

Sudden Social Identity Change:
Exploring the Impact of Post-High School
Experiences on The Social Identities of
Newly Graduated Girls

A Dissertation

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by

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Abstract

The transition from high school to adulthood represents a critical juncture in the lives of young women, particularly for those from marginalised communities in Cape Town, South Africa. This period is marked by significant shifts in social identity, yet existing literature largely overlooks the sudden social identity changes (SSIC) that occur in non-traumatic contexts, such as this transition. Most studies on identity development have focused on gradual changes and their impact on individual well-being, leaving a gap in understanding how young women navigate abrupt identity transformations during key life stages.

This research addressed this gap by examining how newly graduated girls experience SSIC and how these changes impact their ability to exercise agency in resisting the risk of becoming NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training). Using hermeneutic phenomenology, the study delved into the lived experiences of these young women, highlighting the complex interplay of socioeconomic status, gender expectations, and the availability of social support systems, such as family, peers, and community networks. These factors significantly influenced the degree of agency exercised by the participants as they navigated their post-high school transitions.

The findings contribute to the theoretical understanding of SSIC by challenging existing categorisations of identity change, particularly by emphasising the role of perceived self-efficacy and control in shaping these experiences. Contrary to traditional views of identity change as externally driven, this study reveals that these young women actively engage in the process, drawing on their resilience and support networks to assert their agency.

In terms of social contribution, the research offers practical recommendations for developing targeted interventions that foster supportive environments, enhance resilience, and empower young women to navigate their transitions with confidence and determination. These insights are crucial for policymakers, educators, and community leaders aiming to support young women in marginalised communities as they transition from high school to adulthood, ensuring they are equipped to overcome challenges and seize opportunities.

Key Words

Sudden Social Identity Change (SSIC), Identity Development, Post-High School Transition, Youth Agency, NEET-Resistance, Marginalised Communities.

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1 Introduction

Over the years, the exploration of identity and social categorisation has piqued the interest of many social psychologists (Abrams & Hogg, 2006; Ashmore et al., 2004; Tajfel, 1978). Notably, research on identity development stages has taken centre stage and laid the foundational theories for identity research. However, there has been limited literature examining experiences or events that instigate Sudden Social Identity Change (SSIC), particularly those of a non-traumatic nature. This study addressed one such event: the impact of post-high school experiences on the social identities of newly graduated girls in Cape Town, South Africa—a period characterised by significant changes in self-perception (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968).

Exploring how post-high school experiences influenced social identities and the capacity to exercise agency during a pivotal life transition was the primary **focus** of this research. By examining the intersection of gender and socioeconomic status, it highlighted the unique challenges faced by these young women within the context of Cape Town's historically marginalised communities. In doing so, it filled a significant gap in the literature by offering insights into how newly graduated girls from disadvantaged backgrounds navigated their identities and future prospects in the post-apartheid era of South Africa.

For young women in Cape Town, the transition from high school to adulthood represented a significant but under-explored period of SSIC. **Although existing literature has extensively addressed identity development during adolescence, less attention has been given to the nuances of sudden identity shifts during the transition into early adulthood, especially in non-traumatic yet challenging contexts.** Understanding how young women managed, experienced, and made meaning of these transitions was crucial for both theoretical advancement and the development of support systems aimed at empowering young women in their journey beyond high school (Coleman, 1988). This research, therefore, sought to explore the interplay between post-high school experiences, identity transformation, and agency. It also examined how socioeconomic factors influenced young women's identity formation, as Destin (2019) argued that socioeconomic status plays a critical role in shaping aspirations, opportunities, and ultimately, social identity.

The research was guided by the **main question: How do post-high school experiences impact the social identities of newly graduated girls?** To answer this, three sub-questions were addressed:

1. What are the post-high school experiences of newly graduated girls?
2. How do these experiences influence changes in the social identities of newly graduated girls?
3. What sources of resilience and coping strategies do newly graduated girls employ in response to these changes?

Several **key assumptions** underpinned this research. First, it was assumed that identity development was subjective, and that participants' narratives reflected valid insights into their personal realities. Additionally, it was assumed that participants were best positioned to provide insight into their experiences, shaped by their unique socio-cultural contexts. The use of semi-structured interviews was assumed to be the most effective method for collecting in-depth data

on participants' experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Lastly, it was assumed that participants would respond honestly, providing authentic reflections on their post-high school experiences.

The **scope** of this study focused on newly graduated girls from historically marginalised communities in Cape Town, South Africa. The research sought to understand how factors such as socioeconomic conditions, societal expectations, and gender roles influenced identity development during the transition from high school to adulthood. By narrowing the focus to this specific group, the study aimed to provide in-depth insights into the lived experiences of young women facing both economic and social challenges during a critical period of identity formation.

The **significance** of this research lay in its contribution to the understanding of identity development during non-traumatic transitions—a topic that had often been overlooked in social psychology. The study provided valuable insights into how young women perceived and exercised their agency in shaping their identities amidst socioeconomic challenges. It also highlighted the importance of social support networks, including family, peers, and community, in empowering young women to navigate complex transitions.

This research also provided policymakers and practitioners with a valuable psychosocial perspective, complementing existing socioeconomic scholarship on youth unemployment, and offering an additional lens for developing and improving interventions aimed at addressing the needs of youth who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET). The findings had important practical implications for developing targeted interventions, educational policies, and community programmes that supported young women in navigating their futures with resilience and agency.

This dissertation was organised into six chapters. Following this Introduction, Chapter 2 presented a Review of the Literature, summarising existing research on identity theory and Sudden Social Identity Change (SSIC). Chapter 3 outlined the Research Methodology, detailing the study design, data collection, and analytical approach used to explore the research questions. Chapter 4 provided an in-depth presentation of the Findings, describing the post-high school experiences of participants and the resulting impacts on identity. Chapter 5 offered a Discussion of these findings in relation to existing literature, drawing out theoretical, practical, and policy implications. Finally, Chapter 6 concluded the dissertation by summarising key insights and suggesting avenues for future research.

This introduction set the foundation for a comprehensive exploration of the literature related to identity, social categorisation, and the nuances of non-traumatic transitions in young women's lives. The next chapter, Chapter 2: Literature Review, delved deeper into existing theories and studies, providing the framework that supported the interpretation and analysis of this research's findings.

2 Literature Review

This literature chapter unfolded as a dual narrative, weaving through the foundational concepts of social identity and the tapestry of Sudden Social Identity Change (SSIC). To understand the potential repercussions of post-high school experiences on the social identities of recently graduated girls, the chapter embarked on a comprehensive exploration of social identity

scholarship, to build an understanding of social identity. This background literature review segment delves into the intricacies of social identity, from its definition to the dynamic interplay of factors influencing its evolution. Having scrutinised its development through the lens of leading theories and acknowledging the contextual impact, groundwork was laid for unravelling the mysteries of identity in the face of life-altering events.

Shifting gears, the spotlight turned toward the focused exploration of SSIC, decoding the themes behind sudden identity changes that resonate across diverse population groups. This focused literature review became a lens through which the contextual variations, abruptness, and severity of events triggering SSIC are dissected. This examination acknowledges the uniqueness of each experience while striving to identify common threads that weave through them. To guide the exploration, the chapter's scope and limitations were defined, recognising the challenge of exhaustive coverage and opting instead for a nuanced approach that emphasises overarching patterns.

The core objectives of this dual narrative are unequivocal: to unravel the impact of SSIC on individuals as they navigate diverse circumstances and to initiate a nuanced understanding of the coping mechanisms deployed in the face of sudden identity upheavals. Together, these sections form a comprehensive exploration, laying the foundation for interpreting the research findings regarding the influence of post-high school experiences and sudden social identity changes on the agency of young women.

2.1 An Introduction to Social Identity

To grasp the potential impact of post-high school experiences on the social identities of recently graduated girls, it's essential to first comprehend the essence of social identity. Background literature for this study on sudden social identity change (SSIC) encompassed an introduction to social identity (Abrams & Hogg, 1990) and aimed to define social identity, offering clarity on the distinctions between social and personal identity, and illuminating their complicated relationship and coexistence. Additionally, it introduced the conceptualization of social identity as a product of group memberships, whether currently held or anticipated (Cinnirella, 1998). The literature also delved into leading theories and frameworks that expound on the nature of social identity, addressing how it develops and evolves over time. These theories emphasised the significance of understanding social identity in comprehending actions, attitudes, and behaviours (Breakwell, 2014), along with potential shifts in these aspects. The journey through life stages, their respective challenges, and the maturity gained are positioned as a key contributor to healthy identity development (Erikson, 1968). Furthermore, the role of context was explored, highlighting structural, environmental, and personal obstacles that hinder the development of social identity (Yoder, 2000). Lastly, the background literature delved into intersectionality as a major influence on the development of social identity and agency, extending from the broader topic of experience and its pivotal role in shaping social identity (Crenshaw, 2017). It does so by scrutinising sociocultural contexts both individually and collectively. A significant portion of this literature predominantly originated from or was conducted by entities from the global north. This perspective may have introduced biases and limited the applicability of findings to a broader, more diverse global context, having potentially overlooked the unique experiences and perspectives of marginalised groups influenced by colonial histories.

2.1.1 Definition and Conceptualization

To understand the experience of, and implications for, sudden social identity change (SSIC) it is necessary to first develop an understanding of social identity. The definition and conceptualization of social identity have been the subject of extensive research and theoretical development within the field of social psychology. By examining the different perspectives and dimensions of social identity, a nuanced understanding of its nature and implications can be achieved.

Within the realm of social identity theory, two distinct types of identity have been identified: personal identity and social identity (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). Personal identity pertains to the unique attributes and experiences of an individual, whereas social identity encompasses the aspects of identity derived from group memberships. These two forms of identity interact and coexist, shaping individuals' self-perception and behaviour.

Building upon the definition, Tajfel et al. (1979) asserts that social identity is commonly understood as the aspect of an individual's self-concept that stems from their group memberships *and* the social categories to which they belong. It encompasses the beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviours associated with these groups, forming a crucial component of one's overall sense of self (Ellemers et al., 2002). Further, it “is not static or fixed, but rather a dynamic and evolving process that is influenced by our interactions with the world around us” (April et al., 2023, p. 32), at micro, meso, and macro levels (Dharani, 2024).

Expanding on the foundational concept of social identity rooted in social categorisation, discourse concerning the conceptualisation of social identity also recognises its multidimensionality. Ashmore et al. (2004) propose six dimensions of collective identity: self-categorisation, evaluation, importance, attachment, and sense of interdependence, social embeddedness, and content and meaning. These dimensions highlighted the complexity of social identity and the various factors that contribute to its formation and significance. For instance, self-categorisation refers to the extent to which individuals identify with a particular group, while evaluation refers to the subjective evaluation of the group. These dimensions interact and influence individuals' identification with their groups and their engagement in collective behaviours.

Another dimension of social identity is explored through the concept of *possible* social identities. Cinnirella (1998) argues that individuals may possess identities that they do not currently hold but could potentially acquire in the future. These possible social identities play a significant role in shaping individuals' self-concepts and behaviour. For example, individuals aspiring to a particular profession may identify with the social group associated with that occupation, even if they have not yet achieved it. The inclusion of possible social identities expanded the understanding of social identity beyond current group memberships, encompassing future aspirations and potential affiliations. The literature emphasised that social identity is inherently social, shaped by the interaction between individuals and their social environments.

2.1.2 Theories and Frameworks

Social identity grand theories and frameworks are interdisciplinary, encompassing various aspects of the field. By incorporating these theories, a more holistic and integrated understanding of Sudden Social Identity Change (SSIC) emerged. These grand theories

provided a broad and comprehensive theoretical framework for grasping this complex phenomenon, offering a lens through which the data from this research was interpreted and analysed.

Bridging the conceptual landscape, the Identity Process Theory (IPT) underscores the reason understanding of social identity is valuable in understanding the responses in different situations. The theory explores the processes through which **social identity influences individual behaviour and attitudes** (Breakwell, 2014). IPT proposes that social identity guides individuals' self-categorisation, comparison, and attribution processes, **influencing their emotional experiences and responses to intergroup relations**. By examining the cognitive and affective mechanisms underlying social identity processes, IPT provided a valuable framework for understanding the link between social identity and individual responses to social contexts.

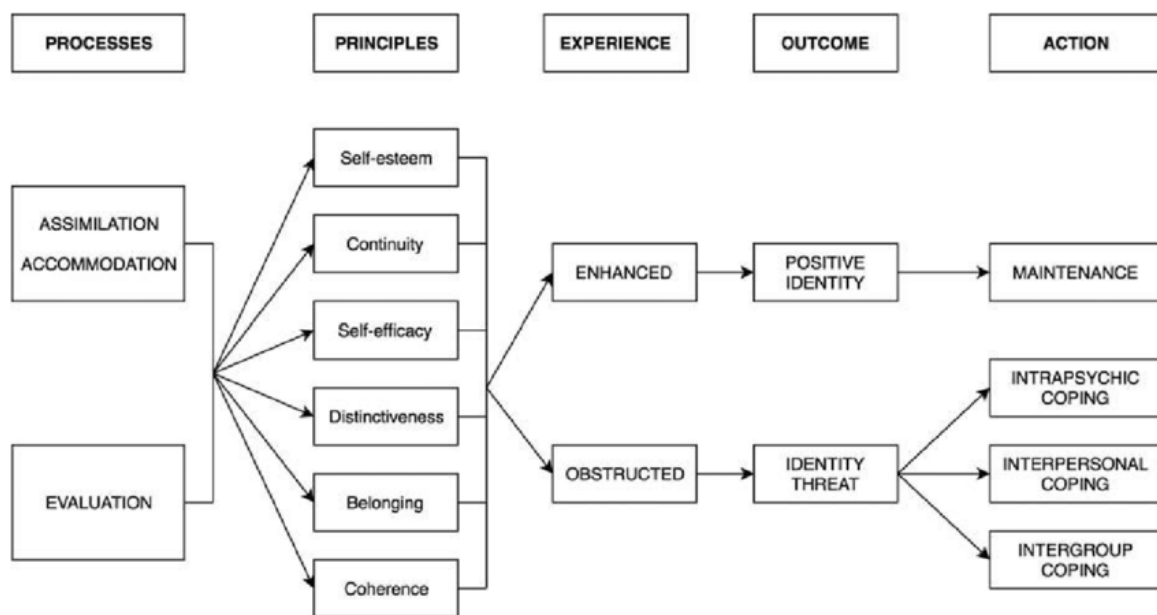


Figure 1 - Identity Process Theory (Jaspal et al., 2014)

Expanding the theoretical groundwork, Social Identity Theory (SIT), proposed by Tajfel and Turner (2004), stands as a foundational theoretical framework in social psychology. **SIT posits that individuals strive for positive social identity by categorising themselves into social groups and favouring their in-group while displaying bias or prejudice towards out-groups, or ‘othering’** (Brons, 2015). SIT highlights the role of social categorisation, social identification, and social comparison in shaping individuals' behaviour and intergroup relations (Tajfel, 1978). SIT initially highlighted the importance of group membership in shaping individuals' self-esteem and behaviour, emphasising the role of social categorisation, social comparison, and intergroup conflict in the formation and maintenance of social identity (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel, 1978). Thereafter, the motives for identity development were extended beyond self-esteem to include belonging, self-efficacy, distinctiveness, and meaning (Vignoles et al., 2006).

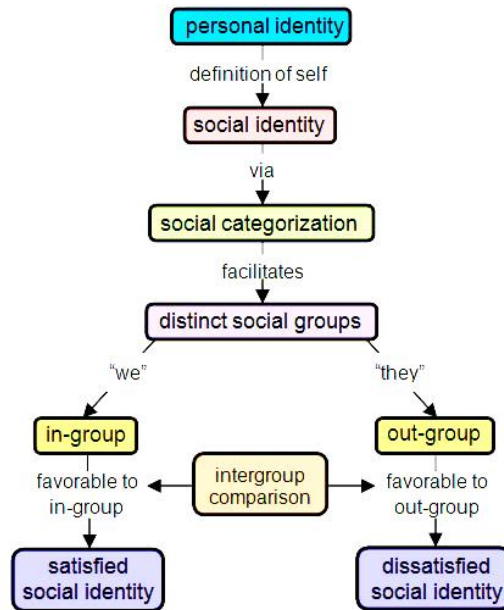


Figure 2 - Social Identity Theory (Shamila, 2017)

Self-Categorization Theory (SCT), an extension of SIT, delves into the cognitive mechanisms involved in the formation of social identities. According to Turner et al. (2012), individuals classify themselves and others into social groups based on shared characteristics, influencing their self-concept and actions. **SCT underscores the role of social context in activating different facets of self-concept, leading to alterations in behaviour and self-perception.** Two key processes examined by SCT are depersonalization, where individuals downplay personal attributes in favour of group characteristics, and social identity salience, which involves the prominence of social identity in a given context. These processes, as elucidated by SCT, contributed valuable insights into understanding how individuals align their behaviour with group norms and participate in collective actions (Van Zomeren et al., 2008).

Continuing from the exploration of Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) and its emphasis on the cognitive processes shaping social identities, the Social Identity Development Theory (SIDT) provides further insights into the dynamic nature of social identity, particularly during adolescence and young adulthood. Developed by Nesdale (2004), **SIDT explains how individuals' social identity evolves over time through processes influenced by social categorization, in-group preferences, and intergroup attitudes.** This theory highlights the role of social comparison, socialization agents, and contextual factors in shaping social identity development. SIDT emphasises the dynamic nature of social identity and the influence of social interactions, societal norms, and individual experiences in the formation of social identities.

