceiling (Christensen et al., 2017). The phenomenological method helped identify lived obstacles in women's experiences and provided insight into where improvement might be needed to strengthen the diversity structure of the work environment and close the gender inequality gap. I will discuss a more detailed analysis of the concept which will be explained in Chapter 2.

### **Nature of the Study**

I used a transcendental phenomenological design to interview senior-level and higher women leaders in the automotive industry in Michigan. The study's qualitative design was consistent with the approach planned by Ziakas and Boukas (2014), and the findings are in proportion to the interviews with women directors and top-level management. I explored the issues affecting senior-level and top-level women leaders as they advance in automotive organizations. I used this phenomenological study to interview each participant to reveal their experiences regarding inequality and the underrepresentation of women in the C-suite (see Patton, 2022). This approach builds on a practice used by Husserl's (transcendental descriptive) logic from the 20th century and Heidegger's (interpretive) explanation (see Reiners, 2012). Heidegger believes every translation is already interpreted, translated, and drove the interpretation (as cited in Maly, 2008).

The idea of translation in this research created an image that includes the knowledge and perception of an amateur and expert familiar with the phenomenon (see Schleiermacher & Bernofsky, 2021)—the strategy to understand the lived challenges and perception of senior-level and higher women's leadership. I understood the essence of a phenomenon through recorded one-on-one interviews and the written transcription of descriptions of the lived experiences of senior-level and above women leaders while remaining unbiased and suspending my own beliefs. (see Heotis, 2020).

A transcendental descriptive approach could help gain knowledge from translating the lived challenges and successful strategies of senior-level women who have achieved C-Suite positions. The study is grounded in the evidence of existing challenges affecting women's advancement (see Berghofer, 2017), having senior-level women inform me, in their own words, of their challenges and approaches to dealing with inequality. Their experiences advancing in the work environment could help identify logical and structural strategies to reduce automotive organizations' inequality.

### **Definitions**

The definitions are a source of commanding terms and concepts outlined throughout the study to understand better subject-specific terms and related meanings distinguished from the usually accepted ones. I use the following definitions in conducting this research:

C-suite: An area of a business in which the structure of executive team members reports directly to the CEO of an organization (Guadalupe et al., 2014). Members with executive-level titles that start with the letter C, such as Chief Operating Officer (COO),

Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Chief Information Officer (CIO), Chief Financial Officer (CFO), chairperson, senior vice president, vice president, organizing director, and treasurer (Haile et al., 2016).

Culture: Behavior that governs the organization's existence, which reveals values, mission, and goals and promotes respect, trust, and inner safety in the work environment (Page et al., 2019).

Gender stratification: An imbalanced allocation of capital, authority, and opportunity between men and women, shown by the unequal participation of women in the workforce (Danaj, 2016).

Glass ceiling: The glass ceiling comprises patterns of various obstacles occurring in women's lives that create significant and increasing boundaries, hindering their ability to gain the knowledge required to develop and climb the corporate ladder into executive roles (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016).

Senior-level managers: A level of management that handles the operations and profitability of a company; they aim to increase the organization's efficiency, productivity, and performance, ensuring that all operations run efficiently (Reh, 2018).

Transcendental phenomenology: Adds consciousness to the study of lived experiences through qualitative research. Transcendental Phenomenology (TP) is a philosophical approach to qualitative research that seeks to comprehend individuals' experiences (Henriques, 2014).

TP is also known as a descriptive approach. The purpose is to remain transcendental impartially, where the researchers consistently assess their biases and

preconceptions to avoid influencing research objectives (see Lopez & Willis, 2004). The transcendental produces no descriptions, viewpoints, beliefs, or recommendations to the study; the researcher assumes the position of a pre-determining goal, an impartial account, using only participants' lived experiences to increase the knowledge of the phenomenon's essence (Neubauer et al., 2019).

### **Assumptions**

Assumptions in research are unconscious beliefs about things or situations that are perceived and accepted as accurate (Ekstrom, 2021). I remained open-minded and flexible with my thoughts during the interview process, which allowed me to recognize and assess the participants' descriptions of their lived experiences, being careful not to misrepresent or distort the data in developing an argument or position (Paul & Elder, 2019). This research study included the primary assumption that obtaining reliable results could positively encourage automotive decision-makers to support more qualified senior-level and higher women's leadership in obtaining C-suite positions. Inequality is present in automotive organizations in terms of women not advancing beyond the glass ceiling. This assumption was necessary because I aimed to examine the relationship between inequality and women's underrepresentation in the C-suite. I asked the volunteer participants to confirm the problem with inequality in automotive organizations and discuss their experiences regarding how inequality might contribute to the underrepresentation of women in the C-suite.

The assumption stemmed from the data collected from one-on-one interviews with 15 volunteer participants until saturation. I analyzed the data using NVivo software

to provide a detailed analysis of the interview records and historical data from the literature. This approach provided credible results from the one-on-one interviews, describing the lived experiences of senior-level or higher women leaders' successes or failures in obtaining a C-suite position.

An additional assumption was that using open-ended research questions following prepared procedures would help me understand the lived experiences of senior-level or higher women leaders who achieved or have failed at achieving C-suite positions. Another assumption was that there would be little expectation of any findings that aided in developing women for C-suite positions. These project assumptions provided data from a range of 15 up to 25 volunteer participants from the automotive manufacturing industry clearly and concisely until I met saturation. The research also avoided individual social opinion and decision perspectives and depended on analytical results gained from the research findings.

My assumptions contributed to data obtained from the perceptions of senior-level or higher women leaders from their lived experiences to analyze the measures adopted to maintain dependable and credible aspects of the management decision processes. The motive was to recognize and avoid coding failures and prevent unexpected conditions for project failures. These actions provided the means to control the study and produce trustworthy findings related to occurrences in the considered organizations.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of this research refers to the problem or issue under which I will perform the interview session (Simon & Goes, 2013). However, the scope of this research

was on exploring the underrepresentation of senior-level and higher women leaders in the automotive industry, discovering the challenges they endured advancing in the automotive industry to achieve C-Suite positions. The research focuses on gaining an understanding by exploring the lived experiences of how they overcame the challenges to obtain a C-Suite position in the automotive industry. I will conduct the study with participants who work in Michigan as senior-level or higher leaders in the automotive industry.

I isolated the delimitation in this research to only a selected group of participants. (Simon & Goes, 2013). The research is delimited to interviewing senior-level and higher women leaders and limited by geographic to participants only in the Michigan automotive industry. The study population came from a sample size of 15 senior-level or higher women leaders in automotive organizations in Michigan. Senior-level or higher women leaders outside of the automotive industry were not part of the interviewed participants. The primary purpose was to address the central research questions (what are the lived experiences of women who strive to be promoted to C-suite positions?).

I combined two concepts (e.g., Blumberg's theory of gender stratification and Kalev and Deutsch's gender inequality theory) to create the conceptual framework. These researchers' concepts discuss unequal practices that have led to women's underrepresentation in the work environment. This framework allowed me to explore lived experiences of senior-level and higher women leaders through their perspectives and explanations of the phenomenon. The projection is that the study's results will help the automotive industry, communities, corporate management, and others in the

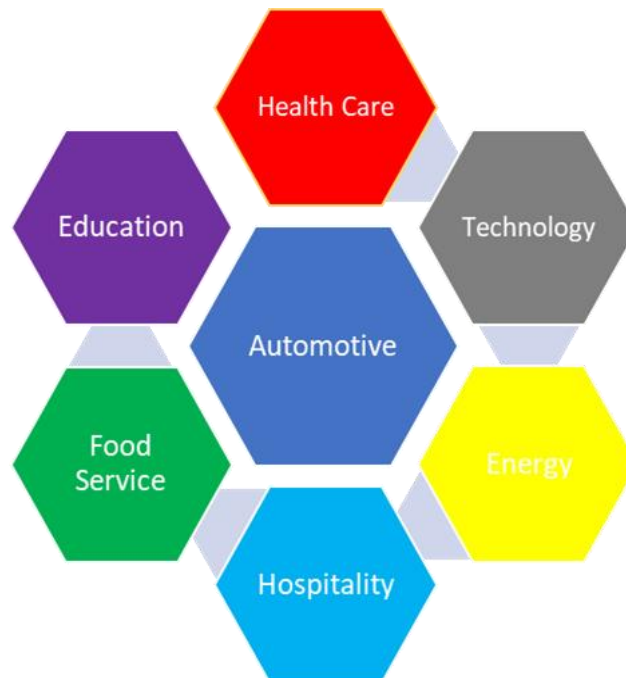


management field to develop or restructure development programs conducive to all. This study may contribute to senior-level and higher women leaders in the automotive industry, as well as other organizations, that will give more women opportunities to develop their skills and advance further in manufacturing and other industries.

The structure of the work environment comprised a broad range of organizations. This study focuses on the automotive industry. Figure 1 is a chart I designed that illustrates a business environment with the study's focus area in the center.

Figure 1.

*Illustration of a proposed research environment Hornbuckle (2021)*



The principal goal was to discuss the participants' experiences of advancing in the work environment. This study's conceptual framework was grounded in the theory of gender stratification articulated by Blumberg (1984) and Kalev and Deutsch (2018).

These researchers have discussed the workplace's unequal practices that have led to women's underrepresentation in C-suite positions.

### **Limitations**

Limitations are substances that are assessable to specific criteria, people, organizations, locations, or other limiting conditions (Simon & Goes, 2013). This study was limited to the focused sampling of only 15 senior-level women leaders in C-suite positions or those seeking positions, forming a limitation because a small sample size may cause the findings not to be generalized to a larger group. The focus was on collecting enough information to allow the reader to understand the participants' contexts and perspectives. Second, various influences could affect the results. That limitation included selecting only women (a) in a CEO-level position in the C-Suite and (b) employed in automotive organizations in Michigan.

The third limitation is that I limited the data to what the participants will report and their capacity to communicate their experiences and thoughts meaningfully and reflectively. Fourth, the research is a qualitative study. I was the primary data collection instrument (see Patton, 2022). Fifth, a qualitative phenomenological method has also limited the study.

This research is a qualitative study, using my frame of reference and knowledge to aid in understanding the participants' lived experiences. Since qualitative research produces transferable results instead of simplifying findings, the findings could also represent other women who are not senior-level or higher or working in automotive

industries. In addition, providing precise contexts and profound descriptions of the phenomenon aids readers in determining transferability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018)

This research's limitation included whether the participants would provide honest answers about their experiences as senior-level women leaders. If the responses were not accurate, the findings could have prevented me from capturing their experiences' essence.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study was significant because the findings contributed to understanding the barriers hindering senior-level and higher women leaders from advancing in their careers. The results might help directors or higher-level women leaders obtain a position in the C-suite. Identifying the challenges that women face might influence positive social changes. Supporting women's success could improve cultural diversity, mitigate gender inequality among individuals in high-level positions, and allow more women to achieve C-suite positions. Clearing the path to the C-suite can appear challenging. Hearing stories and recommendations from senior-level women leaders in C-suite positions might benefit future female leaders. The results contribute to a better understanding of senior-level women's adversity. They helped create supportive programs that brought positive social change so that more senior-level women leaders could achieve C-suite positions.

### **Significance to Practice and Theory**

Women and men in management have different perceptions of women's environmental barriers to workplace advancement (Annabi & Lebovitz, 2018). Women encounter more scrutiny than their male counterparts do; they have been penalized for expressing male-typed behaviors or female-typed emotions and are often judged as

overly emotional, undermining their capability and professional authority (Smith et al., 2016). As a result, only a few senior-level women leaders have achieved C-suite positions. Many women find it challenging to get essential career resources that support women's progress into C-suite positions (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016). Whereby, causing an absence of critical viewpoints about how hiring managers view qualified women as they attempt to advance beyond the glass ceiling (Ross et al., 2017).

Few hiring managers identify with the issues that shape women's experiences and their chances of achieving a C-suite position (Glass & Cook, 2015). This study's results offer more insight into the phenomenon of gender disparity that hinders women from obtaining positions in the C-suite. These findings contributed to suggestions for advanced leadership training and development that could close this gender gap. Extant literature discusses gender disparity as an issue for women seeking promotions into the C-suite (Johns, 2013). Moreover, gender disparities continue to exist as women face ongoing biases; these disparities have lessened their chances for advancement in the work environment (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016). Furthermore, women are often disadvantaged, even when they achieve the organization's C-suite position (Glass et al., 2016).

### **Significance to Social Change**

This study's results may contribute to positive social change in the work environment for senior-level women leaders in automotive organizations in Michigan wanting to advance in their careers. A few women are in top leadership positions in automotive organizations, but they only made it there with challenges. To achieve gender

equality in the C-suite, the social barriers that hinder some women from advancing must be abstracted. (Subodh Mishra, 2018). Providing senior-level women with resources could lead to more opportunities to achieve C-suite positions in Michigan's automotive organizations. The study's findings provide strategies that might influence more women to seek top-level automotive organization positions.

Empowering women is vital to the continued growth of the economy and social change (Sullivan & Foundation, 2016). The knowledge gained from the stories of women already in top-level positions can offer women strategies for motivation and professional development. Scholars believe that having more qualified senior-level women in C-suite leadership positions could access a grander scale of resources, ideas, skills, energy, and competitive advantage (Bertrand et al., 2019). Hence, this study may also influence future studies that could lead to more in-depth research on strengthening diversity in the C-Suite (see Larcker & Tayan, 2020).

### **Summary and Transition**

Chapter 1 described the problems that senior-level and higher women leaders experience advancing in the workplace. Women have experienced slower career growth since entering the workforce. Although women have made significant contributions showing substantial improvement and cost-effective measures in organizations, women's progress in automotive organizations still needs to catch up to their male counterparts. This research aimed to provide insight into the lived challenges senior-level women experience when advancing in the work environment towards C-suite positions. The

knowledge obtained from this study supported these women by offering advice and strategies.

Chapter 2 is the literature review, where I present the foundation of the study, presenting the gender gaps affecting the underrepresentation of women in automotive industry C-suites. The literature presented in Chapter 2 addresses the challenges of senior-level and higher women's ability to get C-suites positions in automotive industries in Michigan. The scholarly material creates a foundation for adding new knowledge to women's lived experiences in the automotive industry, which could assist more women with shattering the glass ceiling, enhance the current understanding of supporting the data, and substantiate the findings.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Literature Introduction**

This chapter comprises the literature on gender inequality and culture challenges, biases, discussion of the glass ceiling, automotive challenges, underrepresentation of women in C-suites, and lack of developmental opportunities for senior-level and higher women leaders leading to top leadership positions. Chapter 2 includes the methods used to uncover existing scholarly literature, including discussing the conceptual framework and literature review and concluding with a synthesis of the research findings in addition to critiques of previous research methods.

The glass ceiling, which has caused inequality and the underrepresentation of women in C-suites, had historically obstructed the progression of senior-level and higher. There have been many studies on inequality in the workplace, but limited data that include a phenomenological approach to examine the experiences of senior-level and higher women leadership who progressed to C-suite positions. Reviewing previous research provides a historical vision supporting the gap addressed in this study. This qualitative phenomenology study aimed to explore and describe the experiences of senior-level and higher women leaders experiences as they related to the advancement of women in the automotive industry achieving C-suite positions and how work-life balance impacts career development. Women are considered less suitable for senior-level C-suite positions than their male counterparts and are sometimes overlooked for advancement opportunities (Seo et al., 2017).

Chapter 2 provides the extent of literature on the glass ceiling phenomenon and senior-level women's perceptions of their experiences in achieving or not achieving C-suite positions. The glass ceiling is a primary factor that has prevented women from advancing in the work environment. Current literature on the lived inequality of senior-level, and higher women leaders' experiences of women's under-representation in the C-Suite justified the need for the study by adding to the vision of seeing more women represented in C-suite positions. Most of the literature discovered focused on the inequality with equal wages, not the inequality gap with diversity and women's development. The focus was on finding solutions that support senior-level and higher women leaders in achieving positions in the C-suite in automotive organizations in Michigan. It did so by exposing and describing current senior-level women leaders' perceptions of their career path to the C-suite.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The literature included an overview of recent scholarly studies. I used keywords for searching for articles relevant to the research question: C-suite, women in C-suite, gender inequality, gender bias, gender barriers, number of women in C-suite, why so few women in C-suite positions, underrepresentation of women in C-suite, Female CEOs Statistics. The databases searched included Emerald insight, online search training, and online learning in Education Sources, ERIC, SAGE Journals, Sage Knowledge, Walden search engine, and Thoreau multi-database search. I searched the Google Scholar search engine for relevant peer-reviewed scholarly articles within the past five years. I collected literature to support conceptual perspectives. I provided a clear description of gender



stratification and inequality theories, which helped provide insight into women's underrepresentation in C-suites. Table 1 illustrates the kinds of relevant literature.

Twenty-six percent of the literature reviewed was over five years old, and 84% of the literature used was within the required guidelines.

**Table 1**

*Literature Review Search Criteria*

Type of references	Quantity	Less than five years	Percentage	Greater than 5 years	Percentage
Books	20	6	30%	14	70%
Peer-reviewed journals	99	15	15%	84	85%
Research databases	8	2	25%	6	75%
Pertinent articles	18	0	0%	18	100%
Total	145	23	16%	122	84%

While many methods were available for the phenomenological approach, some needed to be suited to understanding lived experiences. The approach chosen for this research problem was transcendental. The TA approach supports understanding the research problems, gaining knowledge, and understanding the participants' experiences. It allows me to collect data clarifying the participants' significant experiences, bringing awareness to the activities and their perception of the phenomenon exposed in the

finding. Analyses of the essential structures of awareness through the contents of the Participant experiences that are transcendent to the structure of their perception.

The transcendental approach used in this research is Ziakas and Boukas's (2014) qualitative strategy to interview women directors and top-level management and explore issues that affect senior-level women leaders as they advance in the automotive industry. There was a review of specific industries and demographic locations for this study. I conducted one-on-one interviews to explore the lived experiences of senior-level women regarding inequality and the underrepresentation of women in the C-suite. I logically incorporated a practice Husserl used (transcendental descriptive) from the 20th century.

I used an approach to understand personal knowledge by viewing the social and significant facts relating to the inequality that caused the underrepresentation of women in top leadership positions (Henriques, 2014; (Sheehan, 2014) and Heidegger's (interpretive) explanation of the individual experience of deliberate obstacles and challenges relating to their awareness from thought, memory, imagination, and motions see Reiners, 2012).

A transcendental descriptive approach helped understand how the glass ceiling phenomenon occurred and how it shaped the lived challenges and success strategies of senior-level and higher women leaders' intended to achieve C-suites positions (see Berghofer, 2017). I ground this research using existing literature regarding the challenges to women's advancement. Examining literature relevant to this study provided essential information and historical data for grounding the dissertation's theories and concepts.

## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study provided the foundation and support for the study. In qualitative research, the conceptual framework provided the study's groundwork to establish clear directions and supported the developing research questions and data collection approaches. I used Blumberg's (1984) theory of gender stratification to examine the Participant's experiences regarding gender inequality in automotive industries. The study also drew on Kalev and Deutsch's (2018) social theory regarding gender inequality, concentrating equally on the inequality and underrepresentation of women in the C-Suite, focusing on the factors that influenced and hinder aspiring senior-level women's careers in the workplace today and in the future.

Gender stratification refers to men's and women's social positions, where men typically occupy more advanced positions than women. Gender inequality allows people different opportunities because of perceived differences based solely on gender (Parziale, 2008). Parziale (2008) stated, "Gender discrimination is the prejudicial treatment of an individual or group due to gender, defined as the social identity of the sexes." (p. 978). Gender stratification and gender inequality are interchangeable (Geist & Myers, 2016), where one or the other theories are used instead of the other without affecting the meaning.

Geist and Myers (2016) mention that "there are a variety of approaches to the study of gender stratification. Most of the research in this area focuses on differences between men's and women's life situations, which are broadly defined." Keister and Southgate speculated that gender is an aspect of stratification (Keister & Southgate,

2012) that identifies with the difference in treatment between genders. It is vital to understand the issues underlying gender inequality for an all-inclusive understanding of gender stratification (Geist & Myers, 2016). Kalev and Deutsch's (2018) theory of gender inequality identified the disparity and empirical signs of gender inequality in the workplace. Gender inequality theories potentially expose potentially biased behaviors among men and women and reveal disparities that affect women's advancement and development opportunities (Bathia et al., 2019; O'Conner, 2020). Kalev and Deutsch (2018) claimed, "Gender outlined the cultural, logical, and structural methods that created inequality in their approach to finding solutions for reducing gender stratification." (p. 258).

Using a phenomenological approach to bring awareness to women's experiences when trying to advance in the work environment can make conscious awareness that inequality regarding advancement opportunities exists (Moustakas, 1994). Gaining a better understanding of these women's lived experiences can bring attention to the cause of the disparities relating to senior-level women leaders' employment in C-suite positions (Essig & Soparnot, 2019).. The concept of gender stratification relies specifically on how the power structure is different among women and men, embedded in organizations and social practices (Danaj, 2016; Vagni, 2020). Danaj (2016) argues that not until the 1970s made the differences between men and women was not longer recognized as "natural." Society believed that it was customary to treat men and women differently.

In addition, Danaj (2016) mentioned "change of perspective in sociology made possible the analysis of inequalities inside the family, including the sources of this inequality, as well as analyses of the labor market from a gender perspective" (p. 1).

Today's women are more driven and motivated than before, striving for more challenges, responsibilities, and authority. Women are reaching a new height, using different strategies to get more possibilities to rise beyond barriers and obstacles. Women are learning to re-think how they develop and advance further in the work environment (Solesvik et al., 2019; Werdhiastutie et al., 2020). It is not about solving a problem that has happened; it is about achieving a goal and reaching its full potential. It is about overcoming challenges impacting many women's career goals. The focus is on bringing awareness to the phenomenon, helping other women learn how to push forward, breaking through the barriers of challenges, and finding avenues of tools and strategies created from the 15 women participants' lived experiences that other women can use to advance in their careers.

Women are moving beyond the hurdles that can limit their growth. They are learning to navigate the countless decisions and options open to them and recognize those things that can help strengthen their ability to grow their career (see Khilji & Pumroy, 2019). They have learned how to negotiate to increase their climb upward, sideways, and sometimes down through the career jungle gym (Adamson & Kelan, 2019; Huq et al., 2020). Even though stakeholders have identified the need for gender diversity (see Singh & Peers, 2019) to increase gender in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) occupations for more women in workplaces around the world (Singh & Peers,

2019), women must continue overcoming the challenges hindering them from advancing in their careers. Women working in automotive today are still experiencing gender-related obstacles that are slowing or stopping them from growing and prospering in their careers, regardless of their scientific degree or skills (Bicquelet-Lock et al., 2020).

### **Literature Review**

The essential areas examined in the literature review were (a) gender inequality, (b) women's path to the C-suite, (c) women in positions in the C-suite, (d) women in the automotive industry, (e) corporate environment under female leadership, (f) factors influencing accomplishment of women getting C-suite positions, (g) women leaders are failing to get C-suite positions, (h) potential reasons for the persistent gender gaps between women and men in higher positions, and remedies; and (i) supporting women in their journey to the C-suite.

The problem of women's underrepresentation in top leadership positions has captured many organizations' attention. This research aimed to understand senior-level and higher women leaders' lived experiences as they advance in the work environment. A search of the Walden University library database failed to turn up any peer-reviewed articles and dissertations that provided essential information. I searched the Google Scholar engine, using gender and cultural challenges in automotive C-suites. And women in automotive C-suite as a search topic. However, the only data generated during my search related to the challenges in the workplace, not related to the automotive industry.

Women who have experienced inequality when trying to advance in the workplace have overcome challenges that have hindered them. Although some women

have progressed beyond barriers, females continue to still be underrepresented in the C-suite (Bell, 2019; Geys & Sorensen, 2019). Men have been an influential group guiding corporate America's structure (Chakraborty & Saha, 2017). A study by Korn Ferry (2018), an organizational consulting company, stated that women in top leadership positions are dramatically lower than men. Their analysis showed that 25% of the top leaders are women, up from 23% in 2020 but still much lower than their male counterparts (Korn, 2019).

There is substantial evidence that corporate leadership should examine corporate strategies regarding socially responsible practices related to gender diversity and equality leading up to and into the boardroom. The boardroom is where the business structure, policies, regulations, and strategies begin (Glass & Cook, 2015). With more millennial women entering the work environment, the challenges of inequality could affect-and-coming senior leaders in the workplace. Corporate leaders must examine the company's stability regarding gender equality in every business area. Their focus should be on developing a balanced work environment and preparing and providing every qualified senior-level woman interested in advancing into top leadership positions with the opportunity to achieve a position in the C-suite.

What is less clear is the relationship between gender diversity and environmental practices. Developing more senior-level and higher females could strengthen diversity in the boardroom by placing more women CEO in the C-suite (Glass & Cook, 2015). In an analysis of Fortune 500 firms, organizations that employed more women and displayed a more significant commitment to environmental sustainability (Ciocirlan & Petterson,

2012), women are the agents of positive change, working in the automotive industries, combating barriers, and enduring the challenges and biases affecting diversity and gender equality. Women's opinions should be heard in every effort to eliminate gender inequality; they are the voices within the role models for sustainability (Singh & Peers, 2019).

Women's commitment to environmental sustainability is also more substantial than their male counterparts. Women are more likely to encourage environmentally responsible practices (Glass et al., 2016). The presence of women as CEOs has prompted and positively improved diversity. Companies are working toward a commitment to women directors, supporting the idea of a gender-board CEO who can improve innovation and strengthen diversity (Saggese et al., 2021).

However, there needs to be more literature on senior-level and higher women leaders and what they face climbing the corporate ladder in the automotive industry. Most of the literature found delved into women's challenges, but not particularly in the automotive industry and not their lived experience. Therefore, this study exposed and addressed the lived experiences of senior-level women leaders in the automotive industry and their ability to achieve a C-Suite position. Sustainability in the workplace depends on CEOs and the Board of Directors. Understanding diversity in the C-suite could bring more stability for women who aspire to excel in the workplace and want equal opportunities beyond the glass ceiling (Cook & Glass, 2011). Sustainability creates fairness that promotes equality, is an essential influencer for organizational development, integrates stability into the business structure, and creates happier, motivated employees



(Ehrenfeld & Hoffman, 2015). D'Orville (2019) claimed, "Sustainability refers to the maintainability of development itself; or to how certain practices or policies may be conducive to a better and stable quality of life; or the viability of a project or institution, in particular, its financial soundness."

Scholars have focused on women's inability to achieve occupational flexibility, suggesting that the glass ceiling is a significant barrier preventing women from rising to the top (Cook & Glass, 2011). Occupational flexibility pertains to meeting the need of the business and the employees. This approach emphasizes adapting to varying situations and doing what it takes to get the job done benefits everyone (Stowers, 2019). Structuring sustainability and flexibility in developing more women might strengthen sustainability for women in the work environment.

Women already comprise almost half of the workforce, with more women increasing annually and facing barriers as they struggle to get to upper management positions (Omran et al., 2015). Women are often evaluated negatively in male-dominated positions despite encouraging stock market growth when leading the organization (Cook & Glass, 2011). Although women have progressed within the marketplace, they remain underrepresented in the upper levels of corporate structures despite the market's growth (Netchaeva et al., 2018). Women have contributed significantly to an organization's growth (Glass et al., 2016). Nevertheless, women remain underrepresented in C-suites. This study helps to promote and change the market mindset regarding women advancing into top leadership positions. This change could benefit an even more robust and diverse market. The research helped to open doors to advancement opportunities. It could provide

data for future studies to embrace generations of women entering the workplace who may desire to achieve positions above the glass ceiling. However, we must do our part to empower more women to aid in closing the gender gap for the future generation of female leaders that might enter the automotive industry. Harvard Business school professor Robin Ely, a gender researcher, believes that having more senior-level women leaders in positions with power improves women's chances for advancement from lower positions (Kelly et al., 2017).

Although women have been the fastest-growing group in the workplace compared to their male counterparts, they continue to combat the glass ceiling's challenges. Society does not believe women have the same ambition or desire to climb the corporate ladder as their male counterparts (Downes et al., 2014). Now that women are slowly progressing up the corporate ladder, there still seem to be lingering obstacles hindering some senior-level women leaders from advancing into C-suite positions. The workplace gap among genders is not due to women's lack of interest in advancement; women are just as concerned with progressing as their male counterparts (Krivkovich et al., 2017). However, only some women can access networking opportunities to effectively empower them to lead organizations (Salahuddin et al., 2022).

Women have often been appointed to CEO positions when there is a declining or failing business (Downes et al., 2014). Women have stood back, believing their turn would come if they continued to work hard, whereby discovering that the challenges were severely embedded and more unshakable than expected. Some scholars believe that the glass ceiling phenomenon will never be eliminated (Chira, 2017). Such a belief does

not mean the fight for gender equality should end. The content should balance equality and workplace diversity, offering more qualified women the opportunity to develop their skills to achieve top leadership positions.

A 2016 survey designed by McKinsey & Company was distributed to 132 organizations, with 34,000 employees responding (McKinsey & Company, 2020). The researchers reported that women who negotiated for promotions were 30% more likely than men to be labeled as daunting, domineering, or hostile. The bias is real, and eliminating it may be impossible. It will not be because women have given up the fight. Some women might become discouraged and give up on the fight (Chira, 2017). However, many women will be willing to stand the test and proceed to open the world's eyes by making it clear that women of all ages are valuable assets to the business world. Women will continue to chip away at the glass ceiling to close the gap between culture and gender inequality (O'Conner, 2020; Salahuddin et al., 2022).

### **Gender Inequality**

Gender inequality is not a new problem; women have been dealing with inequality since entering the work environment. Gender inequality is a long-standing barrier limiting women's wages, opportunities, and career advancements. There is evidence of gender differences causing an imbalance where women are underrepresented. Whereby affects women's ability to advance and develop in the workplace. Women remain noticeably underrepresented in top leadership positions, even though having reached equivalence with men at the associate level long ago despite the policies in place to eliminate inequality (Padavic et al., 2020). "Stagnation" is a word used to describe

women's hindered progress into top-level positions that impose power and influence on the organization's development (Padavic et al., pp. 61- 111, 2020). Stagnation slows women's ability to advance in their careers regardless of their education, forcing them into underemployment or sluggish career growth. Padavic et al. (2020) said, "This stagnation is a crucial component of gender inequality in the labor force; its persistence is still poorly understood." (p 66).

### **The Impact of Gender Inequality**

Gender inequality affects everyone, having a significant and undesirable impact on human well-being (Amjad et al., 2021) in an examination of a poll survey conducted by reporters from Automotive News titled the Project XX survey. Women express their perceptions regarding the continued sexism and unconscious biases that continue throughout the industries (Carty et al., 2017). After the publication of their finding, there was an increase in the news regarding women's inability to advance and the inequality affecting them. Women started speaking up and telling their experiences with harassment; social media opened doors for more women from many industries to be included and heard, believing it would open men's eyes to the depth of the problem (Carty et al., 2017). In addition, women were willing to openly discuss their experiences without fear of reprisal or retribution while under the protection of anonymity provided by the Project XX Survey, but getting people to talk on the record was challenging.

Companies refused requests for on-the-record interviews with female executives regarding the unbiased experience women endured. However, those women who would discuss their knowledge asked for secrecy to protect their employment (Carty et al.,

2017). Lytle et al. (2019) said, "Even as the automotive industry gears up to race ahead with electric mobility and self-driving cars, it is being held back by a deepening talent crisis." (p.1). Women are the underdeveloped source of talent in the automotive industry that can help pull auto companies out of a bind (Lytle et al., 2019). Companies that do not work to produce a diverse workplace encouraging gender diversity could miss critical competitive advantage even though significant proof has shown that strengthening diversity has produced positive financial performance (Lytle et al., 2019).

### **Gender Inequality in Automotive**

Women see things differently regardless of how the automotive industry says they want and need more female leaders. Women continue to experience indirect and open challenges that delay their development, causing some to leave the automotive industry (Carty et al., 2017). The obstacles continue to be a controlling factor hindering women's progress up the corporate ladder. Even though women have made significant gains, the challenges of climbing the corporate ladder have limited the number of women achieving positions in the C-suite (Johnson et al., 2018). Advancing in the workplace is more challenging for women to climb corporate ladders than for men. Women face more significant barriers than men as they progress up the ladder (Akpinar-Sposito, 2013).

Gender inequality prevents females from accomplishing their full potential and enjoying the significant advantages of gender diversity in leadership. This study supported and hoped that more organizations would consider supporting more educated, qualified senior-level and higher women leaders in obtaining C-suite positions. I attempted to provide additional insights to help address this question by doing the

following: (a) examining the extent to which women have achieved leadership positions in automotive companies, (b) describing the advantages of women's leadership and the challenges that women face in becoming leaders, and (c) exposing any strategies used to overcome barriers for women striving for C-suite positions. Although this study could potentially intervene in broader discussions on culture and gender inequality, the research scope was limited to senior-level and higher women leadership in the automotive industry.

Despite women's progress in the workplace, women remain underrepresented at higher levels within the automotive industry Catalyst USA (2020) revealed that women hold 19.9% of corporate board seats and comprise 5.8% of CEO positions in those companies. While there is a vast amount of literature regarding women's advancement in the workplace, there needs to be a better understanding of why women's career levels are limited and fall short of the glass ceiling. Some women have had minimal opportunities to advance and sustain a top position. Gender inequality has women at a disadvantage at the top of the organization's pyramid, which might affect their ability to achieve top-level positions (Cotter et al., 2001).

Barriers and unconscious and conscious biases have limited the maximum potential of some women's ability to advance in the work environment (Downes et al., 2014). Limited mentorship, networking opportunities, and a lack of sponsorship might be causing women to face many obstacles trying to advance in their careers (Ang, 2019; Blanchard & Blanchard, 2020; Boone et al., 2013). Organizations often use caution when hiring and endorsing women. However, the outside environment and organizational

characteristics have influenced and controlled women's ability to advance in the workplace (Ng & Sears, 2017). Despite the increasing prevalence of women in the automotive industry, women still represent a small percentage in the industry C-suites. Women have advanced past mid-level, and only some have senior leadership roles. Even when women are involved in significant projects, their work only sometimes leads to a promotional opportunity. Women have a slower career path than men. (Blanchard & Blanchard, 2020).

It is essential to increase society's awareness and knowledge of women's perception of the barriers hindering their ability to advance. Women's stories might help identify attributes that inhibit females from obtaining or pursuing career advancement opportunities (Downes et al., 2014).

### **Women's Path to Top Leadership Positions (C-Suite)**

There are positions leading to the C-suite right within their reach, at arm's length, yet obstacles within women's path prevent them from developing and reaching their full potential. Even though there has been a progression for women have increased in the work environment, females are still underrepresented in C-suite in the automotive industries. Women already in C-suite positions are moderators and mediators that could support the continued development aiding other women to rise beyond obstacles and barriers. Women's path to the C-suite has been challenging; their career journey has required them to overcome many hurdles in the work environment. They have discovered that as they continue their career journey, other barriers are discovered on the path to top leadership positions (Rogish et al., 2020).

Researchers have focused on the underrepresentation of women in management positions, arguing that the glass ceiling was outdated (Eagly & Carli, 2018). However, the issues addressed in this research described the obstacles women continue to experience when advancing to higher organizational levels. The glass ceiling affects their advancement and reflects a failure to promote women to leadership roles (Eagly & Carli, 2018; Kaftandzieva & Nakov (2021). Change is needed. Despite progress on gender and diversity, few would dispute that unconscious and deliberate biases still exist (Korn Ferry, 2019). Society believes that the lack of progress in women's career advancement is due to family obligations; however, men experience some of the same family obligations, yet they continue to advance (Padavic et al., 2020).

For more women to reach their full career potential, organizations should help eliminate roadblocks and barriers hindering them from developing further in their careers. This study will enable other women to hear the voices of senior-level and higher leaders by describing their experiences that could impact their vision of women's ability to achieve top leadership positions (Bullock, 2019). Women are sometimes reluctant to apply for harsh and challenging job assignments to avoid obstacles that could prevent them from advancing in their careers (Spencer et al., 2019). Moreover, women continue to face obstacles and roadblocks because they are women (Rathore, 2017). Educated, qualified women seeking advanced positions believe fairness in the work environment differs because of their gender (Annabi & Lebovitz, 2018). Hiring managers need more critical viewpoints regarding qualified, educated women advancing beyond the glass ceiling to senior management positions and above (Ross et al., 2017). This research



aimed to assist more women in overcoming obstacles and decrease any fears they may have with advancing in their careers.

Creating a new roadmap could help more senior-level women pursue top leadership through education and empowerment (Korn Ferry, 2019). The data obtained in this research provided insight into why the push to develop more women in the automotive industry is needed. Growing leadership roles are presenting new opportunities. The structure of the C-suite today throughout industries differs from a decade ago. In addition, the structural requirements have transformed over the last few years, as digital transformation and disturbance, demographic changes, and macroeconomic influences have produced inclusive changes to the work environment (Rogish et al., 2020). Companies have begun to create new C-suites positions as a vital strategy to steer through the complexity of change (Rogish et al., 2020).

### **Women in the Automotive Industry**

Since the invention of the first vehicle, virtually every position in the industry has been male dominated. The image of female mechanics, technicians, or vehicle designers was not an option. Women felt underrepresented in leadership positions, feeling that industry bias prefers men for leadership positions as an organizational cultural norm (Gareth, 2020). Over half the women in the auto industry need a structured career path to get them to their desired level in the auto industry (Gareth, 2020).

Women are gradually playing a significant part in the automotive industry. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, the percentage of women in the automotive repair and maintenance industry was 9.9% in 2019. They grew from 7.3% in

2015 and 1.4% in 1999. According to Catalyst, women held 23.6% of the jobs in the automotive industry. Even though women have made considerable progress, only some of them have been able to reach top leadership positions (Catalyst USA, 2020).

The United States working population is almost half women, embodying less than one-fourth of the automotive workforce (Catalyst USA, 2020). The automotive industry includes businesses that research and design motor vehicles and manufacture and market them to customers (Naik et al., 2019). The increase of women in the workforce did not include women's representation in the C-suite (Alliance for Board Diversity, 2016; Catalyst, 2018; Larcker & Tayan, 2020). Research reveals that women in the automotive industry are significantly underrepresented in top leadership. Women of color represent an even smaller number (Bishop, 2020).

The challenges are even more critical for minority women, who are underrepresented in top leadership positions (Krivkovich & Nadeau, 2017). Women of color represent 17% of entry-level employees and 3% of C-suite positions in all businesses (Bishop, 2020). Catalyst (2018) has shown how, in the motor vehicle and parts dealers' industry, women made up the majority (74.8%) of office and clerical workers in 2018 and were underrepresented in higher-level positions such as first/mid-level officials and managers (18.1%) and executive/senior-level officials and managers (17.6%). The automotive industry was the least successful at inviting and keeping women in top leadership positions (Catalyst USA, 2020). This evidence points to the exclusion of women from male-dominated areas (Bullock, 2019).

The challenges are ever-present throughout women's careers, posing barriers to women seeking advancement opportunities. These challenges continue in the automotive industry, even though evidence consistently shows that women increase company value, financial growth, and innovative strategies in the workplace (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017). For years, the automotive industry has been known as male-dominated, influencing gender gaps in the workplace (Cortes & Pan, 2018).

Over the past five years, women have seen changes in the automotive industry's attitude toward recruiting, retaining, and advancing women. However, there is still a gender imbalance in C-Suites (Giffi et al., 2017). The promotion of women in the automotive industry occurs through programs encouraging women to enter fields such as science, technology, engineering, and production. However, barriers hinder women from top leadership positions (Giffi et al., 2017).

The automotive industry has shown little progress in gender diversity in top leadership positions. In 2014, 14 women (7%) were in the top 20 vehicle and component businesses of the Global Fortune 500. Catalyst USA, 2020). This number progressed to 16 women (8%) in 2018, and more than half of the top 20 Automotive companies had no women in the top leadership positions (Catalyst USA, 2020). Women in the United States automotive industry held 23.6% of the positions in 2019 (Catalyst USA, 2020). In Michigan, Mary Barra became the first woman CEO of a major automotive company in 2014; she shattered the glass ceiling paving a path of possibility for other women (Catalyst USA, 2020; Colby, 2015).

Mary Barra graduated with a Bachelor of Science in electrical engineering in 1958 and earned her MBA in 2014 from Stanford Graduate School of Business in 1990 (see LaReau, 2020). No data were found on any known unique treatments given to Mary, who has more than s 40-year career GM. According to LaReau, Mary said, "Commit yourself to what you are doing like you are going to do it for the rest of your life," Barra also said that kind of commitment is how you get noticed, then people want to help you and give you more projects." Admitting that she experienced some challenging times and Mary was often one of just a few women in the room (LaReau, 2020).

The research focused on the challenges women continue to face in their careers. Gender diversity has become a developing requirement for all organizations. There must be more prospects for women in the automotive industry; women hold 13% of C-suite executives, 18% of VP-level executives, and 20% of managers positions (Bomey, 2019). Nathan Bomey (2019) of USA Today quoted the CEO of Inform, Terry Barclay, saying that "the contrast for the automotive sector versus corporate America as a whole could not be starker." Dr. Kambil (2018) said, "changing organizational culture is often both a priority and a challenge. It is also why many executives find it difficult to articulate and deal with culture precisely." (p. 1).

### **Women in C-Suite positions**

Women have become influential representatives for change, diversity, and gender equality in the workforce. Companies often become more profitable when women are in executive leadership roles. A mixture of senior-level management in terms of gender has strengthened some companies' financial performance (Bishop, 2020). Even with evidence

of improved financial performance, too few women hold top leadership positions. Although women with college degrees make up half of the workforce, out of 3000 organizations, women only lead in 167 top leadership positions, which is less than 6% (Fuhrmans, 2020). According to Coughlan and Grega (2017), the underrepresentation of women on boards of directors and in the C-Suite is surprising in a world driven by analytics to increase the bottom line.

The Peterson Institute for International Economics conducted a study of organizations, the results of which showed there were no women board members in 60% of the organization studied; in over half of the organizations, there were no women in senior-level positions, and less than 5% had women CEOs (Coughlan & Grega, 2017). When Mary Barra became the first woman to lead a global automotive company, that appointment provided a glimpse of hope for opportunities for women in the auto industry (Bomey, 2019). Bomey (2019) said "that the auto industry as a whole remains a boy's club in the upper echelons despite Barr's success at GM, where Mary was widely credited with boosting profits." (p. 1).

Having more women in the boardroom has its advantages, creating different leadership styles and promoting diversity and equality (CED, 2019). A diversified boardroom would be valuable in automotive organizations because it provides different perspectives, leadership styles, a knowledgeable workforce, and a consumer population, increasing economic performance. More women are needed in C-suite positions to help close the gender gap and strengthen automotive organizations' diversity (Vemala et al.,

2018). Businesses with healthy gender ratios have proven to receive improved revenues (Naik et al., 2019).

### **Corporate Environment Under the Leadership of Women in Michigan**

Statistic has proven that a work environment's strength tends to be more stable when women manage (Brammer et al., 2007; Singh et al., 2021). In addition, researchers have concluded that women can better combine several shareholders' concerns by embracing communities, employees, suppliers, and customers (Glass et al., 2016). Brammer et al. (2015) said, "Corporate social responsibility improves employee loyalty, motivation, satisfaction, and commitment." (p. 325). Corporations are experiencing increased pressure to place more women in C-suite positions (Malepati, 2020). Corporations are beginning to undertake these transformations by supporting more women in top leadership positions, these changes could improve gender diversity in the boardroom (Malepati, 2020). Women in the C-Suite positions could become advocates for equality to help make the journey for women's advancement easier for the next generation of women

### **The Gap in the C-Suite**

Efforts to increase the number of women attaining a C-suite position continue worldwide. Despite their progress, women remain significantly underrepresented in top leadership positions. Evidence shows that gender discrimination continues to be a problem for women in senior leadership positions (Greenberg, 2020). My research focused on identifying and understanding the issues women face in the automotive industry. I evaluated participants' lived experiences in the Michigan Auto Industry to

provide insight for others to know and understand the challenges women endure. In Michigan, women comprise 57.04% of the workforce. However, women continue to deal with inequalities that prevent them from maximizing their potential (Status of Women data, 2018). In the US, women also make up over half of the labor force at 50.04%. In the past years, women have held positions by men, representing 13.8% of mining, logging, and increase manufacturing positions (Dmitrieva, 2020).

The extant literature does not examine cultural and gender-based inequality in terms of the lived experiences of senior-level women leaders in automotive organizations trying to advance to top leadership positions. Numerous articles and literature described the glass ceiling challenges, Kapoor et al., (2021), but more information on women in the automated industry seeking C-suite positions was needed. Research on automotive companies outlines senior-level women leaders' challenges in advancing in the workplace, describing how women struggle to find balance in a male-dominated work environment (Jackson, 2017). Although the gender gap has narrowed, showing women holding 25% of C-suite positions, increasing from 23% in 2018, men still dominate CEO positions (Stevenson & Kaplan, 2021). For every woman in the C-suites position, there are 17 men (Cahn, 2021). Gender disparities, unfortunately, still exist in career advancement for senior-level and higher-seeking positions in C-suites. The information regarding the issues of inequality is undeniable and discouraging with the number of women in the workforce (Carter & Peters, 2016).

Even though there are diversity intervention programs and affirmative action, there has yet to be any substantial progress based on the number of women progressing

and still entering the workforce (Carter & Peters, 2016; Sims & Carter, 2019). Increasing awareness and knowledge of the phenomenon in the automotive industry could positively impact gender and cultural equality in the C-suite (Carter & Peters, 2016). It has been hard for qualified females to obtain C-suite positions. Women often had to prove themselves over and above their male counterparts before being given opportunities, in addition to having a more extended development period (Stevenson & Orr, 2017). They spend more time and energy to achieve the same result their male counterparts did with less time and energy, creating a longer path for women and giving them a shorter time to impact the top position (Stevenson & Orr, 2017). The auto industry has remained a boys' club in the upper echelons despite Barra's success at GM, who is credited with boosting profits and beating many rivals on self-driving car technology (Bomey, 2019). Not strengthening diversity in the auto industry could compromise earning power by refusing to include more women in C-suite leadership positions (Bomey, 2019).

I focused the research on understanding and identifying senior-level and higher women leaders' content in achieving C-suite positions in automotive industries. In addition, the participants described their challenges and allowed me to document their lived experiences for others to have insight into the phenomenon women continue to endure throughout their careers. I learned that women spend more time and energy trying to prove their ability to achieve the same result their male counterparts did with less time and energy, thereby creating a longer path for women and giving them a shorter time to impact the top position (Stevenson & Orr, 2017). The auto industry remains a boys' club in the upper echelons despite Barra's success at GM, who is credited with boosting profits



and beating many rivals on self-driving car technology (Bomey, 2019). Not strengthening diversity in the auto industry could compromise earning power by refusing to include more women in C-Suite leadership positions (Bomey, 2019).

Even though there are diversity intervention programs and affirmative action, there has yet to be any substantial progress based on the number of women progressing (Carter & Peters, 2016). Increasing awareness could positively impact gender and cultural equality in the C-suite (Carter & Peters, 2016). It has been difficult for many qualified females to obtain C-suite positions. Even though women have proven their abilities over and above their male counterparts before being given opportunities, leading to a more extended development period (Stevenson & Orr, 2017).

Although the gender gap has narrowed, showing women holding 25% of C-suite positions, increasing from 23% in 2018, men still dominate CEO positions (Stevenson & Kaplan, 2021). I discovered that for every woman in the C-suites position, there are 17 men (Cahn, 2021). Gender disparities, unfortunately, still exist in career advancement for senior-level and higher-seeking positions in C-suites. The information regarding the issues of inequality is undeniable and discouraging with the number of women in the workforce (Carter & Peters, 2016; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2020).

Statistical data showed that the number of top female leaders in the automotive industry is limited. The means for obtaining and documenting the participants' lived experiences are intended to identify and explain the challenges that could be the reasons for the underrepresentation of women in C-suites. I asked the participants their opinion

regarding the work environment and culture change in addition to what changes they expect for the next generation of top female leaders. The study provided much-needed insight into women's ability to achieve a position in the automotive industry C-suite, in addition to aiding in narrowing the gaps in the literature.

### **The Gap in the Literature**

The extant literature does not examine cultural and gender-based inequality in terms of the lived experiences of senior-level women leaders in automotive organizations in Michigan for those trying to advance to C-suite positions. Numerous articles and literature describe the glass ceiling challenges, but more information on women in the automated industry seeking C-suite positions must be available. I discovered that research on automotive companies outlines senior-level women leaders' challenges in advancing in the workplace, describing how women struggle to find balance in a male-dominated work environment (Jackson, 2017). None related to the challenges senior level and higher women leaders endured with bias, barriers, or other obstacles.

There are hundreds of articles and books about gender inequality relating to women in leadership and issues involving family and career agendas. However, an extensive search has revealed limited articles or data on senior-level or higher women leaders in automotive manufacturing industries, with no specific literature on their lived experiences in the automotive industries related to achieving C-suite positions. Many articles discuss the challenges of discrimination and barriers women encounter trying to advance in the workplace. However, they could be more specific to women working and

advancing in a male-dominated automotive industry regarding obtaining a C-suite position.

Many articles, literature, and books describe gender inequality relating to the challenges and barriers women experience in the work environment, such as wages. These issues involve having an agenda involving family and career opportunities (Padavic et al., 2020). There were discussions on how women have put their careers on hold for their families hinder women, which is only the situation for some women. Hewlett (2002) mentioned that "between a third and a half of all successful career women in the United States do not have children 33% of such women (business executives, doctors, lawyers, academics, and the like) in the 41-to-55 age bracket are childless—and that figure rises to 42% in corporate America." (p. 1) Society used the potential of becoming a mother as a crunch to limit opportunities and prevent women from advancing in their careers. I found proof that gender inequality in the work environment aims to hinder women from climbing the corporate ladder (see Chowdhury & Gibson, 2019; Verniers & Vala, 2018).

The progression of women's careers has been slower than men, whether they have children; lifestyle choices are only some things affecting women's ability to develop (Every woman, n.d.). Verniers and Vala (2018) discussed "the myths according to which women's work threatens children and family life mediates the relationship between sexism and opposition to a mother's career." (p. 1) Tastad et al. (2018) spoke about "Society operates with assumptions about women that hold them back." (p. 1) Verniers

and Vala (2018) also argued that "There is evidence that gender inequality in the workplace stem, at least in part, from the discrimination directed against women." (p. 1)

It is critical to understand what issues affect women in the automotive industry from C-Suites and expose the perceptions that prevent women from developing to obtain top leadership positions. The literature review provided an overview of the published literature on the inequality and cultural challenges of women in the automotive industry. I searched for articles and literature relating to the subject matters of my proposed dissertation, trying to locate literature about the culture and inequality issues affecting the underrepresentation of women in automotive C-Suites.

I searched for literature addressing women's underrepresentation in the C-Suite (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016). I searched through Walden library and databases, Scholarly Google search engine, and other search engines hoping to find articles, literature, and statistical data on cultural changes and gender inequality regarding C-Suites in the automotive industry. The literature I found revealed limited articles and data about women in the automotive industry. They described no specific literature on the lived experiences of senior-level or higher women leaders and their ability to achieve positions in the C-Suite of the automotive industry. However, there were numerous studies investigated various issues that describe challenges of discrimination, barriers, and inequality that women encounter as they try to advance in the workplace (Carty et al., 2017); (Danaj, 2016); (Geist & Myers, 2016). There were also limited studies that described specific data on women developing and advancing opportunities in a male-dominated automotive industry to obtain a top leadership position (King, 2020).

There is a gap in the literature that does not support closing the disparity in cultural and gender inequality in addition to encouraging more advancement and development opportunities for women in the automotive industry C-suites. There is also limited research on how women advance in the automotive industry. The search criteria I used for women advancing to automotive C-suites produced information on women's ranks and wages in the C-Suite. Cahn (2021) mentioned that "In the highest ranks of corporate America, there are seven times as many male executive officers as female executive officers; and at the CEO level, men outnumber women by 17 to one." (p.1).

No known literature focused on gender disparity in C-Suite (Fitzsimmons et al., 2014). Fitzsimmons et al. (2014) mention the "Patterns in the accumulation of career-relevant experiences stretching back to birth into working lives that created significant and cumulative limitations upon the ability of women to access CEO roles and the types of CEO appointments available to them." (p. 244) None of the literature related to women's issues seeking top leadership positions in the automotive industry. Byham (2021) spoke about "The number of women in top leadership roles continues to grow with 2020 marked women's highest Fortune 500 representation." (p. 1) Keeping the progression of women from the C-suite position is the continued gender disparity caused by inequality opportunities in the workplace (Byham, 2021).

Most of the literature I discovered, described the disparities and challenges women experience trying to advance in the workplace, nonspecific in the automotive industry. A few provided strategies that might help develop more senior-level and higher women leaders to close the gap in automotive industry C-suites.

I focused this research on understanding and identifying senior-level and higher women leaders' content in achieving C-suite positions in the automotive industry. I documented their lived experiences for others to have insight into the challenges women continued to endure and extracted any strategies they used to overcome some obstacles to advance in the workplace. I also addressed the means for obtaining and documenting the participants' lived experiences to identify and explain the challenges that could be the reasons for the underrepresentation of women in C-Suites.

I conducted this research to close the gaps and strengthen cultural and gender equality in C-Suites of automotive industries by interviewing senior-level and higher women leaders about their experiences of inequality they encountered in their rise to top leadership positions. I aimed to provide additional contributions to the existing literature and insight into women's ability to achieve positions in the automotive C-Suite industry, potentially filling the gap in the literature regarding female executives in the automotive industry. This research will contribute to the existing literature to fill the gap in the literature on senior-level and higher women leadership in the automotive industry. The importance of understanding women's lived experiences seeking a C-Suite position in the automotive industry was limited in the existing literature. Most of the literature described and addressed women's life balance and leadership style (Hakim, 2016). Gender disparity in C-Suites with the underrepresentation of women and culture (Fitzsimmons et al., 2014). The phenomenon of the glass ceiling (Salahuddin et al., 2022). The glass ceiling phenomenon impacts the underrepresentation of women in top leadership . (Bertrand et al., 2019; Kapoor et al., 2021; Manzi & Heilman, 2021).