Introducing a dimension of complexity to the exploration of social identity, the Social Identity Complexity (SIC) model proposed by Roccas et al. (2002). The SIC model suggests that **individuals may hold multiple social identities that differ in their centrality and compatibility.** It emphasises that the relationships between different social identities can be characterised by complementarity or conflict, influencing individuals' perceptions and behaviours. The SIC model provides insights into how individuals manage the complexity and interplay of their social identities, addressing the multifaceted nature of social identity beyond a single group membership.

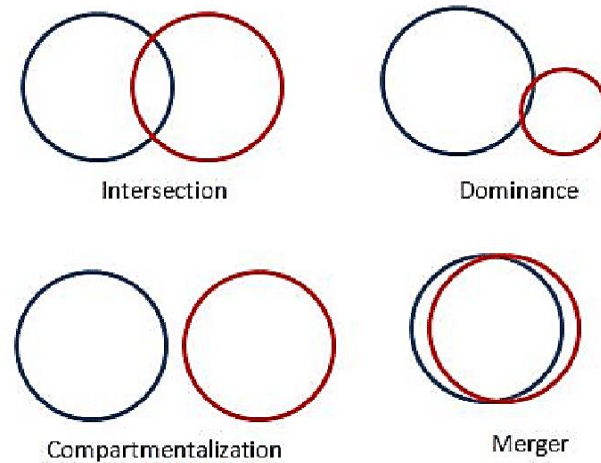


Figure 3 - Social Identity Complexity (Wilson et al., 2015)

Extending the discourse from the complexity outlined in the SIC model, Solomon's (2012) exploration delves into the nuanced dynamics of **vertical and horizontal identity tensions**. Horizontal identity pertains to affiliations with peers, communities, and shared interests, emphasising a sense of belonging on a peer-to-peer level. For instance, someone might identify horizontally with a close-knit group of colleagues who share similar professional interests. In contrast, vertical identity involves connections with aspects such as race, ethnicity, cultural heritage, and societal expectations, emphasising a sense of continuity and inheritance. Solomon's work highlights the dynamic interplay and potential conflicts between these two dimensions, shedding light on how individuals navigate the tension between their horizontal affiliations and vertical ties. This examination enriches the understanding of identity formation, emphasising the complex negotiations individuals undertake as they balance communal bonds with familial and societal expectations.

Complimenting both the SIC model and Solomon's horizontal and vertical identities, the intersectionality perspective, developed by Crenshaw (2017), emphasises how **social identities intersect and interact, leading to unique experiences and challenges** faced by individuals. Intersectionality highlights that social identities such as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation are not isolated but intersect to shape individuals' experiences of privilege, disadvantage, and discrimination. This perspective enriches the understanding of social identity by recognising the complexities and interconnections between multiple social categories.

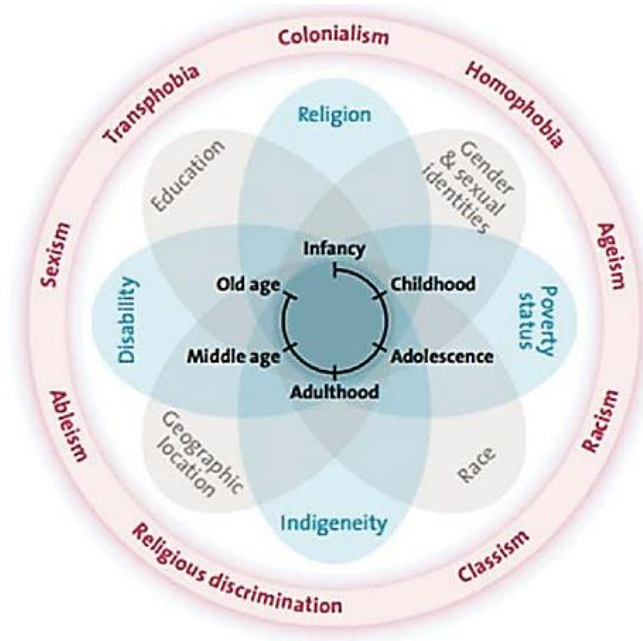


Figure 4 - Intersectionality Wheel (UN Women, 2022)

2.1.3 Influences on Identity Development

Life Stages

Life stage transitions are pivotal moments in an individual's journey toward identity development, and scholarly research underscores the significance of these stages in shaping one's sense of self (Arnett, 2000; Côte & Levine, 1983; Cuzzocrea, 2019; Erikson, 1968; Honwana, 2012; Marcia, 1966). According to Erikson's psychosocial theory, specific crises emerge during different life stages, influencing identity formation (Erikson, 1968) This perspective emphasises the importance of successfully navigating these crises for healthy identity development.

During adolescence and emerging adulthood, individuals experience a particularly crucial life stage marked by the transition to adulthood, a period that demands exploration and commitment to foster identity development (Erikson, 1968). Erikson's theory posits that navigating psychosocial challenges during this phase contributes significantly to the development of a stable identity (Erikson, 1968). Marcia's Identity Development Theory and identity status paradigm complement this notion by highlighting the central role of cognitive processes, such as exploration and commitment, in identity development (Marcia, 1966). Active engagement in exploring various identity options leads to a restructuring of an individual's self-concept, propelling them from identity diffusion or foreclosure to identity moratorium or achievement (Marcia, 1966).

<p>IDENTITY FORECLOSURE</p> <p>HIGH commitment towards the prospect of a new career identity but LOW exploration activity. Have accepted the prospect of changing careers but unmotivated to start the process of job seeking.</p>	<p>IDENTITY MORATORIUM</p> <p>LOW commitment to the prospect of a new career identity but HIGH level of engagement in exploring new opportunities so are more knowledgeable about possible options.</p>
<p>IDENTITY DIFFUSION</p> <p>LOW commitment towards considering a new career. LOW motivation to explore new options. Overwhelmed or unaware of number of possibilities so inertia sets in.</p>	<p>IDENTITY ACHIEVEMENT</p> <p>HIGH commitment to a new career identity and HIGH exploration of possible new career options. Accepting of a new career and taking positive action to explore the job market.</p>

Figure 5 - Marcia's (1966) Identity Statuses (BioScience Careers, 2015)

Côte and Levine's (1983) research further delves into the intricacies of ego identity status, neuroticism, dogmatism, and purpose in life, demonstrating the interconnectedness of these factors. Their findings reveal that individuals' ego identity status is linked to experiences of neuroticism and dogmatism, while their sense of purpose in life is tied to their achieved identity status (Côte & Levine, 1983). This underscores the multidimensional nature of identity development, suggesting that cognitive, emotional, and purpose-driven elements contribute to the formation of a cohesive identity.

Marcia's (1966) concept of the moratorium period, based on Erikson's (1968) theory of identity development, offers a valuable perspective on the importance of taking time in exploring and forming one's identity. This phase provides individuals with an opportunity for exploration, experimentation, and the process of change in identity. Cuzzocrea's (2019) work on moratorium and waithood further emphasises the distinct forms of time-taking during adolescence and the changing shape of youth. Honwana's (2012) conceptualisation of "waithood" sheds light on the far-reaching influence contextual factors has on the social identity development of numerous young individuals in Africa. This extended transitional phase between childhood and adulthood, characterised by unstable employment, limited economic prospects, and social exclusion, shapes the social identities of the affected youth (Honwana, 2012). The prevailing conditions of waithood, stemming from factors such as the decline of formal employment and the ascent of informal economies, engender negative consequences, including reduced economic opportunities, increased poverty, social exclusion, and psychological distress (Honwana, 2012). Life transitions, such as entering adulthood and where they are fortunate enough to enter the workforce, emerge as critical periods during which identity development is particularly pronounced (Cuzzocrea, 2019). These transitional periods prompt shifts in identity status and values as individuals adapt to new roles and responsibilities, highlighting the dynamic nature of identity development during life stage transitions (Cuzzocrea, 2019).

Moratorium and waithood represent different forms of extended transitions in identity development and exercise of agency. Agency is defined as the manifestation of intentional actions, where individuals exercise control over their life decisions and actions in various

contexts (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Marcia's (1966) concept of moratorium involves a voluntary period of exploration, where individuals delay commitments to experiment with various identities. This phase allows for self-discovery and personal growth. In contrast, Honwana's (2012) concept of waithood refers to an involuntary delay in reaching adulthood, driven by socio-economic barriers like unstable employment and limited opportunities. While moratorium offers autonomy in identity exploration, waithood is characterised by systemic constraints that limit agency, particularly in African contexts (Honwana, 2012).

The process of identity development is linked to introspection and self-reflection, allowing individuals to gain insights into their values, beliefs, and aspirations (Erikson, 1968; Hardy & Carlo, 2011). Reflective thought about moral issues, as discussed by Hardy and Carlo (2011), plays a crucial role in moral identity development, contributing to the refinement and redefinition of identities over time. This self-discovery process involves a continuous exploration of personal values and ethical considerations, ultimately influencing one's moral identity.

Emotions, according to Erikson, are closely intertwined with identity development and can serve as powerful catalysts for self-reflection and exploration (Erikson, 1968). For instance, feelings of uncertainty or dissatisfaction with one's current identity status may trigger a quest for new experiences and a reevaluation of the sense of self (Erikson, 1968). Emotional resonance with specific identity options can motivate individuals to make significant changes in their lives, aligning their actions with their authentic selves (Erikson, 1968).

An examination of key life stages and their implications for identity formation serves as a comprehensive conclusion to the exploration of this complex process:

- **Adolescence: A Crucial Phase of Identity Exploration**
Adolescence is widely recognised as a critical period for identity exploration and formation (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966). Erikson's theory of psychosocial development posits that during adolescence, individuals face the psychosocial crisis of identity vs. role confusion (Erikson, 1968). This stage marks a significant transition from childhood to adulthood, during which young people seek to establish a stable and coherent sense of self (Erikson, 1968). Marcia's identity status paradigm further emphasises the importance of adolescence in the process of identity formation, as individuals actively explore various identity options and commitments (Marcia, 1966). This phase sets the foundation for the subsequent stages of identity development.
- **Emerging Adulthood: Navigating New Possibilities**
In recent years, the concept of emerging adulthood has gained prominence as a distinct life stage characterised by exploration and self-discovery (Arnett, 2000). This transitional period typically occurs between late adolescence and early adulthood, providing individuals with the freedom and flexibility to explore various life paths (Arnett, 2000). During this time, young people engage in identity moratorium, actively experimenting with different roles and commitments (Erikson, 1968). The pursuit of higher education, career choices, and romantic relationships are central aspects of identity exploration during emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). These life transitions allow individuals to refine their values and aspirations, shaping their emerging adult identities (Arnett, 2000).
- **Midlife: Reevaluating and Consolidating Identities**

As individuals progress through adulthood, they encounter the challenges of midlife, a period marked by re-evaluation and consolidation of identities (Erikson, 1968). Erikson's stage of generativity vs. stagnation captures the significance of this phase, during which individuals seek to contribute meaningfully to society and establish a sense of purpose (Erikson, 1968). For some, this may involve pursuing new career paths, engaging in philanthropy, or nurturing familial relationships (Erikson, 1968). Midlife transitions prompt individuals to reflect on their accomplishments and reorient their identities to align with their evolving life circumstances, contributing to the ongoing development of their identities (Erikson, 1968).

- **Late Adulthood: Reflecting on Life's Journey**

Late adulthood represents the final stage of Erikson's psychosocial development theory, where individuals face the crisis of integrity vs. despair (Erikson, 1968). During this phase, individuals engage in life review, reflecting on their past experiences and accomplishments (Erikson, 1968). The process of self-reflection in late adulthood allows individuals to find a sense of integrity, accept the course of their lives, and embracing their achievements (Erikson, 1968). Conversely, those who struggle to find meaning in their life journey may experience feelings of despair (Erikson, 1968). The role of life transitions in late adulthood is to facilitate a sense of closure and acceptance, enabling individuals to make peace with their identities (Erikson, 1968).

Context

This chapter delved into the profound contributions of esteemed scholars (Abo-Zena, 2019; Arnett, 2000; Bourdieu, 1977, 2011, 2018; Burke et al., 1988; Butler, 2011; Crenshaw, 2017; Cuzzocrea, 2019; Erikson, 1968; Hardy & Carlo, 2011; Honwana, 2012, 2019; Kearney, 2006; Lipsitz Bern, 1981; Loyd et al., 2019; Markus & Kitayama, 2014; Provis, 2019; Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Yoder, 2000). Their work is approached through the lens of diverse contexts, specifically exploring sociocultural, cultural, and gendered perspectives. This examination aimed to deepen the understanding of how these perspectives shape the development of social identity and agency. Furthermore, the concept of intersectionality was introduced in the chapter, illuminating the collective influence of these perspectives on the multifaceted landscape of social identity development.

Sociocultural Context

Sociocultural context, encompassing various factors such as family dynamics, cultural norms, societal expectations, socioeconomic status, and social class, plays a pivotal role in shaping the experiences and impacts of life transitions, thereby influencing identity development (Arnett, 2000; Bourdieu, 1977, 2011, 2018; Cuzzocrea, 2019; Erikson, 1968; Hardy & Carlo, 2011; Honwana, 2019; Kearney, 2006; Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Yoder, 2000).

Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus offers a nuanced understanding of how identity development is influenced by sociocultural factors, highlighting the interplay between structure and agency. Habitus refers to the internalised dispositions shaped by individuals' experiences, which guide their perceptions, attitudes, and actions in various social contexts. It is through these socially ingrained habits and ways of thinking that individuals navigate life transitions, often unconsciously replicating the norms and behaviours of their social environment. In this way, habitus shapes not only how individuals perceive opportunities but also how they respond to constraints, influencing the trajectories of identity development and reinforcing or challenging social structures (Bourdieu, 2018). The role of habitus is particularly significant in

the context of social class, where access to resources and cultural capital affects one's ability to engage in identity exploration and make life choices that align with or resist societal expectations (Bourdieu, 2011).

The influence of sociocultural factors becomes evident in the opportunities and constraints individuals face during life transitions. Socioeconomic status and social class shape access to educational opportunities, impacting identity exploration and future prospects, particularly for individuals from working-class backgrounds (Cuzzocrea, 2019). Yoder's (2000) examination of barriers to ego identity status formation further delves into the structural, environmental, and personal obstacles within the sociocultural context that hinder individuals' exploration of identity options and commitments, leading to confusion and uncertainty. Complementing this perspective, Kearney's (2006) work on girls' media engagement challenging traditional gender roles underscores the influence of societal norms and expectations on gender identity.

In the context of barriers constricting identity development, Honwana's (2019) research delves into barriers similar to those discussed but from the perspective of waithood. Exploring the sociocultural landscape, Honwana sheds light on the extended transition into adulthood marked by prevalent unemployment, political exclusion, and social marginalization. This context significantly shapes the social identities of individuals, particularly within the waithood generation. The disillusionment within this demographic, arising from the perceived failures of leaders to address their needs, has fuelled global youth-led protests and movements (Honwana, 2019). The diverse composition of the waithood generation, spanning variations in race, ethnicity, gender, class, and location, plays a crucial role in shaping unique social identities within this demographic (Honwana, 2019). Despite facing complex challenges associated with waithood, young people actively engage in crafting alternative paths, utilizing strategies such as protest, social media engagement, and entrepreneurship to navigate and redefine their identities (Honwana, 2019). The reliance on social networks, both formal and informal, becomes a crucial aspect of their identity formation as they seek employment and resources.

Building upon the significance of social networks in identity development, social influences, as emphasised by Erikson (1968) and Hardy & Carlo (2011), are integral in shaping the process of change in identity throughout life. Interactions with diverse social environments expose individuals to different norms, values, and role models, significantly impacting their sense of identity (Erikson, 1968). Exposure to moral role models, in particular, can foster the development of a strong moral identity (Hardy & Carlo, 2011). Social identity theory further emphasises the role of group membership and social categorisation in influencing individuals' self-concept as they identify with various social groups, aligning their self-concept with the norms and values of those groups (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). The intricate interplay between sociocultural context and social influences underscores the complexity of identity development and the multifaceted factors that contribute to individuals' evolving sense of self. Given the central role of culture and gender in this study, these contexts have been individually addressed in the following two sections.

Cultural Context

Culture serves as a significant lens through which social identity is shaped, reinforced, and comprehended. The exploration of this relationship draws upon the seminal works of Markus and Kitayama (2014), Loyd et al. (2019), Helms (1990), Abo-Zena (2019), and Butler (2011),

delving into the nuanced complexities of cultural influences on social identity. This examination seeks to understand how cultural norms, values, and traditions mould individuals' self-concepts and influence their interactions within the communities they belong to.

Markus and Kitayama (2014) introduce the pivotal concept of independent and interdependent self-concepts, revealing the penetrating impact of culture on individuals' perceptions of the self. Independent self-concepts emphasise personal attributes and individual qualities, epitomizing personal agency and autonomy—characteristics more pronounced in Western cultures. In contrast, East Asian cultures favour interdependent self-concepts, placing a strong emphasis on collective harmony and interconnectedness. This cultural distinction in self-concepts underscores how deeply ingrained cultural values shape fundamental aspects of individuals' identities (Markus & Kitayama, 2014).

Extending this exploration, Loyd et al. (2019) contribute insights into the role of culture in ethnic identity development, particularly among Black South African youth. The study illuminates how shared language, history, and values within a cultural context contribute significantly to the formation of ethnic identity. Importantly, the cultural shaping of identity extends beyond ethnicity to encompass diverse facets of social identity, including race and gender (Helms, 1990). Personal experiences within cultural contexts intertwine with familial and societal influences, contributing to the construction of a multifaceted social identity (Loyd et al., 2019).

Elaborating further on the interplay of cultural forces, cultural norms wield significant influence over gender identity and expression, as exemplified by Abo-Zena's (2019) exploration of the impact of cultural expectations on Muslim adolescent females in the United States. The study elucidates how these expectations pressure individuals to conform to traditional gender roles and behavioural norms, emphasising the broader consequences of cultural expectations on shaping gender identity. Deviations from prescribed gender norms may result in stereotypes, negative perceptions, and even discrimination against those who defy cultural expectations (Abo-Zena, 2019).

Delving into the psychological ramifications of cultural dynamics, Helms (1990) emphasises the extensive implications of cultural context on individuals' social identity, extending this insight to the realm of gender identity. A robust sense of cultural identity emerges as a powerful factor positively influencing individuals' psychological well-being, fostering a sense of belonging and pride within their social groups. Conversely, cultural conflicts or pressures to assimilate may lead to psychological distress and feelings of alienation, underscoring the intricate interplay between cultural context and the social dimensions of identity (Helms, 1990).

Gendered Context

In the tapestry of social identity development, gender and gender identity serve as integral components, wielding influence over individuals' experiences, relationships, and perceptions within society. This dynamic interplay between these elements and the construction of social identity is shaped by various factors and perspectives, as articulated by Abo-Zena (2019), Helms (1990), Burke et al. (1988), Lipsitz Bern (1981), Butler (2011), and Provis (2019).

To illustrate, Abo-Zena's (2019) study on Muslim adolescent females in the United States vividly portrays the challenges emerging from the convergence of gender and cultural

expectations. These young women navigate societal stereotypes that demand adherence to traditional gender roles, including responsibilities like household chores and caregiving. The expectations grounded in cultural norms intensify the pressure on them, influencing their gender identity development and limiting their exploration of diverse opportunities. The link between gender and cultural identity becomes evident as these individuals grapple with the intersectionality of being Muslim women in a society that often subjects them to discrimination and prejudice.

Expanding on the solidifying of gender roles, Lipsitz Bern's (1981) exploration of gender schemas emphasises the cognitive structures that organise information about gender, ultimately shaping individuals' interpretation of the world. Gender schemas guide attention, influencing the perception and recall of gender-related information. This process becomes a cornerstone in the development of social identity, as individuals interpret ambiguous information in alignment with established gender norms, reinforcing stereotypes and influencing self-perception.

Challenging the notion of gender stereotypes, Butler's (2011) conceptualisation of gender as a performative act challenges the conventional notion of fixed gender identity. This performative aspect implies that individuals actively engage in shaping their gender identity through daily interactions, thereby contributing to the ongoing construction of their social identity. By understanding gender as a dynamic and evolving performance, individuals gain agency in navigating societal expectations and expressing their gender identity authentically.

In a different vein, Provis (2019) introduces the concept of identity politics, illustrating how the intertwining of personal and group identities can fuel extended political conflicts. Within the context of gender, identity politics becomes a potent force, shaping individuals' engagement with societal structures and norms. The link between gender identity and social identity development is evident as individuals navigate political landscapes to challenge or uphold gender norms and inequalities.

Turning attention to the connection between gender identity and psychological well-being, Helms (1990) highlights the significance of a strong gender identity in fostering positive mental health outcomes. This link further solidifies the role of gender in shaping the multifaceted dimensions of social identity. Individuals with a robust sense of gender identity are more likely to navigate social interactions confidently, forming meaningful relationships that contribute to social identity development.

Unique Experience (Intersectionality)

Intersectionality is a critical framework that highlights the interconnectedness of social identities, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and culture. Drawing on the scholarship of Crenshaw (1991; 2017), Abo-Zena (2019), Pargament (2001), Markus and Kitayama (2014), Burke et al. (1988), Butler (2011), and Provis (2019), this section delves into the multifaceted nature of intersectionality, examining how various aspects of social identity intersect and shape individuals' experiences, opportunities, and challenges. In contrast to the sociocultural context, which consists of the varied experiences presented by different social and cultural contexts that influence identity development and the acquisition of multiple identities, intersectionality zeros in on the overlap of these multiple identities and the new and unique positioning of individuals that results. It specifically emphasises how these identities intersect in contexts transcending sociocultural contexts, contributing to unique and multifaceted experiences within society, and in turn the complex nature of social identity development (Crenshaw, 1991; 2017).

Intersectionality challenges single-issue approaches that focus on one aspect of social identity while neglecting others (Crenshaw, 1991; 2017). This perspective is critical in understanding the layered complexities of individuals' challenges. For instance, when addressing gender-based discrimination, it is essential to consider how intersecting identities may magnify or mitigate the impact of discrimination, shaping the trajectory of social identity development, and to recognise that individuals may face multiple forms of discrimination simultaneously.

Further examining the intersection of gender and religion, Abo-Zena's (2019) study on Muslim adolescent females in the United States exemplifies the complexities of intersectionality. Muslim women experience challenges related to both their gender identity and religion, facing stereotypes, negative perceptions, and discrimination based on their intersecting identities. This intersection of gender and religion compounds the pressures to conform to cultural norms and societal expectations.

Pargament's (2001) work on the psychology of religion and coping provides insight into how religious identity intersects with other social identities, influencing how individuals cope with stress and adversity. The research emphasises that religious beliefs and practices function as coping strategies influenced by the interplay of gender, culture, and ethnicity. This intersectionality can either bolster resilience or intensify challenges, especially when religious identity conflicts with other aspects of social identity. The framework underscores the importance of understanding how coping strategies are deeply embedded in the broader socio-cultural and religious contexts.

Incorporating culture into this intersection, Markus and Kitayama's (2014) concept of independent and interdependent self-construal aligns with intersectionality by emphasising the cultural context's role in shaping individuals' self-perceptions. The cultural context further influences how intersectionality manifests, impacting individuals' understanding of their myriad social identities and the construction of social identity. For example, cultural norms and expectations may vary, affecting how intersectionality affects gender identity and other aspects of social identity.

Introducing power dynamics to the intersection, intersectionality also highlights the influence of power dynamics in shaping individuals' experiences. Burke et al. (1988) demonstrate how gender intersects with power dynamics within intimate relationships. The intersection of culture and gender may amplify gender-related expectations and stereotypes, reinforcing the power dynamics within the cultural framework, and influencing abusive behaviours, with individuals exerting power over others based on their gender identity, significantly influencing the trajectory of social identity development of all involved parties. These dynamics are further complicated by other intersecting identities, such as race or socioeconomic status, which can magnify the impact of power imbalances.

Taking a broader view, Provis (2019) explores the role of identity politics in shaping individuals' social identities. As previously mentioned, identity politics acknowledges the intertwined nature of personal narratives and group identities, influencing political actions taken to address social inequalities. Intersectionality becomes a powerful tool for understanding the various factors contributing to identity-based political conflicts. For instance, the intersection of race, gender, and culture may lead to unique challenges faced by marginalised communities seeking recognition and justice.

2.1.4 Background Literature Conclusion

The exploration of social identity in the literature has revealed its intricate and multifaceted nature, challenging researchers to navigate through various influences. The complexity arises from the individual's possession of multiple social identities (Roccas & Brewer, 2002), each influencing thoughts, perceptions, and actions based on their distinct prevalence and dominance, contingent upon social contexts. Vertical and horizontal factors further contribute to the complexity, encompassing both inherited and acquired social identities (Solomon, 2012), with the latter derived from present and potential affiliations (Cinnirella, 1998). The dynamic evolution of social identity across life stages (Erikson, 1968) and its susceptibility to sociocultural contexts, centring around the importance of social interaction in social identity development or change (Arnett, 2000; Cuzzocrea, 2019; Erikson, 1968; Hardy & Carlo, 2011; Honwana, 2019; Kearney, 2006; Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Yoder, 2000) is accompanied by intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; 2017) which adds layers to the intricacy of this phenomenon.

The next chapter turned the attention to the literature concerning sudden social identity change (SSIC) and the coping mechanisms employed in response. This exploration aimed to shed light on how individuals navigate the challenges posed by sudden changes in social identity. As the exploration unfolded, the subsequent changes in social identity were examined for their impact on the ability of these young women to navigate the challenges of life after triggering events. The coping mechanisms employed, both enabling and constraining agency within this context, at the group and individual levels, were also scrutinised in the next chapter.

While delving deeper into this critical intersection of identity and post-high school experiences, the literature limitations were kept top-of-mind, including the pervasive global north perspective and the ongoing gap in linking social identity and agency, especially in the context of post-high school experiences.

In parting, one may ponder: How can the exploration of sudden social identity change illuminate new pathways for supporting the agency of young women in the face of post-high school challenges?

2.2 Sudden Social Identity Change (SSIC)

This chapter unlocked the secrets behind sudden social identity changes, offering an exploration of how diverse experiences, regardless of their nature, leave an indelible mark. This focused literature chapter delved into the intricate realm of Sudden Social Identity Change (SSIC), seeking to unravel its complexities across diverse population groups. As the spotlight turned toward events responsible for triggering SSIC, the contextual variations, abruptness, and severity of these events were acknowledged. Despite the distinctiveness of each experience, the chapter aimed to draw out commonalities and glean insights applicable to the interpretation of this research's findings.

Within the contours of this exploration, certain boundaries are set to define the scope and limitations. The chapter has meticulously navigated through a range of events triggering SSIC, emphasising common threads while recognising the impossibility of exhaustive coverage. It acknowledged that the depth of understanding may vary across different events, and the focus will be on overarching patterns rather than exhaustive specificity.

The core purpose of this exploration was twofold: to begin unravelling the impact of SSIC on individuals' ability to navigate diverse circumstances, and to initiate an understanding of the coping mechanisms employed in the face of SSIC. As the chapter unfolded, it strove to shed light on the multifaceted consequences of these identity changes and their implications for individuals navigating the complexities of life-altering events.

2.2.1 Events and Consequences

The phenomenon of Sudden Social Identity Change (SSIC) can be instigated by a myriad of events that significantly impact an individual's perception of self and their sense of belonging. Understanding these events sheds light on the complexity of identity formation and offers valuable insights into the catalysts behind such identity change. This section examines various examples of events associated with SSIC, drawing from the literature spanning diverse populations. These include individuals who have “come out” as part of the LGBTQIA+ community (Dym et al., 2019; Hollier, 2023); survivors of suicide attempts (Williams et al., 2018); those affected by suicide-related loss (Goulah-Pabst, 2023); individuals grappling with moral injury (Cahill et al., 2023); displaced persons (Gürsoy, 2021) and persons experiencing diaspora (Akter, 2018); individuals, particularly women, with acquired impairment (Adler et al., 2021; Żuchowska-Skiba, 2020) and facial disfigurement (Martindale & Fisher, 2019); women diagnosed with breast cancer (Al-Riyami et al., 2020); students studying abroad (Ng et al., 2018); individuals who have intentionally lost a significant amount of body weight (N. Rubin et al., 1993); and non-physician healthcare workers (NHCWs) during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hennekam et al., 2020).

The events these populations' experiences have been categorised based on whether they are Self-Lead (SL) and Non-Self-Lead (N-SL), Traumatic (T), and Non-Traumatic (N-T) in nature. This categorisation facilitates a comprehensive grasp of the spectrum and repercussions of the events in question. Below are the events of the aforementioned populations, grouped into the four SSIC event categories. This examination aimed to unravel the contexts of these events and explore their psychological, emotional, social, and agency-related consequences.

<p>Self-Led/Traumatic</p> <p>(SL/T)</p> <p>e.g., “coming out”; surviving a suicide attempt</p>	<p>Non-Self Led/Traumatic</p> <p>(N-SL/T)</p> <p>e.g., suicide loss; moral injury; acquired impairment; debilitating illness; diaspora; displacement</p>
<p>Self-Led/Non-Traumatic</p> <p>(SL/N-T)</p> <p>e.g., studying abroad; dramatic weight loss</p>	<p>Non-Self Led/Non-Traumatic</p> <p>(N-SL/N-T)</p> <p>e.g., NHCWs sudden zero-to-hero change in social status during the COVID-19 pandemic</p>

Figure 6 - SSIC Event Categories (created by Author)

“Coming Out”

Beginning with SL/T events, the journey of coming out is a deeply personal and transformative experience for LGBTQIA+ individuals and can have a wide range of consequences, both positive and negative. Hollier (2023) argues that the act of coming out exposes individuals to potential harm and psychological distress, framing the experience within the context of trauma. This perspective invites an understanding of coming out beyond a mere disclosure event, recognising the potential emotional and psychological toll it can take on individuals (Hollier, 2023). Beyond the event itself, the consequences of coming out resonate across various dimensions. **Psychological distress, encompassing anxiety, depression, fear, shame, and isolation, commonly accompanies the anticipation or experience of rejection, discrimination, and hostility. The potential for social isolation looms, with the loss of support networks, family estrangement, and difficulties forming new relationships due to fear or rejection** (Dym et al., 2019; Hollier, 2023). LGBTQIA+ individuals may face an increased risk of violence, discrimination, hate crimes, and unfair treatment in various social settings (Hollier, 2023). Moreover, internalized stigma, fuelled by societal negativity, can lead to **self-doubt, shame, and challenges in accepting one's own identity**. Additionally, for individuals with intersecting marginalised identities, the impact of coming out can be further layered, requiring awareness and tailored support to address specific needs (Hollier, 2023).

Navigating these potential consequences, online communities, especially fanfiction platforms, emerge as pivotal spaces offering support and resources during this vulnerable period (Dym et al., 2019). As they navigate the complex terrain of self-discovery, fanfiction

platforms emerge as digital havens offering a unique psychological sanctuary. **Here, individuals can anonymously explore their identities before the pivotal moment of public disclosure, fostering internal acceptance and understanding** (Dym et al., 2019). The digital realm becomes a crucial space for individuals to connect with their authentic selves, providing a supportive backdrop for a significant and often challenging event in their lives. These digital spaces not only redefine LGBTQIA+ identities but actively reshape societal perspectives by challenging and rewriting harmful media narratives (Dym et al., 2019).

Suicide

Navigating the aftermath of suicide, both from the perspective of attempted survivors (SL/T) and those who have experienced suicide-related loss (N-SL/T) involves deep emotional and psychological challenges. Staying briefly with the LGBTQIA+ population, for Gender and Sexual Minority (GSM) individuals attempting suicide, the compounding stigma of both their sexual or gender identity and the act itself intensifies the struggle (Williams et al., 2018). The internalized **shame, guilt, and self-loathing** further complicate their mental well-being. Attempt survivors often face social environments marked by **rejection and discrimination, exacerbating feelings of isolation**. Conversely, those who have experienced suicide-related loss grapple with the social stigma surrounding suicide, encountering awkwardness, silence, or even blame-shifting (Goulah-Pabst, 2023). Strained relationships contribute to **feelings of abandonment, loneliness, and misunderstanding**. Social isolation, charged by stigma and strained connections, hinders grief processing, increases mental health risks, and impedes personal growth.

Both events significantly alter individuals' identities from the point of the incident. The stigma exacerbates social isolation, hindering the formation of supportive networks (Goulah-Pabst, 2023), which as stated in previous sections, is integral in shaping the process of change in identity throughout life (Erikson, 1968; Hardy & Carlo, 2011). The impact on the agency is palpable, affecting the ability to navigate social spaces confidently. Both groups may experience a reevaluation of their agency within societal structures, either empowering or constraining their ability to assert themselves and find meaningful connections (Yoder, 2000).

Moral Injury

Moving onto N-SL/T events, moral injury, a variant of trauma stemming from a breach of deeply ingrained moral beliefs and values, stands as a significant catalyst for sudden social identity changes. Instances such as directly causing harm to another person, failing to safeguard someone in harm's way, or being compelled to act against one's moral principles can significantly alter an individual's moral identity (Cahill et al., 2023). The emotional aftermath, marked by feelings of guilt, shame, anger, and social isolation, instigates a questioning of one's core beliefs and societal roles. These internal conflicts can fracture the individual's sense of self, creating a struggle to reconcile past convictions with present experiences. This disruption in moral identity reverberates, leaving enduring impacts on psychological well-being and the ability to engage meaningfully in interpersonal relationships (Cahill et al., 2023).

The consequences for an individual's agency in the wake of moral injury are deep-seated. The internal turmoil and emotional upheaval may restrict one's capacity to navigate life with a sense of purpose and self-determination. Survivors of moral injury often find it challenging to articulate their experiences, feeling a deep disconnect from those who haven't undergone similar traumas (Cahill et al., 2023). This **sense of isolation is intensified by overwhelming**

feelings of guilt and shame, creating barriers to seeking support and connection. Consequently, addressing the social implications of moral injury necessitates the establishment of safe spaces for open dialogue, promoting empathy and compassion within communities, and developing comprehensive support systems.

Displacement and Diaspora

Perhaps originating from similar instances as moral injury, displacement, and diaspora, often resulting from armed conflicts, violence, or natural disasters, thrust individuals into an abrupt rupture of their social identity. The experience of being uprooted from familiar environments and communities can evoke intense emotional distress, including feelings of **loss, grief, and disorientation** (Gürsoy, 2021). Internally displaced individuals and refugees commonly grapple with a sense of instability and uncertainty about their future, contributing to heightened levels of anxiety and trauma. The psychological consequence extends to the challenges of identity formation in new contexts, as individuals must navigate unfamiliar social landscapes and redefine their sense of belonging. Additionally, the works of Akter (2018) suggest that the emotional impact of displacement can manifest in various ways, from the struggle to maintain cultural connections to the **psychological strain of adapting to new social norms and expectations.**

From a sudden social identity change (SSIC) perspective, displacement engenders a drastic reconfiguration of an individual's identity. The abrupt shift in social context and the challenges of integrating into new communities force individuals to reassess their self-perceptions and redefine their roles within societal structures (Gürsoy, 2021). The consequences of displacement extend to the agency, as individuals find themselves navigating unfamiliar social spaces, potentially leading to a sense of disempowerment. **The abruptness of the change may disrupt established social networks, leaving individuals isolated and struggling to assert their agency within the new context.** Additionally, the process of identity renegotiation may lead to internal conflicts as individuals grapple with the tension between preserving their cultural roots and adapting to the demands of the new environment (Gürsoy, 2021; Solomon, 2012).