The findings of this study will be added to the literature to provide more information on women's issues in seeking top leadership positions in the automotive industry. Mehrotra (2021) argues, "A common reason the C-suite is not often data-driven is a lack of trust in the data. According to research, 40% of senior execs have reservations about relying on the data and analytics." Maurer (2018). In addition Mehrotra (2021) also mentions that "this can be due to either the correct data not being shared, or not being explicitly linked to the challenges or immediate needs of the industry, usually resulting from a lack of knowledge around business priorities and agendas."

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The literature review revealed that there is still much to be examined regarding women's underrepresentation in C-Suite positions. In Chapter 2, I presented a synopsis of the strategies used to research the literature on senior-level and higher women leadership striving for top leadership positions and a table listing the types and dates of the articles used. Women's roles remain limited; even after decades of fighting for equality, the gender gap persists. Even with women representing over 50% of the workforce, they are still fighting to overcome cultural and gender inequality. Tully (2017) spoke about the millions of dollars invested in enhancing and creating employee training programs to improve company operations. The initiatives to combat gender inequality could be more efficient if the attempts to sustain the phenomenon and remove the barriers hindering women's development remain enforced and monitored (Tully, 2017)

In Chapter 3, I will discuss the research method. I outlined the approach I used to identify the lived experiences of senior-level and higher women leaders whose quest is to

achieve a C-Suite position. In Chapter 3, I described the qualitative methods used to explore the study's conceptual framework, answer the research questions, and address the gap in the current literature. Finally, I will provide a synopsis of the strategies to the research literature on senior-level and higher women leaders' quest to obtain C-Suite positions. The examination process I used involved having an in-depth one-on-one interview with 15 Participants from the automotive industry. At the point when saturation was achieved while upholding the research design criteria for this study.



### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenology study was to explore and describe the lived experiences of senior-level and higher women leaders experiences as it relates to the advancement of women in the automotive industry achieving C-Suite positions. Chapter 3 includes the explanations and descriptions of the research process that was used during the interview process of this qualitative phenomenology research. In this study, I describe the lived experience of senior-level and higher women leaders in their ability to achieve positions in the automotive industry C-Suite in Michigan and the details used to answer the research question.

The transcendental phenomenology design was used to understand the lived experiences and perceptions of senior-level and higher women leaders who have pursued and have or have not achieved a C-Suite position in the Michigan automotive industry. A transcendental phenomenology approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the lived experience, allowing for an unbiased description to be collected about the experiences (see Sheehan, 2014). The situation or issue that prompted this research was that the gender ratios in leadership are slowly changing despite women being more than 50% of the workplace (Omran et al., 2015).

Women are underrepresented in top leadership positions, even though they contribute substantial improvement and cost-effective measures to improving corporate (Glass et al., 2016). Women influence corporate strategies as women in leadership roles alter the workplace as they move into leadership roles (Glass et al., 2016). However, women continue to need help to advance into top leadership positions.

Gender inequality limits the number of senior-level and higher women leaders from achieving a C-Suite position in Michigan's automotive organizations (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016). I performed this qualitative study to describe the challenges women face and need to overcome as they pursue positions in the C-Suites of automotive manufacturers in Michigan through the lived experiences and perceptions of the senior-level and above women leader participants. Chapter 3 begins with a rationale for selecting the qualitative methodology and addresses the case study design. For example, I explain the logic used for selecting participants, data collection types of equipment, procedures followed for recruiting participants, data collection, data analysis process, and data coding and computer-assisted software.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

A qualitative method with a phenomenological design guided the research by examining the lived experience of senior-level and higher women leaders' development and the under-representation in C-Suites. In this study, I proposed a single overarching research question: What are the lived experiences of women who strive to be promoted to C-Suite positions? I also addressed three supporting sub-questions: (a) What barriers have you encountered as you advance in the workplace? (b) What is the perspective on the representation of women in the C-Suite? (c) How has work-life balance impacted career development?

I answered this research question using a qualitative phenomenological approach. This study aimed to capture a broader understanding of the lived experiences and perceptions of senior-level and higher women leaders as they relate to gender inequality

in C-Suites. I used an open-ended technique to explore the lived experiences of senior-level and higher women leaders in the Michigan automotive industry. I used a qualitative rather than quantitative approach, even though the quantitative approach could progress by providing numerical-driven results. I used numbers to find the value by forming numbers and counts that create associated numeral values.

This qualitative study provided the result I was seeking in a more descriptive finding. This study was customized to allow exploring, increasing knowledge of, and describing the lived experiences of 15 senior-level and higher women leaders in the automotive industry. By examining the participants' descriptions of their experience, I exposed the impact of and emphasized issues relating to the underrepresentation of women in C-Suites. Qualitative research depends on the information gathered by the researcher during the interviews, observation, and questionnaires; the data are analyzed to study and aid in the interpretations and perspectives to expose providing a comprehend the meaning of the participants' experiences (Billups, 2019; Levitt, 2019; Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer et al., 2019; Pathak et al., 2013) while trying to advance the workplace.

I chose a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach to conduct this study. Rutberg and Bouikidis (2018) explained, "Qualitative research examines phenomena using an in-depth, holistic approach, where as quantitative research uses a rigorous and controlled design to examine phenomena using precise measurement." (p. 209). A quantitative study will not provide an understanding of the phenomenon; it provides data reflecting variables employing numbers and exactness, while qualitative research emphasizes lived experiences and a person's perceptions (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018).

This study was designed to explore and increase the knowledge of cultural and gender inequality impacts by documenting the lived experiences of 15 senior-level and higher female leaders in the automotive industry. By examining the participants' experiences, I uncovered the challenges that affected their career journey and emphasized the biases relating to cultural and gender inequality that could hinder some women's ability to achieve positions in the C-Suites. Qualitative research relies on the data obtained through interviews, observation, and questionnaires, aiding with exploring interpretations and perceptions and providing a clearer understanding of the participants' experiences (Pathak et al., 2013).

### **Research Design**

Qualitative research helped me focus on understanding the lived experiences and feelings of 15 senior-level and higher female leaders by finding a profound examination of a problem to generate innovative ideas for research relying on data collected from Participant observation, interviews, questionnaires, and recording in the individual natural setting. Moustakas (1994) demonstrated several approaches to phenomenology for qualitative research. Using the research question to decide the best method for researching the problem is vital to finding the best approach for understanding lived experiences. Moustakas's approach focuses on many human discipline beliefs and examples using qualitative methods, such as grounded, ethnography concept, and phenomenological, which are the most widely used methods, with transcendental phenomenological being the most used (Moustakas, 1994). Wertz's review of Moustakas's (1994) approach showed that the steps in phenomenological analysis use a

structured approach. In this study, I aimed to identify the data analysis steps used in transcendental phenomenology and to illustrate those steps with a qualitative study of the lived experience of senior-level and higher women leaders getting positions in C-Suites. Understanding the steps can help readers understand how transcendental phenomenology progresses in the analysis process (Wertz, 2015). Phenomenology is a research method to help researchers focus on and learn from the lived experiences of others (Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer et al., 2019).

The phenomenological approach allowed me to concentrate on gaining a broader understanding of lived experiences to understand how people understand their experiences relating to the phenomenon. I focused on understanding the phenomenon of lived experiences and the nature of the experiences. The participants described their experiences with the phenomenon; (see Neubauer et al., 2019; Patton, 2022). I inserted their statements into a computerized database from their interview transcription, where they were grouped into meaning units and themes (see Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas's approach takes researchers through detailed analysis and supplies good illustrations of the procedures. Using a phenomenological design, I understood the participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon (see Wilson, 2015).

Both qualitative and quantitative studies can use grounded theory to understand the discourse and practice of phenomena by collecting data and analyzing the information. Using a comparative examination, I strove to understand the discourse and the real-world presentation of grounded perceptions and practices and produce a comparative method for combining and exploring the data collected (Chun, 2019; Ogaba,

2021). Ethnography is the study of individuals in their environment through observation and one-on-one interviewing, involving detailed descriptions of a culture outside of the researcher's country of origin. It is an attempt to understand the circumstances of the people who I studied. Researchers examine the participants' way of living as identified by insiders and outsiders. I explored their lives, beliefs, rituals, and interactions with others and those around them (see Acharjee, 2021; Shaffer, 2017; Skukauskaite & Sullivan, 2022). I explore the participating cultural phenomena from their point of view.

Transcendental is an approach understood by Husserl (1931), also known as a descriptive approach (Serban & Apostolescu, 2020) translated into a qualitative method by Moustakas (1994). It is used when the researcher seeks to understand the life world or lived experience of individuals and to find an equal value between aim and subjective experiences, focusing on the unprejudiced observation of external realities, arguing the individuals' awareness (Greening, 2019; Lavery, 2003). The purpose is to engage in the lived experience of individuals to highlight the essence of the phenomenon (Lopez & Willis, 2004). In studying culture and gender inequality in C-suites, I examined and analyzed the information. I received from the participants' interviews to acquire new knowledge about the phenomenon (Chun Tie et al., 2019; Moustakas, 1994). I examined the phenomenon for the first time while remaining free from biases. I obtained current information from the essence of the lived experience described by the participants (Moustakas, 1994).

I chose Moustakas's phenomenological approach to perform the study and Husserl's transcendental method described by Moustakas (1994) for data analysis because

my study fit the criteria of these methods and the questions under investigation. The conceptual framework discussed in Chapter 2 showed how the foundation of the research focused on the cultural and gender inequality that affects the underrepresentation of women in C-Suites. A phenomenological research design allowed me to explore and examine lived experiences, interpretations, and beliefs while revealing current information about participants' experiences (see Moustakas, 1994).

### **Rationale**

Phenomenology is investigating and studying a selected group's perception of a lived experience (Moustakas, 1994; Wilson, 2015; Zahavi, 2019). I evaluated qualitative and quantitative research methodologies to select the appropriate research methodology for this study. A quantitative method creates a connection between certain variables in a measured location to find a cause and effect between variables for an extensive population study that could increase various strategies through experimental, quasi-experimental, or non-experimental projects (Farghaly, 2018). A Quantitative study is used to measure the problem by creating arithmetical information or data that can be changed into practical figures (Sauro & Lewis, 2016).

Qualitative phenomenological research could bring insight into situations from participants' experiences and perceptions of the situations or events. They are drawn on phenomenology, historical data, case study, ethnography, narrative research, ground theory, and action research (Farghaly, 2018). A qualitative study focuses on understanding the reasoning, perceptions, and inspirations related to the phenomenon, giving a visual of the problem and helping to create concepts or theories (Crowe &

Sheppard, 2010). Quantitative research provides information based on numbers, whereas qualitative research provides descriptive data from experiences and visualizes the phenomenon without any measurement (McLeod, 2019). Presenting quantitative research confirms or assesses a technique and suggestion. A qualitative research method will bring insight into understanding the participants' concepts, thoughts, and experiences.

I chose a qualitative method over a quantitative one because it generated the information I was trying to expose. Performing qualitative research brought insight into understanding concepts, thoughts, or experiences (Strecker, 2019). The goal was to provide insight into senior-level and above women leaders' lived experiences as they seek C-Suite positions. For this study, a phenomenology design was the best to study the phenomenon from the participant's perspective. Dawidowicz (2016) said, "phenomenology is a collection and analysis of people's perceptions of a specific, definable phenomenon." I explored the lived experiences and women's perceptions of their understanding of the inequality affecting women's underrepresentation in the C-Suite, to reveal collective dynamics during their journey to advance into a top leadership position.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My role as the researcher was to explore the phenomenon related to gender inequality, limiting the number of senior-level and higher women leaders from achieving top leadership positions. A transcendental-related phenomenology research design was used to understand and obtain an in-depth knowledge of the lived experiences of gender inequality, limiting the number of senior-level and higher women leaders from achieving



top leadership positions. In addition, I aimed to bring insight into the challenges senior-level and higher women leaders experience in achieving C-suite positions.

I was instrumental in seeking and collecting lived data from senior-level and higher women leaders and analyzing qualitative research; Saldana and Omasta (2016) alleged that most qualitative data are documentation of what people say, do, write, and create (p. 3). To capture the participant's lived experiences, I wanted to select a suitable research method for this study; I examined qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. A quantitative method creates a connection between certain variables in a measured location to find a cause and effect between variables for an extensive population study that could increase various strategies through experimental, quasi-experimental, or non-experimental projects (Farghaly, 2018). Crowe and Sheppard (2010) asserted, "Quantitative data does not need interpretation but manifests itself through mathematical means. (p. 1).

Qualitative research brings insight into situations from participants' experiences and beliefs of the situations or events drawn on phenomenology, historical data, case study, ethnography, narrative research, ground theory, and action research (Farghaly, 2018). Qualitative is an investigative approach to understanding the essential views and motives, providing insights into the phenomenon, or aiding in developing strategies or theories. (Crowe & Sheppard, 2010). McLeod (2019) added, "Quantitative data is information about quantities; numbers and qualitative data are descriptive and regards phenomenon that can be observed but not measured, such as language" (p.1). Presenting quantitative research confirms or assesses a theory or hypothesis. Conversely, qualitative

research brings insight into understanding concepts, thoughts, or experiences. The qualitative collection data is not in a numerical format and uses an empirical approach to collect descriptive data where knowledge about the phenomenon is received through experience (McLeod, 2019).

The participants in this study would have included up to 25 senior-level and higher women leaders who were currently in or desired to seek C-Suite positions within automotive manufacturers in Michigan. The interviews continued until I achieved saturation with 15 participants. In addition, the participants provided challenges with viable solutions to help other women overcome the barriers that hindered their path to C-suite positions.

I was instrumental in seeking and collecting lived data on senior-level and higher-leader women and analyzing qualitative research Levitt (2019) explained, "Qualitative researchers seek to present their findings to accentuate their context and situations in time" (p. 3), helping me to decide on how to present the study and using diagrams, charts, or pictures for presenting a resilient presentation style (Levitt, 2019) helping me to communicate the participant's story of their lived experience. My role in this qualitative phenomenological research was to collect the data from 15 senior-level and higher women leaders' participants to analyze the data to expose associated themes and record any categories and themes exposed.

While I could have provided input on some of the challenging experiences for this study, I did a self-evaluation to acknowledge viewpoints, preconceptions, and philosophies (see Hennell et al., 2020) and monitored my bias. Because I have personal

and lived experience advancing in the automotive industry, there was a potential presence of preconceived bias, making it vital that I made every effort to bracket and not allow biases to shape how the data was viewed, understood, or interpret. In phenomenological research, it was essential to recognize and decrease any potential bias besides understanding the impact of previous knowledge during the data collection and analysis process. (O'Halloran et al., 2016).

I kept my bias and personal perceptions from affecting the research outcome by having the participants review the results to ensure that the interpretations found in the data represented their beliefs. Chan et al. (2015) proposed that "bracketing be used to assume the data collection and analysis process to decrease the potential of influencing the participant's perspectives or knowledge of the phenomenon." (p.1). As a researcher, it was necessary to protect the participant data (McKibbin et al., 2021; Moustakas, 1994; Samhita, 2022). The data needed to incorporate the participant's description and interpretation of their experiences, allowing me to provide a clear description and insight, resulting in the transferability of the findings (see Manen, 2020).

I kept a reflexive journal documenting my views and interpretations to ensure accuracy in presenting an unbiased explanation of the advancement experiences of senior-level and higher women leaders in the automotive industry. Sanjari et al. (2014) contend that one role in understanding phenomenological research is that it was vital to understand and capture the participants' experiences based on common perspectives converted from the data collected from their descriptions of their lived experiences. After I collected the data, I interpreted and decoded the participants' experiences into categories

and themes, documenting the essence in writing for an all-inclusive description of the experience (Sanjari et al., 2014).

Since I have extensive experience as a woman advancing in the automotive industry for over 25 years, I needed to conduct a self-assessment to acknowledge any presumptions, viewpoints, and philosophies (Sanjari et al., 2014). Because of my lived and firsthand experiences, and the potential for preconceived bias, it was vital for me to make every attempt to bracket and ensure that not allow any biases to influence the ways of viewing, understanding, and interpreting the data (see Chan et al., 2015; Wang & Jeon, 2020).

I conducted a phenomenological study to recognize and reduce potential bias and understand the impact of earlier experiences during data collection and analysis. Chan et al., (2015) proposed bracketing to decrease the probability of influencing the participant's perspectives or knowledge of the experience. Being biased can create a wrong assumption with a misleading result (Simundic, 2013).

### **Role of the Researcher as Observer**

My role in this study was primarily as an observer, not a participant or observer-participant. In this context, the observer does not refer to visual observation of action seen during the interview, but as a witness to a participant's experiences as they relate to the participant.

### **Professional Relationships and Power Dynamics**

I had no personal or professional relationships with any of the participants, but two works for the same employer but at different work locations. In addition, neither the

participants nor the researcher had ever had any earlier contact or communication before the research; all work out of different facilities, and professional contact never existed. Therefore, there was no emphasis on supervisory relationships involving any of the participants.

### **Researcher Biases**

My biases derive from my experiences as an employee and leader in the automotive industry. Twenty-five plus years of my career experience has been in the automotive industry. While I could provide input on some of the challenging experiences I heard about in this study, I have kept my biases and personal perceptions from affecting the research outcome.

### **Methodology**

In this study, I used qualitative phenomenological methods to investigate the lived experiences of senior-level and higher women leaders (see Moustakas, 1994). The sampling strategy for this study included criterion sampling of participants who met the predefined criterion (Malterud et al., 2016; Patton, 2001): persons who are senior-level and higher women leaders in the automotive industry. My sampling strategy included recruiting potential participants using social networking sites, LinkedIn, and Facebook, along with referrals from co-workers, friends, and family members.

I was expecting to interview 10 to 25 participants until I achieved saturation. I accomplished saturation with a sample size for this study of fifteen. I received description details from senior-level and higher women leaders from the Michigan automotive industry who are striving for or have obtained a C-suite position. No further repetitive

information was occurring. Based on the concept of saturation in qualitative research, fifteen participants were sufficient to conduct this research (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I analyzed the interview data to establish data saturation until I recognized repetitive themes. Burmeister and Aitken (2012) & Hennink and Kaiser (2022), proposed that 15 participants were sufficient because saturation was not based on size but on the density of the information collected. Based on the data collected or examined previously, no further data collection or analysis was necessary (Saunders et al., 2018). Saturation was obtained in this study by analyzing the interview data until themes were repeated. When I could no longer uncover data that would differentiate patterns that would bring awareness to women's experience regarding promotional opportunities in C-Suite positions, saturation was obtained (Bansal et al., 2018).

When considering a quantitative approach, I discovered that the focus would be on numerical data. Collecting and using measurements examines the relationship between variables that focus on frequency or amount (Fox, 2020). Using a qualitative approach was a more appropriate selection than other approaches because it allowed me to gain more insight into the significance of the participants' allocation to a specific phenomenon (Patton, 2022). I focused on acquiring informative sample data, while quantitative data collection would limit how detailed the information would be. A qualitative approach would allow for narrative compared to the quantitative, resulting in numerical information.

This method allowed the researcher to seek patterns and trends by finding shared beliefs that the existing literature still needs to address. I used a phenomenology design

that allowed the participants to describe their experiences of inequality. For example, women leaders might have experienced striving to achieve C-Suite positions. Byrne et al. (2018) stated: "that common challenges and experiences of the lived experience/peer workforce globally are considered by leadership, emphasizing that future developments protect and promote the unique lived experience perspective for others who might enter the automotive industry's workforce." (p. 77). The participants' descriptions of their lived experiences unveiled common themes during the interviewing process that could provide insight into the challenges experienced in automotive manufacturing in Michigan. I coded and analyzed data using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) to expose common interview themes.

I chose the qualitative method over the quantitative one because it generated the information I was trying to expose. Performing qualitative research brought insight into understanding concepts, thoughts, or experiences (Strecker, 2019). The goal was to provide insight into senior-level and above women leaders' lived experiences as they seek C-Suite positions. A phenomenology design was the best to study the phenomenon and obtain the participant's perspective. Phenomenology collects and analyzes people's beliefs about a specific, definable phenomenon (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). I explored the lived experiences and women's perceptions of their understanding of the inequality affecting women's underrepresentation in the C-Suite, to reveal collective dynamics during their journey to advance into a top leadership position.

### **Participant Selection Logic**

This descriptive phenomenological qualitative intended population was ten to 25 senior-level, and higher women leaders who hold executive roles in the automotive industry or until saturations were obtained. In this research, the characterization of the general population was senior-level and higher women leaders who shared the attributes of interest that resulted in them being elected as a member of the specified population (Asiamah et al., 2017; Ritchie et al., 2013; Staller, 2021) Reybold et al. (2013) believe Participant selection is one of the most invisible and least critiqued methods in qualitative circles. I did not just collect and analyze the data; I decided who mattered and what data was essential to the study. I selected the participants that met the study's criterion to participate in the research. The next step was to choose the targeted population by limiting the group to those individuals (senior-level and higher women leaders) with specific characteristics of interest and who could contribute to the research (Asiamah et al., 2017; Taherdoost, 2017). The group was exclusive to the general population and had no characteristics that overturned the study hypothesis, context, or goal (Asiamah et al., 2017).

The participants in this study included interviews with a sample size of 15 senior-level and higher women leaders, which was obtained through data saturation (Lakens, 2022; Moura et al., 2021). Braun and Clarke (2019) declared that data saturation is defined as 'information redundancy' or the point at which no new themes or codes 'emerge' from data. The target population was senior-level or higher women leaders employed in automobile industries in Michigan.



Senior-level and higher women leaders currently in or seeking C-Suite positions in the Michigan automotive industry were among the participants. Their title of president, vice-president, senior president, provost, chief administrative officer, chief financial officer, chief information officer, chief legal counsel, and director identified the chosen participants. They met the study's criteria for answering the research questions related to the underrepresentation of women in C-Suites. Email, letter, or personal communication was used to contact the candidates from a suggested colleague, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

### **Instrumentation**

The data collected was through one-on-one interviews using Zoom and Microsoft Teams because of the onset of COVID-19. Three participants agreed to do face-to-face interviews while wearing masks, one at Starbucks and the other two in the city of Warren at the public library, with permission of the participants; all interview sessions were audio-recorded using a recording app downloaded to my phone. My phone is password protected to avoid compromising the participant's data should the phone become misplaced or lost. To ensure the data's validity and reliability, only participants who met the criteria and had signed and returned their consent forms to participate in the study. I specifically designed an interview script for the study. (Appendix B) to prepare the participants before the interview and answer questions they may have before the interview.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

After approval and an assigned number from the Walden Institution Review Board (IRB), then I reached out using emailed and contacted potential candidates from a

list of potential candidates who responded to posting from LinkedIn, Facebook or from referrals received from co-workers, friends, and family, who met the criteria to participate in the study. Participants who agreed to participate were emailed and provided guidelines and an approval consent letter of their agreement to take part in the study. The researcher expected to interview a range between 10 to 25 participants, an amount necessary to achieve saturation with women representing senior-level or higher leaders in automotive organizations. Qualitative research participants are small to preserve each volunteer's individuality in data examinations (Maxwell, 2012). The target population was senior-level and higher women leaders who strove for top leadership positions and have yet to achieve a C-Suite position.

### **Recruitment**

The researcher started recruiting by searching for volunteers to participate in the study. I recruited the participants based on their demographic location, level of positions, and experience with achieving or failing to achieve C-Suite positions. I posted a request for participants on LinkedIn and Facebook, where I reached out to the women in the automotive network. In addition, I asked friends and colleagues to recommend women they may know that fit the criteria and might participate in the study. Aurini et al. (2016) mentioned that "snowball sampling is a common strategy for obtaining a qualitative method sample." (p. 17). The process involves asking people the researcher knows for others' names who fit the selection criteria. The preferred candidates were emailed a participation invitation letter (Appendix A). The package included information about the study and what the researcher was looking to explore. Those who agreed to participate

and meet the required criteria were asked to provide their consent by email agreeing to participate in the study. When the consent was received, I emailed to schedule the interview at the participant's convenience.

I conducted one-on-one interviews, a technique used to acquire insight into people's perceptions, understanding, and experiences related to a phenomenon (Ryan et al., 2013). Read (2018) said, " researchers expected to conduct a single interview, 45 minutes to 2 hours duration, with each participant." However, to maximize the number of individuals interviewed." The one-and-one interviews were based on a set of fundamental assumptions. The desired information exists and is straightforward to conceptualize and understand; the research participants know this information and are given the proper assurances and motivation to convey it to me in one relatively expeditious interview session.

Because of the world's current situation, handling the COVID-19 issues, face-to-face interviews were done through virtual, interview sessions using Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Conducting the interview process took several sessions, allowing the researcher to build familiarity and trust (Read, 2018). With the permission of the participants, each interview session was audio recorded.

### **Data Collection**

After the Walden Institution Review Board (IRB) approval, I searched for senior-level women leaders currently working in the automotive industry. The researcher used contacts recommended by friends and colleagues and canvass on LinkedIn for women who met the study's criteria. I tried to understand the participants' lived experiences in

achieving C-suite positions. I removed any biases I had that would have influenced the research and focused on identifying common topics in the participants' explanations of their experiences. A phenomenological interview would prompt facts and personal stories of individuals who share a similar experience (Billups, 2019). In addition, Billups (2019) said the researcher would accumulate data from the interviews and then create an essential meaning that reflects a composited description of the phenomena. A phenomenological interview is a grounded discussion of the study of individuals' lived experiences to understand the experience better and make sense of their worlds (see Manen, 2020; Moustakas, 1994).

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The data analysis section of the research strategy supports the data analysis structures relating to how the research was performed (Maxwell, 2012). A coding process allowed me to extract the information to address the research questions. The coding process allowed the interview data to be extracted and categorized, then analyzed to familiar themes. I organized the data collection into categories to develop themes for the analysis using NVivo 12, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), which helped organize the data. CAQDAS aid research by making the methodological process more visible, increasing truthfulness within a study (Humble, 2015). After coding and analyzing the data collected, the researcher began writing a comprehensive description of the data, using direct quotes from the participants. According to Hunt et al. (2018), "direct quotes are essential to ensure data reliability and validity." (p. 1). The subject comes to life between quotations (White et al., 2014)

## Issues of Trustworthiness

### Credibility

The data analysis section of the research strategy supports the data analysis structures relating to how the research was performed (Maxwell, 2012). A coding process allowed me to extract the information to address the research questions. The coding process allowed the interview data to be extracted and categorized, then analyzed to familiar themes. I organized the data collection into categories to develop themes for the analysis using NVivo 12, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), which helped organize the data. Humble (2015) said, " CAQDAS assists research by making the methodological process more visible, increasing truthfulness within a study." (p.) After coding and analyzing the data collected, the researcher began writing a comprehensive description of the data, using direct quotes from the participants. According to Hunt et al. (2018), "direct quotes are essential to ensure data reliability and validity." (p. 1). The subject comes to life between quotations (White et al., 2014)

Credibility in the study was the level of certainty that the participants' descriptions of their experiences were accurate, relating to the truth of the results. The trustworthiness of research relies on confidence in the data, from the understandings and procedures used to ensure the study's quality (Beck, 2021; Connelly, 2016). The credibility of the study comes when confidence in the finding builds trust. Establishing credibility starts with evidence that provides facts or proof that sway people to believe something is actual. In the Merriam-webster dictionary (2020), "credibility is the quality or power of inspiring belief." To ensure data credibility, reliability, and validity, developing a rapport with the

participants was essential. I started the interview process by introducing myself, then allowing them to introduce themselves. I thank them for completing the consent form and the demographic questionnaire. To ensure the participants that I protected their privacy in all phases of this study, I asked the following questions relating to protecting privacy:

Are there any concerns about your privacy?

Are there questions with the informed consent form?

Do you allow this interview to be audio recorded?

Are there any other concerns or questions before we proceed?

The analysis process begins at the end of the interview. I asked the participants if they had questions, comments, or concerns. I thanked the participants again and shared my appreciation for the opportunity to learn about their life experiences and perceptions. The participants were informed that as soon as the recordings were transcribed, they would receive an email with a copy of the transcript to ensure that everything was accurate. I concluded by expressing my gratitude for being respectful, patient, honest, and transparent with their experiences.

After the analysis process, I reached out to the participants by emailing a copy of their transcription. The participants were to verify the data collected findings and their accuracy. I instructed the participants to read the transcript, change anything they found to be incorrect, and add anything they believed could be valuable, and I informed the participants that they had 48 hours to respond to the accuracy of the transcript; otherwise, I would proceed as written.

**Transferability**

The researcher used transferability to get a profuse description from the participants. The explanation aided and helped other females with their description of the phenomenon in their lived experience. Korstjens and Moser (2018) mention that there is a degree to which qualitative research results can be transferred to other settings or environments with other respondents. I used the full description of the research and the similarity for selecting participants. The participants chosen for this research represented a small group of senior-level women leaders within a specific industry who can relate to the challenges of advancing to obtain a C-suite position. Sandelowski and Leeman (2012) discussed the challenge of presenting qualitative research findings; I presented their findings in a manner that permits transferability.

**Dependability**

I described dependability as the process of continuously checking to establish reliability with the capability of reproducing the research study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Connelly (2016) said, "It is similar to reliability in quantitative research, but with the understanding stability of conditions depends on the study." (p. 435). Being consistent with collecting the data is dependability, ensuring the design standards are adequate (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

I defined the data analysis process and how it supports the research design. The information collected came from the questions. The participant answers the interview questions, signifying the participants' perceptions. I will review the participants'

descriptions of their experiences, and the results from the analysis will be shared with the research participants (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

### **Confirmability**

I used the triangulation method to achieve confirmability. Fusch and Ness (2015) believe that triangulation comprises several data collection methods. Daniel (2019) maintains that "triangulation is a critical element of credibility in qualitative research methods ." (p. 104). The data collected in this research comprised one-on-one interviews, observation notes, transcribed interviews, audio recordings, and the demographic questionnaire. During the study, the researcher used transcripts, audio recordings, researched observation notes, and demographic data during the analysis phase to ensure the result's reliability. The participants could review and edit the interview transcripts to ensure the information agreed with their perspective.

### **Ethical Procedures**

The researcher ensured the qualitative study's validity and reliability, ensuring that information collection was ethical. The researcher gave the participants consent forms outlining their rights to participate, withdrawal restrictions on using their data, written and audio recordings, and the research's expectations. It is always the researcher's responsibility to create and enforce proper ethical behavior, for scientific findings' liability, and to protect the participants. The researcher made to ensure that the approved IRB requirements occurred.

The interview occurred at a time the participants chose and was mutually agreed upon by both. Because of what the world is experiencing, the president of the United



States issued a world way mandate from a recommendation from the CDC because of the onset of COVID-19, a global pandemic. They advised wearing masks and keeping a 6 feet distance from individuals around you to avoid catching the virus. The interviewer session was scheduled using Zoom and Microsoft teams as a live web method.

Approval was obtained from Walden University before the study began to ensure that the research fulfilled all the ethical processes. I followed the approved IRB requirements to ensure that participant privacy and confidentiality were appropriate. A participation consent form was given, outlining the participants' rights and expectations regarding their research participation. The participants were informed that they might withdraw and have restrictions placed on using their information, written and audio recordings. The participant's name was not published in any format. The data would be a part of a collection, which includes other participants' information. The participant's demographic profiles were to be submitted, identifying no attributes.

To protect and secure the data collected from the interviews. The researcher's resident encrypted and saved all transcriptions and audio recordings on a password-protected USB drive and remained secured in a locked file cabinet and saved. With the dissertation defense's approval, the data's disposal can be done after five years.

I provided all the participants with a copy of the final transcript to ensure their information was represented correctly. The participant may request a viewing of the recording. Should a Participant request be excluded from the research, I will send a formal letter to Walden's IRB informing them of the participant's removal. The researcher will destroy all the excluded participants' data.

**Summary**

Chapter 3 provided the information that helped protect the participants during the interview process. An explanation of selecting a qualitative study using a phenomenology design for the research was explained in Chapter 3, with discussions of the recruitment process and the reason for choosing the demographic investigated. Trustworthiness issues were mentioned, including credibility, transferability, dependability, conformability, ethical procedures, and participants' guidelines. A one-on-one interview was used to transcribe and record the participants' lived experiences and perceptions regarding senior-level women and above leaders' challenges with achieving C-Suite positions.

In Chapter 4, I describe the research setting of this study, the demographic factors of the participants, and the methods used for data collection. I discussed the procedures used in the study to analyze the data and provided evidence of trustworthiness. I also include comprehensive discussions of the data analysis results, and a summary of the participants' responses addressing the research question.

## Chapter 4: Results

This qualitative phenomenological research aimed to explore and describe the lived experiences of senior-level and higher women leaders experiences as they related to the advancement of women in the automotive industry achieving C-Suite positions (see Moustakas, 1994). The purpose was achieved by exploring senior-level, and higher women leadership lived experiences from their perspectives of obtaining C-Suite positions. The study started with the participants briefly describing their demographic background, followed by the participants 'describing the momentous events and lived experiences of senior-level or higher women in the automotive industry. Throughout this and the next chapter, I will quote the participant with examples and illustrations of their lived experiences to answer the overall research question. Through their response to the research sub-interview questions, I used an interview protocol to guide the interview between the participants and myself.

I expected the finding to identify services, programs, and a support system that could improve and provide better support for women in the automotive industry. The interview data were applicable for addressing one central research question: What are the lived experiences of women who strive to be promoted to C-Suite positions? And three subquestions (SQ):

SQ1: What barriers have you encountered as you advance in the workplace?

SQ2: What is the perspective on the representation of women in the C-Suite?

SQ3: How has work-life balance impacted career development?

The research allowed me to understand and describe participants' perceptions, feelings, shared ideas, and experiences concerning senior-level and higher women leaders' ability to obtain C-Suites positions in the automotive industry. Based on the findings, I answered the research questions to explore the lived experiences of senior-level and higher women leaders in the automotive industry (see Creswell, 2013). Because of the findings, three categories, three emergent themes and 22 subthemes, emerged that were vital to the research questions and included categories (a) barriers encountered. b) the perspective of women in C-Suites, and (c) the impact of work-life balance.

In this chapter, I describe this study's research setting, the participants' demographic factors, and the methods used for data collection. I discussed the procedures used in the study to analyze the data and provided evidence of trustworthiness. I also include a comprehensive discussion of the data analysis results and conclude with a summary of the participants' responses addressing the research questions.

This descriptive qualitative phenomenological research aimed to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of senior-level and higher women leaders who have pursued and achieved or may still need to achieve a C-Suite position. The expectation was to expand the knowledge and bring awareness about the conscious and unconscious challenges experiences by senior-level and higher women leaders during their career advancement, besides exposing and identifying methods and strategies they used to overcome the challenges.

While I was exploring and describing the participant's experiences of trying to achieve C-Suite positions in Michigan's automotive industry, I could fulfill the purpose of

this study by analyzing the data and identifying patterns, themes, attitudes, insights, and perspectives. Using a phenomenological approach allowed me to capture a vital description of the events and lived experiences. The first section examined the barriers to the participant's experiences advancing in the workplace of the automotive industry. The second section explored the participant's perspective on the representation of women in C-Suites and what strategies the participants believe may have helped them achieve C-Suite positions. I examined and evaluated the participants' descriptions of the challenges they experienced during their career journey. The third section provided information about work-life balance and its impacts on career development.

### **Research Setting**

Selecting an appropriate setting influenced the value of the study. I wanted the participants to be comfortable as they described their experiences. Location is key in allowing the researcher to make observation, capturing broader and more detailed data than from just the interview content (Elwood & Martin, 2010). I conducted the interviews in a location familiar to the participants from their home, workplace office, conference room, Starbucks coffee house, or city of a local public library. I conducted 12 recorded one-on-one interviews using Zoom and Microsoft Teams and three interviews at public locations.

I conducted the interviews with the 15 participants from January 31, 2022, to March 15, 2022, at agreed location and suitable interview times selected by each participant. Eight participants selected a day and time in their home environment where they were more comfortable after working hours. Four participants' interviews were

performed with their permission during their lunch hours in their office. I conducted three participants in a public location (Coffee house or library setting). Elwood and Martin (2010) mentioned “the interview site itself embodies and constitutes multiple scales of spatial relations and meaning, which construct the power and positionality of participants in relations to the people, places, and interactions discussed in the interview.” (p. 649). I designed the interview questions to obtain a description of the lived experiences and perceptions of senior-level and higher women leaders advancing to top leadership positions.

I started the interview by introducing myself and allowing the participants to introduce themselves briefly to develop a relationship. I reviewed the reason and nature of the research study and informed the participants of the consent process, the interview process, and the member-checking process. I reminded the participant that they could cease the interview. Before asking the interview questions, I also reminded the participants that the interviews were being recorded and asked if they were still ok with that and if they had questions before beginning the interview. There were no individual or organizational concerns or conditions that influenced the participants or their experience that influenced the interpretation of the research results to include (a) modifications in personnel, (b) financial reductions or restrictions, and (c) other traumatic incidents.

### **Demographics**

I located participants through multiple sources, including posting on LinkedIn, an online professional networking site, and Facebook and referrals from friends and family members. Twenty potential candidates responded out of the 40 volunteer notifications I

sent out. I emailed requests for consent forms and experience surveys to the 20 candidates upon receiving the consent form and the approved demographic questions approved by the IRB. I determined that five participants were not eligible for the research, leaving me with 15 candidates. I reached saturation on March 15, 2022, after completing my 15th interview.

Senior-level or higher women in the automotive industry in Michigan were the subjects of the interviews. The participants were all volunteers who met the criteria outlined in this study. The participants were (a) females who worked in the automotive industry, (b) senior-level or higher leaders, and (c) from a Michigan automotive industry. The targeted sample size was 15 participants, from participant 1 to participant 15. The participants represented a diverse group of women at the senior level whose years of service in the automotive industry ranged from 15 to 40 years. The participants who worked in the automotive industry encountered challenges with advancing in their careers and attempting to obtain C-suite positions in the automotive industry. I selected participants based on their job level and experiences in the Michigan automotive industry. Table 2 illustrates the demographic data of each participant.

All the participants had higher education, with six (40%) having their Bachelor, seven (43.66%) completing their Masters, and two (13.33%) having their Ph.D. One (6.66%) participant held a VP title, another (6.66%) held the executive director title, and the other 13 (86.67%) participants had director titles; of the 15 women who took part in this study, eight were married with children, five were not married with children, and two out of those five were divorced. Two had never married, and one had one child. One

(6.66%) was Albanian, two (13.33%) were Asian, three (20%) were White, and nine (60%) were African American. I provided details of the participants' demographic data in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Participants' Demographic Overview*

Participant	Highest Degree	Marital Status	Ethnicity	Years in Automotive	Current Position	Years in Senior Leadership Position
Participant 1	PhD	No	African American	20	Director	5
Participant 2	BA	Yes	African American	40	Director	20
Participant 3	MBA	Yes	African American	20	Director	5
Participant 4	BA	No	African American	10	Director	5
Participant 5	MBA	No -D	African American	22	Director	5
Participant 6	MBA	Yes	White	37	Director	4
Participant 7	MBA	No -D	African American	20	Director	2
Participant 8	BA	Yes	Asian	30	Director	5
Participant 9	MBA	Yes	Albania	10	Director	2
Participant 10	MBA	Yes	White	27	VP	6 months
Participant 11	BA	No-D	African American	25	Director	3
Participant 12	BA	Yes	White	35	Director	2
Participant 13	BA	N	African American	15	Director	5
Participant 14	MBA	Yes	African American	27	Director	5
Participant 15	PhD	Yes	Asian	15	Ex. Director	2

*Note N = 15*



## Data Collection

I conducted one-on-one formal, in-depth interviews with 15 participants from January 31 through March 15, 2022. I interviewed participants over nine weeks, depending on the participant's schedules and availability. Each interview session lasted from 30 to 45 minutes. I conducted most of my work using Zoom and Microsoft Teams. However, two participants participated in face-to-face interviews, one at a Starbucks coffee shop and the other at the local public library. Most participants agreed to participate in an online interview meeting because of the world's situation with the COVID-19 pandemic. An interview script was used to guide the interview, allowing the participants to share the stories of their lived experiences (Appendix A). I recorded the interviews (after asking permission) and later transcribed the interviews to familiarize myself with the data.

I initially reached out to find potential candidates to participate in the study. I solicited candidates through recommendations from friends, colleagues, and various women manufacturing networks like LinkedIn and Facebook posting, selecting only those who met the criteria of the research study. I emailed the candidates who agreed to be interviewed a cover letter (Appendix B) explaining the purpose of the study and a consent form requesting their consent to be a part of the study. I presented the data collection process in Chapter 3. There were no unusual circumstances encountered during data collection.

The participants sent their consent by email, acknowledging that they consented to be a participant in my research study. The participant acknowledgments were received

before proceeding with scheduling the interview. At each scheduled interview, I reminded the participants of their informed consent and the interviewing process before starting the interview. I asked the participants if there were questions about their consent or the interview process.

I informed the participants that the interview would be recorded and asked if there were any objections. The participants agreed to have the audio of their interview recorded. A series of open-ended questions (see Appendix C) explored the participants' views and identified communal experiences, patterns, and emerging themes. I took field notes along with notes of the non-verbal communications that transpired during the interview and immediately following each session.

I wrote field notes to ensure that the dialogue conveyed the essence, thoughts, emotions, and ideas of the participants' lived experiences and perceptions. Microsoft Teams and Zoom have a video capability that allows me to observe emotional behavior such as crying, laughing, giggling, frowning, and other gestures, such as hand motions, shoulder shrugging, head shaking, and nodding body postures. Physical body movements and expressions are forms of nonverbal communication, speaking without a speech (see Maloney et al., 2020). Six-five to 75 % of people express their feelings and emotions nonverbally (Idham et al., 2019).

A phenomenological interview technique encourages facts and personal stories of individuals who share similar experiences (Billups, 2019). I also interviewed following a transcendental phenomenology method, allowing for a profound understanding of the lived experiences and an unbiased description of their experiences (see Sheehan, 2014).

Using purposeful sampling, I recruited and interviewed 15 senior-level and higher women leaders who worked in the Michigan automotive industry and participated in this qualitative phenomenological study (see Moustakas, 1994).

A phenomenological approach aided me in answering the research questions, and the foundation was an example of the knowledge and subjectivism of senior-level and higher women leaders (see Moustakas, 1994). I provided the participants with an interview script to aid and guide the interview, allowing them to share their experiences. Describing their perceptions and understandings aided in a better understanding of the participant's individuality and experiences by capturing and reporting senior-level and higher women leaders' actions during and after advancing to top leadership positions were provided (see Moustakas, 1994).

I performed semi-structured interviews to collect rich data between January 31 and March 15, 2022; I interviewed each participant once, with 30 to 45 minutes sessions. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants agreed to participate in live online interviews via Microsoft Teams or Zoom. An interview script guided the interview, allowing the participants to share their lived experiences. The participants answered open-ended questions, allowing them to provide as much or as little information about their experiences as they were comfortable providing. The participants explained the phenomena and extended their perspectives (Moustakas, 1994). I asked probing questions, allowing the participant to expand their responses further. I also asked clarifying questions to verify the participant's response (e.g., to ensure I understood you, did you say?). The participant responses were concise, with detailed, helpful data in

answering the research questions. After the interviews, I listened to the audio recording several times to ensure accuracy. I transcribed the interviews verbatim, leaving out any identifying information. The audio transcripts, along with the field notes, were uploaded and saved to my password-protected computer. After uploading the audio files and saving my field notes, I transcribed each interview by listening to each recorder several times. I transcribed the interviews verbatim, leaving out any identifying information, such as names of the industry and job titles.

As part of the check process, I asked participants to read their transcripts and provide feedback. Only one participant commented and changed her transcript. The other participants confirmed and approved the transcripts as they were initially transcribed. I then loaded the transcripts into NVivo 12® to be analyzed. After uploading the audio files, I started the analysis process. A line-by-line transcript analysis was performed to expose the descriptions of the phenomena. NVivo 12® was used to extract a coding scheme and to conduct qualitative data to generate a descriptive and inferential analysis, extract relevant quotes, and create a cross-tabulation matrix to explore code associations. (Adu, 2019). I shared the findings with the participants to ensure accurate interpretations of the data.

I took the following steps to analyze the data:

1. The transcriptions were read and re-read while listening to the audio recordings of the interviews.
2. A line-by-line analysis of the transcript was performed to expose the descriptions of the phenomena.

3. NVivo 12® was used to extract a coding scheme and qualitative data to generate a descriptive and inferential analysis, extract relevant quotes, and create a code cross-tabulation matrix to explore code associations. I shared all the findings with participants to ensure accurate interpretations of the data.

I collected the data by interviewing 15 senior-level or higher women from the Michigan automotive industry, through Zoom and Microsoft Teams, on a date and time that was mutually agreed upon. I solicited candidates through recommendations from friends, colleagues, and from women manufacturing networks who met the criteria using LinkedIn and Facebook posts. I reached out in search of potential candidates who would participate in the study. I emailed the candidates who agreed to be interviewed with a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study and asking them to be a part of the study.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis process for this research included an interview protocol, a descriptive expressed using language rather than numerical values, including field notes to help manage, organize, and analyze the collected information (Moustakas, 1994). The foundation of data was a thematic analysis (TA) method used to organize, code, and analyze the data further (see Nowell et al., 2017). The exploration method depended on the research questions and the value of the information collected (Adu, 2019). This method proved to help acquire a better understanding of how the participants found clarity and recognized their experiences, allowing me to identify with what had happened from their descriptions of their lived experiences and perceptions.

The information collected from the participants provided insight into the phenomenon, relating to the lived experiences of senior-level and higher women's ability to achieve C-Suite positions. The analysis of qualitative data took the form of obtaining relevant quotes to create a code cross-tabulation matrix to explore code connections. I used a thematic analysis (TA) method to identify the interview data, permitting the spoken words to form patterns of meaning (themes), identifying similarities and differences, and any surprising insight. To generate the patterns, I repeatedly read the participants' transcripts, searching for meaningful information in which I found similar and common patterns.

By becoming familiar with the data, I could identify repetitions in the participants' experiences, which allowed codes to generate by capturing critical descriptions from the data. I use a structured approach to produce a clear description transcript (see Nowell et al., 2017). Thematic analysis is a method I used to uncover the views, opinions, knowledge, experiences, or values from the participants' interview transcripts.

I familiarized myself with the data by reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, field notes, and participant observation logs, searching for codes and patterns I could extract from the data, and focusing on specific characteristics to remove. In answering the interview questions, I identified keywords and tagged the words or phrases related to a specific theme or issue in the data from the participant descriptions.

The TA method has four approaches: (a) inductive, (b) deductive, (c) semantic, and (d) latent for analyzing the data (Nowell et al., 2017). I had to decide which TA approach was best for coding the data.

Inductive--When there is not enough information on the topic, and theory must be created.

Deductive -- uses existing theories to identify codes and themes to identify with the participants' experiences.

Semantic-- is used to expose a clear substance of the information to develop the coding and themes.

Latent--is used when coding and themes are developed by reporting concepts and assumptions underpinning the overt content of the data. It involves reading into the subtext and assumptions underlying the data.

Because there is not much information available on the challenges of senior-level and higher women leaders in their ability to get a C-suite position in the automotive industry to perform this analysis, I selected the inductive approach to perform an iterative comparison between codes and themes using the information extracted from the participants' transcripts; the goal was to identify and extract words and patterns that are important and interesting to address the underrepresentation of women in C-suites. I used the research questions to aid in exposing the issues of the participants and their responses to the questions.

Castleberry and Nolen (2018) consider TA a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) described as a descriptive method that reduces the data flexibly and merges with other data analysis methods. TA method is appropriate enough for various data types to examine and investigate research data (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

This project involved three phases: (a) Data coding, (b) analysis, and (c) results presentation. To save time, I used NVivo 12®, a computer-based software coding to review, organize, and analyze all data. NVivo 12® is a qualitative analysis software used to analyze the participant's transcripts. In the first phase, I conducted a series of passes using NVivo 12® software to identify and extract relevant themes. The data collected from the interviews were input into NVivo 12®. NVivo 12® analysis software aiding me with the sorting, grouping, and identifying recurring words and emerging themes correlated with the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants (Edhlund & McDougall, 2018).

In the data analysis process, I used an augmented interview protocol and field notes to help manage, categorize, and evaluate the collected information (Moustakas, 1994). I started the analyzing process by doing a line-by-line analysis of the transcript to expose the descriptions of the phenomena before entering the data into NVivo 12. The coding process comprised several runs.

I used NVivo 12® to extract a coding scheme and qualitative data to generate a descriptive and inferential analysis, extract relevant quotes, and create a cross-tabulation matrix to explore code associations. I shared all the findings with participants to ensure accurate interpretations of the data. NVivo 12® analysis tool helped me discover themes, sort themes, analyze the relations between themes, and conduct queries about repetitive words and phrases (Edhlund & McDougall, 2018). I used the field notes and participants checking the transcribed data to provide a means for triangulation in the research (Lemon & Hayes, 2020). Triangulation is a strategy for managing quality, a process where



numerous approaches or data sources are used in qualitative research to create a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena (Patton, 1999) Amankwaa (2016); Fusch and Ness (2015); Morse (2015) contends that triangulations is also used to develop trustworthiness, so others to duplicate for creating trustworthiness practices in their study.

The purpose of the interviews was to obtain data that answered the research questions, which is the aim of this descriptive phenomenological study. By listening intently, I expose the meaning of their perceptions and experiences of the participants (Williams & Moser, 2019) by taking field notes and allowing them to describe their experiences openly. During the coding process, I could expose embedded themes from the data (Williams & Moser, 2019). The themes that emerged were based on the lived experiences and perceptions of the study participants.

The coding process started after examining the data; coding took a few iterations before exposing clear themes. A qualitative analysis followed the coding process, ranging from descriptive or associative to establishing conceptual correlations.

NVivo 12® is an efficient, timesaving, resourceful computer-based software coding tool., for reviewing, organizing, and analyzing all data sources. NVivo 12® aided in the process by (a) comparing participants' interview responses, (b) detecting patterns, (c) revealing essential themes, (d) and interpreting the data.

I uploaded the audio transcript from each interview to my password-protected computer. After uploading the audio file, I transcribed each interview several times by listening to each recorder. I transcribed the interviews verbatim, leaving out any identifying information, such as names of the industry and job titles.

I took the following steps to analyze the data:

1. The transcriptions were read and re-read while listening to the audio recordings of the interviews.
2. I performed a line-by-line transcript analysis to expose the phenomena's descriptions.
3. I used NVivo 12® to extract a coding scheme and qualitative data to generate a descriptive and inferential analysis, extract relevant quotes, and create a code cross-tabulation matrix to explore code associations. I shared all findings with participants to ensure accurate interpretations of the data.

To sufficiently capture the senior-level and higher leader perspectives of their lived experiences, it was essential to understand how their insight aligned to their "etic perceptions as shared views of similarities and differences between cultures. The etic concept furthers the data analysis process for providing a broader understanding of culture besides the gender inequality challenges the participant may have encountered with career development in the automotive industry (Bazeley, 2019). The etic process allowed investigation of the difference in the power of gender role perception across cultures.

I coded the data after I completed the interviewing process; I started the coding by reviewing the data and entering it into the NVivo 12®. The coding took a few iterations before generating clear data themes. After the coding process follows the qualitative analysis, ranging from descriptive or associative to establishing conceptual correlations.

An in-depth analysis of the coding will be described in the proceeding paragraphs (Bazeley, 2019).

### **Data Coding**

All qualitative data require coding to prepare it for meaningful analysis. To understand coding as classifying or tagging text data in simple terms. Qualitative analysis generates variables by applying a coding scheme and participating in descriptive and inferential analysis. Coding is a way of mapping data to summarize different information to allow the researcher to make sense of the data for the research question (Elliott, 2018). The foundation used in the examination process was a Thematic analysis (TA) method to further organize, code, and analyze the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This method proved instrumental in acquiring a better understanding of how the participants found clarity, better comprehension, and recognition of their experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2019)

I chose a thematic analysis (TA) method to identify the interview data, permitting the spoken words to form patterns of meaning (themes), identifying similarities and differences and any surprising insight. To generate the patterns, I repeatedly read the participants' transcripts, searching for meaningful dating in which I found similar and common patterns. By becoming familiar with the data, the data allowed codes to be generated. I captured critical features from the data set, using a structured approach to produce a clear description from the transcripts (Nowell et al., 2017). Thematic analysis is an approach used to uncover something regarding people's views, opinions, knowledge, experiences, or values from the participants' interview transcripts.

Validations were applied by returning to the participants and letting them see their responses in the themes generated. The overall process begins by gathering all relevant data into each potential theme and reviewing each to determine if it is robust in connection to the code extracted and the data set. This project included three phases: data coding, analysis, and results presentation. In the first phase, I conducted a series of passes using NVivo 12® software to identify and extract relevant themes. The themes were used to generate information about the qualitative data in the second phase. In the second phase, these themes were used to analyze the transcript material, generating quantitative information about the qualitative data. As part of this process, broader themes from the qualitative material also emerged. The analysis generated these themes and produced evidence supporting their existence and relative strength.

The theme was used to analyze the transcripts material, generating quantitative information about the qualitative data during this process, where broader themes emerged, producing evidence supporting their existence and relative strength. Using NVivo 12®, I explored trends and themes and uncovered answers to the research questions. The participant's thoughts were documented in notes linked to the relevant portion of the text generated from NVivo 12®. In re-reading the participants' transcripts, keywords and phrases were recognized, leading to major thematic concepts. Transcripts should be re-read to ensure familiarity with the content (Neale, 2016). I also conducted manual coding to ensure the consistency and reliability of the codes.