Physical Injury and Illness

Continuing the exploration of abrupt and profound transformations, the focus now shifts to individuals grappling with acquired impairment, including facial disfigurement or physical impairments stemming from accidents, injuries, or medical conditions. This context introduces another dimension of sudden identity changes with notable emotional and psychological impacts. The research by Martindale and Fisher (2019) sheds light on the challenges associated with acquired facial disfigurement, revealing the psychological implications of altered physical appearances, **social stigmatization, and heightened self-consciousness regarding societal perceptions.** The effects on identity are multifaceted, influenced by factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, social support networks, and coping mechanisms (Martindale & Fisher, 2019). Additionally, Żuchowska-Skiba's (2020) exploration of individuals with acquired impairment underscores the dynamic process of identity reinvention and adaptation to post-life-altering events. This includes the significance of a supportive social network and active processing of experiences, vital elements in fostering successful identity integration for individuals with acquired impairment. Moreover, the study by Adler et al. (2021) delves into the identity change following acquired brain injury (ABI) in adolescents, emphasising the importance of actively processing life experiences and finding support from a caring social network during the arduous

journey of identity reconstruction after ABI. The cancer journey, specifically for women diagnosed with breast cancer, introduces another layer of sudden identity change, involving emotional and physical challenges (Al-Riyami et al., 2020). These women may grapple with a profound **sense of identity loss as they navigate changes in physical appearance, caregiving roles, and work**. However, cultural and religious identities can serve as sources of strength and support as they navigate the complexities of their altered identities.

The consequences of acquired impairment are evident in the altered self-perceptions and the reshaping of roles within societal structures (Martindale & Fisher, 2019). The agency of individuals with acquired impairment or illness may be impacted as they navigate unfamiliar social contexts, potentially experiencing a sense of disempowerment (Adler et al., 2021; Al-Riyami et al., 2020). Addressing the social implications of acquired impairment, particularly facial disfigurement or physical impairments, necessitates creating inclusive environments prioritizing empathy, understanding, and acceptance of individuals with diverse abilities.

Dramatic Weight-loss

Keeping with the theme of appearance but redirecting the conversation to SL/N-T events, the study conducted by Rubin et al. (1993), explores how rituals play a crucial role in helping individuals affirm identity changes, specifically the transition from being “fat to thin”. The emotional and psychological impacts of this transformation are significant, as individuals navigate a **shift in their self-perception and societal expectations** (Rubin et al., 1993). Informal rites, such as buying new clothes, discarding old ones, and altering hairstyles, serve as tangible expressions of their new identity as thin individuals. These rituals not only symbolize the physical changes but also contribute to a sense of accomplishment and ownership of their transformed selves. Moreover, the study highlights the role of rituals in coping with the social stigma associated with being overweight. Individuals engage in these rites to manage societal judgment, choosing to avoid places where they might feel scrutinised, such as the beach or the pool (Rubin et al., 1993). The emotional toll of societal expectations and potential judgment is alleviated through these rituals, providing a coping mechanism for individuals undergoing this identity change.

The rituals employed by individuals in the study signify not just a physical transformation but also a renegotiation of their social identities. The change in wardrobe, hairstyles, and self-set goals reflects an altered social presentation, influencing how individuals are perceived by others (Rubin et al., 1993). The avoidance of certain places due to anticipated judgment underscores the **impact on social interactions and the restructuring of one's social environment**. From an agency perspective, these **rituals represent a proactive approach to regaining control over one's life**. Setting goals, such as weight loss targets or clothing size objectives, becomes a mechanism for individuals to assert agency and actively participate in the process of identity transformation (Rubin et al., 1993). The rituals, therefore, serve as a means for individuals to shape their social identities and exercise agency in navigating the complexities of societal expectations and self-perception.

Studying Abroad

Returning to the subject of relocation, this time presenting an entirely distinct encounter from that of forced relocation, such as displacement and diaspora, is the SL/N-T event of moving abroad for higher education. International students often encounter a sense of identity uncertainty when moving to a new country for their studies. The **process of cultural**

adaptation and acculturation exposes them to new social norms, values, and customs, leading to a re-evaluation of their own identities. Ng et al. (2018) elucidate the experiences of international students through the lens of the Social Identity Model of Identity Change (SIMIC). The SIMIC framework emphasises three key pathways - social identity gain, social identity maintenance, and social identity redefinition - as crucial factors in facilitating identity navigation in a new cultural environment. Exploring their new cultural identity becomes imperative for international students, as it **helps them understand the values, beliefs, and customs of the new culture and fosters a sense of comfort and confidence in themselves.** Finding a social identity and engaging in social interactions with the host community play pivotal roles in building friendships and social connections in the new culture (Ng et al., 2018).

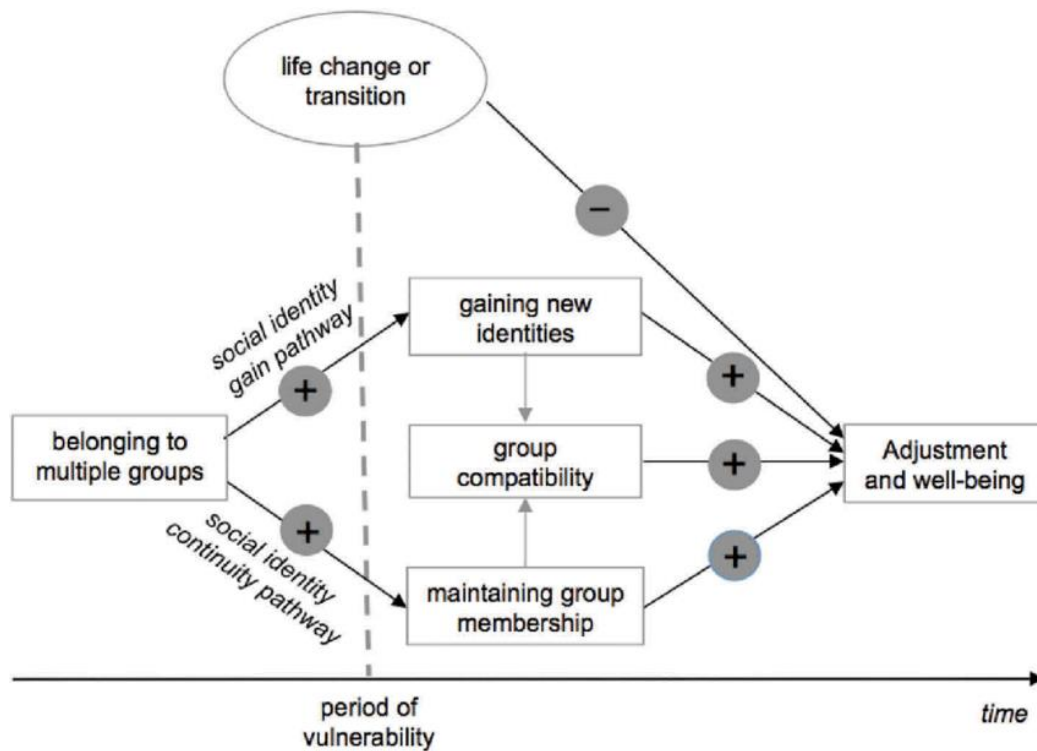


Figure 7 - SIMIC Model (Jetten et al., 2018)

The process of adjusting to a new cultural environment can lead to **feelings of isolation, loneliness, and anxiety.** The Social Identity Model of Identity Change (SIMIC), which is ordinarily referenced in group conflict resolution, provides insights into how international students can navigate this uncertainty and make friends in a new culture (Ng et al., 2018). In addition to the activities of exploring a new cultural identity, finding a social identity, and engaging in social interactions, individual traits such as openness to new experiences play a crucial role in shaping the outcomes of this process (Ng et al., 2018). Social interactions and support networks, including family and friends back home, also significantly contribute to the formation of friendships and social integration (Ng et al., 2018). The social implications of identity uncertainty for international students highlight the importance of fostering an inclusive and supportive environment within host countries to facilitate their integration and overall well-being.

Sharp Upturn in Social Status

Finally examining an occurrence which at face value bore a resemblance to the post-high school experiences of newly graduated girls in terms of sudden social identity change event

categories, albeit potentially embodying an inverse experience. The N-SL/N-T event, zero to hero, was brought forth by the COVID-19 pandemic and rapidly transformed the social identities of nonphysician healthcare workers. Often regarded as "invisible" and undervalued in the healthcare system, these workers suddenly found themselves elevated to the status of public heroes due to their critical roles in combating the pandemic. Hennekam et al. (2020) explore the perceptions of nonphysician healthcare workers and the ambivalence and scepticism they experienced in response to their newfound hero status.

Nonphysician Healthcare Workers (NHCWs) elevated to public hero status during the COVID-19 pandemic may experience ambivalence and scepticism about their newfound identity (Hennekam et al., 2020). While being publicly celebrated, they may not necessarily perceive the recognition as genuine or believe that it will lead to lasting change (Hennekam et al., 2020). The sudden shift in their social identity, from being traditionally "invisible" to being valued, can bring about **feelings of incredulity and concerns about unrealistic expectations** (Hennekam et al., 2020). Nonphysician healthcare workers experiencing sudden hero status during the COVID-19 pandemic may encounter social implications related to public perceptions and expectations (Hennekam et al., 2020). The ambivalence and scepticism they experience about their newfound identity can influence their social interactions and relationships (Hennekam et al., 2020).

2.2.2 Coping Mechanisms

Exploring catalytic events of SSIC in the previous sections has already shed some light on the coping mechanisms employed in coping with this phenomenon, spanning both social and individual levels. The significance of nurturing social networks has been emphasised as imperative for fostering healthy identity change and included a brief introduction to the part played by individual dispositions. This section aimed to offer a more in-depth examination of the supportive role played by group memberships within the realm of SSIC, while also briefly discussing the part played by individual characteristics and the severity of the change.

The Identity Process Theory, introduced in the background literature of this research, emphasises the importance of comprehending social identity for understanding responses in different situations, exploring the processes through which social identity influences individual responses [to change] in terms of behaviour and attitudes (Breakwell, 2014).

Seminal works go on to underscore the significance of group memberships in providing essential support during changes in social identity, fostering belonging and shared values within groups that substantially impact individuals' well-being (Haslam et al., 2021; Haslam et al., 2009). Additionally, social identity is recognised as a coping mechanism during stressful life transitions, enabling individuals to navigate changes with purpose and continuity (Praharso et al., 2017). Considering life stages, **social cohesion within peer networks is highlighted as influential in shaping adolescent mental health, with high levels associated with reduced depressive symptoms** (Copeland & Kamis, 2022). Examining retirement, the maintenance of pre-retirement social group memberships is found to promote a sense of continuity in life during retirement, contributing to better physical and mental health (Haslam et al., 2023).

Aspirations indicate that the individuals are motivated by the support and expectations of their family and community networks. The communal ties provide a source of encouragement and accountability, helping them strive for higher achievements despite challenges. Coleman (1988) introduced the foundational role that social capital plays in shaping aspirations and

actions. This underscores the importance of communal support systems in fostering resilience and ambition.

Self-efficacy theory, proposed by Bandura (1977), focuses on an individual's belief in their ability to succeed in specific situations. This belief shapes how people face challenges, influencing their resilience and determination. In the context of post-high school transitions, participants' confidence, often shaped by educational achievements, affects their ability to navigate new opportunities and challenges. Strong self-efficacy fosters proactive behaviour, persistence, and effective coping strategies, promoting successful adaptation to life transitions.

Identity change, a complex process laden with emotional responses and self-evaluations is a focal point of exploration (Iyer et al., 2010), and resilience emerges as a crucial factor in successful adaptation, representing the ability to rebound from challenges with flexibility and emotional strength (Pratt et al., 2006). **Individuals with robust coping skills and a positive attitude towards identity change exhibit greater resilience, transforming challenges into opportunities for growth and development** (Iyer et al., 2009, 2010).

The severity of the threat to identity, individual resources, and the social context serve as influential factors shaping successful adaptation (Breakwell, 2015). Managing more severe threats becomes challenging, while individual resources such as personality, social support, and coping skills mediate the effectiveness of coping strategies (Breakwell, 2015; Iyer et al., 2009). The social context, influencing support systems and resources, further determines an individual's ability to cope and adapt during identity change.

2.2.3 Focused Literature Conclusion

The exploration of sudden social identity change (SSIC) literature has uncovered a **shared thread of emotional responses, irrespective of contextual differences in the abruptness and severity of events**. The prevalent feelings of anxiety, shame, and various forms of loss and abandonment (Akter, 2018; Al-Riyami et al., 2020; Cahill et al., 2023; Gürsoy, 2021; Ng et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2018) underscored the universal challenges individuals face during identity upheavals. Common social implications, such as isolation, stigmatization, and heightened social expectations, highlighted the need for a nuanced understanding of the impact of SSIC on individuals (Cahill et al., 2023; Gürsoy, 2021; Hennekam et al., 2020; Hollier, 2023; Martindale & Fisher, 2019; Ng et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2018).

Feelings of disempowerment are more common during sudden social identity changes (SSIC) linked to traumatic events (Akter, 2018; Cahill et al., 2023; Gürsoy, 2021). However, community support and rituals provide crucial coping mechanisms, helping individuals regain a sense of agency. Rituals, in particular, enable individuals to process experiences and actively engage with their changing identity (Dym et al., 2019; Hollier, 2023; Ng et al., 2018; Rubin et al., 1993).

Emphasised throughout this chapter is the pivotal role of group memberships in effectively navigating challenging circumstances. These memberships are intertwined with an individual's access to resources and support during such periods, influencing key characteristics that play a crucial role in the renegotiation of identities. Factors such as an individual's propensity for a positive outlook and their level of personal resilience (Ng et al., 2018) are significantly shaped by the dynamics of their group memberships during these transformative moments.

2.3 Literature Review Conclusion

The exploration of social identity within the literature has unfolded a rich tapestry, showcasing its intricate and multifaceted nature. Having navigated through the myriad influences shaping social identity, the complexity became evident in the interplay of multiple social identities (Roccas & Brewer, 2002), each influencing thoughts, perceptions, and actions based on distinct prevalence and dominance within social contexts. Vertical and horizontal factors further contribute to this complexity, encompassing both inherited and acquired social identities (Solomon, 2012), the latter derived from present and potential affiliations (Cinnirella, 1998). The dynamic evolution of social identity across life stages (Erikson, 1968) and its susceptibility to sociocultural contexts, emphasising the role of social interaction in development or change (Arnett, 2000; Cuzzocrea, 2019; Erikson, 1968; Hardy & Carlo, 2011; Honwana, 2019; Kearney, 2006; Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Yoder, 2000), is further complicated by the overlay of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; 2017).

However, having delved deeper into the intersection of identity, experiences, and agency, the constraints of the literature surfaced. The pervasive global north perspective and the ongoing gap in linking social identity and agency, especially in the context of post-high school experiences, act as limitations to the breadth of understanding.

Turning the attention to the exploration of sudden social identity change (SSIC), the literature review has unearthed a common thread of emotional responses, transcending contextual differences in the abruptness and severity of events. Feelings of anxiety, shame, and various forms of loss and abandonment (Akter, 2018; Al-Riyami et al., 2020; Cahill et al., 2023; Gürsoy, 2021; Ng et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2018) underscore the universal challenges individuals face during identity upheavals. Shared social implications, such as isolation, stigmatization, and heightened social expectations, highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of the impact of SSIC on individuals (Cahill et al., 2023; Gürsoy, 2021; Hennekam et al., 2020; Hollier, 2023; Martindale & Fisher, 2019; Ng et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2018).

Throughout this chapter, the pivotal role of group memberships in navigating challenging circumstances has been emphasised. These memberships intertwine with an individual's access to resources and support during such periods, influencing key characteristics crucial in the renegotiation of identities. Factors such as an individual's propensity for a positive outlook and their level of personal resilience (Ng et al., 2018) are significantly shaped by the dynamics of their group memberships during these transformative moments.

Reiterating the purpose and objectives, this exploration has partially addressed key questions, shedding light on how resulting social identity changes impact individuals' ability to navigate challenging circumstances and uncovering the coping mechanisms employed in the face of SSIC. However, persistent limitations and gaps, particularly the dominance of research from the global north, cast a shadow over the universality of the findings. The context gap, specifically in the event of post-high school experiences and their impact on the social identities of newly graduated girls, hints at the need for more diverse perspectives and comprehensive studies, remaining a notable justification for further research in this area.

Concluding this chapter, a thought-provoking question emerges, expanding on a previous inquiry: How can social, professional, and industry organisations emerge as beacons, enhancing the resilience and agency of young women navigating post-high school experiences?

This question encourages additional contemplation regarding the potential impact of the reviewed literature and lays the groundwork for future discussions on empowering individuals amidst the complex dynamics of identity renegotiation. This reflection prompts a deeper consideration of how organisational structures and societal systems can actively contribute to the well-being and agency of individuals navigating sudden social identity changes, specifically in the context of post-high school experiences.