I started with coding and reviewing the data. The coding took a few iterations before generating clear data themes. The qualitative analysis follows the coding process,

ranging from descriptive or associative to establishing conceptual correlations. The analysis method depended on the research questions and the data quality collected. The information collected from the participants provided insight into the phenomenon, relating to the lived experiences of senior-level and higher women's ability to achieve C-Suite positions. This method proved instrumental in gaining a greater understanding of how the participant found clarity and recognized their experiences, allowing me to identify with what had happened from their description of their experiences and perceptions, producing familiar patterns and themes planned.

NVivo 12® helps generate a list of keywords and phrases from the participants' transcripts. For example, keywords/phrases identified in interview question 1 included (a) Bias against ambitious women, (b) more is expected out of women than male counterparts, (c) women underestimated, (d) trust your voice and your own skills

Manual coding was also performed to confirm and ensure the consistency and reliability of the codes (Adu, 2019; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Interpretative Phenomenological analysis (IPA) method was used during the coding phase to enable the changes of my observations, field notes and information from the participants' transcripts (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Moustakas, 1994). Table 3 illustrates examples of participants' original transcripts and some of the emergent themes.

Table 3

*Examples of Participants' Transcripts*

Participants from the original transcripts	Emergent themes
<p>Interviewer: What barriers have you encountered as you advance in the workplace?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being treated equally, being held to a higher standard than my male counterparts.</li> <li>• One of the many obstacles I have encountered trying to advance to the C-suite was that my male counter partners were being promoted within two years, and women were being promoted within three years. And it wasn't as overt as; I was too aggressive." It was more as if they were unsure if I was ready for that job.</li> <li>• There was a lot of unfair, and unjustifiable treatment of those women that disagreed with the prejudiced behavior that was occurring.</li> </ul>	<p>The challenges women endure from bias outweigh the opportunities.</p>
<p>Interviewer: What is the perspective on the representation of women in the C-Suite?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In my perspective there is a dearth amount of women representation in the C-suite because of the systemic gender bias that is still plaguing most organizations.</li> <li>• There are not enough women in the C-suite, period. Continued gender bias is the primary reason more women did not make it to the top in their own companies. And I believe women are not given sufficient opportunities to become leaders in their company and/or advance to a director's position.</li> <li>• Women are underrepresented at every level, not just the top tiers, which is causing barriers in the workplace.</li> </ul>	<p>Women are underrepresented due to systemic gender bias.</p>
<p>Interviewer: How has work-life balance impacted career development?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work-life balance influenced my career development tremendously. Not only was achieving a healthy balance difficult, but leaders were not receptive to the rewards of when employees are balanced. For example, deciding to cultivate a family or climb the corporate ladder became problematic, to say the least.</li> <li>• I was given a choice between a promotion or utilizing FMLA to stay at home with my newborn baby.</li> <li>• I believe that it takes women more time to obtain that accomplishment because of the norm of having men as the top leader in the workplace. Not because of family.</li> </ul>	<p>Work-life balance has less impact than bias</p>

## Research Findings

Fifteen female participants answered four open-ended research questions. I offered the participants an opportunity to offer additional comments regarding their lived experiences and suggestions or advice they would like to offer to women working in or seeking positions in the automotive industry. O'Connor and Joffe (2020) believe that the power of a qualitative study is shedding light on questions concerning experience. (p.1).

The participants answered one central research question and three sub-research questions. That was related to their individual and individual experiences as senior-level and higher leaders in the automotive industry. Each participant answered questions using their own words, explaining, and describing the challenges, barriers, accomplishments, and concerns regarding senior-level and higher advancement opportunities in the automotive industry. Responding to the semi-structured open-ended questions, the participants thoughtfully described their perceptions and experiences as women advancing in the automotive industry.

The open-ended questions the participants were asked in this study were: RQ1) What are the lived experiences of women striving to be promoted to the C-suite position? The participant gave their perception and descriptions of their experiences as senior-level and higher leaders ranging from challenging, demanding, under-valued, male-dominated, and Sub-RQ1) What barriers have you uncounated as you advance in the workplace? A participant described how women are not given sufficient opportunities, more is expected out of women, the challenges with blatant sexism and harassment, male dominance, bias against ambitious women, and pay disparities.

Sub-RQ2) What is the perspective on the representation of women in the C-Suite?

All the participants felt women were underrepresented in C-Suites. Sub-RQ 3) How has work-life balance impacted career development? All but one participant (14) believe that work-life balance has less impact than bias. Many participants (9) believe women are forced to make choices males do not face. A smaller number of participants (2) described the situation of missed family opportunities.

At the end of the interview, participants were asked if they had any additional comments or advances they would like to contribute. 10 out of the 15 participants advised women to adopt a growth mindset for self-development. They recommended always giving their best, being willing to give back, helping eliminate inequality, and seeking mentor-sponsor. One participant suggests that companies develop unconscious bias training for their employees.

Numerous themes, words, and categories emerged from the data analysis. The three categories that emerged are (a) challenges women to endure from bias outweigh the opportunities, (b) women are underrepresented due to systemic gender biases (c) work-life balance has less impact than bias. I will explain themes and categories in greater detail in the succeeding paragraphs.

The category "challenges women endure from bias outweigh the opportunities" emerges as the first category from interviews with the fifteen participants in this descriptive phenomenological study.

Analysis of research questions R1: What are the lived experiences of women who strive to be promoted to the C-suite position? The participants were asked to reflect on



their experiences at a senior level and higher leaders in the automotive industry. The fifteen participants expressed that the challenges women endure from bias outweigh the opportunities in the automotive industry. The participants answered the research question by responding and answering the three sub-questions.

Analysis of sub-question SQR1: What barriers have you uncouncted as you advance in the workplace? The first theme exposed the challenges women endure from bias outweighs the opportunities trying to advance to a top leadership position in the automotive industry.

Theme 1--Challenges women endure from bias outweigh the opportunities. All fifteen (100%) participants described their experiences as senior-level and higher leaders in the automotive industry, believing the challenges women endure from bias outweigh the opportunities. P14 stated, "women just want to be treated; equally, the ambition seen in men is seen as a strength, the ambitions of women are perceived as a positive attribute." P14 also stated, "They expect more of women than their male counterparts."

P15 stated it is "very challenging dealing with the biases and stereotypes yet rewarding when you get there when looking at your accomplishments." P04 stated, "Some of the lived experiences I have encountered while moving up the corporate ladder were gender biases, gender pay gap, and sexual harassment. I would suspect that many women experienced the same lived experiences as I did while being promoted to C-suite positions." P9 stated, "I have noticed this with female leaders; we need to repeat our request to be implemented. You have to project repeatedly that you are the leader, which

is what the process will be. You have to find the balance on this; otherwise, you will quickly be labeled bossy."

P7 stated, "They get away with being arrogant, where women are seen as a complainer and less capable of leading when they speak up. Women work twice as hard as men and get rewarded less. Women do not stick up for themselves as much as men do." P4 stated, "The barrier I had encountered in the workplace was not being invited to the secret meeting. I am requested to attend the weekly management meetings, but it was communicated to me by my male counter partner that there is a follow-up meeting after the management meetings. When I inquired about the follow-up meeting with my boss, I was told it was for potential promotion individuals." P3 stated, "My experience resonates with women who rose to the C-suite. Strong women in my family taught me that life is fair if you work hard, and the rest will take care of itself. It does work for most of your career. Unfortunately, it does not work for climbing to the top." P1 stated, "three women are considering downsizing or leaving the workforce entirely.

The remaining two-thirds are bombarded with extra work and more responsibility. They want to transition into the higher leadership ranks, but they find they are more in the weeds than ever and are not enjoying their work." P1 also said, "Being treated equally. Being held to a higher standard than my male counterparts." P7 stated, "Being mistreated, not given a position that I was already performing, so often. Men advance easier and quicker than women. Men are always their first choice. Even when they are less educated."

Analysis of sub-questions SQ2: What is the perspective on the representation of women in the C-suite? The second theme maintains that women are underrepresented due to systemic gender biases.

Theme 2--Women are underrepresented due to systemic gender biases. The semi-structured interview questions asked senior-level and higher women leaders in the automotive industry to describe their perspective on the representation of women in the C-suite. All fifteen participants (100%) stated that women are underrepresented due to systemic gender biases. P 1 said, "Two significant trends are happening in the corporate world right now, the Great Resignation and an emphasis on diversity in leadership. I believe now more than ever; women need the tools to get promoted into executive leadership."

P2 said, "There is a clear moral argument for increasing diversity in the C-suite. However, the conversation usually stops when explaining why more female executives are associated with better business outcomes and what specific mechanisms cause those positive changes." P14 said, "Women are underrepresented. Looking around the workplace, I see more educated women in lower positions than men with less education in higher roles. A limited number of women are even considered for top leadership positions. I attended a meeting the other day. I counted three females to 18 males; women were underrepresented all around. Women have limited involvement in decision-making. There needs to be better equality." P10 stated, "I think we still have much room to grow. We do an excellent job of onboarding and attaching talent; we get diverse candidates placed in 7 & 8-level jobs, and then we lose our ability to bring women through the

organization." P10 also said, "one challenge I have seen in my career over the years, and we have gotten much better when you get to those ninth executive senior levels. Twenty years ago, few women were in those positions, so leaders were not diverse. Leaders hire people who look like them, think like them, and talk like them, which festers the problem. I have intentionally pulled diversity up in the organization, which will help grow a much more diverse organization." P11 said, "I find them to be sometimes challenging and non-diverse. Women and underrepresented in C-suite, more so in automotive. Progress is happening slowly. Now organizations are filtering "inclusion" into their strategy that supports the development of everyone. I have seen new initiatives around diversity and equality, and women being appointed to senior level and higher positions, but we are still a long way from equal."

P7 said, "There are not enough women, and they are being trained to advance to the C-suite. The automotive industry has shown some progress, but not enough." P15 also agreed, "There is not much representation in the C-suite. Women are climbing slowly, but as women continue to speak up and refuse to accept the norm, I believe the percentage will change; the most challenging part is getting the rest of the workforce to see the contributions that women can and have contributive." P6 said, "There are only a limited number of women advancing to C-suite positions, and those who get there must sacrifice time they spend with their family. It takes women longer to advance in the workplace; I believe that is why so few women get to the C-suite." P13 said, "In my perspective, women are underrepresented at the C-suite level. Until we can assist the next woman climbing the ladder, women will be considered a marginalized group regarding

the C-suite." P5 also agrees, "There are not enough women in a top leadership position, and the expectation for them to get there is more challenging. Women do not get much help moving up the corporate ladder, and the few that get there are not always willing to support others."

Analysis of sub-question SQ3- How has work-life balance affected career development? The third theme reveals that work-life balance has less impact than participants describe the impact of work-life balance and career development.

Theme 3--Work-life balance has less impact than bias. Participants were asked if their career was affected by work-life balance. P14 found this question challenging: "This is hard to answer. Having a family should not be a barrier that prevents you from developing. The preventative reason is balance in the workplace. It not received or offered an opportunity to advance when I have applied my self-giving 100 percent to the jobs, even being innovative at performing my tasks, yet not being recognized or giving acknowledgment to the team when the team was not involved in performing any of the tasks, and no one spoke up about it. Unfair."

P6 said, "I only had one child, born later in my career. Family choices did not impact my career. My career development was limited to the prejudice that was happening in the workplace." P11 said, "Work-life balance had no impact on my career development. The bias, prejudice, and unfairness hindered my development in the beginning. My family life did not affect my work, and the work responsibilities did not impact my work." P5 stated, "Family life makes it more challenging but rewarding when you balance them and accomplish your desired career. It takes women more time to obtain those

accomplishments because of the norm of having men as the top leader in the workplace, not because of family. I was once asked how many children I have; my response was 3. I wondered where this was going; the director said I chose family over my career. I looked at her before I responded, not wanting to say the wrong thing, so I asked her what she meant by that—thinking to myself. I always worked while raising my family. She assumed that I chose raising a family before starting a career. I spoke up, stopped her, and told her I did not. I worked while raising my family and obtaining my MBA. There are many assumptions in the work environment concerning women and advancement. I remained in automotive manufacturing but had to change departments to advance. P15 said, "I have only one child and the support of my family. Stereotypes and biased behaviors and attitudes held up my development."

### **Conclusion**

The research question "What are the lived experiences of women who strive to be promoted to C-Suites positions?" along with three sub-questions: (1) "What barriers have you encountered as you advance in the workplace" (2) "What are the perspective of the representation of women in the C-suite?" and (3) "How has work-life balance impacted career development?" generated descriptions of the lived experiences of the fifteen participants in this research. The interpretation and analysis of the data yielded three categories (a) Barriers Encountered, (b) the perspective of women in C-Suites. (c) Impact of work-life balance. Three themes emerged (a) Challenges women endure from bias outweigh the opportunities. (b) women are underrepresented due to systemic gender

biases. (c) work-life balance has less impact than bias. There were twenty-two sub-themes generated from the themes.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

Credibility in research is achieved when the degree of confidence in the information collected from the participants makes the degree of validity in the study results valuable and meaningful. The correct procedures are used to ensure the quality of the study (Connelly, 2016; FitzPatrick, 2019) and the degree of truthfulness in the study outcomes, which were determined (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Davies, 2020). I determined credibility with the transcription of the participant's experiences, which displayed facts with evidence that the phenomenon occurred from their description of the past events; credibility with the evidence and factual proof that the participants' experiences were real.

I wrote the interview questions to ensure they were concise and clear; before establishing the interview question for this study. Before completing my research question, I submitted a draft of some questions to be reviewed by a panel of three Walden University expert faculty, to whom I emailed a field test request letter (Appendix D) for advice on constructing the best research question. The volunteer experts reviewed a draft of my interview questions (Appendix E) and provided feedback and recommendations.

Credibility is achieved when others communicate and understand explicit details with related experiences of the same occurrence (Leedy & Ormrod, 2018). I restructured the questions based on the information I received from panel experts (see review sheet

Appendix F). Changes to the interview questions were made from the experts' recommendations to ensure clarity in developing the interview questions to aid in and avoid any unclear responses from the participants.

Because two participants could identify with the researcher as a business professional and a rapport allowed for truthful responses, it was important not to let my beliefs and concerns negatively impact the data collection or analysis. The participants reviewed the finding to validate their transcripts, which helped determine the results' trustworthiness.

After each interview, I asked the participants if they had any interest in receiving information about the outcome of the study (Vanover et al., 2021).

### **Transferability**

Daniel (2019) maintains that "transferability suggests that the findings from one study can be applied to other settings or groups of people." (p. 104). By providing evidence of the participant's experiences, I determined the transferability that the study results could apply to other women's circumstances, situations, or groups (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I used transferability to obtain detailed descriptions of each participant's experiences. Their explanations will aid in helping other females describe the phenomenon in their lived experiences with advancing in their careers. The descriptions were used, exposing similarity to ensure transferability in this study. The participant provided rich and repetitive consistent stories about their experiences, improving the transferability and reliability of the information collected during the interviews, allowing inclusive and broad data on the study methodology and data collection procedures to be



presented besides recruiting participants with specific criteria which confirmed transferability a degree to which comparable research practices could develop future associated studies (Sandelowski & Leeman, 2012).

### **Dependability**

Dependability is achieving consistency and reliability by collecting data under various situations and ensuring the design standards are repeatable in the information (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I gave the participants access to the findings to substantiate dependability to ensure that participants' understandings and recommendations of the statements presented in the study were acceptable. I used NVivo 12® in the data analysis process to extract the data and formulate the themes and analysis of the study. A manual analysis of the research was also performed, so I could extract and obtain similar themes and familiar contexts using the participants' transcripts. The participants answered the interview questions, justifying their understanding and perceptions. I used an assistant who was not a part of the research process. The assistant examined the data for accuracy and helped determine whether the data sustained the outcome of the participant's understanding and perceptions (Adu, 2019a ; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To further ensure dependability, I adhered to the quality guidelines and standards put in place by Walden University.

### **Confirmability**

Kyngas, et al. (2019) maintained that confirmability describes the degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study reflect the respondents' opinions and experiences rather than the researcher's biases, motivations or interests (p. 41) that a

triangulation method was used for confirmability. Several approaches were used to collect the data. The process comprised one-on-one recorded interview sessions using Zoom and Microsoft Teams with twelve participants and a face-to-face session with three out of the fifteen participants. I took written notes while observing and communicating with the participants during the recorded interviews (Fusch & Ness, 2015). The transcripts, observation notes, audio recordings, and a demographic questionnaire (Appendix D) were used to analyze various phases of the results. To ensure data credibility, reliability, and validity, I contacted the participants to verify the findings and accuracy of the data collected. I informed the participants that as soon as the recordings were transcribed, they would receive an email with a copy of the transcript to ensure that everything was accurate. I asked the participants to read the transcript, change anything they thought was incorrect, and add anything they deemed valuable. The participants responded with an email acknowledging that they read the transcripts and verified that the data was accurate from their perspective. The researcher allowed the participant to validate their transcripts added to determine the trustworthiness of their transcripts. I achieved confirmability by verifying that I had not influenced or had any persuasion in the outcome attained from interpretations of the finding (see Lemon & Hayes, 2020; Nowell et al., 2017). After coding and analyzing the data collected, I started writing a comprehensive description of the data using direct quotes from the participants. According to Daniel (2019) and Hunt et al., (2018), direct quotes ensure data reliability and validity.

## Study Results

In this qualitative phenomenological study, I explored the lived experiences of senior-level and higher women leaders and their ability to advance into a C-suite position (Moustakas, 1994; Williams, 2021). A group of diverse women describes their experiences advancing in the automotive industry, for instance, the participants' demographics, level of education, current position, and years working in the automotive industry. Despite the challenges they experienced being women in the automotive industry, all the participants were delighted to provide feedback about their experiences. The narratives shared by the participants provided a detailed argument of their thoughts and viewpoints. The arrangement of the results section is associated with the research questions.

The data provided by the study participants proved to be informative; the participants' responses aligned with the senior-level and higher women leaders' experiences. Their responses also aligned with the participant's ability to advance to a top leadership position in the automotive industry. The questions used during the interviews were vital in addressing the research questions that guided the study. The basis of the critical findings presented in this study is the prevailing themes developed from participants' interviews. The results section aligned to the central research question, and subquestions were then organized based on the categories, themes, and sub-themes; the finding: categories, themes, and subthemes associated with the interview questions aided in answering the central research questions. Quotes from the participants' replies supported the data.

### **Central Research Question**

The central research question that guided this study was: "What are the lived experiences of women who strive to be promoted to the C-suite position?" The details of the sub-questions that addressed the central research questions are in Appendix D of this study. The interview questions were the foundation for creating categories, themes, and sub-themes that address the participants' experiences advancing in the auto industry. In the following sections, I described the findings, categories, associated interview questions, themes, and sub-themes that emerged during the analysis. Some responses were the same; therefore, some were combined, and I included only some responses in the discussions.

Three categories and three emergent themes (see table 4) were formed from the data analysis essential to the research questions. A shared issue recognized in the existing literature is the need for more information related to the top categories and themes described in the research. The absence of senior-level and higher women leaders challenges obtaining a C-suite position is a recognized issue that needs to be addressed in the existing literature.

Table 4

*Categories, Emerging Themes, and Number of Times Referenced*

Categories	Themes	Reference
Barriers encountered	Challenges women endure from bias outweigh the opportunities	41
Perspective of women in C-Suite	Women are underrepresented due to systemic gender bias	32
Impact of work-life balance	Work-life balance has less impact than bias	17

The data presented in this research revealed the significance of all the findings. The number of references was determined by the number of times the participants made expressions toward their lived experiences, increasing the reference point. The reference analysis is determined by the subject's characteristics extracted from the literature examination (Lowe, 2003). I will describe the findings associated with each category. I describe the findings, categories, associated interview questions, themes, and sub-themes in the following sections. Because there were similarities in the respondents, some were combined, and I did not include all the responses in the following discussions.

**Category 1: Barriers Encountered**

Based on the finding of the first category, barriers encountered, theme one emerged as challenges women endured from bias outweighed the opportunities. All the participants are senior-level or higher women working in the automotive industry in Michigan, indicating they experience barriers to advancing. The theme provided details

associated with the participant's perception of the experience they endured in their careers and how the bias impacted opportunities. The first finding describes the participants' experience with bias. Based on the analysis of the finding, 12 sub-themes emerged.

***Interview questions.*** The interview questions associated with the first category were sub-question 1: What barriers have you encountered as you advance in the workplace?

**Finding 1.** The findings associated with research sub-question one generated category one; barriers encountered. Based on the analysis of the category, one theme emerged: women endure bias outweigh the opportunities. Based on the analysis of the findings, twelve sub-themes emerged including bias against ambitious women, blatant sexism and harassment, bossy vs assertive bind, boy's club networking, building own network, the main focus on adding value and next steps, more is expected out of women than male counterparts, more opportunities but not enough, pay disparities, trusting own voice-own skills, women underestimated, and work-life balance. Based on the participants' responses two (13.3 %) felt that there was bias against ambitious women. Six(40%) experienced blatant sexism and harassment, two (13.3 %) spoke of women as begin seen as bossy vs assertive, one ( 6.6%) spoke on boy's club networking, three focused on building their network, two (13.3%) mainly focused on adding value and their next step, five (33.3%) felt that more is expected out of women than their male counterparts, four contented that there were more opportunities but not enough, three discussed pay disparities, four believed women should trust their voice and own skills, five ( 33.3%) believe women are underestimated, and two (13.3%) discussed work-life

balance. In the following sections, data is presented detailing the findings. Based on the findings, the associated emergent theme one, sub-themes, and the number of participants who had similar feelings, and views, with associated percentages are in Table 5. Based on the analysis of the findings, 12 subfindings emerged including:

Subfinding 1a. Bias against ambitious women.

Subfinding 1b. Blatant sexism and harassment

Subfinding 1c. Bossy vs assertive bind.

Subfinding 1d. Boy's network bind.

Subffinding 1e. Building their own network.

Subfinding 1f. The main focus is adding value and the next step.

Subfinding 1g. More is expected out of women than their male counterparts.

Subfinding 1h More opportunities but not enough.

Subfinding 1i. Pay disparities.

Subfinding 1j. Trusting own voice – own skills.

Subfinding 1k. Women underestimated.

Subfinding 1l. Work-life balance.

Table 5

*Responses to Category Title Barriers Encountered*

Emergent themes	Sub-themes	n	%
Challenges women endure from bias outweigh the opportunities	Bias against ambitious women	2	13.3
	Blatant sexism and harassment	6	40
	Bossy vs assertive bind	2	13.3
	Boy's network bind	1	6.6
	Building their own network	3	20
	The main focus is on adding value and new steps	2	13.3
	More is expected out of women than male counterparts	5	33.3
	More opportunities but not enough	4	26.6
	Pay disparities	3	20
	Trusting own voice-own skills	4	26.6
	Women underestimated	5	33.3
	Work-life balance	2	13.3

Note: N =15. n = number of participants who mentioned the theme. % = percentage of participants

The subfindings describe in this section aligned to the emergent theme; challenges endure from bias outweigh opportunities.

**Subfinding 1a.** The first subfinding was biased against ambitious women. A total of 2 out of 15 (13.3%) participants shared that they felt there was bias against ambitious women. For example, P14 mentioned that she wanted to be treated equally. she mentions, "ambition seen in men is seen as a strength while the ambition in women is perceived as a positive attribute." P14 also mentioned that "they expect more of women than their male



counterparts." P12 described how it was "very challenging dealing with the biases and stereotypes. Yet, it became rewarding when you got there when looking at your accomplishment."

**Subfinding 1b.** The second sub-finding was blatant sexism and harassment. A total of six (40%) experienced blatant sexism and harassment. For example, P4 mentioned that she "encountered while moving up the corporate ladder were gender biases, gender pay gap, and sexual harassment. I would suspect that many women experienced similar lived experiences as I did while being promoted to C-suite positions." P4 said, "It used to be worse – for years, we never got included and were bypassed. Females that got included did some shady things, I hate to say, but those that were good at their jobs just got overlooked and missed promotions. For 20 years, I watched the men I worked with better jobs and promotions. It has improved here lately, but ten years ago women that were promoted were blonde, young, and received better treatment. The rest of the females were disregarded and overlooked for promotional opportunities. There was a lot of unfair and unjustifiable treatment of those women that disagreed with the prejudiced behavior that was occurring. It was a challenge to advance, but I did not give up. I changed positions and locations several times before more opportunities came." P13 believes, "One of the main reasons women are less likely than men to be promoted to C-suite positions boils down to unconscious bias, and it manifests itself in several noteworthy ways." P 2 argues, "Even though more women have risen to the C-suite at large corporations in recent years, women are still promoted less often than men to the highest jobs. One of the main reasons women are less likely than men to be promoted to

CEO boils down to unconscious bias, which manifests itself in several important ways, such as gender pay disparity, gender sexual harassment, and racism." P5 describe a time when she was "told that I did not have the criteria that they were looking for later finding out that they hired a male with less or no experience and P15 describe at the time in her career, "when I started working towards more leadership roles, I received some explicit feedback from an "expert career coach." He said – "You are Asian, you are a woman, and you have a Ph.D. You invoke a stereotype of someone who belongs in a 'lab', not in leadership ranks." Then he sheepishly added – "after talking to you for 5 mins, you bust that bias". "But you should be aware that this bias exists and that you will have to work to overcome it."

**Subfinding 1c.** Bossy verse assertive. The third subfinding was bossy verse assertive; A. total of two (13.3%) felt that women were considered bossy verse assertive. For example, P9 mentioned that she noticed that "with female leaders we need to repeat our request to be implemented. You must project repeatedly that you are the leader, and this is what the process will be. You have to find the balance on this ether wise you will quickly be labeled as bossy." Whereas P7 believed that men "get away with being arrogance, where are women are seen as being a complainer and less capable to lead when they speak up. Women tend to work twice as hard then men and get rewarded a lot less. Women don't stick up for themselves as much as men do."

**Subfinding 1d.** Boy's club networking. The fourth sub-finding was boy's club networking. Only one participant (6.3%) believed that the boy's club network played a significant part in hindering women. For example, Participant 4 describes her barrier:

"The barrier I had encountered in the workplace was not being invited to the secret meeting. I am requested to attend the weekly management meetings, but it was communicated to me, by my male counter partner that there is a follow-up meeting after the management meetings. When I inquired about the follow-up meeting with my boss, I was told it was for potential promotion individuals."

**Subfinding 1e.** and building own network. The fifth sub-finding was building its own network. Three (20%) participants focused on building their network that focused on developing women's skills. For example, P1 discussion was on "building alliances, mentioned that women are not great at "playing the game" Unfortunately, women need to find alternate routes to building mutually beneficial partnerships and strategic relationships." P13 mentioned that she "faced many challenges throughout her career, including but not limited to searching for a job, starting a new role, or receiving a promotion. Fortunately, there are methods and strategies which I used to implement to overcome almost any obstacle, including networking and utilizing a mentorship program." P8 discussed "Not having the right connections or network, and not having a sponsor or mentor."