3 Methodology

The research methodology underpins any empirical study, providing a robust framework for the acquisition, analysis, and interpretation of data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This chapter elucidated the methodological approach adopted for this research, focusing on how post-high school experiences impacted the social identities of girls from low-income areas of Cape Town. The study aimed to illuminate the lived experiences of these young women, unravel the impacts of post-high school experiences had on their identities, and in turn the impact on their ability to exercise their agency, and finally dissect the major coping methods of sudden social identity change (SSIC). In doing so, this research sought to make a meaningful contribution to the broader discourse on social identity, youth empowerment, and agency.

The selection of an appropriate research design was contingent on the research question and objectives, the nature of the phenomena under investigation, and the **epistemological stance** of the researcher (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). Given the exploratory and subjective nature of this study, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate. Qualitative research facilitated an in-depth understanding of social phenomena from the perspective of the participants and within their particular context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Drawing from **phenomenology**, this research sought to understand the subjective experiences of newly graduated/unemployed girls in Cape Town, acknowledging the multiple realities constructed by these individuals in their interaction with the world (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Phenomenology emphasises the individual's perception and interpretation of their lived experiences (Smith, 2015). Therefore, this approach aligned with the research objectives, enabling a nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences and the associated impacts on their identities.

This research was anchored in an **interpretivist paradigm**, which asserts that reality is socially constructed and subjective (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Interpretivism seeks to understand the world from the standpoint of the social actors, thereby recognising the unique experiences and interpretations of the research participants (Bryman, 2016). This paradigm aligned with the study's aim to understand the subjective experiences and perceptions of the participants concerning their post-high school experiences and SSIC.

The data for this study was gathered through **semi-structured interviews**. This method allowed for the exploration of complex issues in a flexible manner, enabling the researcher to delve into the participants' thoughts, feelings, and perceptions (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Interviews were conducted via a WhatsApp video call, a platform that is easily accessible and familiar to the participants. The video call format also enabled the observation of non-verbal cues, thereby enriching the data collected.

This chapter further detailed the research design, sampling and recruitment, data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations, and the limitations of this study. Each section provided a comprehensive account of the methodological choices made and the reasons underpinning these choices.

3.1 Research Philosophy and Approach

The process of conducting academic research required the researcher to make significant decisions about their philosophical stance and approach, given that these aspects ultimately guide the entire research journey (Bryman, 2016). For this study on sudden social identity change in high school graduate girls navigating post-high school experiences, two main philosophical paradigms were considered: positivism and interpretivism.

Positivism is a traditional research philosophy that involves a deductive approach, emphasising measurable and observable data, and the ability to generalize findings (Saunders et al., 2019). While positivism is useful for objective, quantitative research, this study required a deeper understanding of subjective experiences, making it less suited to the positivist paradigm.

Interpretivism, on the other hand, emerged from the social and human sciences as a counterpoint to the positivism dominant in the physical sciences (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). It acknowledges the complexities and nuances of human behaviour, and it is suited for studies that aim to explore and understand phenomena from the perspective of those who experience them. The essence of interpretivism revolves around the idea that reality is socially constructed and subjective, thus aligned with the study's goal of exploring the subjective experiences of high school graduate girls navigating post-high school experiences (Berger & Luckmann, 1991).

In terms of approach, deductive reasoning is typically associated with the positivist philosophy, focusing on testing theory, whereas inductive reasoning is aligned with interpretivism, concentrating on building theory (Bryman, 2016). Considering the exploratory nature of this study and its aim to gain insights into phenomena and experiences, an inductive approach was chosen. This approach prioritises the collection of qualitative data and allows the emergence of themes and patterns, which can contribute to a richer understanding of the lived experiences of the participants (Saunders et al., 2019).

Given the interpretivist philosophical underpinning and the inductive approach of this study, phenomenology was an appropriate methodological choice. Phenomenological inquiry places the researcher within the context of the study, valuing subjective experiences and interpretations as meaningful data (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This aligned with the study's goal of exploring the phenomena of sudden social identity change through the experiences of the participants.

To summarize, the **research philosophy chosen for this study was interpretivism, with an inductive approach. This decision was motivated by the study's intent to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena from the perspectives of those experiencing them.** The interpretivist perspective, combined with inductive reasoning and phenomenological inquiry, provided the necessary depth and nuance required to explore the complex and subjective reality of SSIC in high school graduate girls navigating post-high school experiences.

3.2 Methodology

A significant decision during the research process concerns the methodological choice, which entails opting for either a quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Each of these methods carries unique features that are relevant to different types of research inquiries.

A quantitative approach is useful when the goal is to generalize findings to a larger population, and it is especially suited for research seeking to test a hypothesis or examine relationships between variables (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The emphasis on statistical analysis, however, might not have yielded a thorough understanding of the personal experiences and perceptions of the individuals involved, which is one of the central goals of this study. Therefore, a purely quantitative design was deemed unsuitable.

Mixed methods research, integrating both quantitative and qualitative strategies, offers the benefits of triangulation, complementarity, and expansion, presenting a holistic view of the research problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). However, mixed methods research can be resource-intensive, requiring substantial time and expertise to integrate and interpret the disparate data sources effectively (Bryman, 2016). Given the exploratory nature of the study and the focus on the in-depth experiences of a specific group, the benefits of a mixed-method approach may not have justified the additional resources required.

On the other hand, a qualitative research design focuses on understanding the 'why' and 'how' of social phenomena, providing rich, detailed insights into people's behaviours, experiences, and perceptions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative methods allow the researcher to delve into complex and abstract phenomena that are difficult to quantify, such as emotions, beliefs, and experiences. Given the study's interpretivist philosophy and inductive approach, a qualitative design was most suitable. The qualitative approach also complements the research strategy of hermeneutic phenomenology, which requires a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of participants (Laverty, 2003).

The chosen methodology for this study, therefore, was qualitative. This choice was motivated by the study's aim to explore and understand the complex phenomenon of social identity change from the perspective of high school graduate girls navigating post-high school experiences. This population was likely to experience a diverse range of emotions and perceptions, which a qualitative approach was well-equipped to capture and interpret. Therefore, this methodological choice aligned with the research objectives, philosophical underpinnings, and the overall research strategy of the study.

3.3 Research Strategy

The research strategy is an integral part of the study design, guiding the process of data collection and analysis. For this study, various strategies were considered, including case study, grounded theory, ethnography, narrative inquiry, and phenomenology.

The case study strategy is well-suited for research that aims to generate a rich and in-depth understanding of a particular 'case' in its real-world context (Yin, 2018). While this strategy can provide profound insights into the individual experiences of the participants, it is more oriented towards the exploration of specific instances rather than more general phenomena, which limited its suitability for this study.

Grounded theory, a methodology that aims to generate or discover a theory grounded in the data collected (Charmaz, 2014), also seemed like a suitable approach. However, the primary focus of grounded theory is to develop a new theory rather than interpret experiences, which was not the primary goal of this study. Hence, this strategy was not optimal.

An ethnographic research strategy, primarily used in anthropological studies, entails long-term engagement with a cultural group to understand their ways of life (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). Although an in-depth exploration of culture can be advantageous, the focus of this study was on individual experiences and perceptions rather than cultural dynamics.

Narrative inquiry, which focuses on the stories individuals tell about their experiences and the world around them (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004), could have been a viable strategy. However, the narrative inquiry strategy is more oriented toward storytelling rather than exploring the phenomenological experiences of identity change.

Phenomenology, particularly hermeneutic phenomenology, seeks to understand and interpret the meanings that individuals attach to their experiences (Van Manen, 2023). Hermeneutic phenomenology allows for a more in-depth exploration and interpretation of the lived experiences and perceptions of individuals (Lavery, 2003). Given that the focus of this research was to explore the phenomena of sudden social identity change from the perspectives of those who experience it, hermeneutic phenomenology seemed to be the most suitable approach.

Considering the aim, philosophical foundation, and methodological choice of this study, **the research strategy chosen was hermeneutic phenomenology. This strategy allowed the exploration of participants' subjective experiences, feelings, and perceptions** concerning post-high school post-high school experiences and their impact on agency and NEET-resistance, providing the necessary depth and nuance that the research required. This aligned with the overall interpretivist and inductive approach of the study, making it the optimal choice.

3.4 Time Horizon

Determining the time horizon for a research study is a crucial component of research design. The two primary types of time horizons include longitudinal and cross-sectional research designs (Bryman, 2016).

A longitudinal design involves repeated observations of the same variables over long periods, allowing the study of patterns and changes over time (Menard, 2007). However, longitudinal designs tend to be more resource-intensive, requiring more time and effort to execute. Furthermore, they might not be suitable for all research inquiries, particularly those focusing on a singular or discrete event or experience, rather than a continuum of changes over time.

On the other hand, cross-sectional research designs involve studying a phenomenon at a particular point in time (Given, 2008). This approach is more time and resource-efficient and is particularly useful for exploratory research and descriptive studies that aim to provide a snapshot of a situation or phenomenon at a specific time.

Given the nature of the study, which sought to explore the experience of identity change in a particular group of individuals at a specific point in their lives, a longitudinal design seemed less suitable. The research did not aim to track changes or trends over an extended period but rather sought to understand a unique, transformative experience – the identity changes resulting

from the shift from identifying as a high school graduate to adulthood, among girls. Hence, it was more appropriate to capture the subjective experiences and perceptions at this specific juncture.

Therefore, a cross-sectional time horizon was selected for this study. This design was consistent with the research's interpretivist philosophical underpinning, inductive approach, qualitative methodological choice, and hermeneutic phenomenological research strategy. **By focusing on a specific point in time, the study provided a snapshot of the emotional and psychological landscape of this group, shedding light on their unique experiences.**

3.5 Positionality

Positionality is a critical aspect of qualitative research, acknowledging the researcher's personal characteristics and experiences that may influence the research process and the interpretation of the findings (R. Berger, 2015). The researcher's standpoint or positionality can shape the entire research process, from the selection of the research topic to the way data is interpreted and presented (Chavez, 2008). In this study, the researcher acknowledged her positionality as follows:

The researcher identified as a woman of colour raised by a single mother in a household where financial struggle and future uncertainty were significant factors. However, she had not experienced life in a low-income area. However, her lack of personal experience living in low-income areas was recognised for its potential to limit her understanding of some of the socioeconomic realities faced by the participants (Milner IV, 2007).

Her educational background included attending English-speaking, semi-private (state-aided) schools, throughout her primary and secondary education. This educational background influences her interactions with participants and her understanding of their experiences was acknowledged. Additionally, the potential bias resulting from unconsciously favouring those who express themselves well in English, even though this may not reflect their actual experiences, was also ratified (Rose, 2016).

After completing high school, the researcher was provided with the opportunity to pursue a university education full-time, and when affordability became an issue, she continued her studies part-time, while securing full-time employment with relative ease. Her most recent academic journey involved completing a master's degree at a prestigious business school, for which this research was conducted. These experiences might have shaped her views on education, employment, and privilege, potentially impacting the analysis and interpretation of the data.

In her professional life, the researcher held a senior role in the people practices field, having employed many privileged youths through skills development programmes. This professional experience might have led to preconceived notions about employment and the job market, potentially influencing her interpretation of the participants' experiences (R. Berger, 2015).

Finally, while she had not interacted directly with any of the participants prior to the research, the researcher has been a well-being speaker and a mentor for a youth empowerment programme from which the first few participants were recruited. This indirect connection had the potential to influence the dynamics during data collection, particularly concerning the participants' comfort levels and the authenticity of their responses (Lichtman, 2013).

Having acknowledged her positionality, the researcher aimed to improve the transparency and trustworthiness of the study. It allowed her to be reflexive and cognizant of the potential influences that her background and experiences may have had on the research process, thereby enhancing the integrity of the study (Milner IV, 2007).

3.6 Data Collection

3.6.1 Semi-Structured Interviews with High School Graduate Girls

In qualitative research, data collection is of paramount importance. It is the foundation upon which the findings of the study are built. Different data collection methods offer unique opportunities for exploring the research question. These methods include participant observation, focus groups, document analysis, and various forms of interviewing (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Participant observation allows researchers to immerse themselves in the setting of the study and the dynamics of a network of participants. While this can provide in-depth data, it may also result in biased results due to the observer's influence (Kawulich, 2005). For this study, participant observation was deemed unsuitable because the research sought to explore the individual experiences of the participants and not the group dynamics.

Focus groups can provide data on the collective views of a group, facilitate interactions, and generate a rich array of ideas and opinions. However, focus groups can also suppress individual voices, and the data produced can be influenced by group dynamics (Krueger, 2014). Given that the research aimed to explore individual experiences and perceptions, focus groups were not chosen.

Document analysis can offer a valuable historical perspective, but the documents used may not always accurately represent the phenomena or may be influenced by the biases of the authors (Bowen, 2009). Although potentially useful, document analysis alone could not provide the depth of data needed to understand the participants' experiences and perceptions.

Interviews, particularly semi-structured individual interviews, provided opportunities for in-depth exploration of individual experiences and perceptions (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006), see Annexure C. They allowed the researcher to delve into the individual's unique experience and understand it from their perspective, fitting well with the interpretivist philosophy and hermeneutic phenomenology strategy of the research. The interview guide consisted of twelve questions of which the second to last question was about the advice participants would offer current Grade 12 students on coping with life after high school. Although this question was not directly tied to the primary research questions, it provided valuable insight into the participants' perspectives. These responses have been collated and are included in Annexure F.

Given the above, semi-structured individual interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method. This method aligned with the study's objectives to explore individual experiences and perceptions concerning post-high school experiences and their impact on agency and NEET-resistance for girls.

3.6.2 Sample Selection and Recruitment

Sample selection and recruitment in qualitative research are critical procedures that significantly impact the depth and breadth of the findings. Strategies include random sampling

convenience sampling, snowball sampling, purposive sampling, and theoretical sampling, among others (Etikan et al., 2016).

Random sampling provides each member of a population with an equal chance of being selected. While this method can produce a representative sample, it may not ensure that participants have the experience or knowledge needed to contribute to the research (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Convenience sampling involves selecting readily available participants, but the resultant sample may not be representative of the population, leading to potential bias (Etikan et al., 2016).

Snowball sampling is useful when members of the target population are difficult to reach. However, this method might introduce bias as the sample might include individuals who share similar characteristics or views (Sadler et al., 2010).

Theoretical sampling is used mainly in grounded theory research, where the sampling continues until no new categories or themes emerge from the data. However, given the nature and scope of the study, this approach was less applicable (Charmaz, 2014).

Purposive sampling involves intentionally selecting individuals who have the experience or knowledge relevant to the research question (Palinkas et al., 2015). For this study, purposive sampling was the most appropriate choice given the specific population of interest: high school graduate girls navigating post-high school experiences. This approach was adopted to secure the first few participants, after which snowballing sampling was employed to secure the remaining participants.

The researcher approached the non-profit organisation, Great Girls, which runs a youth empowerment programme targeting the demographic of interest. The NPO granted permission to approach programme participants to invite them to partake in this study, see Annexure A.

Recruitment involved a clear explanation of the study's objectives, the nature of their involvement, the estimated time commitment, and assurances about their rights and confidentiality, via a Microsoft Forms digital form, see Annexure B. The researcher made sure to obtain informed consent from all participants, respecting their autonomy and their right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. The target sample size of 20 participants was determined based on the principles of data saturation, where data collection continued until no new themes emerged (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

To conclude, the selection of both purposive and snowball sampling methods, and the specific recruitment strategy, enabled this study to obtain rich, detailed data from a sample of participants whose experiences aligned with the research objectives.

3.7 Justification of the Chosen Population

Cape Town is a city marked by historical racial and socioeconomic divisions, which have profoundly affected the identities and opportunities of its youth (Dwyer et al., 2017; Soudien, 2001). **Low-income areas** of the city are characterised by significant socioeconomic challenges (Dwyer et al., 2017) that heavily influence life experiences, trajectories, and ways in which agency is exercised for its residents.

The city's **youth**, especially those from low-income areas, bear the brunt of these socioeconomic divisions, resulting in high rates of unemployment (Statistics South Africa, 2021). The thwarted sense of belonging, mental distress, and risk of substance abuse is reported to be high among NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) youth (El-Behadli et al., 2019; Mngoma & Ayonrinde, 2022). Their socioeconomic environment also significantly influences their occupational aspirations and expectations (Andres et al., 1999; Jaśkiewicz & Besta, 2014). Focusing on the youth was also of critical importance, given their stage of development and transition into adulthood (Erikson, 1968).

The choice to focus on **girls** was justified due to the distinctive gender dynamics at play in South Africa. Women face unique challenges in their career paths and educational aspirations, impacted by societal expectations and constraints (Iqbal & Maldonado García, 2020; Posti-Ahokas & Palojoki, 2014). Additionally, unemployed women are often more vulnerable to violence (Tertilt & Van Den Berg, 2014), and their marital status could significantly impact their risk of HIV (Wand et al., 2022).

For **newly high school-graduated** young women, the transition out of high school represents a significant turning point, where the mastery experiences associated with high school graduation play a crucial role in bolstering their confidence and sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). In contrast, graduating high school and facing unemployment has implications for youth's self-worth and identity, leading to feelings of hopelessness, particularly among adolescents (Baillergeau & Duyvendak, 2022; Fedorowicz et al., 2014). Additionally, this transition impacts the youth's social capital and political participation, their future orientation, and their propensity toward violence (Khetarpal et al., 2023; Lorenzini & Giugni, 2012).

The study of **youths' identities** matters in the context of securing their future, as it is central to both their sense of self and their resulting socioeconomic opportunities. As Destin (2019) pointed out, combined research on identity and socioeconomic opportunity can provide important insights into how young people navigate their lives, particularly those from marginalised and disadvantaged backgrounds.

By focusing on how sudden changes in social identity as a result of post-high school experiences affect the agency of newly graduated girls, this study filled a significant gap in the current literature. This specific population group provided a unique lens through which to explore the intersection of gender, socioeconomic status, and agency in South Africa's post-apartheid era.

3.8 Research Criteria

The researcher endeavoured to ensure that all the case studies included were trustworthy and complied with the criteria of **credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity** (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). To establish credibility, efforts were made to ensure that the research accurately reflected participants' real experiences. **Authenticity** was achieved by encouraging participants to share their stories genuinely, facilitated by the rapport established through personal introductions and ethical engagement.

Transferability and **credibility** were enhanced through the use of **thick description** in the findings chapter, allowing readers to assess the applicability of the results to other contexts. While the study has limitations, its findings are relevant for broader youth development and Human Development fields, and the procedures are described in a manner that can be

replicated, thereby supporting transferability. The researcher's responsiveness to changes in the research context contributed to the study's dependability.

Dependability and **confirmability** were also reinforced through **reflexive journaling**, as detailed in Annexure E. Considering that freely telling personal stories requires a certain degree of rapport (Rubin & Rubin, 2011), the researcher took several measures at the start of each interview to establish trust and ensure ethical conduct. The researcher introduced herself thoroughly, sharing personal details such as completing her high school education in the city of Durban, graduating high school seventeen years ago, and being raised by a single mother. This personal introduction aimed to build a connection with the participants and create a comfortable environment for sharing.

The purpose of the research was clearly communicated to participants, emphasising the researcher's belief in the importance of better understanding youth experiences and the collective impact of their stories. This statement motivated participants to engage in sharing their core memories over the last five or seven months.

By incorporating these elements into the research setting, the study aimed to create a supportive and open environment for participants to share their experiences authentically. The diverse interview settings added richness to the data collected, offering a nuanced understanding of how contextual factors influence the narratives of the participants.

3.9 Data Analysis

The process of data analysis in qualitative research involves a close, iterative examination of the collected data to identify themes, patterns, and insights relevant to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For this study, the data analysis took place in a series of systematic stages that allowed the researcher to make sense of the rich, detailed narratives obtained through the semi-structured interviews.

Upon completion of the interviews, which were conducted via a WhatsApp video call, and recorded via Zoom, the Zoom audio files were imported into Fireflies.ai, an artificial intelligence (AI)-powered transcription platform. Fireflies.ai is renowned for its high accuracy, efficiency, and ease of use, making it a valuable tool for researchers who need to transcribe large volumes of interview data. While automated transcription tools like Fireflies.ai have not fully eliminated potential errors and misinterpretations, they considerably ease the burden of manual transcription and allow researchers more time for in-depth analysis (Davidson, 2009).

Upon completion of transcription, the data was manually cleaned to ensure accuracy and authenticity. Manual checking of the transcriptions ensured that the AI's output accurately represented the contents of the interview recordings. This stage was crucial, as transcription errors could lead to misinterpretation during the analysis phase (Oliver et al., 2005).

The cleaned and verified transcriptions were then imported into NVivo qualitative data analysis software. This software is specifically designed to assist researchers with coding and analysing textual data. It provides a user-friendly interface and a range of tools to facilitate the identification and categorisation of themes (Kuckartz, 2013). The free version, NVivo, offers a robust set of features sufficient for managing, coding, and annotating a large amount of text data. The decision to use this tool was driven by its compatibility with the research design and its cost-effectiveness.

The data was analysed using a thematic analysis approach, a flexible method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach allowed for the systematic identification of key themes and concepts within the data, thereby providing a detailed and nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences.

In conclusion, the use of AI-powered transcription software Fireflie.ai combined with NVivo for data analysis provided an efficient, accurate, and cost-effective method for handling and interpreting extensive interview data. This combination of tools suited the research's nature and its limited budget, making it an appropriate choice for this project.

3.10 Research Ethics

Ethical considerations are paramount in all types of research, particularly in studies involving human participants, such as this one. They ensure respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (Israel & Hay, 2006). Given the potential sensitivity of the subject matter in this research, special attention to ethical considerations was critical.

Firstly, the principle of informed consent was strictly adhered to. Participants were provided with an informed consent form detailing the purpose of the research, what participation involves, the anticipated benefits and potential risks, and the procedures for maintaining confidentiality, see Annexure B. It emphasised that participation is entirely voluntary, and participants are free to withdraw at any point without penalty (Sieber & Tolich, 2012). Participants were informed of their right to request a copy of the transcript of their interview. Furthermore, participants were encouraged to ask any questions to ensure that they fully understood what the research involved before they decided to participate.

Next, the principle of confidentiality was upheld to protect the participants' identities and personal information. Pseudonyms such as *Participant #* replaced participants' names during data analysis, and any identifying information was redacted in the presentation of findings (Kaiser, 2009). The data collected during this research was stored securely, with only the researcher having access to it.

In relation to the participants' emotional state, considering the potentially sensitive nature of the topics discussed, the researcher remained alert to signs of distress. Where participants became upset or distressed during the interview, the researcher paused the interview and provided the participant with the option to continue or stop. The researcher also recognised the potential for interviews to uncover issues that may require professional counselling. In these instances, participants were provided with contact information for free counselling services, both during and after the interview, see Annexures C and D. This step adhered to the ethical responsibility to minimise harm and provide appropriate referrals for participants in distress (Bergold & Thomas, 2012).

Lastly, issues of positionality and power differentials were considered. As the researcher holds a senior role in her profession and has had experiences different from those of the participants, therefore there was a potential power differential that could impact the data collection process. To mitigate this, the researcher employed reflexivity throughout the research process to question and critically reflect on her assumptions, biases, and influences on the research (Berger, 2015), see Annexure E.

In summary, this research was committed to the ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality, minimisation of harm, and reflexivity were adhered to, and providing a secure and respectful environment for participants.

3.11 Methodology Limitations

Like any research, this study was not without its limitations, which were considered when interpreting the findings. Acknowledging these limitations was crucial in enhancing the validity of the research and providing context for the generalizability of its results (Gioia et al., 2013).

Firstly, the choice of a qualitative research design, while providing in-depth insights into participants' experiences, limited the generalizability of the findings. The sample size in this qualitative research was generally smaller than that of quantitative studies and focused on specific areas of a single city (Leung, 2015). Therefore, the experiences and perceptions of the young women from low-income areas of Cape Town may not be representative of all unemployed high school graduated girls in South Africa, or elsewhere in the world (Leung, 2015). However, given the research objectives and the exploratory nature of this study, this approach is deemed most appropriate (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Secondly, the nature of semi-structured interviews, the primary data collection method in this study, may have introduced bias. Despite the efforts to remain impartial and objective, the researcher's interpretations and preconceptions may have influenced the data collection and analysis processes. Reflexivity has been employed to mitigate this, but the potential for bias is a limitation that must be considered (Berger, 2015). The researcher plans to implement rigorous selection criteria within the pool of Great Girls program participants to ensure a diverse and representative sample, minimizing potential bias in the study's findings.

The choice of virtual interviews as the medium for the data collection might have limited the depth of data that could have been obtained. Non-verbal cues, which can provide additional valuable information in interviews, can be less observable in virtual interviews (Sullivan, 2012). Also, technology-related issues such as poor internet connection might have affected the quality of data collected. In response, the researcher ensured to provide clear instructions to participants in preparation for the interview which included camera placement instructions, and steps to choosing an ideal interview location based on connectivity, light, noise, and privacy, within the confines of their environment, see Annexure D.

Moreover, the use of the Fireflies.ai transcription software, while beneficial for transcribing large amounts of data, might not have been perfectly accurate. Transcription inaccuracies, although minor, might have introduced errors in the data, influencing the results (Paulus et al., 2017). In response, the researcher manually copy-edited all transcripts while listening to the recording, before importing them into the data analysis tool to ensure a higher level of accuracy.

The limitation of using thematic analysis in this study is the potential for subjectivity in the interpretation of participants' lived experiences, which could introduce bias into the analysis. To counteract this researcher intends to maintain transparency in the research process by keeping a reflexive journal to document their own biases and assumptions, see Annexure E.

Lastly, this research's focus on young women from low-income areas of Cape Town might not have captured the full complexity of social identity change and agency in South Africa. While the chosen focus provided an in-depth understanding of a particular group, it also limited the

study's scope, as the findings may not entirely apply to young men or gender-fluid high school graduates, or those from different socioeconomic backgrounds (Maxwell, 2012).

While these limitations have posed challenges, they have also highlighted avenues for future research, which might consider other methods, larger or different samples, or alternative topics to extend the knowledge in this field.

3.12 Methodology Conclusion

In conclusion, the methodology chapter laid the foundation for a thorough exploration of the impact of post-high school experiences on the social identity and agency of recent high school graduate girls from low-income areas of Cape Town. The research design, guided by a qualitative approach, was well-suited for delving into the rich and nuanced experiences of the participants, aligning with the study's objective (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The use of semi-structured interviews, despite potential biases, served as a means to amplify the voices of youth, providing a platform to uncover the intricate factors presented by their transition out of school. The researcher's reflexivity and ethical sensitivity were integral safeguards against bias, ensuring a respectful and empathetic engagement with the participants (Berger, 2015).

The purposive sampling strategy coupled with snowball sampling targeted young women in specific socioeconomic contexts, aligned with the research's emphasis on understanding the unique challenges faced by this population (Maxwell, 2012). While limiting generalizability, this approach was crucial for gaining comprehensive insights into the experiences of a disproportionately NEET group (Delannoy et al., 2020).

The integration of digital tools, such as WhatsApp, Fireflies.ai and NVivo, reflected a conscientious adaptation to the evolving landscape of qualitative research in the digital age. While recognising potential limitations, these tools offered efficiency and accuracy advantages in managing the substantial qualitative dataset generated by this study (Paulus et al., 2017).

Ethical considerations, from participant well-being to post-interview support, were meticulously addressed, demonstrating a commitment to upholding the dignity of the participants. The provision of free counselling resources ensured that participants had access to support services following their engagement in the research, see Annexures C and D.

This methodology, conceived with a keen awareness of the complexity and sensitivity inherent in the research topic, was a meticulously planned endeavour. Every step, from the initial design to the final analysis, was crafted to ensure the production of meaningful, credible, and ethically sound findings. The study aspired to shed light on the lived experiences of the participants, contributing to a relatively underexplored area of research. Ultimately, the findings not only contributed to academic knowledge but also offered practical insights that may inform interventions and policies aimed at addressing the pressing issue of youth unemployment and agency in South Africa. The next chapter presented the insightful and nuanced findings derived from this methodologically robust research.

4 Research Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presented the findings of this research project in the context of the research questions. As covered in the literature review, the phenomenon of Sudden Social Identity Change (SSIC) can be instigated by a myriad of events that significantly impact an individual's perception of self and their sense of belonging. Further, social identity was recognised as a coping mechanism during stressful life changes, enabling individuals to navigate changes with purpose and continuity (Praharso et al., 2017). Lastly, it was acknowledged that social identities influence thoughts, perceptions, and actions based on their distinct prevalence and dominance, contingent upon social contexts (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Having established the relationships between both events and social identity development, as well as social identity and agency, the main research question of this study is: How do post-high school experiences impact the social identities of newly graduated girls?

This research question seeks to understand how the experience of post-high school events, which take place over a short (five to seven-month) period and result in the loss, gain, and maintenance of group memberships and social support structures, go on to trigger sudden and significant changes in the social identities of newly graduated young women, and how they exercise their agency in navigating life after high school.

Understanding these dynamics contributes to the broader discourse on social identity formation and agency. It provides policymakers and practitioners with a valuable psychosocial perspective, which compliments existing socioeconomic scholarship on the matter of youth unemployment, and an additional lens for developing and improving interventions which address the issue of youth who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET).

The sub-questions of this research are:

1. What are the post-high school experiences of newly graduated girls?
2. How do these experiences influence changes in the social identities of newly graduated girls?
3. What sources of resilience and coping strategies do newly graduated girls employ in response to these changes?

The structure of this chapter is as follows:

- Description of Participants and Context: An overview of the backgrounds, varying levels of high school achievement, motivations, and aspirations of the newly graduated girls. This includes a description of the research setting and a statement of saturation.
- Experiences of Post-High School Events: A discussion of the diverse experiences encountered by participants from the final exam and beyond, emphasising significant collective events that set off a series of social identity negotiations for newly graduated girls.
- SSIC in Newly Graduated Girls: This section is divided into two parts -
 - Impact on Group Memberships and Sense of Self: Examined how post-high school experiences have influenced changes in group memberships and social support structures for newly graduated girls.
 - Emotional Experiences: Detailed the participants' emotional experiences related to sudden changes in their social identities, presenting data on how these

changes affected their feelings, emotional states, and responses. This provided a foundational understanding of the emotional impact of sudden social identity changes, setting the stage for further interpretation and comparison in the discussion chapter.

- Sources of Resilience and Coping Strategies: Identified people and practices that young women rely on as sources of strength and inspiration while navigating life after high school.
- Exercise of Agency: Explored how newly graduated girls exercise their agency across various domains such as employment, education, and training, in response to SSIC, which was further discussed in the practical contributions of the Discussion chapter.

This structure systematically explores the inputs for this case of SSIC, including the experiences of post-high school events, changes in group memberships, and sources of resilience. It then revealed their influence on SSIC from the perspective of newly graduated girls, highlighting the actions taken by this population. These dynamics, as illustrated below, are discussed further in the discussion chapter.

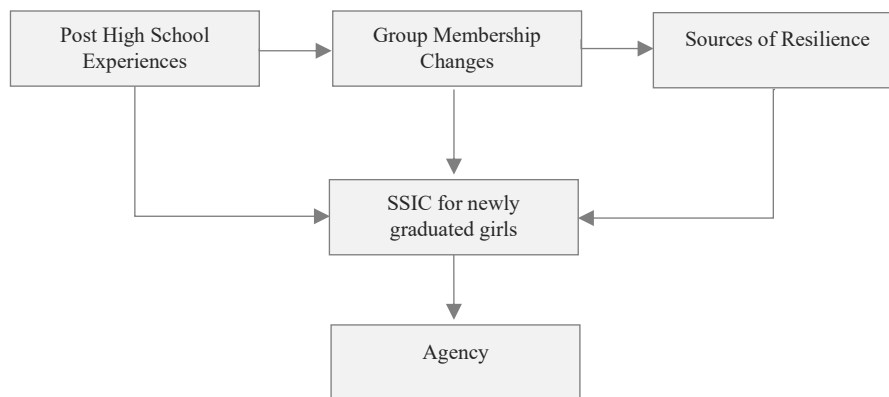


Figure 8 - The Dynamics of SSIC for Newly High School Graduated Girls (created by Author)

The following section, 'Description of Participants and Context,' provided an overview of the backgrounds, varying levels of high school achievement, motivations, and aspirations of the newly graduated girls. This foundational context was essential for understanding the subsequent findings and analysis, as it highlighted the diverse starting points and perspectives of the participants. By grounding the research in a detailed description of the participants and the research setting, it ensured a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing their post-high school experiences and social identity changes, and further the external validity of the study's findings.

4.2 Description of Participants and Research Context

Understanding the backgrounds, motivations, and aspirations of the participants was necessary for contextualising the findings of this study. This section introduced the participants, highlighting key aspects of their diverse experiences and the unique factors that influenced their experience of post-high school events. Additionally, it included descriptions of the research context, offering insights into the environments and conditions under which the study was conducted. By providing this overview, the section set the stage for a deeper exploration of the socioeconomic, cultural, and educational contexts that shape the participants' trajectories.

Furthermore, a statement of saturation is addressed, ensuring the depth and breadth of the qualitative analysis were sufficiently captured.

4.2.1 Research Participants

This study's participants were 20 newly high school-graduated girls who completed their final high school examinations in 2023 and received their senior certificates with either a diploma or bachelor's pass on January 19, 2024. In South Africa, high school graduation is also referred to as matriculation, where the final year of school, grade 12, is commonly referred to as matric, and those who successfully graduate are in turn referred to as matriculants. The majority of participants both graduated from high schools, and resided, in the Cape Flats, more specifically Mitchell's Plain, Lavender Hill, and Belhar etcetera, at the time the research was conducted. All participants are classified as Black, Coloured, or Indian in the South African context.

Social Background

Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus refers to the ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that individuals acquire through their life experiences and social interactions. These are shaped by the social structures and cultural norms of their environment, influencing their perceptions, actions, and aspirations.