**Subfinding 1f.** The focus is on adding value and the next step. The sixth sub-finding focused on adding value and the next step. Two (13.3%) participants focused on adding value and their next step. For example, P9 describes How she was "Eager to be challenged and not to the next step. High on Emotional Intelligence- able to adjust to circumstances and teams. Positions held within manufacturing and outside manufacturing. Understand how to develop their brand and build a relationship outside

their group." P10 mentioned how she "never really strived to advance, her initial aspiration was to get hired in the automotive industry. She was a contract worker for four years." Also mentioned. "How do I add value in terms of working with the people around me and how they can perform at their best? It was never about me! When I wanted to be within the organization, I never aspired to be at any position at any point in my career, it just evolved that way."

**Subfinding 1g.** More is expected out of women than of their male counterparts. The seventh sub-finding is that more is expected out of women than male counterparts. Five (26.6%) participants believed more is expected of women than their male counterparts. For example, P14 mentioned, "They expect more out of women than they do their male counterparts." P3 discussed that "We are not taught to defend ourselves." My lived experience resonates with women who rose to the C-suite. Strong women in my family taught me that life is fair if you work hard, and the rest will take care of itself. It does work for most of your career. Unfortunately, it does not work for climbing to the top." While P9 mentioned, "One of the barriers is always trying to prove that you are worth it to have the position. I do not think men stress this as much as women do." P1 argues that "one in three women are considering downsizing or leaving the workforce entirely.

Moreover, the remaining two-thirds are bombarded with extra work and more responsibility. They want to transition into the higher leadership ranks, but they find that they are more in the weeds than ever. They are not enjoying their work." P1 also described how she only wants to be treated equally. believing that women are "being held

to a higher standard than our male counterparts." And P7 mentions that women are "Treated unfairly, not given a position that I was already performing, so often. You see men advance easier and more quickly than women. Men always tend to be their first choice, even when they are less educated.

**Subfinding 1h.** More opportunities but not enough. The eighth sub-finding is more opportunities but not enough. 4 (26.6%) participants describe the perception of more opportunities as insufficient. For example, P14 mentions that. "There are more opportunities today than there have been, but the challenges women endure outweigh the opportunities." P7 discussed her perception, indicating that the "Automotive industry has not done enough to bridge the gender gap for women in the workplace." Participant 5 has seen women "begin overlooked for advancement opportunities." Furthermore, P8 was disappointed because she needed to be considered for assignments that would have broadened her experience and skills.

**Subfinding 1i.** Pay disparities. The ninth sub-finding was pay disparities. Three (20%) discussed pay disparities. For example, P14 mentioned that "there is still a noticeable bias with race. And equal pay. You more than like to see a male promoted before seeing females. Women have been allowed to learn a new skill, but the position is obtained only as a lateral move when there have been men holding that same role at much higher pay. Being a part of Human Resources (HR), I have seen men with less education giving positions for which they didn't qualify. Women are held to a higher standard than their male counterparts." P11 stressed that "Being overlooked and ignored. It was hurtful to work hard and give 100 to 110 percent of yourself and not be recognized. And the

recognition you do receive and just lateral moves. Until one day someone sees your potential and gives you that opportunity." P2 argues, "Even though more women have risen to the C-suite at large corporations in recent years, women are still promoted less often than men to the highest jobs. One of the main reasons women are less likely than men to be promoted to CEO is unconscious bias, which manifests itself in several important ways, such as gender pay disparity, gender sexual harassment, and racism." Pay disparities. The ninth sub-finding was pay disparities. Three (20%) discussed pay disparities. For example, P14 mentioned that "there is still a noticeable bias with race. And equal pay. You more than like to see a male promoted before seeing females. Women have been allowed to learn a new skill, but the position is obtained only as a lateral move when there have been men holding that same role at much higher pay. Being a part of Human Resources (HR), I've seen men with less education giving positions for which they didn't qualify. Women are held to a higher standard than their male counterparts." P11 stressed that "Being overlooked and ignored. It was hurtful to work hard and give 100 to 110 percent of yourself and not be recognized. And the recognition you do receive and just lateral moves. Until one day someone sees your potential and gives you that opportunity." P2 argues that "Even though more women have risen to the C-suite at large corporations in recent years, women are still promoted less often than men to the highest jobs. One of the main reasons women are less likely than men to be promoted to CEO boils down to unconscious bias, which manifests itself in several important ways, such as gender pay disparity, gender sexual harassment, and racism."

**Subfinding 1j.** and trusting own voice – own skills. The tenth sub-finding was trusting your voice-own skills.. 4 (26.6%) participants believe that women should trust their voice and skills. For example, P1 stated that she had to trust her voice, mentioning, "I was too often pushed through internal and external barriers to find the confidence to express my ideas." P2 stated, "You need to adopt a growth mindset. You need to believe that you can acquire new abilities through learning and dedication." P13 mentioned, "there are methods and strategies which I used to implement to overcome almost any obstacle, including such as networking and utilizing a mentorship program."

Moreover, P15 described the step she took to strengthen her skills; she said, "I started reading a lot of leadership books and started building my knowledge base – I realized that this is a learnable skill set! I also started seeking out assignments away from my core technical area – I learned so much about other parts of the business and got the opportunity to exercise those leadership skills because I did not have the relevant technical skills for those jobs! These things worked out great for me eventually."

**Subfinding 1k.** Women underestimated. The eleventh sub-finding was that women were underestimated. 5 (33.3%) participants agree that women are underestimated. For example, P3 mentioned, "One of the many obstacles I have encountered trying to advance to the C-suite was that my male counter partners were being promoted within two years, and women were being promoted within three years. And it wasn't as overt as; I was too aggressive." They were unsure if I was ready for that job." P12 mentioned, "For the first part of my career, my focus was on raising my children, and I did not seek advancement much."

I started working in a Manufacturing plant in the early 90s when it was unique to see a woman in the plant, let alone one working on equipment on the plant floor. I was fortunate in that the people in the plant did not let the fact that I was a woman deter them from accepting that I could do my job. That is not the case for most women, then. After my children were mostly grown, I decided to advance my career. I started automotive at a 5th level, rose to an 8th level in 8 years, and now a department's Directory. My career has been much being in the right place at the right time. I was able to do a lot of different positions because I was there. When I first started in the plant in 1990, I did have a co-worker tell me that he told my boss not to hire me because 'A woman cannot do this job.' He apologized and said that I had proved him wrong.

However, it was quite a surprise to hear." Participant 5 believed that she was "not being taken seriously, looked down upon, and when an opportunity does occur, it happened when the work environment is dealing with difficult challenges and need help getting out of." P7 mentioned, "I feel there is a bias toward females, in particular minority women in automotive. The thought is that most women cannot handle it, and few minorities are given the opportunity. Men are biased and believe that women are not strong enough to endure the daily routine of automotive." P8 mentioned she endured "challenges with people who did not think I was worthy of the level I had achieved (especially males)" in addition, she mentioned that "When I first started my career, apprehension from me who had not had experience working with women (doing the same job they were doing)."



**Subfinding 11. Work-life balance.** The twelfth sub-finding was work-life balance. Two (13.3%) participants mention work-life balance. For example, P10 mentioned, "I would say for me that the barriers were self-inflicted, in terms of not being able to articulate where I think I should be in the company. Being concerned about if I could take on more - can I handle the job and my family? Holistically as a person, because I am a mother of 3 girls, it was always about, like, this level of unsureness in terms of and another thing is first my dad was a basketball coach, he said don't ever say you want playing time, your behavior should tell you whether you earned behavior playing time in term of how you make the team successful so when anyone asks me what I want to do when I grow up? I just want to be the best me I can be in whatever role I am in. When I am at work I want to be the person people want to collaborate with or work with because they know we will get things done working together not working against people, so I would say it was more just that. It was never a concern to me whether I could do the job; it was can I do the job and still be who I want to be outside of work." Furthermore, P7 discussed that "Women fear taking days off to support the family while most companies rejoice and encourage men to take time off to support families."

### **Category 2: Perspective of Women in C-Suites**

Based on the findings, the second category emerged as a perspective of women in C-suites. The participants in this study were employed in the automotive industry. The themes that emerged provided details associated with advancing into C-suites in Michigan automotive industries. The study participants experienced while advancing in the automotive industry were exposed to similar views of women in the automotive

industry. The emergent theme was women are underrepresented due to systemic gender bias. Based on the findings of this study, women discussed their thoughts and perceptions of their ability to advance to top leadership positions, and their facts are diverse. However, all the participants felt that women are underrepresented in C-suites. The following section describes the participants' perception of women being underrepresented in the automotive industry C-suites.

***Interview questions.*** The associated interview question associated with the second category was sub-question 2: What is the perspective on the representation of women in the C-suite?

**Finding 2.** The findings associated with research sub-question two generated category two: the perspective of women in C-suites. Based on the category analysis, theme two emerged that women are underrepresented due to systemic gender bias. Based on the analysis of the findings, six sub-themes emerged, including; biases block positive change through added diversity, more educated women in lower positions versus men with less education progress made – much room to grow, takes women longer to advance in the workplace, women are not given sufficient opportunities, and women need to help other women. Based on the participants' responses, three (20%) participants mentioned that biases block positive changes through added diversity, while one (6.6%) participant noted that there were more educated women in lower positions versus their male counterparts with less education, five (33.3%) indicated that progress made, but there is much room to grow. One (6.6%) indicated that it takes women longer to advance in the workplace, while six (40%) believe women are not given sufficient opportunities. One

(6.6%) believed women need to help other women. Based on the findings, the emergent theme, sub-themes, the number of participants who had similar perspectives and feelings, and associated percentages are presented in Table 6. Based on the analysis of the finding, six subthemes emerged, including:

Subfinding 2a. Biases block positive changes through added diversity.

Subfinding 2b. More educated women in lower positions versus men with less education

Subfinding 2c. Progress made a lot of room to grow.

Subfinding 2d. Takes women longer to advance in the workplace.

Subfinding 2e. Women are not given sufficient opportunities.

Subfinding 2f. Women need to help other women.

Table 6.

*Responses to Category Title Perspective of Women in C-Suites*

Emergent theme	Sub-themes	n	%
Women are underrepresented due to systemic gender biases	Biases block positive change through added diversity	3	20
	More educated women in lower positions versus men with less education	1	6.6
	Progress made – a lot of room to grow	5	33.3
	Take women longer to advance in the workplace	1	6.6
	Women are not given sufficient opportunities	6	40
	Women need to help other women	1	6.6

Note: N = 15, b = number of Participants who mentioned the themes. % = percentage of Participants.

The subfindings describe in this section aligned with the emergent theme; women are underrepresented due to systemic gender biases.

**Subfinding 2a.** Biases block positive change through added diversity. The first sub-finding was biases block positive change through added diversity. 3 (20%) participants discussed their experiences. For example 1 argues, "Two significant trends are happening in the corporate world right now, the Great Resignation and an emphasis on Diversity in Leadership. I believe now more than ever; women need the tools to get promoted into executive leadership." P2 stated, " There is a clear moral argument for increasing diversity in the C-suite. But when it comes to explaining why more female executives are associated with better business outcomes, and what specific mechanisms

cause those positive changes, the conversation usually stops. And P8 believe that it is "still a man's world and need more women with diverse background and skills..

**Subfinding 2b.** More educated women in lower positions versus men with less education. The second sub-finding is more educated women in lower positions versus men with fewer educations. One (6.6%) Participant mentioned their experience. For example, P14 stated, "Women are underrepresented. When I look around the workplace, I see more educated women in lower positions verse men with less education in higher roles. There are a limited number of women even being considered for a top leadership position. I attended a meeting the other day. Moreover, I counted three females to 18 males. Women seem to be underrepresented all around. We have limited involvement in decision-making. There needs to be better equality."

**Subfinding 2c.** Progress made – a lot of room to grow. The third sub-finding is the progress made a -a lot of room to grow. Five (33.3%) participants describe their experience. For example, P10 said, "I think we still have a lot of room to grow. I think we do a good job of onboarding and attaching talent, we get very diverse candidates placed in 7 & 8-level jobs, and then we lose our ability to bring women through the organization. One of the challenges I have seen in my career over the years, and we have gotten a lot better when you get to those nine executive senior levels, you know, 20 years ago, not many women were in those positions. There was not much diversity at the executive level; leaders would tend to hire people who look like them and think like them and talk like them, which festers the problem. I have been very intentional about pulling diversity up in the organization, which will help to grow a much more diver organization over

time." P11 discussed her feelings; she said, "I find them to be sometime challenging and non-diverse. Women and underrepresented in C-suite, more so in automotive. Progress is happening slowly. Now organizations are filtering "inclusion" into their strategy that supports the development of everyone. I have seen new initiatives happening around diversity and equality, and women being appointed to senior level and higher positions, but we still are a long way from equal." P12 had a different feeling saying, "I feel like the automotive company is currently an excellent place to advance as a woman. In my last promotion, I feel like my being a female helped me to gain the position. I am the only female in my current role, and I think that combined with my 30+ years of manufacturing experience, helped in obtaining my position." P7 mentioned, "There are not enough women, and few women are being trained to advance to the C-suite. The automotive industry has shown some progress, but not enough." Furthermore, P15 commented, "There is not much representation when you look in the C-suite. Women are climbing slowly, but as women continue to speak up and refuse to accept the norm, I believe the percentage will change. The most challenging part is getting the rest of the workforce to see the contributions that women can and have contributive."

**Subfinding 2d.** It takes women longer to advance in the workplace. The fourth sub-finding is that it takes women longer to advance in the workplace. There was only one (6.6%) who discussed their experience. For example, P6 said, "There are only a limited number of women advancing to C-suite positions, and those that get there have to sacrifice time they would spend with their family. It takes women longer to advance in the workplace, and I believe that is why so few women get to the C-suite." **Subfinding**

**2e.** Women are not given sufficient opportunities. The fifth sub-finding is that women are not given sufficient opportunities. Six (40%) participants describe their challenges with finding opportunities. For example, the participant declared that "there are not enough women in the C-suite, period. Continued gender bias is the primary reason more women did not make it to the top in their own companies. Furthermore, I believe women are not given sufficient opportunities to become leaders in their company and advance to a director's position."

P4, in agreement, said, "Women are underrepresented at every level, not just the top tiers, which is causing barriers in the workplace." P9 made a similar comment saying, "There are not enough women in the C-suite. The automotive industry still feels like a men's world. You can count on one hand the women in the C-suite." P1 mentioned, "perspective there is a dearth amount of women representation in the C-suite because of the systemic gender bias that is still plaguing most organizations." P13 commented, "In my perspective, women are underrepresented at the C-suite level. Until we can assist the next woman climbing the ladder, women will be considered a marginalized group regarding the C-suite."

And P5 made similar comments "There are not enough women in a top leadership position, and the expectation for them to get there is more challenging. Women don't get a lot of help moving up the corporate ladder and the few that get there are not always willing to support others."

**Subfinding 2f.** Women need to help other women. The sixth sub-finding is that women need to help other women. One (6.6%) Participant is up about women helping

other women. For example, P14 mentioned that "Now I try to give opportunities to others by offering every one of my employees an opportunity to grow by mentoring and giving them feedback on their progress. Taking that type of approach has motivated and encouraged a few of them to take on leadership roles. It is a good feeling to see people develop from your input."

**Category 3: Impact of Work-life Balance.**

Based on the finding of the third category, the impact of work-life balance, one theme emerged: a work-life balance has less impact than bias. The senior-level and higher women leaders working in the automotive industry provided their experience balancing work and life experiences. The study participants experienced while advancing in the automotive industry were exposed to various viewpoints of women in the automotive industry. The theme provided details associated with the participant's experience with work-life balance. The finding provided details surrounding the participants 'balancing work and family life. The following section describes the participants description of their experience with work-life balance and how it impacts career development.

***Interview question:*** How has work-life balance affected career development?

**Finding 3.** The findings associated with research sub-questions three generated category three: Impact of work-life balance. Based on the analysis of the category, one theme emerged, which is work Life balance has less impact than bias. Based on the analysis of the findings, three sub-themes emerged to include: career development was limited to prejudice in the workplace, women were forced to make choices males do not face, and



women missed family opportunities. Based on the participants' responses, 5 (33.3%) Participants mentioned that career development was limited to prejudice in the workplace, and 9 (60%) participants believed women are forced to make choices males do not face.

Furthermore, 2 (13.9%) participants mentioned women missing family opportunities. In the following sections, data is presented detailing the findings. Based on the findings, associated emergent theme three, sub-themes, and the number of participants who had similar feelings and views, with associated percentages, are in Table 7. Based on the analysis of the findings, three subfindings emerged including:

Finding 3a. Career development was limited to prejudice in the workplace

Finding 3b. Women are forced to make choices males don't face.

Finding 3c. Women missed family opportunities.

Table 7

*Responses to Category Title Impact of Work-life Balance*

Emergent theme	Sub-themes	n	%
Work-life balance has less impact than bias	Career development was limited to prejudice in the workplace.	5	33.3
	Women are forced to make choices males don't face.	9	60
	Women missed family opportunities	2	13.3

Note: N = 15, b = number of Participants who mentioned the themes. % = percentage of Participants.

The subfinding described in this section aligned to the emergent theme, work-life balance has less impact than bias.

**Subfinding 3a.** Career development was limited to prejudice in the workplace.

The first sub-finding is that career development was limited to prejudice in the workplace. 5 (33.3%) participants discussed their experiences. For example, P14 shared, "This is hard to answer. Having a family should not be a barrier that prevents you from developing. The preventative reason is balance in the workplace. It not received or offered an opportunity to advance when I had applied my self-giving 100 percent to the jobs, even being innovative at performing my tasks, yet not being recognized or giving acknowledgment to the team when the team was not involved in performing any of the tasks, and no one spoke up about it. Unfair." P6 mentioned, "I only had one child, born later in my career. Family choices did not impact my career. My career development was limited to the prejudice that was happening in the workplace." P11 discusses how "Work-life balance had no impact on my career development. The bias, prejudice, and unfairness hindered my development in the beginning. My family life did not affect my work, and the work responsibilities had not impacted my work." P2 declared, "It has always been that assumption in the "good old boys" opinion, that one day she may want a family, and if we put her in that position and she starts a family will she be able to handle the responsibility of the job? I once applied for a position with several outside candidates and one male counterpart. Mind you, I was performing the jobs and had been doing them for eight months. Then came the time to fill the position; of course, the position was filled by my male counterpart, who needed more education and knowledge of the position. When I learned who received the position through another co-worker, I approached the manager and asked him what skills I needed to get an opportunity. He responded that I had given

the position to him. I said, "but I did the job for the last eight months. This time, he responded that he has a family, and I am giving him the position. I wondered what he thought I went home to every day. There were family pictures on my desk. It was not a challenge for me to balance work and family life. I went to work daily and returned home to my family." P5 cited, "Family life makes it more challenging, but more rewarding when you can balance them and accomplish the career you want. I believe it takes women more time to obtain those accomplishments because of the norm of having men as the top leader in the workplace, not because of family. I was once asked how many children I have; my response was 3. Wondering where this was going, then the director said that I chose family over my career. I looked at her before responding, not wanting to say the wrong thing, so I asked her what she meant by that. I always worked while raising my family. She assumed that I chose raising a family before starting a career. I spoke up and stopped her and told her no, I did not. I worked while raising my family in addition to obtaining my MBA. There are many assumptions in the work environment concerning women and advancement. I remained in automotive manufacturing but had to change departments to advance." And P15 revealed, "It hasn't," stating, "I have only one child and the support of my family. My development was held up by stereotypes and biased behaviors and attitudes."

**Subfinding 3b.** Women are forced to make choices males do not face. The second sub-finding is that women are forced to make choices males do not face. Nine (60%) participants describe their experiences. For example, P13 mentioned, "Men have

families, and they are not limited in their development, yet women seem to be penalized just because of some bias thoughts they will not be available, or they might fail to apply themselves to the job as they should." P3 declared, "I was given a choice between a promotion or utilizing FMLA to stay at home with my newborn baby. I chose what my male counter partners would refer to as the latter, and I stayed at home for six months after the birth of my son." P4 talk about "What is work-life balance? I am a single woman under 40 and have never been married. I refused to have anything interfere with my career trajectory. My goal is to start a family after one more promotion. That way, I will be able to take time off without being penalized for it." P9 stated, "Before becoming a mom, I would not hesitate to go after an opportunity. Now that I am a mom, I have noticed that I hesitate to go after an opportunity. It is the mom's guilt. Will I be able to give the 110 when I need to be involved in my child's life as well – after school? I am a new mom and trying to navigate the new work-life balance. I have to say it's very difficult to have a work-life balance in automotive manufacturing when you have no other option but to show up to work every day. Even though the team is supporting the nature of the job causes difficulty in supporting work-life balance." P1 said, "Work-life balance influenced my career development tremendously. Not only was achieving a healthy balance difficult, but leaders were not receptive to the rewards of when employees are balanced. For example, deciding to cultivate a family or climb the corporate ladder became problematic, to say the least." P12 revealed, "For the first 25 years of my career, I prioritized being available for my children over advancement. I worked an off shift (3–12-hour days a week) to ensure that I could be home more with

my children and that my job didn't involve me having to bring much work or stress home with me. It enabled me to stay full-time employed and involved in the company while still putting my family first. Once my children were mostly grown, I changed my focus and started working on promotions and being more involved with my work." P13 stated, " In my opinion, balancing my professional and personal life can be challenging, but it's essential. More often, work takes precedence over everything else in my life. My desire to succeed professionally pushed me to set aside my well-being. Creating a harmonious work-life balance or work-life integration was critical, though, to improve not only my physical, emotional, and mental well-being but it's also essential for my career." P2 said, "Most ambitious females get asked the same two questions, do you think you can have it all? And "who looks after the kids while you are at work?" My husband and I made a conscious decision to create a family plan. Meaning we decided to grow our family after he made a partner and I was promoted to a higher leadership position. The objective was to secure a position that would allow flexibility in my schedule." Furthermore, P8 mentioned, "I don't believe it has; I had had a great support system at a personal level, having had parents who acted as caregivers for my children when they were younger and a husband with a flexible schedule who could accommodate after school activities as they grew up. I believe work-life balance is what you make of it and that you decide what sacrifices you need or are willing to make to achieve the balance that enables personal and professional satisfaction."

**Sub-finding 3c.** . Women miss family opportunities. The third sub-finding is that women miss family opportunities. 2 (13.3%) participants described their experience. For

example, P14 said, "If anything, my family suffers because of the job. I wasn't always available to attend my children's games, plays, and other activities. I missed a lot."

Furthermore, P7 mentioned, "It has gotten better over the years, but in the beginning, trying to support and be there for my family and keep a job was challenging, especially working in automotive manufacturing. At various times in my career, I worked all three shifts which meant I missed seeing my children grow up. I didn't get to see my daughter take her first step. I'm not complaining, because I had an excellent childcare provider. My daughter grew up without me being there to see her grow. I think that was the most challenging part. I have two sons. I was able to be there more during their growing years because I worked a dayshift job, but when I have my daughter, I changed positions with automotive which required me to work the off shift. It was hard trying to balance work and family. I had to put my career on hold while trying to balance work and family, but once my children became of age, I went back to school and obtained my MBA."

### **Summary**

This qualitative phenomenological study answered the formulated research question. The participants offered detailed information to the semi-structured interview questions during face-to-face and Microsoft Teams and Zoom interviews, which aided in responding to the research questions. The participants shared their perceptions, accounts, and experiences, whether positive or negative, as they related to their ability to advance in a C-suite position. The central research question was: "What are the lived experiences of women who strive to be promoted to C-suite positions?"

There were three categories, and several themes and sub-themes were identified for each of the interview questions. The participants shared their perspectives and thoughts relating to the challenges they experience advancing in the automotive industry. The finding from the interview question helped in responding to the central research questions. The first category was Barriers encountered, and the associated emergent theme was challenging women to endure bias outweigh the opportunities. The participants shared the challenges they endured seeking career opportunities. The second category was the perspective of women in C-suites, and the related emergent theme was that women are underrepresented due to systemic gender biases. The participants shared their experience with seeking top leadership positions and the challenges associated with being a woman working in the automotive industry and gender disparities, as well as having to deal with sexual harassment.

The third category was the impact of work-life balance, and the identified emergent theme was that the impact of work-life balance has less impact than bias. The participants shared their experiences relating to work and balancing family life, indicating that balancing their careers had less impact than the challenges of bias in the work environment. The study revealed that senior-level and higher women leaders working in the automotive industry felt that women are underrepresented in C-suites. The findings will be described in detail in Chapter 5, along with a concluding statement and recommendations for future research.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences and perceptions of senior-level and higher women leaders regarding their ability to get a C-suite position. The reason for conducting this research was in response to the identified need for further research on the underrepresentation of women in C-suite positions. To address the gap in the existing literature, I conducted a qualitative phenomenological study using semi-structured interviews. The automotive industry may use the key findings of this study, policymakers, communities, corporate management, and other industries and organizations to bring awareness and gain a better understanding of the challenges associated with senior-level and higher women leaders obtaining a C-suite position, as well as aid in developing and creating programs to meet better the needs of women working in the automotive industry (Morris et al., 2019)

This study may result in positive social change within the automotive industry. Women may share their experiences through networking, mentorship, and coaching to help develop society and effectively improve the strategies for addressing senior-level and higher women leaders' ability to achieve C-suite positions. The exploration of the problem assisted in conducting an in-depth evaluation and analysis of the interview data collected from 15 senior-level and higher women leaders who shared their experiences of advancing in Michigan's automotive industry.

This study's key findings were based on three general categories, including (a) the barrier encountered, (b) the perspective of women in the C-suite, and (c) the impact of work-life balance. These three categories, three emergent themes, and 22 subthemes



substantiated the central research question and three subquestions that guided the study. The latest information presented in this study related to the senior-level and higher women leaders and the strategies they used to overcome biases, barriers, and other challenges to advance in their careers. These may generate new areas of advancement challenges that need to be addressed in the extant literature.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The motivation for this study originated from the work of Akpınar-Sposito (2013), Byham (2021), Arora and Malam (2018), Bomey (2019), Ramos et al., (2022) and others who reported on the challenges senior-level and higher women encountered when advancing in the automotive industry. Researchers such as Byham, Bomey, Carty, et al. (2017) and Verniers and Vala (2018) explored women advancing in the automotive industry over various subject matters, as discussed throughout this study. However, as noted in Chapter 2 in searching through peer review literature, there is a persistent gap in the literature exists in understanding the meanings of the lived experience of senior-level and higher women leaders of experience and higher education ranging from Associate to Doctoral degrees, whose ages range from 25 to 50+, who work in the automotive industry with 5 to 30+ years (see Table 2) as reported in this study.