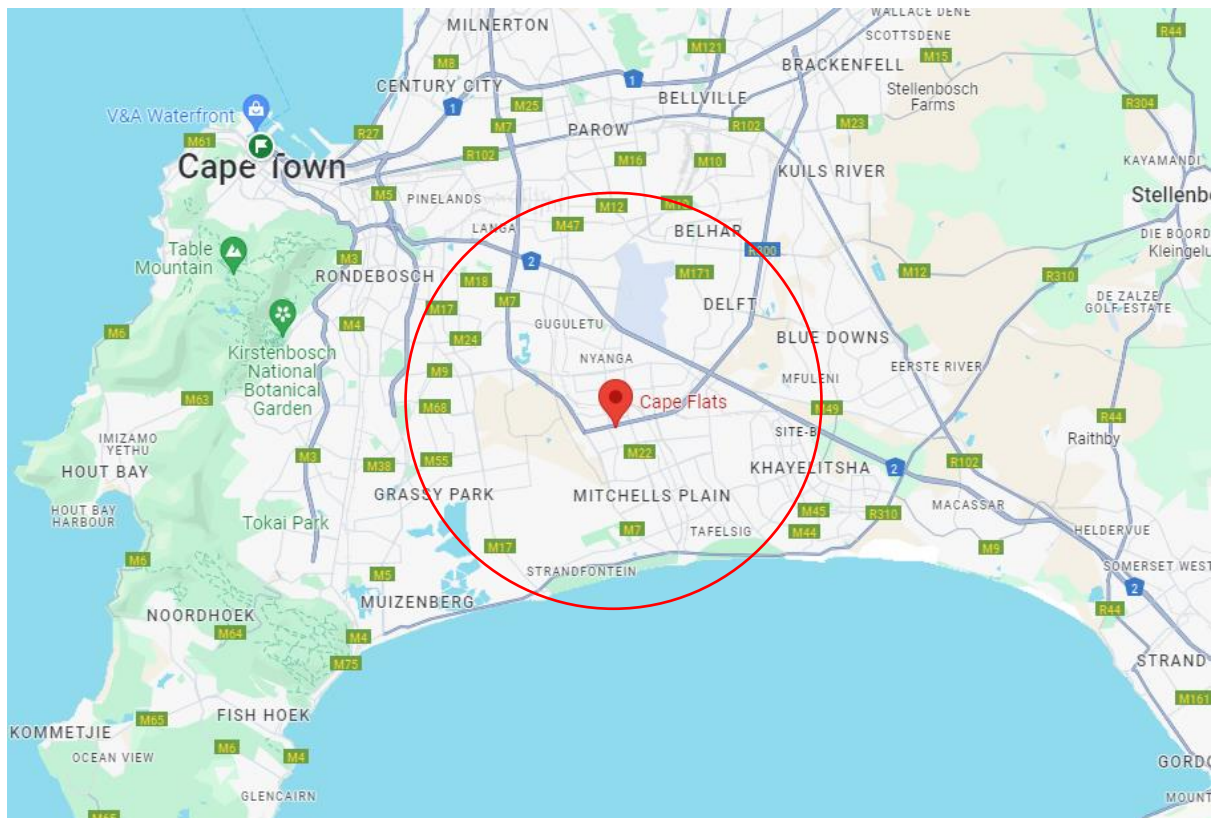


Figure 9 - Approximate Location of the Cape Flats (created by Author using Google Maps)

The neighbourhoods in which the majority of participants schooled and resided are characterised by socioeconomic challenges, including high levels of unemployment, limited access to quality education and healthcare, and exposure to crime and violence (Dwyer et al., 2017; Soudien, 2001). All participants are classified as persons of colour in the South African context, situating them within historically marginalised communities that have faced systemic inequalities due to apartheid-era policies (Seekings & Nattrass, 2004). The participants'

habitus, therefore, was shaped by these socioeconomic and historical contexts. Growing up in low-income areas with limited resources and opportunities likely influenced their dispositions and worldviews in several ways:

- **Perceptions of Social Mobility:** The participants' aspirations to break generational cycles and achieve more than their predecessors reflected an awareness of the socioeconomic constraints imposed by their backgrounds. This drive for upward mobility is a reaction to the habitus shaped by their environment, where success is often seen as a means to transcend the limitations of their socioeconomic status (Bourdieu, 2018).
- **Value of Education:** Despite the challenges, participants' completion of high school signified a critical mastery experience that bolstered their self-efficacy. In areas where dropping out is common, achieving high school graduation is viewed as a significant accomplishment, reflecting a disposition that values education as a pathway to better opportunities (Bandura, 1977).
- **Resilience and Agency:** Living in low-income areas often requires developing resilience and coping strategies to navigate daily challenges. This resilience is embedded in their habitus, influencing how they approach post-high school life. Their determination to pursue further education or meaningful employment demonstrated their agency in seeking to improve their circumstances despite structural barriers (Bourdieu, 1990).
- **Community and Social Support:** The social networks within their communities also play a role in shaping their habitus. The support and expectations from family and peers can either reinforce or challenge their dispositions. Participants' references to breaking generational curses and setting new standards for their families indicated the importance of communal ties in motivating their aspirations (Coleman, 1988).
- **Cultural Identity and Social Context:** Being classified as Black, Coloured, or Indian in South Africa brings specific cultural and social dimensions to their habitus. These identities carry historical significance and influence their experiences of inclusion or exclusion in various social spheres (Seekings & Nattrass, 2004). The interplay between their cultural identity and socioeconomic status further shapes their dispositions and actions.

Participants' habitus is profoundly influenced by their socioeconomic and cultural contexts. Their aspirations, resilience, and actions were responses to the structural conditions they navigate daily. Understanding their habitus provided a deeper insight into how they perceive and respond to their life circumstances, emphasising the importance of considering social and cultural backgrounds in analysing their behaviours and attitudes.

Educational Background

According to signalling theory, educational credentials serve as indicators of an individual's abilities and potential (Spence, 1978). This study acknowledged that the participants' high school achievements, including diploma and bachelor passes, act as signals of their competence and capability to employers, educational institutions, and other entities. These signals can either support or hinder their agency –

Diploma Passes:

- **Signal of Basic Competence:** A diploma pass signals that the individual has met the minimum requirements for graduation, demonstrating basic academic competence. However, this signal may limit access to more prestigious opportunities.
- **Limited Opportunities:** Graduates with diploma passes may face more challenges in accessing higher education or competitive job markets compared to those with bachelor passes.

Bachelor Passes:

- **Signal of High Competence:** A bachelor's pass signals a higher level of academic achievement and capability, opening doors to more prestigious universities and competitive job markets.
- **Greater Opportunities:** Graduates with bachelor passes are likely to have more options for higher education and career opportunities, as their signal suggests greater skills and knowledge.

Specifically concerning employment, recent trends have shown a decrease in entry-level job opportunities. According to the Quarterly Labour Force Survey, youth jobs decreased by almost 100,000 in the last quarter of 2023, and 80,000 women lost their jobs while 60,000 men gained jobs, reflecting the volatile earning environment for young women in particular (Harambee, 2024). Despite a record 40.9% bachelor's pass rate, which allows 283,000 youth to apply for university, the broader labour market remains challenging. The reality in South Africa is that the signals sent by diploma and bachelor passes are far weaker compared to those of tertiary education qualifications or work experience. A person with a degree is twice as likely to be employed as someone without a high school graduation certificate, and high school graduates face an expanded unemployment rate of 51% (Harambee, 2024). This underscored the significant challenges newly graduated girls face in securing employment.

Motivating Factors

Expanding on the prior point concerning the value of education for young women from low-income areas, Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory emphasised the importance of an individual's belief in their ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish tasks. This belief significantly influenced their motivation, effort, and persistence in the face of challenges. The participants in this study demonstrated varying levels of self-efficacy, which shaped their approach to post-high school challenges and opportunities. One critical factor contributing to their self-efficacy was their successful completion of high school, which served as a mastery experience. Mastery experiences, as Bandura (1977) posits are the most influential source of self-efficacy because they provide direct evidence of one's ability to succeed. The participants' high school graduation represented a significant achievement that bolstered their confidence in their capabilities.

Participant 1 exemplified high self-efficacy by recognising the need to break the cycle of procrastination and take proactive steps towards their goals:

"I realised that cycle had to break. I can't next term. I can't next year... Can't do that anymore. After matric, there is no next year of high school. So, the mindset came from last year, really. I just put it into action this year because I didn't want to limit my abilities because of my procrastination." (Participant 1)

The determination to change one's mindset and take action reflected a strong belief in the capability to overcome personal barriers and achieve success, rooted in the mastery experience of completing high school.

Many participants expressed a desire to break generational cycles and achieve more than their predecessors, reflecting their self-efficacy and aspirations for a better future. Participant 5 highlighted this by noting the significance of their educational achievement within their family:

"You know, my parents don't have matric, my siblings, and we are five, and I'm the second youngest. So, after me, there's only one baby girl. So, all of them dropped out. Either grade eleven, grade ten, grade eight, they all dropped out. So, to my family... it was a huge success, you know, because I did something that they couldn't do. Like, I was like, you know, breaking the generational curse." (Participant 5)

This quote illustrates the belief in the ability to break the cycle of educational dropout and set a new standard for the family, showcasing high self-efficacy enhanced by the mastery experience.

Participant 19's awareness of her family's financial struggles and their determination to avoid similar pitfalls also emphasises the role of self-efficacy in shaping future-oriented behaviours:

"I'm only hearing [about my parents' debt] now, actually grade eleven with my school fees. They didn't pay it, so I couldn't go to school. And then I was asking them like, what's happening? And then they mentioned all the debt they were in, all the mistakes they made. And because of that, I didn't want to be in the same financial situation as my parents... If I ever have a family, I don't want to put that on them. I want to be financially free and stable, able to look after myself and my future family, if I do have one. So, I'm preparing now." (Participant 19)

The proactive steps to ensure financial stability reflect a high level of self-efficacy, driving preparation and planning for the future.

Participant 3 expressed a desire to transcend perceived limitations and inspire future generations, showcasing a belief in their potential and ability to influence others:

"I'd like to travel, I'd like to go visit places, experience things that I can speak about to my family... one day and say, like, this is what I did with my life, and I want you to do more. I don't want you to stay stagnant in this place or just think that this is all that you are made for. Because I feel like a lot of, not only girls, but the kids in this generation, think you were born in a specific area, and that is your perimeter of going anywhere." (Participant 3)

These aspirations to travel and broaden horizons demonstrated high self-efficacy and ambition to break free from socio-geographic constraints.

The participants' aspirations and future plans were diverse, ranging from pursuing higher education to entering the workforce directly. These aspirations reflected their individual goals and the opportunities available to them based on their academic achievements and socioeconomic backgrounds. For instance, Participant 6 emphasised the importance of higher education over immediate employment to achieve long-term goals:

"I didn't want to work [straight after school] because I feel like working, especially because when I look at these people, they get so used to this routine of working. They don't want to study, and I can't work because then I'm going to enjoy getting money, and then I'm not really going to get my degree because I really want to study law." (Participant 6)

Participant 20's lifelong dream of entering the fashion industry reflected their self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation:

"I dreamt of going into the fashion industry since I was in grade school. Many of my family members from my mother's side are fashion designers. I feel like they inspired me. But besides them, fashion was just something I always wanted to do. It was always within me." (Participant 20)

Graduates with higher self-efficacy feel more capable of pursuing higher education or competitive job opportunities, while those with lower self-efficacy may struggle with confidence. Participant 2's metaphorical comparison to a character striving to rise above their circumstances illustrated their drive to improve their situation:

"So, like, there was one cartoon as well where, I think Shark Tale, where the guys, the one fish said, like, he wants to be on top of the food chain. He doesn't want to be at the bottom. He doesn't want to be so small. [Similarly], I don't want to be small anymore. I don't want to be there where they can pick on me every time. I want to build myself up year by year, month by month, every day." (Participant 2)

This exploration of participants' backgrounds and aspirations stressed the significant role of socioeconomic and cultural contexts in shaping their habitus and self-efficacy and the challenges they face. Although high school graduation serves as a critical mastery experience that enhances their self-efficacy, socioeconomic challenges—such as high unemployment rates, limited access to higher education, and volatile job markets—significantly impact their ability to leverage their educational credentials. The potential of diploma and bachelor graduation passes to support or hinder their agency is influenced by these challenges. In reality, higher education qualifications and work experience often send stronger signals to employers offering entry-level jobs. Understanding these dynamics provided deeper insight into how participants navigate post-high school life, emphasising the importance of considering social and cultural backgrounds in analysing their perceptions, behaviours, and aspirations. The next section delved into the research context, providing a comprehensive understanding of the environments and conditions under which this study was conducted.

4.2.2 Research Context

During the course of this study, 60 to 90-minute-long interviews were conducted with participants using WhatsApp video calls. The choice of this medium allowed flexibility and accessibility for participants, who joined from a range of settings. The choice of this medium not only allowed flexibility and accessibility for participants, who joined from a range of settings but also enabled a degree of mobility that was crucial for ensuring their comfort and participation. While most participants secured private spaces such as their bedrooms or dormitory rooms for the interviews, a notable subset participated from communal environments, including sitting or TV rooms, and even workspaces.

This diversity in interview settings provided unique insights into how external factors, such as disruptions and interactions with surrounding individuals, influenced participants' narratives. In communal spaces, for example, interruptions and background activities sometimes prompted participants to reflect on aspects of their experiences that might not have emerged in more controlled settings. These variations enriched the qualitative data with additional layers of context and depth, offering a richer understanding of the participants' lived experiences during key moments discussed in the study.

The study focused on exploring how final and post-high school experiences impact the social identities of newly graduated girls. To prompt storytelling, the researcher used four core memory examples: Final Exam, December Break, Schools Reopening, and Receiving Their Graduation Results. Starting with a detailed description of her own memory of receiving graduation results, the researcher illustrated the depth of detail expected in participants' narratives and fostered rapport through shared experience.

4.2.3 Statement of Saturation

In exploring the research question " How do post-high school experiences impact the social identities of newly graduated girls?" data saturation was achieved by the seventh participant. This was determined by the cumulative analysis of coded themes. By the seventh interview, new data no longer introduced significant novel insights or themes related to social relationships, identity formation, coping mechanisms, and support systems. Subsequent interviews largely confirmed existing patterns and themes, indicating that sufficient depth and breadth of understanding were reached. This saturation point ensures that the findings were comprehensive and reliably reflective of the participants' experiences in relation to their social identity, agency, and resistance to becoming classified as NEET.

CODE	
Name	ABR
Social Relationships and Networks	S
Restructuring of Social Environments	S-R
Observed Changes in Friends	S-O
Loss of Relationships	S-L
Gain of Relationships	S-G
Meaning-Making and Reflection	M
Schools Re-opening Memory	M-S
Receiving Final Marks Memory	M-R
Post-Graduation Memories	M-P
Final Exam Memory	M-F
December Break Memory	M-D
Identity Formation and Explorations - Other	I
Belonging	I-B
Comfort and Confidence	I-C
Independence	I-I
Presentation/Appearance	I-P
Shame, Fear or Guilt	I-S1
Self-Awareness	I-S2
Gender (Intersectionality)	G
Educational and Career Trajectories	E
Coping Mechanisms and Agency	C
Social Network Support	C-S1
Senior Encouragement or Support	C-S2
Role Modeling	C-R
Motivated to Break The Cycle	C-M1
Faith	C-F

Figure 10 - SSIC Research Coding Key (created by Author)

Participant	S	S-R	S-O	S-L	S-G	M	M-S	M-R	M-P	M-F	M-D	I	I-B	I-C	I-I	I-O	I-P	I-S1	I-S2	G	E	C	C-S1	C-S2	C-R	C-M	C-F	N
P1	15	4	3	7	1	11	2	7	1	1	0	5	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	2	11	1	2	0	3	5	84
P2	6	1	1	4	0	10	1	2	1	4	2	2	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	2	3	7	0	3	1	3	0	56
P3	2	0	1	1	0	15	2	2	4	5	2	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	4	8	2	2	1	1	2	61
P4	4	0	2	1	1	16	1	4	2	8	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	44
P5	4	0	3	1	0	21	2	8	1	8	2	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	7	0	3	2	1	1	69	
P6	5	2	2	1	0	16	0	7	3	4	2	5	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	2	3	12	1	7	2	2	0	79
P7	2	0	2	0	0	17	1	7	0	5	4	7	0	0	1	1	0	0	3	6	3	6	0	4	0	2	0	71
P8	7	1	6	0	0	21	1	9	1	7	3	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	7	8	0	3	5	0	0	85
P9	6	2	1	2	1	15	3	3	1	7	1	5	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	5	0	3	1	1	0	59	
P10	4	1	2	1	0	13	2	3	1	5	2	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	0	6	3	2	0	1	0	54
P11	3	0	2	1	0	13	1	3	1	4	4	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	5	2	1	1	0	1	44	
P12	5	0	3	1	1	18	4	4	2	6	2	5	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	9	7	0	4	0	0	3	76
P13	4	0	3	1	0	10	1	2	3	2	2	3	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	6	7	2	3	1	0	1	53
P14	4	2	1	1	0	16	1	5	2	6	2	5	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	4	3	0	3	0	0	0	0	58
P15	2	0	2	0	0	17	2	7	2	3	3	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	4	6	0	4	1	0	1	56	
P16	3	1	2	0	0	13	1	3	1	6	2	2	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	39
P17	4	0	2	2	0	11	0	3	1	4	3	4	0	2	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	40
P18	2	0	0	1	1	13	1	3	3	3	3	3	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	1	0	1	39
P19	3	0	1	1	1	10	1	3	0	2	4	3	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	34
P20	6	1	3	0	2	12	0	4	1	4	3	6	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	4	4	0	3	0	0	1	56	
N	91	15	42	26	8	288	27	89	31	94	47	71	1	8	5	8	2	2	14	20	54	107	12	48	15	16	16	1157

Figure 11 - SSIC Research Coding Matrix (created by Author)

4.2.4 Description Conclusion

This section provided a comprehensive overview of the participants and the research context, essential for understanding the findings of this study. The detailed description of the participants' backgrounds, including their socioeconomic, cultural, and educational contexts, highlighted the significant role these factors played in shaping their self-perceptions, aspirations, resilience, and agency. By examining the challenges they faced, such as high unemployment rates and limited access to higher education, alongside their high school achievements and self-efficacy, a deeper insight into how these young women navigated post-high school life was gained. Additionally, the discussion on signalling theory emphasised how educational credentials impacted their opportunities and agency in the broader socioeconomic landscape. The research context and methods employed ensured that the data collected was rich and reflective of the participants' lived experiences. Finally, the statement of saturation confirmed the robustness and comprehensiveness of the qualitative analysis. This foundation set the stage for the subsequent sections, which delved into the collective post-high school events experienced by these newly graduated young women over a period of 5-6 months, providing further insight into the dynamics that influenced their social identities and future trajectories.