Two concepts informed the analysis of the themes that emerged from the lived experiences of senior-level and higher women leaders in the automotive industry. Blumberg's (1984) concept of gender stratification and Kalev and Deutsch's (2018) concepts of gender inequality provided insight into these study participants' automotive industry experiences. Blumberg's concepts of gender stratifications provided a conceptual

lens that exposed the sacrifices that senior-level & women leaders had to overcome to advance in the automotive industry, exposing the differences between men's and women's circumstances, while Kalev and Deutsch's concepts of gender inequality examined factors that could influence and hinder women's careers Kalev and Deutsch's concept of gender inequality was helpful in identifying the inequality and biases toward women and the impact on their career advancement. Kaley & Deutsch's concept enabled a diverse group of 15 senior-level and higher women leaders (see Table 2) to describe and highlight the phenomena as defined by their lived experiences.

This study allowed senior-level and higher women leaders of the automotive industry to communicate their lived experiences of advancing in their careers in such a way that expanded on the phenomena of women advancing to C-suite positions in the automotive industry. The findings aligned with the conceptual framework used in this study because I explored the lived experiences of senior-level and higher women leaders besides the associated challenges and strategies aiding advancement and career development. Two conceptual models: Blumberg's gender stratification model and Kalev and Deutsch's gender inequality model, framed the conceptual framework used in this study. These models allowed for the investigation of the challenges senior-level and higher women leaders faced trying to advance up the corporate ladder into C-suites positions to be exposed.

I discovered that senior-level and higher woman's experiences resulted from underlying bias between men and women consistent with gender inequality. Participants described challenges and strategies and advised on managing one's career development.

The findings also aligned with the conceptual framework and Kalev and Deutsch's (2018) concept. The two concepts helped supply a conceptual lens driven by allowing senior-level and higher women leaders in the automotive industry to describe their experiences, giving them a voice to their beliefs about the phenomena defined by their lived experiences. The educational levels of the participants are displayed in table 8.

Table 8

*Level of Education of participant*

Education Level	# of Participants	Percent	Cumulative percent
PhD	2	13.33	13.33
Bachelor's	6	40.0	53.33
Masters	7	46.66	99.99
Total	15	100.0	100.0

Table 8 represents the education level of the participants who responded to the questionnaire. Out of 15 participants, six participants (40%) possess bachelor's degrees, seven participants (46.66%) possess master's degrees, and two participants (13.33%) possess Ph.D. degrees. This analysis suggests that most participants who responded to the questions had a bachelor's degree to a Ph.D. The level of education the participant holds could show that most women in the automotive industry regard education as the source of life worth having to advance and achieve their career goals. The issues in this study are critical in any efforts to reinforce and develop the knowledge, value, attitude, practices, and skills required for senior-level and higher women leadership to advance, develop, and sustain C-suite positions in the automotive industry. The participants in this study were

between 25 years to over 50 years of age. Table 9 illustrates a description of the participant's ages.

Table 9

*Age of participants*

Age	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percentage
25-29	1	6.66%	6.66
30-39	3	20%	26.66
40-50	7	46.6%	73.26
50 +	4	26.66%	99.92
Total	15	100.0	100.0

Table 9 represents the ages of the participants who responded to the questions. Out of 15 participants, one was 25 to 29 (6.6%), three were 30-39 (20%), seven were 40-50 (46.60%), and four were 50 and older (26.66%). This analysis suggests that most participants in senior-level or higher leadership positions were in the 40-50 age group.

In today's global economy, the automotive industry employees are from various cultures. The ethnicity of the participants who responded to the questions was nine (60%) African Americans, three (20%) Whites, two (13.33%) Asians, and one Albanian (6.6%). This analysis suggests that there were mixed cultures of senior-level or higher women leaders who volunteered to share their experiences and beliefs that affect the

underrepresentation of cultural and gender inequality experienced in the automotive industry. Table 10 displays the ethnicity of the participants in this study.

Table 10

*Ethnicity of participants*

Ethnicity	Number of Participants	Percent	Cumulative percent
Albanian	1	6.6	6.66
Asian	2	13.33	19.99
White	3	20	39.99
African American	9	60	99.99

Table 10 shows the number of participants by ethnicity who volunteered to participate in this study. Nine African Americans, three White, two Asian, and one Albanian, described their lived experience and perception of cultural and gender inequality in the C-suite of the Michigan automotive industry. Each participant answered the questions in their own words, explaining challenges, accomplishments, obstacles, strategies, and concerns relating to their career and choice during their advancement in the automotive industry, reflecting the participants' feelings and experiences as women working in the automotive industry through their responses to the semi-structured open-ended sub-questions.

While the research on senior-level and higher women leaders is minimal, the findings reported in this study aligned with earlier literature on the challenges women met in their effort to advance in their careers in the automotive industry. The finding in this study supply more insight, as presented in Chapter 2, into gender inequality, gender bias, gender barriers, and the underrepresentation of women in the C-suite. Women have

had numerous barriers as they try to advance their careers, as reported in Chapters 2 and 4 of this study. Various challenges have been associated with women as they advanced up the corporate ladder in the automotive industry. This study supplied a written vision of the participant's perceptions of the phenomena women face.

### **Interpretation of Results**

In this qualitative phenomenological study, 15 senior-level and higher diverse women leaders with 15 to 40 years of employment in the Michigan automotive industry were asked one central open-ended question, and three sub-questions producing three primary themes: (a) challenges women to endure bias outweigh the opportunities, (b) women are underrepresented because of systemic gender biases, and (c) work-life balance has less impact than bias. The participant's demographics, transcript, and data collected during the recorded interview session also included their current position in the automotive industry in Michigan. These women were excited and appreciative of participating and contributing to the possibility of social changes that could benefit up-and-coming women in accepting employment in the automotive industry.

The participants shared a detailed description of their lived experiences and perceptions. Women's experiences in top leadership positions provided examples of identity-related themes that could be valuable to other women seeking relevant gender-specific guidance, resources, and strategies to advance in the automotive industry. The qualitative data collected during the interviews using open-ended questions develops the understanding of women's experiences in the automotive industry. The primary themes from the analysis are that the challenges women endure from bias outweigh the

opportunities. Women are underrepresented because of systemic gender biases, and Work-life balance has less impact than bias. The study interviews provide opportunities to understand and obtain descriptions of participants' lived experiences and perceptions regarding the underrepresentation of work opportunities.

The research has confirmed continued cultural bias and inequality affecting the representation of women seeking top leadership positions leading to the C-suites of automotive industries. Even though the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was implemented to prevent workplace discrimination and protect individuals' rights (Kelly & Marsack-Topolewski, 2021) based on sex, there continue to be barriers that hinder women's advancement and development opportunities in male-dominated industries.

Women have faced many challenges in their pursuit to advance in the workplace. This study showed that there are also biases against senior-level and higher women leaders who have striven to advance to C-suite-level positions.

For analysis of the central research question: What are the lived experiences of women who strive to be promoted to C-suite positions? I asked participants to describe their experiences while advancing in the automotive industry and how they perceive women's ability to advance into C-suite positions by responding to the three subquestions SQ:

SQ1. What barriers have you encountered as you advance in the workplace?

SQ2. What is your perspective on the representation of women in the C-suite?

SQ3. How has work-life balance impacted your career development?

For the analysis of SQ1 (What barriers have you encountered as you advance in the workplace?), I asked participants to reflect on their experience and describe the events or challenges they met in the automotive industry.

### **Category 1**

The finding associated with SQ1 one indicated that the participants endured many obstacles and challenges while advancing in their careers in the automotive industry. Based on the analysis, the first theme that was generated is that the challenges women endure from bias outweigh the opportunities, generating the twelve subthemes listed below:

#### ***Theme 1: Challenges Women Endure from Bias Outweigh the Opportunities.***

- Subtheme 1a. Bias against ambitious women.
- Subtheme 1b. Blatant sexism and harassment.
- Subtheme 1c. Bossy vs. assertive bind.
- Subtheme 1d. Boy's Club networking.
- Subtheme 1e. Building own network.
- Subtheme 1f. The primary focus is on adding value and the next steps.
- Subtheme 1g. More is expected out of women than male counterparts.
- Subtheme 1h. More opportunities, but not enough.
- Subtheme 1i. Pay disparities.
- Subtheme 1j. Trusting own voice- own skills.
- Subtheme 1k. Women underestimated.
- Subtheme 1l. Work-life balance.



Subthemes 1a, 1b and 1d have hindered women's ability to advance further in their careers. Women face many workplace difficulties and biases in hiring, evaluations, and promotional opportunities (Wynn & Correll, 2018). Despite their contributions, there is evidence that women experience bias (Bian et al., 2018). Participant 2 said, "There is a clear moral argument for increasing diversity in the C-suite. However, the conversation usually stops when explaining why more female executives are associated with better business outcomes and what specific mechanisms cause those positive changes." Black (2021) said, "The automotive industry has denied females decades of opportunities, advancement, and respect. Women are perceived as less knowledgeable." (p. 2).

Many women have experienced or seen blatant or subtle sexism in their workplace. Behaviors are offensive, humiliating, and intimidating to women, and the offender lacks a sense of gender respect (Foley et al., 2020). Participant 6 said, "it was worse for years; we never got included and were bypassed. I hate to say that females who got included did some shady things, but those who were good at their jobs just got overlooked and missed promotions. For 20 years, I watched the men I worked with better jobs and promotions. It has improved lately, but ten years ago, promoted women were blonde, young, and received better treatment. The rest of the females were disregarded and overlooked for promotional opportunities. There was a lot of unfair and unjustifiable treatment of those women who disagreed with the prejudiced behavior. It was a challenge to advance." Houser (2019) said that "recent diversity reports show no significant improvement, and in fact, women lost ground during some years." (p.1) Participant 15 said, it was very challenging dealing with the biases and stereotypes." To improve

diversity in the automotive industry, they should acknowledge it to promote growth, equality, diversity, and inclusion (Kaur & Arora, 2020). Participant 1 said, "two significant trends are happening in the corporate world right now, the Great Resignation and an emphasis on Diversity in Leadership. I believe now more than ever; women need the tools to get promoted into executive leadership."

Subthemes described the initiatives or strategies used that were significant in helping the participants with their career advancement. Despite their battle with cultural and gender inequality in the automotive industry, women broke through barriers to challenges to advance in their careers. Make yourself visible so others will recognize your talents and abilities. Messmer (2004) said, "working hard will always be critical to your career success, but you will never achieve full advancement potential unless others are aware of your accomplishments and expertise." (p. 12). The authors of the Mindtools team (2022) said, "to get ahead in your career; it pays to be visible—when people know who you are and what you can do, they are more likely to consider you for promotions or exciting assignments. Those who keep their head down often miss out, despite their arduous work." (p. 1). Participants in the study also believe women could enhance their skills and add value to how they are perceived. Participant 10 said, "How do I add value to working with the people around me, and how can they perform at their best? It was never about me! I never aspired to be in any position in my career; it developed that way." In listening to and seeing participant 10 enthusiastic emotions, I sensed the aspiration she has that continues to exist, to inspire and motivate other women, which might have aided in her ability to advance further in her career. Participant 8 described a

similar yet different approach; she said she was "Eager to be challenged and not hesitating to the next step." She said women should "Understand how to develop their brand and build a relationship outside their group." The automotive industry has been attached to a masculinity configuration, excluding women from the male-dominant areas (Bullock, 2019). The finding is that this study might aid in finding strategies that could end the conscious and unconscious bias that could limit the number of senior-level and higher women leaders from C-suite positions.

The finding uncovered factors in senior-level and higher women leaders' career paths that hindered their ability to advance in the automotive industry. Women faced many obstacles compared to their male counterparts (Withisuphakorn & Jiraporn, 2017). A few women are in the boardroom or leading daily car meetings; the automotive industry has been attached to a masculinity configuration, excluding women from the male-dominant areas (Bullock, 2019). Bias behavior is one problem that the participants encountered while advancing in the automotive industry.

## **Category 2**

The finding associated with sub-question two describes the beliefs of the gender biases women experienced affecting the underrepresentation of women in the C-suite in the automotive industry. Based on the analysis, the second theme that was generated is that women are underrepresented due to systemic gender biases, generating the ten subthemes listed below:

### ***Theme 2: Women are Underrepresented Due to Systemic Gender Biases.***

- Subtheme 2a. Adopt a growth mindset-self-development.
- Subtheme 2b. Always give your best.

- Subtheme 2c. Be willing to give back and help eliminate inequality.
- Subtheme 2d. Companies need unconscious bias training for employees.
- Subtheme 2e. Seek mentors-sponsors.
- Subtheme 2f. Biases block positive change through added diversity.
- The theme is subtheme 2g. More educated women are in lower positions versus men with less education.
- Subtheme 2h. Progress made much room to grow.
- Subtheme 2i. It takes women longer to advance in the workplace.
- Sub-theme 2j. Women are not given sufficient opportunities.

Subthemes 2a through 2e. are advice the participants offered to aid in developing other women looking to advance in the automotive industry. Having a self-development growth mindset enhances your ability to achieve your goal. Participant 14 said. "It has been hard to push through barriers at work, but I am the type who will not give up. I met a VP when I first got hired at the company. I was currently working for eight years before they gave me an opportunity. Not realizing I was being watched from a distance. I applied for a manager position but did not get it, but they offered me another opportunity to build and highlight my skills and talent. I took the position as a lateral move because I was going anywhere in my current position; I watched other individuals move several times. No matter how many times I tried, I was the only one left in that department. However, it only took one individual who saw my potential and allowed me to display my skills, allowing me to develop and move up in the organization. You never know whom it is watching, so always give your best."

Participant 2 described her career journey and experience with a co-worker she was coaching; she said, "I once coached a woman who emerged from a meeting with her employer, obviously rattled. She felt she messed up the meeting and infuriated her employer, but she recognized her hyperbolic negative self-talk when we unpacked the situation. It turns out she had failed to answer just one question. She had interpreted an eyebrow raise from her employer to mean that he was angry. However, when we distinguished the drama from the truth, she realized that her value was well-demonstrated and needlessly worried about others' feelings toward her. For her, the change required shedding judgmental self-talk and embracing a more balanced worldview.

Achieving a mindset change like this means overcoming the following four (common) barriers to transformation, such as work environment, old (bad) habits, and attachments to mindsets and worldviews." They directed the behavior of unfair treatment toward a class or group of individuals because of their differences (APA, 2019), causing women to overthink the situations; this behavior stems from their experiences with bias and discrimination.

A lack of knowledge or failure to understand different things has led to social biases and behavior norms. Participant 2 said, "there is a clear moral argument for increasing diversity in the C-suite. However, the conversation usually stops when explaining why more female executives are associated with better business outcomes and what specific mechanisms cause those positive changes." The feeling of women in the workplace can be changed. It starts with women continuing to speak up and leadership listening. Strengthening equality and diversity in the workplace is a team effort. To

strengthen diversity, organizations should create aims and employ a more diverse workforce (Wolfgruber et al., 2021). Automotive industry leaders should see that now is the time to focus on upcoming leaders and help them advance in their careers (Morgan, 2020).

Subthemes 2f, 2i. and 2j affected senior-level and higher women leaders during their career advancements in the automotive industry, affecting the representation of women in C-suites. Wynn and Correll (2018) said, "women must deal with the belief that females are less competent than their male counterparts. They are often held to higher performance standard, facing scrutiny, and shifting criteria when being evaluated, meeting likeability and motherhood penalties and lacking access to powerful networking." Participant 8 said it is "still a man's world" the automotive industry "need more diverse backgrounds and skills." Another participant also identified with the inequity and bias experienced in the representation of women in top leadership positions. Participant 14 describes what she experienced in the automotive industry; she shared, "Women are underrepresented. When I look around the workplace, more educated women are in lower positions than men with less education in higher roles. Participant 14 continued by describing an imbalance in her observation during a meeting; she said (while shaking her head), "there are a few women even being considered for a top leadership position. I attended a meeting the other day and counted three females to 18 males; women are underrepresented all around. We have limited involvement in decision-making. There needs to be better equality." Participant 6 said. It takes women longer to advance in the workplace. I believe that is why so few women get to the C-suite.

Participant 3 said, "continued gender bias is the primary reason more women did not make it to the top in their own companies." Besides her belief, she said, "I believe women are not given sufficient opportunities to become leaders in their company and advance to a director's position." Participant 1 said, "there is a dearth of women representation in the C-suite because of the systemic gender bias that is still plaguing most organizations." The lack of diversity in leadership divides businesses into a less inclusive workplace, where women have limited development and growth opportunities in the work environment. Improvement in diversity in the automotive industry can strengthen the business, but more needs to be done to increase progress in diversity in the workplace (Chamarty, 2021). Participant 1 said, "two significant trends are happening in the corporate world right now, the Great Resignation and an emphasis on Diversity in Leadership. I believe now more than ever; women need the tools to get promoted into executive leadership." Goel (2018) said, "workers for diverse backgrounds bring individual talents and experiences." A diverse work environment promotes innovation and creativity, leading to improved performance and results (Goel, 2018; Picincu, 2020).

Participant 2 found empowerment in strengthening diversity; she said, "throughout my leadership career, I have worked with a diverse group of professionals, helping them shift their outlooks and transform themselves. It would help if you adopted a growth mindset when you want to change something in your workplace. It does not matter if you are an individual transitioning to a leadership position or the company's CEO trying to overhaul its culture. If you believed you could gain new skills through learning and dedication, it would help. It is a mindset you need to cultivate deliberately."

Participant 5 said, "There are not enough women in a top leadership position, and the expectation for them to get there is more challenging. Women need more help to move up the corporate ladder. The few women who make it to the C-suite are not always willing to support others." Bullock (2019) said that discoveries "demonstrate that women in leadership in the automotive industry experience contradictory feelings, messages, and interactions that affect their identity perceptions and expectations for performance and achievement in their work settings." Llorens et al. (2021) said, "a major source of inequity is gender bias, which has a substantial negative impact on the careers, work-life balance, and mental health," (p. 1) which shows there is a need for further research. Llorens et al. (2021) mentioned that "gender bias impacts all women, with even more impact on women whose gender intersects with other identities." (p. 2)

Researchers are documenting and describing the gender bias against women in their study. They discuss ongoing evidence exposing biases that favor men over women (Handley et al., 2015). One reason for the deficiency with progression to gender equality is the undesirable and persistent bias, which could enable hiring and advancement opportunities in women's careers (Casad et al., 2021). Eliminating bias and developing a stronger diverse work environment is essential for continued growth in the automotive industries.

### **Category 3**

The finding associated with sub-question three describe the perception of work-life balance's impact on career development. Based on the analysis of the finding, it



generated a third theme: Work-life balance has less impact than bias, generating the three sub-themes are listed below:

***Theme 3: Work-Life Balance Has Less Impact Than Bias***

- Subtheme 3a. Career development was limited to prejudice in the workplace.
- Subtheme 3b. Women are forced to make a choice that males do not face.
- Subtheme 3c. Women miss family opportunities.

Subtheme 3a. Gave indications of the prejudice senior-level and higher women leaders experience trying to develop their careers. The participants described their work and family domains experiences and the work/family struggles related to sustaining their careers. The finding suggests that bias in the workplace had more impact on senior-level and higher women leadership than on balancing the adventures of harmonizing work and family. Participant 14 found this question hard to answer; she said, "Having a family should not be a barrier preventing you from developing. The preventative reason is balance in the workplace. I was not received or offered an opportunity to advance when I had applied myself, giving 100 percent to the jobs, even being innovative at performing my tasks, yet not being recognized or giving acknowledgment to the team when the team was not involved in performing any of the tasks. No one spoke up about it." She also said it was "totally unfair."

Participant 2 referenced a similar experience; she said, "It always been that assumption in the "good old boys" mentality that one day she may want a family, and if we put her in that position and she starts a family, how she will manage the responsibility of the job? I once applied for a position with several outside candidates and one male

counterpart. Mind you, and I was performing the jobs for eight months. Then came the time to fill the position; of course, the position was given to my male counterpart, who had less education and no knowledge of the position. When I found out which employee received the position, I approached the manager and asked him what skills I needed to have. He responded that I gave him the position and said, "but I did the job for the last eight months. This time, he responded, he has a family, and I am giving him the position. I said to myself, wondering what he thought I went home to every day. There were family pictures on my desk. It was not a challenge for me to balance work and family life. I went to work daily and returned home to my family."

Women also had to deal with a unique twist of unfairness. They were already dealing with biases from the male gender, but they also encountered prejudice from female leadership. This type of behavior is known as the Queen B phenomenon. The Queen B phenomenon responds to women leaders' negative stereotypes and discrimination. That female encounters during their career development can have a problematic effect on women's self-esteem and career opportunity for women not in a leadership position.

Queen B phenomenon creates an avenue; the further loss of women is the ability to develop in their careers. Salles and Choo (2020) said Queen Bee is "an echo of a stereotype of the successful woman as being bossy and more prone to sabotage other women than helping them." (p.1). A female bully uses her power position to control advancement in the workplace (Harvey, 2018). The findings in this study can add to the knowledge of work-life balance and its impact on career development, which will be an

addition to the limited literature on senior-level and higher women leaders in the automotive industry. This finding broadens the range for further research.

Subthemes 3b and 3c. They spoke about the choice they were forced to make and their missed opportunity to bond with their family because of their career choices and the challenges they had to overcome. Participant 14 said, "Men have families, and they are not limited in their development, yet women seem to be penalized just because of some bias thoughts they will not be available, or they might fail to apply themselves to the job as they should." One participant delay career development because of family obligations. Participant 9 shared, "before becoming a mom, I would not hesitate to go after an opportunity. Now that I am a mom, I have noticed that I hesitate to go after an opportunity. It is the mom's guilt. Will I be able to give the 110 when I need to be involved in my child's life after school? I am a new mom trying to navigate a new work-life balance. It is tough to have a work-life balance in automotive manufacturing when you have no other option but to show up to work every day. Even though the team supports the nature of the job, it causes difficulty in supporting work-life balance."

When the participants identified with family, they described the missed family events they could never get back. Participant 14 mentioned (with a bitter, sad expression on her face), "if anything, my family suffered because of the job. I was not always available to attend my children's games, plays, or other events. I missed a lot." Participant 7 also describes her experience balancing work and family; she said, "It has gotten better over the years, but in the beginning, trying to support and be there for my family and keep a job was challenging, especially working in automotive manufacturing. I worked

all three shifts at various times in my career, which meant I missed seeing my children grow up. I did not get to see my daughter take her first step. I am not complaining because I had an excellent childcare provider. My daughter grew up without me being there to see her grow. I think that was the most challenging part. I have two sons. I could be there more during their growing years because I worked a dayshift job, but when I had my daughter, I changed positions with automotive, which required me to work the off shift. It was hard trying to balance work and family. I had to put my career on hold while balancing work and family, but once my children came of age, I returned to school and obtained my MBA."

Before concluding the interview session, the participants were asked if they had any additional information, comments, or advice they would like to share. A few participants gave excellent advice. Participant 9 said she would tell other women, "You are more than capable of being successful in automotive manufacturing. Believe in yourself and what you can achieve. Leave the guilt at home and support each other in this journey." Other participants focused on developing and growth mindset for advancing in their careers. Participant 1 said she would "encourage women to believe and trust in themselves and not let no one and biased behavior stop them. Keep striving and looking for opportunities to expand your skills and knowledge. The right person will recognize." Participant 10 said, "One of the things I think that helps me with my career is that I never shy away from different assignments. I started in assembly and went to Stamping, Powertrain, Production, Material, engineering, ME (Manufacture Engineering), and labor. I never turn down an assignment because sometimes, I think women turn down

positions thinking they must check all the boxes and be very efficient before putting their names out. We all can learn new transferable skills that should make us capable of taking on any assignment."

Two participants' advice stood out the most; Participant 14 has a passion for motivating and encouraging others to reach their full potential. She said, "I try to give opportunities to others by offering every one of my employees an opportunity to gain experience by mentoring and giving them feedback on their progress; taking that type of approach has motivated and encouraged a few of them to take on leadership roles. It is a good feeling to see people develop from your input." Participant 14 also believes women should be willing to give back; she said, "I feel more leaders should be open to helping people reach their full potential. Everyone should be willing to give back and help balance and eliminate inequality in the workplace." Participant 2 said, "Throughout my leadership career, I have worked with diverse professionals, helping them shift their outlooks and transform themselves. It would help if you adopted a growth mindset when you want to change something in your workplace. It does not matter if you are an individual transitioning to a leadership position or the company's CEO trying to overhaul its culture. It would help if you believed you could acquire new abilities through learning and dedication. It is a mindset you need to cultivate deliberately."

Participant 2 also said, "I once coached a woman who emerged from a meeting with her boss, obviously rattled. She felt she messed up the meeting and infuriated her boss, but she recognized her hyperbolic negative self-talk when we unpacked the situation. It turns out she had failed to answer just one question. She had interpreted an

eyebrow raise from her boss to mean that he was angry. However, when we distinguished the drama from the truth, she realized that her value was well-demonstrated and needlessly worried about others' perceptions of her. For her, change required shedding judgmental self-talk and embracing a more balanced worldview. Achieving a mindset change like this means overcoming the following four (common) barriers to transformation. Such as work environment, old (bad) habits, and attachments to mindsets and worldviews."

Cultural and gender inequality are challenging barriers women face in the automotive industry. Women must stay focused and continue to speak up about the obstacles they endure advancing in the automotive industry to eliminate the invisible barrier, glass ceiling, gender bias, and queen bee syndrome that limits or prevents women's developmental and advancement opportunities. O'Connor and Cech (2018) said, "the effects of perceived bias on satisfaction, turnover, and spillover operate beyond experiences with family responsibilities discrimination and having colleagues who are unsupportive of work-life balance." (p. 809).

There were no conflicting evidence or contradictions to the dominant evidence discovered in this study; there were no data that were an outlier. All women in automotive leaders (100%) interviewed face some form or barrier to advancement. However, some women are overcoming the challenges in male-dominated industries because of their self-confidence, determination, creative strategies, and enthusiasm.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were several limitations presented in this study. The study limitations included the issues of trustworthiness discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, emerging throughout the research process; the limitations addressed during this research are credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. The trustworthiness of research relies on the degree of confidence in the data, from the understandings and procedures used to ensure the study's quality (Connelly, 2016).

A limitation of this phenomenological study is that a small sample size was used based on the study's criteria, which required the participant to be in a senior-level position or higher and be employed in automotive organizations in Michigan, allowing women participants to be referred to the research as opposed to the researcher selecting the participants for the study.

The third limitation is that the sample size did not include middle management women or leaders for automotive industries outside of Michigan. Only senior-level or higher women leaders or those seeking C-suite positions were the focus of the fourth limitation.

The fifth limitation was whether the participants would provide honest answers about their lived experiences. Proper responses made it possible to capture the real essence of the experience. The sixth limitation is that the findings of this study are based on the lived experiences and perceptions of 15 participants. The final limitation is the women's openness and willingness to participate in the recorded interviews. To remain authentic to the phenomenon being studied, the consistency of this phenomenological study was

maintained by maintaining an unbiased aim, detached recording, and written notes. I examined and reflected on my biases and rationale for deciding as the study progressed (Johnson et al., 2020).

### **Recommendations**

While the findings have significance to the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants in this study, some findings encompass existing literature. That deserves to be discussed further to aid in finding solutions that could eliminate the inequality that impacts the development of women desiring to progress further in their careers. A few participants in this study attributed limited access to career development to the impact of prejudices and bias in the workplace rather than the challenges of work-life balance. The essential data collected from this study has created a lead that opened up several opportunities for future researchers to examine senior-level and higher women leaders' lived experiences in the automotive industry.

There is evidence that women are underrepresented in management-level positions. Women in top leadership positions are more underrepresented in the automotive industry (Bullock C., 2019). The necessity to understand women's lived experiences seeking a C-suite position in the automotive industry was limited to the existing literature. Most of the literature found insight into women's challenges, not particularly in the automotive industry and not their lived experience. The literature addressed women's life balance and leadership style (Hakim, 2016). I could not locate literature that addressed the gender disparity in C-suites affecting the underrepresentation of women and culture (Fitzsimmons et al., 2014). The phenomenon of the glass ceiling



(Cook & Glass, 2011; Kisi, 2019). even though none of the participants mention the glass ceiling phenomenon, the problem has also impacted the underrepresentation of women in top leadership positions (Bertrand et al., 2019; Grangeiro et al., 2022; Salahuddin et al., 2022). There needs to be more information on women's issues in seeking top leadership positions in the automotive industry.

It would be interesting to conduct a similar study with women according to their ethnicity, climbing the corporate ladder, and challenges in the automobile industry. This study attempted to address gaps in the literature regarding the underrepresentation of senior-level and higher women's leadership and their lived experiences in the automotive industry. Other studies regarding the challenges in the automotive industry addressed the women's challenges and biases in automotive and the effect it has on women rather than senior-level and higher women leaders advancing to the C-suite position.

Therefore, similar studies from the perspective of senior-level and higher automotive industry leaders would close the literature gap.

Even though there are a considerable number of senior-level and higher women leaders in the automotive industry, there has been little concern about their ability to advance. There is more literature on career advancement, discrimination, pay disparity, and inequality from management's perspective in the automotive industry, but none relates to women's representation in C-suite positions.

There needs to be more research conducted on the value of the lived experiences of senior-level and higher women leaders in the automotive industry, which focuses on strengthening the cultural and gender equality that senior-level and higher women leaders

endure. Having various levels of women in the automotive industry, with similar studies at various levels, would produce different outcomes. The study revealed that women still face challenges with advancing to top leadership positions. Also revealed are numerous resources the participants suggested other women should include in their career journey, such as using a self-development approach, networking, and getting a mentor or sponsor. Recommendations for future research are based on analyzing the lived experiences of 15 senior-level and higher women leaders in the automotive industry. The findings of this qualitative research study revealed topics for future research. Potential research could include duplicating this research in the global automotive industry. A second recommendation could duplicate this study using middle-level and lower leaders.

Recommendation to conduct research using each recurring theme and subthemes that emerged during the analysis. Each theme and subthemes represent the thoughts, perceptions, and lived experiences of the 15 participants in this research. An in-depth examination of each theme could expose more essential details concerning the underrepresentation of women in the C-suite of the automotive industry. Creating additional research on the challenges women face in the automotive industry trying to advance will add to the knowledge of this subject and create additional literature that could aid in bringing social, behavioral, and organizational change.

Another recommendation is a study on the perceptions of men in C-suite positions, their perspective on the automotive industry as it relates to automobiles, and the underrepresentation of women in the C-suite. This study focuses on women getting a C-suite position in the automotive industry. Women leaders are managing bias and

inequality in the automotive industry. These are just a few areas recommended for future studies with the potential to add to the literature concerning the underrepresentation of women in the C-suite of the automotive industry.

Finally, future research could focus on improving and addressing the perception of the lived experiences and be inclusive of recognizing the challenges women experience throughout the workplace. Women should have a fair chance at promotions and advancement opportunities to C-suite positions in the automotive industry. Change begins with recognizing and understanding the bias that exists. Once the knowledge of the biases is recognized, automotive leadership can start creating strategies to help women overcome the challenges that have prevented many from reaching their full potential. Further research covering previously mentioned recommendations could cover even broader areas by including different states, other industries, and organizations.

### **Implications**

A summary of the potential impact of the study's contributions to positive social changes will be presented here. Positive change is social change that impacts individuals, families, organizations, and societal/policy. I took on this study to get the experience of senior-level and higher women leaders, hoping that the result would help women in lower manager positions advance further in their careers. There is much research conducted on inequalities, discrimination, and equal pay, but minimal mention regarding the culture and inequality with senior-level and higher women leaders' barriers to getting a C-suite position in the automobile industry. So often, a man is hired for higher positions quicker than a female. Most of the time, the criteria and promotion process are subjective to the

decision-making of a male leader who could be biased. Studies suggest organizations promote those candidates who resemble themselves. This study attempts to give a voice to senior-level and higher women's leadership to help educate and prepare future women in the automotive industry. The study also has the potential to advise and educate management on the phenomenon in the industry.

A transcendental phenomenology approach was the baseline for allowing a deeper understanding of the lived experiences with an unbiased description to be collected (Sheehan, 2014). Transcendental phenomenology is a philosophical approach to qualitative research to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants' lived experiences. (Neubauer Witkop & Varpio, 20019). Transcendental phenomenology is based on the principles identified by Husserl (1931) reflecting on making a connection with the lived experience of others (Carr, 2009), which was translated into a qualitative method (Breuer, 2020; Moustakas, 1994).

Women occupy over 50% of the positions in the workplace, yet the gender ratios in leadership have slowly changed despite the increased number of women working. Despite their contributions, senior-level or higher women leaders are underrepresented in top leadership positions (Glass et al., 2016). Gender inequality limits the number of senior-level and higher women leaders from achieving a C-suite position in Michigan's automotive organizations (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2016).

Empowering women is vital to the continued growth of the economy and social change (Sullivan & Foundation, 2016). The knowledge gained from the stories of women already in top-level positions can offer women strategies for motivation and professional

development. Scholars believe that having more qualified senior-level women in C-suite leadership positions could access a grander scale of resources, ideas, skills, energy, and competitive advantage (Bertrand et al., 2019).

### **Social Change Implications**

The finding of this study provided valuable information. It may influence positive social change using documentation of the explanations of the lived experiences of senior-level and higher women leaders in the automotive industry. The favorable social change implication could provide a deep understanding of the phenomenon and acceptance of more senior-level and higher women leaders in C-suite positions. The finding could influence social change by revealing the personal and professional experiences and perceptions of senior-level and higher-level women leaders striving to get top leadership positions. The findings could also contribute to social change by increasing the knowledge and attention on promoting and developing more senior-level and higher women leaders into C-suite positions in automotive industries. Managers and leaders in the world's automotive industries will benefit from the findings of this study.

To increase their understanding of the underrepresentation of senior-level and higher women leaders in top leadership positions, I focused on finding effective ways to support more women in achieving C-suite positions in the automotive industry. The findings are essential for senior-level and higher women leaders, policymakers, and organizations developing training programs that eliminate workplace bias. P4 said, "I propose companies provide "unconscious bias" training for employees. That training could

help improve the lack of women moving up to manager and eventually further up the corporate ladder." ("Why It Is Harder for Women to Be Promoted in Their Careers")

The research findings increase awareness of the experiences, perceived inequality, and bias associated with the underrepresentation of women in C-suites. Sharing senior-level and higher women leaders' lived experiences during career development.

Introducing it to the leaders of automotive industries offers valuable and useful data for management and policymakers who provide services and influence changes and the development of policies that could help more women advance in their careers while helping to eliminate inequality and bias.

### **Societal/Policy Implications**

The study finding might have social implications in capturing the behaviors and processes exercised by the participants who successfully advance to positions in the C-suite and those who did not experience some accomplishment in achieving C-suite positions. Other automotive organizations can benchmark these processes to enhance and create programs that support the development and growth of women who strive to advance and can do so without bias or inequality. P14 said, "I feel more leaders should be open to helping people reach their full potential. Everyone should give back and help balance and eliminate inequality in the workplace."

### **Individual Implications**

At the Individual level, the senior-level or higher women leader has lived experiences and perception that provides revealing and valuable knowledge, which can be used by other senior-level and higher women to (a) identify the strategies relating to

development and advancement opportunities and (b) achieve a position in automotive C-suites.

The findings reported in this study can provide women with vital information for a better understanding of the experiences of senior-level and higher leaders, as well as the challenges they experienced progressing through to their success with career development. Structuring the knowledge to build strategies that support other women's growth. With words of encouragement and wisdom, P14 said, "I would encourage women to believe and trust in themselves. Do not let a no and biased behavior stop you. Keep striving and looking for opportunities to expand your skills and knowledge. The right person will recognize." The finding reported in this study is that women should seek a mentor and a sponsor. P6 said, "I suggest that women not give up on your desire to advance. Keep at it and sign up for a mentor right away."

### **Organizations Implications**

In the automotive industry the findings can affect positive social changes across the automotive industry, encouraging initiatives that will create ways to develop and advance more women to progress further in their careers through ongoing development and bias training programs that promote and generate an inclusive work environment within the automotive industry, in training as an annual mandatory training starting with Michigan automotive organizations and influencing automotive industries around the world to incorporate a more inclusive approach that drives programs that promote developing both men and women equally throughout the workforce at all levels. At the societal level, the finding provides similar knowledge and experiences that could aid in

taking a more collocative approach to address the bias (e.g., career development, bias knowledge training, and resilient training) from senior-level and higher women leaders' perspective of the challenges they face in the automotive industry in Michigan.

### **Family Implications**

The findings can affect social changes at the family level and encourage positive family development. They allowed women to grow in their careers and balance and support family values where work and home can gain stability, allowing family activities and events to be included in their lives. This study examined women's biases and inequalities in career advancement based on their perspectives, perceptions, and lived experiences regarding the underrepresentation of women in the automotive industry C-suites.

The 15 structured interview findings provided data that have implications for women aspiring for C-suite positions in the automotive industry; the finding provided information based on the lived experience of women in senior-level or higher leadership positions in the Michigan automotive industry. The finding provided information about women's bias and inequalities in the automotive industry.

The information and advice discussed by the participants can help women overcome challenges. Advice and information can help women. P11 said, "Women need to network more and find more activities and training, which would strengthen their skills and knowledge in automotive. Sometimes it is not what you know but whom you know. Overturning the challenges of bias and exclusions to step up should not stop. I keep reaching even if the reach is sideways."



The findings in this study provide an understanding of the increased difficulties and challenges senior-level, and higher women leaders face in the automotive industry. Evaluation of existing literature revealed no data on senior-level and higher women leaders' ability to achieve C-suite positions in the automotive industry. As more women enter the automotive industry, they would be at an advantage from the knowledge of the lived experiences and advice received from the participants. P11 said, "I would tell women not to give up on advancement opportunities. Find a good mentor, preferably a sponsor, who sees your potential and will refer you for opportunities." Those who participated in this study provided valuable lessons from their experiences that can be used as resources that women can use in generations to come.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

This qualitative research aimed to investigate the experiences and perceptions of women leaders in the automotive industry on bias and inequality women faces in advancing to C-suite positions in the automotive industry. The research data revealed that a diverse group of 15 women experienced bias and inequality while trying to get C-suite positions in the automotive industry in Michigan in various and similar ways. Numerous participants described the problem mentioned in other research, such as sexual harassment, boy's club networking, pay disparities, insufficient opportunities, bias, and inequality.

This research addressed the gap in the literature revealed in reviewing the existing literature. There is a need to recognize and acknowledge the factors (e.g., bias against ambitious women, biases blocking positive change, blatant sexism and harassment, boy's

club networking, women underestimated, and work-life balance) influencing the underrepresentation of women in the C-suite of the automotive industry when your account for the number of women employed in the industry. Addition research is needed to evaluate further and bring awareness and knowledge relating to these and other challenges.

Women workers have dual roles; It challenges them to manage their careers and family (Rahim et al., 2019). Those with family must balance work and family. Participant 7 discussed her experience; she said, "Women fear taking days off to support the family while most companies rejoice and encourage men to take time off to support families. P14 spoke of missed family opportunities; she said, " my family suffered because of the job. I was not always available to attend my children's games, plays, or other events. I missed a lot." P14 describes the difference between men with family obligations. She said, "Men have families, and it does not limit them in their development, yet women seem to be penalized just because of some bias thoughts that they will not be available, or they might fail to apply themselves to the job as they should."

The research reveals that the qualification regarding advancement for men differs from women regarding work-life balance. The automotive industry should examine the practices to find equality in balancing work-life balance for all genders so that senior-level and higher women leaders with families interested in advancing to top leadership positions in C-suites can.

Senior-level and higher women leaders' choices for advancement should be based on their skills and qualifications, not on the assumption that they can balance family

obligations to work responsibilities. The insight from the researchers describes how women without families were not affected by the work-life balance but by bias and prejudice. Another important finding was that not everyone had a problem with work-life balance and their challenges when the question was asked about the prejudice, bias, and unfair treatment they experience because of other perceptions, regardless of their skills or ability.

Recommendations are based on the reflection and analysis of the data from the lived experiences and perceptions of the 15 senior-level and higher women leaders interviewed from various Michigan automotive industries in this phenomenological study. One finding discussed was the problem of bias against ambitious women. As the culture continues to change, the organization must educate every employee about cultural differences and balance a continuing culturally gender-diverse workforce. Women should not have to decrease their ambition and continue to accept slower progress up the corporate ladder because of bias and prejudice. P11 said, "Women want to be treated; equally; the ambition seen in men has seen a strength. I perceive the ambition of women as a positive attribute." P15 described her frustration: "it is very challenging dealing with the biases and stereotypes. There is a clear moral argument for increasing diversity in the C-suite. However, the conversation usually ceases when explaining why more female executives are associated with better business outcomes and why specific mechanisms care for those positive changes." Women should have a fair chance to perform and be recognized for their performances. It is vital to be recognized for one's skills, abilities,

and contributions. Gender biases and stereotypes are many in the automotive industry, creating problems in women's attraction, retention, and advancement.

Organizations should address the biases and stereotypes by incorporating annual training classes that educate all employees on the conscious and unconscious biases in the automotive industry. P4 agrees with the training; she said, "I propose companies give unconscious bias training for employees." That training could help improve the need for more women to move up to managers and eventually further up the corporate ladder. If I coached and counseled women climbing the corporate ladder, I would communicate the importance of not sharing too much. Implement an idea before sharing it."

To ensure that the workplace is free of harassment. The industry must be conscious of any foreseen unacceptable behavior. The workplace should be free from discrimination, harassment, and retaliation. Several participants in this study cited sexual harassment and discrimination as career challenges. P4 said, "some of the lived experiences I have encountered while moving up the corporate ladder were gender biases, gender pay gap, and sexual harassment. I would suspect that many women experienced the same lived experiences as I did while being promoted to C-suite positions." Leadership handles the organization, holding individuals accountable for any offensive harassment that violates company policies.

They understand the current challenges with the development of women in the automotive industry; I took data currently known in this area and identified this area in which further research would be beneficial—the factors identified as potential influences on the underrepresentation of women in C-suites. I am concluding with my

recommendations that future research is conducted to increase awareness of the experiences of women to aid in closing the gap on culture and gender inequality in the C-suite and throughout the workplace.

## **Conclusions**

The underrepresentation of women in the workplace is a complex issue that has been a subject of concern for many years. Despite significant progress toward gender equality in recent decades, women continue to be underrepresented in many industries and positions, particularly in leadership and senior management roles. There are many reasons women are underrepresented in the workplace. One of the main factors is gender bias and discrimination, which can manifest in various ways, such as unequal pay, lack of opportunities for career advancement, and stereotyping. For example, women may be passed over for promotion or leadership roles because of assumptions that they are less committed to their jobs because of family responsibilities.

Other factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of women in the workplace include societal and cultural norms that reinforce traditional gender roles, lack of access to education and training, and a lack of mentorships and support networks for women in male-dominated fields.

To address the underrepresentation of women in the workplace, an environment that is inclusive, diverse, and equitable is vital. This includes policies and practices that promote equal pay, flexible work arrangements, and opportunities for career development and advancement. It also involves addressing unconscious bias and stereotypes through

training and education, promoting mentorship and networking opportunities for women, and creating more visibility and representation of women in leadership roles.

I conducted this study based on existing literature that revealed a gap resulting in the exploration of the lived experiences of senior-level and higher women leaders in the automotive industry considering advancing to C-suite positions. This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to understand the underrepresentation of women in C-suites through the lived experiences and perceptions of 15 senior-level and higher women leaders in the automotive industry. Structure interviews allowed for data collection, coding, analysis of the data, and interpretation based on the lived experience, perception, and perspective of 15 women from the automotive industries in Michigan.

The study sought to examine and compare inequalities, biases, and women's effects on getting a C-suite position. Women are moving beyond the hurdles that limit their growth. They have learned how to navigate the countless decisions and options and recognize those things. Women have refused to cease their dream; that is why this study is critical because it not only provides insight into the lived experience of the participants but also gives the participants a voice allowing them to tell their stories, offering advice and strategies that could aid other women in the ability to overcome obstacles and barriers.

Even though limited research examines senior-level and higher women leaders, their experiences in the automotive industry, and their ability to achieve C-suite positions, the information obtained from this study warrants further research to examine the long-term efficacy of the challenges and biases affecting women's ability to climb the

corporate ladder. These challenges have undermined women's abilities to reach their full potential, impacting gender and cultural inequality in the automotive industry. The 15-structure interviews showed that senior-level and higher-level women leaders aspiring to get C-suite positions are subjected to bias and inequality.

The findings provide information on the lived experiences and perceptions related to the underrepresentation of women in C-suite positions in the automotive industry. The findings in the research also warrant additional research to help the automotive industry understand how they might aid in decreasing gender bias and inequality, helping more women reach their career goals. While future and investigational strategies are needed, it is also essential to understand the phenomenon, improve the theory, and develop strategies to promote sustainment.

The findings in this study will be valuable not only in the automotive industry but in other organizations as well. Ultimately, achieving gender equality in the workplace requires a collective effort from all stakeholders, including employers, policymakers, and society. Recognizing the importance of diversity and taking concrete steps to promote gender equity would create a more inclusive and prosperous workplace for everyone.

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### Appendix A: Interview Script Prior To Interview

Interview Date:

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Start Time:

---

End Time:

---

Interviewer Rocelia Hornbuckle

Thank you for your participation in this study of senior-level and higher women leaders in Michigan automotive industry, I would like to go over a couple of reminders before we get started. First, I want to reiterate for you that participating in this study is completely voluntary. If you feel uncomfortable answering a particular question, please let me know and we will move onto the next question. Also, you can request to stop the interview at any time for any reason. Identifying information shared during this interview will be removed from findings. The structure of the interview will start with questions:

1. Regarding your lived experiences striving to be promoted to top level position
2. Followed by what barriers you encountered advancing in the workplace
3. How work-life balance impacted your career development.

Do you have any questions regarding your participation in this study before we start?

Next, I would like to ask your permission to record this interview. Do you agree to be?

Recorded?

Thank you. I will now begin recording.

### Interview Questions

The following questions are designed to create a conversation between you and me. I may ask more questions for clarification. Remember, there is no right or wrong answers.

You may decline to answer any question or to stop the interview at any time.

## Appendix B: Email Invitation to Participate

Title of Study: Organizational Cultural and Gender Inequality in C-suites

Hello Participant,

My name is Rocelia Hornbuckle, I am a PhD student at Walden University. I am conducting a study to examine the lived experience of senior level women and their perception of the development of senior-level and higher women achieving top leadership positions in the automotive industry. As a member in senior executive leadership within the automotive industry, you have unique experiences and knowledge regarding this subject. Therefore, I would like to invite you to participate in this research study.

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of women who strive to be promoted to C-suite positions. Along with how women can overcome barriers within the automotive industry in Michigan. Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to be available for a one interview session via Zoom, or Microsoft Team. The in-person interview session will last 30-45 minutes and will be audio recorded. The interview will take place at a mutually agreed upon date, and time.

The expected interview phase will be January 24, 2022 – March 1, 2022. This research could aid in increasing the representation of women within the automotive by developing strategies that would aid in developing more inspired women for top leadership position. This is an official invitation requesting your participation.

I have attached a consent form that provides additional information about the study.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at XXX or XXX-XXX-XXXX. I appreciate your consideration of this request. I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you,  
Rocelia Hornbuckle

## Appendix C: Research Questions

What are the lived experiences of women who strive to be promoted to C-suite positions?

### **Sub Questions**

1. What barriers have you encountered as you advance in the workplace?
2. What is the perspective of the representation of women in the C-suite?
3. How has work-life balance impacted career development?

## Appendix D: Demographic interview Questions:

1. Current Age? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Marital Status \_\_\_\_\_
3. Any children? Yes      No
4. Ethnicity? \_\_\_\_\_
5. What is your education level and certifications? \_\_\_\_\_
6. What is your current position? \_\_\_\_\_
7. What is your current salary? \_\_\_\_\_
8. How long have you been in your current positions? \_\_\_\_\_
9. Did you come from within or outside of the company? \_\_\_\_\_
10. Are you the first women to achieve this position? \_\_\_\_\_
11. How many other women are in executive role (executive management or board seats) in your organization? \_\_\_\_\_
12. Total number of employees at your organization? \_\_\_\_\_
13. Explain your level of influence in the organization? (# or direct reports, ability to make decision affecting the company etc.)



### Appendix E: Field Test Request Letter

I am a Walden Ph.D. candidate working toward attaining my degree in Management with a concentration in Leadership and Organizational Change. My research project is a qualitative phenomenological study. I am currently completing Chapter 3, and my dissertation chair (Dr. Roger Wells) indicated that I need a field test to complete my proposal before submission to the University

I am seeking expert volunteers who expect are in qualitative research to confirm the interview questions resulting in obtaining data required to address my primary research question. I would appreciate your assessment of the questions and provide feedback on the configuration of the questions and any recommendations on their appropriateness or the phrasing to get the data needed.

The purpose of my qualitative phenomenological research is to report the lived experiences of senior-level and higher women leaders of their career progression and identify any challenges relating to women in automotive industries in Michigan's metropolitan area. Using transcendental phenomenology design will help understand the lived experiences that may influence women's ability to achieve positions in C-suites. The study's findings might provide information to assist other women in the automotive industry to understand the expectation to achieve C-suite positions. The proposed study will have me interview twenty-five female senior-level and higher leaders or until I achieved saturation. The result might provide information regarding aspects of the glass ceiling and if it affects the women's progression to C-suite. I have attached a template

that includes my research question, interview questions, and an area for your feedback. I have attached the field test sheet for you to use for your response.

I appreciated you participating in my study. If you require additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me using the information below.

Sincerely,

Rocelia Hornbuckle

Walden University Ph.D. Student of Management

Leadership and Organizational Change

## Appendix F: Expert Faculty Interview

### Expert Faculty Interview

#### **Institutions:** Walden University

1. Can you share with me an experience that highlights how you have experienced cultural differences that might hinder women's advancements to top management levels?
2. Can you tell me about a time when you experienced cultural differences that you believe may have hindered women's ability to advance to a top management position?
3. Share with me the experience that exemplified how you overcame the obstacle in your career path?
4. Thinking about your experiences in the automotive industry, what could you share about how women could advance their position?

What suggestions can you offer from your lived experiences to other women who may be experiencing challenges and desire to advance to senior positions or higher within the automotive industry?

## Appendix G: Panel Review Sheet

Attached is the Request with comments from Expert Participants

.....

### Expert Panel Review/Field Test

I value your feedback on my interview questions

Please provide your comments in the area title "feedback."

- Do my questions make sense?
- Are the questions open-ended?

Your feedback will support the strategy to empower, promote, encourage, and help more women advance in the automotive industry.

### Research questions

What are women's lived experiences who strive to be promoted to the C-suite position in the automotive industry?

### Interview Questions

**RS 1.** What is your experience of cultural differences that you believe have hindered women's advancement to senior level and higher positions?

### Expert 1:

I had to put a different angle on being "one of the guys" – not using coarse language and hearing the content, not the vocabulary they used. I always tried to function as if I was the leader, the manager, whatever title was appropriate. If I saw myself that way, they could too. But I had to be technically better than average – that kept me on my toes and my A-game as an engineer. Little things are important. I did not make or pour coffee. When someone suggested I take the minutes of a meeting, I was quick to note that the recorder was the one who assigned action items and briefed senior management – and I did that.

**Expert 2:**

As above on sharper specificity in the Participants' context.

**Expert 3:**

Can you share with me an experience that highlights how you have experienced cultural differences that might hinder women's advancements to senior management levels? Again, you want to have them share with you the experience. The circumstance

**RS 2.** What is your experience of cultural differences that you believe have hindered women's advancement to senior level and higher positions?

**Expert 1:**

Keep on keeping on. Do not always treat all of the guys as a group. Be available to talk to each of them individually and understand their backgrounds and specializations – then use that information to acknowledge in meetings and get tutoring when needed.

**Expert 2:**

It's best to ask about a time that they have experienced this.

**Expert 3:**

**RS 3.** What have been your experience with overcoming the obstacles you have encountered in your career path?

**Expert 1:**

Let co-workers know you are more than just a worker (as well as wife, mother, and whatever your other roles may be). Develop a hobby about which you can talk. Whether it is pottery or flying or sports, or anything else. Be genuine, but let them see you as multifaceted

**Expert 2:**

Suggest "key experiences" or similar.

**Expert 3:**

Share with me the experience that exemplified how you overcame the obstacle.

**RS 4.** What approaches from your lived experiences do you believe you can provide to help more women advance in the automotive industry?

**Expert 1:**

Know your product. In automotive, know cars – by badges, reputations, race performance, and anything else that helps put various customers in perspective.

**Expert 2:**

This appears doable.

**Expert 3:**

If you think about your experiences in the automotive industry, what could you share about how women could advance their position?

**RS 5.** What suggestions can you offer from your lived experiences to other women who may be experiencing challenges and desire to advance to senior position or higher with the automotive industry?

**Expert 1:**

Know the people in the next level up and use them as your mentors. Ask them questions about how to manage situations. Be sure to thank them – and to report the result of following their advice

**Expert 2:**

Some Participants might intermingle the above "approaches" with this RS's "suggestions"—just advising on the possibility for some confusion. Appropriate rewording just might help to cement the semantic differences from the Participants' perspective, helping to provide clear and consistent responses---a thought.

**Expert 3:**

Yes, this is good, just the way it is.

Additional Comments

Do my questions make sense? Although you are interested in the role of culture, you may need to define that term to more cohesive responses. For me, the only cultural difference was male/female. Ethnicity and other factors were simply dwarfed by that and were no different for me as a woman than for the men of the majority culture

The questions were noted as being open-ended; it was suggested that restating the question might help the Participants focus on the factors you are interested.

**Expert 3:**

Introduction to the field questions: Your feedback will support the strategy to empower, promote, encourage, and help more women advance in the automotive industry.

My career in aerospace and automotive engineering and management spanned about 40 years, and the conditions changed quite a bit over that time. Often biggest issue, especially at first, was simply being the only woman around. I had to take the initiative to be included with my male coworkers to assure that they saw me as one of them – always wearing my professional "face" and "voice" and the wardrobe.