4.3 Experiences of Post-High School Events

The shift from high school to adulthood represents a pivotal moment in the lives of newly graduated young women, marked by a series of defining events and experiences. This period was characterised by a blend of excitement, anxiety, and the anticipation of new opportunities. The journey began with the culmination of high school examinations, a milestone that encapsulated years of academic effort and personal growth. As students moved beyond the classroom, they entered a phase of reflection during the December break, contemplating their achievements and aspirations.

The beginning of a new school year, in which they no longer participated as students, served as a powerful reminder of their changed status and prompted a re-evaluation of their identities. Receiving final results further underscored this transition, offering both validation of past efforts and a gateway to future possibilities. These events collectively illustrated the dynamic

interplay between academic milestones and personal development, as well as the challenges and opportunities inherent in navigating this significant life change.

This section delved into the post-high school experiences of these young women, exploring the emotional and social dimensions of their transition. This section features illustrations and extended quotes to support the visualisation, and therefore a deeper understanding, of the experiences of these young women. By examining the impact of gender, socioeconomic status, and cultural expectations, the analysis revealed how these factors influenced their trajectories and shaped their evolving identities. Through their stories, the need for supportive environments that empower young women and recognise the unique challenges they face became evident. Progressing to the next section, the focus shifts to the concept of sudden social identity change, exploring how these experiences affect group memberships and self-concept.

4.3.1 The Final Exam



Figure 12 - The Final Exam: Celebration and Uncertainty (Generated by OpenAI's ChatGPT using DALL-E)

The final exam day was a pivotal moment for the participants, marking the conclusion of their high school journey and the beginning of a new chapter. Their experiences encapsulate a complex blend of emotions—relief, celebration, uncertainty, and nostalgia.

Reality Settles In

Participant 13 described a profound moment of realisation when the invigilator announced, "pens down" for the last paper. *"Reality just settled on me,"* she recounted. *"Like, I'm done with school now, high school's over. Like, there's nothing after this."* The gravity of this moment was palpable, as she noted the overwhelming sensation of finality and loss. The silence among peers and the exchanged glances symbolised a shared recognition of the end of an era. Participant 13 reflected on the bittersweet nature of this experience, emphasised the finality of never again attending school assemblies or sharing daily routines with friends. *"It was like a bittersweet memory,"* she said, highlighting the emotional impact of leaving behind friends and experiences accumulated from grade eight to grade twelve. She often found herself looking

around at her peers, thinking, *"this is people I'm not gonna sit with again. I'm never gonna laugh with them again."*

Shared Moments and Mixed Emotions

This theme of mixed emotions was echoed by Participant 7, who recalled a poignant moment with her best friend across the exam hall. *"As soon as the pens went down, we both looked at each other, and we're, like, happy and sad at the same time,"* she described. This moment of connection, marked by simultaneous happiness and sadness, was emphasised by the physical distance between them, emphasising the shared but unspoken emotions of the occasion. Their eyes met across the hall, bridging the gap that would soon widen as they moved on to different paths. Similarly, Participant 9's experience was coloured by a sense of denial despite the celebratory atmosphere. After handing in her exam materials and witnessing the exuberant display of students tossing ties and question papers, she had admitted, *"I was in so much denial."* Despite the anticipation and excitement leading up to the final day, she found it difficult to reconcile their long-awaited achievement with the reality of leaving school behind. *"It feels a bit crazy now that I think of it,"* she reflected, *"because it had been something that I've been wanting for a very long time."*

Personal Reflections and Future Uncertainties

The mixed emotions continued as participants grappled with their personal reflections and future uncertainties. For Participant 15, the excitement of her peers contrasted sharply with her own apprehension. *"I looked around me and saw a lot of children excited,"* she noted. *"But then I was sitting and thinking to myself, how can you be so excited about something you don't know what's holding for you there?"* This internal conflict had reflected a deep sense of uncertainty about the future, overshadowing the celebratory mood of the day. The joy of her peers seemed almost incomprehensible, as she grappled with the vast unknown that lay ahead. Participant 1 emphasised the significance of the final shared moments with classmates. *"We just took in that moment,"* she said, describing how she and her peers deliberately slowed their pace to savour their last day together. On their journey home, the act of walking slowly and parting ways symbolises the end of a shared journey and the beginning of individual paths. This emotional farewell was further highlighted by her solitary walk to her aunt's house, underscoring the personal realisation of her change. *"I walked that long road to my aunt's house alone now thinking, wow, I'm actually done,"* she reflected, capturing the solitude and contemplation of the moment.

Celebrations and Personal Achievements

In contrast to the mixed emotions and uncertainties, some participants found solace and joy in personal celebrations and achievements. Participant 4 had treated herself to a special meal, including fried chips, a burger, and eggs, as a reward for her hard work. *"I had worked very hard. I've never worked like that in my entire life,"* she said. This act of self-reward stressed her sense of accomplishment and the significance of marking this milestone. Her mother's pride added to this sense of achievement, highlighting the journey she had successfully navigated. Participant 5 had experienced a profound sense of unity and celebration with her grade twelve group. *"We all walked together, singing and chanting,"* she recalled. *"It was so memorable."* This communal celebration, marked by taking pictures and sharing food, highlighted the rare moment of togetherness before parting ways. *"We ended up buying food, like nine or ten Gatsbys,"* she said, sharing the joy of the collective experience. Participant 5's reflection on the eventual solitude of her path emphasised the transformative nature of this stage in life.

"Honestly, I felt like, this is how life's gonna be. You know, everyone go their own ways, and then you left alone to walk your own journey," she mused.

Challenges and Resilience

As the participants reflected on their experiences, the theme of resilience in the face of challenges emerged prominently. Participant 3 felt a profound sense of freedom after completing school but later reflected on the challenges ahead. *"I was just, like, so free,"* she said. *"If I knew how it was going to be, like, a few months later, I don't think I would have been that happy."* This initial elation had been tempered by the anticipated difficulties of post-school life, a stark contrast to the momentary joy. For Participant 18, the final exam day was marked by personal tragedy. A few hours before the exam, her father passed away. Despite this immense grief, Participant 18 had chosen to sit the exam in a separate venue, demonstrating remarkable resilience. *"I still had to go write my exam,"* she shared, highlighting her determination to complete her high school journey despite personal loss. This harrowing experience underscored her strength and perseverance, even in the face of significant personal challenges.

Family and Social Dynamics

The influence of family and social dynamics played a vital role in shaping the participants' experiences and emotions. Participant 19's experience highlighted the immediate change from student to jobseeker, humorously emphasised by her father's remark, *"now you're officially unemployed."* This comment, although light-hearted, had encapsulated the abrupt shift in identity and the new realities they faced. Participant 19 laughed it off, possibly masking the deeper anxieties about the future. Participant 7 received heartfelt support from her parents, who celebrated her achievement with a small gift and a congratulatory note. *"I got a letter from them. It was very sweet,"* she recounted. This gesture of pride and recognition from her family added a layer of emotional depth to the completion of her high school journey. Being the first child in the family to finish school, her parents' pride was undeniable. Similarly, Participant 5's celebration with her family was deeply significant. *"I made mom and dad proud,"* she said, recalling a celebratory dinner with close friends and family. *"We had, like, KFC, two big family meals, close cousins came over; we had some cake and sweets."* This event was more than just a meal; it was a recognition of her achievement and a symbolic breaking of a *"generational curse."*

Participant 4's mother expressed immense pride in her accomplishments. *"There's many people that you were on the journey with, and many of them got lost along the way, but you made it to the end,"* she said. This acknowledgement of her resilience and determination highlighted the personal and familial significance of completing high school. In contrast, Participant 12's experience revealed a different perspective. she noted that the end of exams was not celebrated as a significant event. *"It wasn't really something that I celebrated,"* she said, reflecting a different outlook on the change. This variation in experiences underscored the diverse ways in which participants navigated the end of their high school journey.

Communal Celebrations and Social Networks

The role of social networks and communal celebrations was also significant for many participants. Participant 20 shared a more communal celebration, where friends and family gathered to mark the end of exams. *"We just celebrated with, like, some wine and, like, just, you know, some goodies,"* she said. This gathering of friends from outside her school had highlighted the broader social networks that supported her during this transformative period. This collective support stressed the importance of social bonds in navigating life changes.

These detailed accounts offered a rich tapestry of emotions and experiences, capturing the complexity of progressing from high school to the next phase of life. The participants' reflections revealed their resilience, the bonds formed during their school years, and the nuanced emotions accompanying this significant life change. This exploration sets the stage for understanding their experiences during the December break, the focus of the next section, which delved into how they navigated this period of change and anticipation.

4.3.2 December Break



Figure 13 - A December Break with a Difference (Generated by OpenAI's ChatGPT using DALL-E)

The December break following the final exams was distinctly different for the participants compared to previous years. Unlike their previous 11-December breaks, which were filled with relaxation and anticipation of the next school year, this break carried a unique significance. It was the first time the participants experienced this period without the looming return to school. This break was marked by a mix of celebrations, work experiences, shifting relationships, anticipation, fear, and, for some, a sense of boredom. These experiences highlighted the transformative nature of this period and the various ways in which participants navigated their newfound freedom and responsibilities.

Celebration

Many participants embraced the break as a time for celebration and newfound freedom. Participant 7 enjoyed a calm celebration with friends and her parents, discussing future plans and relishing the freedom from school restrictions. *"We were just talking about plans... what are we going to finally do now that, like, I'm finally free?"* she remarked. This conversation symbolised the end of one era and the beginning of another, filled with possibilities. She felt liberated by the newfound freedom to make plans and explore options previously restricted by school and age limitations.

Participant 3 described the break as liberating, akin to a scene from a Hollywood coming-of-age movie. She celebrated her birthday, attended parties, and spent time with cousins and friends. *"It felt like one of those Hollywood teenage dramas with summer break, and then they*

just have this epic break," she said. This sense of adult freedom was echoed by Participant 20, who spent time at restaurants and clubs, celebrating a friend's birthday. Having reflected on her high school experience, she expressed a desire to broaden her horizons and change her outlook on life: *"I just want to be different compared to how I was in high school."* The opportunity to redefine herself and embrace new experiences was a recurring theme among participants.

Participant 18 focused on planning her grade 12 dance, which took place early into her December break, finding the experience fulfilling despite being more introverted. *"It was exciting that I could finally spoil myself by going all out for that dance,"* she shared. This planning process was a way to celebrate the culmination of her schooling career. Participant 10 had cherished the time with her brothers who visited from Durban, enjoying family outings to the beach. *"Spending time with them was kind of special to me because I haven't seen them in like four or three years,"* she noted. This highlighted the importance of family connections and the unique significance of this break.

Work

For some, the break was an opportunity to gain work experience and earn money. Participant 5 spent the break job hunting and eventually secured a part-time job as a baker. *"It was different because I had to job hunt, you know, and I had to, like, reality kicked in. Next year, I'm not going to school. So, I need to do something constructive,"* she explained. The pride in earning her own money and the cultural significance of her first salary, which she took to her pastor to be blessed before giving it to her mother, symbolised a step towards adulthood and independence.

Participant 9 took on a job despite exhaustion from exams but had to stop working after collapsing from fatigue. *"I collapsed on the 21st of December, and when I got to the hospital, they said it was exhaustion,"* she recounted. This underscored the physical toll of progressing from school to work and the need for rest. The remainder of the break was spent recovering, which was unusual for her, but necessary. Similarly, Participant 11 sought employment to avoid idleness, working long hours despite initial challenges. *"The work environment was cold and frustrating, but the financial independence was [good],"* she shared. This period highlighted the shift from being a student to a more adult role, with its own set of responsibilities and rewards.

Loss/Shedding of Relationships

The break also saw shifts in social dynamics. Participant 2 experienced a sudden and unexplained disconnection from her cousins who were her friends as well, leading to feelings of exclusion and confusion. *"They went out every day in December without me. I was like, what did I do wrong?"* she lamented. This unexpected change in relationships highlighted the transformative nature of this period and the shifting social landscapes as participants moved on from high school. Participant 20 noted a lack of contact with her usual friend group during the grade 12 breakfast event, which took place early into her December break, feeling a sense of detachment. *"I wasn't in contact with them, and I felt like everyone left immediately after the speeches,"* she reflected. This detachment emphasised the individual paths that each participant was beginning to take, leading to a natural drifting apart from some old friendships.

Anticipation

Anticipation for the future was a common theme during the December break. Participant 16 felt excitement and finality as she awaited her final high school results. *"I knew I had something*

to look forward to, unlike previous breaks where I knew I had to go back to school," she said. This sense of anticipation was shared by Participant 19, who highlighted the financial reality of being unemployed. *"We all just looked at each other and said, we need to get a job when we start college so we can go out more,"* she recalled. Despite this, there was a collective sense of relief among friends about not returning to the often-disliked environment of high school.

Fear

The uncertainty of the future brought fear to some participants. Participant 8 experienced a mix of excitement and dread. *"It marked the beginning of finally being unemployed,"* she noted. The reality of leaving the structured school environment was daunting. Participant 4 initially avoided thinking about results but eventually succumbed to anxiety. *"From the 15th of December, I was having nightmares up until the day I received my results,"* she shared. Participant 17 described the break as different due to the uncertainty of the future. *"The options don't speak out, they're just quiet. You don't know where you're going to be,"* she reflected. This pervasive sense of uncertainty was a common thread among many participants. Participant 15 found the break stressful due to the impending release of exam results and the lack of a clear plan for the future. *"I didn't enjoy my December holidays at all. My mind was on wondering, what am I going to do if I get my results? Am I going to pass? Am I not going to pass?"* she expressed. This fear of the unknown and the significant changes ahead were central to her experience.

Boredom

For some, the lack of structured activity led to boredom. Participant 7 noted that despite the initial relief and freedom from school, boredom set in as the longer-than-usual break progressed. *"I felt lonely because I'm not around people as much, and I'm just at home all the time,"* she said. This sense of boredom was a stark contrast to the highly structured school environment she had left behind. The unstructured time, with no place to be, led many to reflect on her future plans and the need to find meaningful activities.

Overall, the December break was a period of significant change and reflection for the participants, marking the end of one chapter and the uncertain beginning of another. This break, while filled with celebrations and new experiences, also brought about new challenges and uncertainties. The next section delved into their experiences as the new school year of 2024 began, marking the first time they were not part of new school year rituals, further highlighting the profound changes they were undergoing.

4.3.3 Start of the 2024 School Year



Figure 14 - Exclusion from Back-to-School Rituals (Generated by OpenAI's ChatGPT using DALL-E)

When the 2024 school year began, participants faced a significant change marked by a profound shift in their daily routines. Having been part of the school environment for twelve years, the realisation of not returning to this familiar setting brought about mixed emotions. The absence of familiar rituals and routines, such as buying new stationery and replacing uniforms, highlighted their exclusion from a world they had been part of for so long. This shift elicited feelings ranging from envy and nostalgia to excitement and liberation, as they observed these rituals from the outside.

Loss of Routine and Past Rituals

Participants had expressed a sense of disconnection from the school rituals they had long been a part of. Participant 13 reflected on this new reality, saying, *"When it came to my December holidays, of course, I was, like, just enjoying it like everyone else was. So, I don't think it really kicked in the fact that I'm not going back to school. I don't have to iron clothes again, and, like, my school clothes get my uniform together. And once my mom had to go and buy my sister school supplies and stuff, I was like, oh, yeah, and, like, my cousins, they were like, oh, yeah, when is school starting? And I was like, I genuinely don't even know."*

The loss of this long-standing routine was particularly poignant for Participant 7, who shared, *"I started missing it. Missing the routine every day. It was a routine every day for twelve years. All of a sudden you wake up; you don't have a routine. I really missed it. And I still do miss it. Like packing your bag for school stationery, the environment in the morning at school with your school friends, like chatting before classes and all that. It's really like a sad feeling to move on. Like you've been doing it your whole life and all of a sudden it's over."*

For others, this change period was marked by a mixture of relief and strangeness. Participant 1 described the experience as *"kind of amazing but also strange,"* noting that while the lack of routine allowed for more freedom, it also led to boredom:

"And then it was two weeks, a week before school opens, and my siblings were starting to get a bedtime again. And, yeah, I'm the only one that's, like, no bedtime, nothing. No checking on school clothes or anything. So, it was kind of amazing. But also, strange to me. It got boring because I like to keep active. I like to be out of the house. It got boring, but I found things to do. So, I would maybe, like, do deep cleaning in the house or try to cook food for the night, or I would, like, scratch in my cupboard and see what clothes I want to throw away or give away and what I would cut up and make new things with."

Nostalgia and Living Vicariously Through Siblings

Observing younger siblings starting or continuing their school journey provided a unique perspective for some participants. Participant 18 shared, *"This year was actually my little sister's first year of school. So, it was like, I'm basically seeing her go through the same steps that I went through. So, it's like, oh, it was like a very proud moment, basically. Because you're gonna watch her do the same thing you went through."* Similarly, Participant 15 found excitement in reliving her school years vicariously through her siblings:

"It was something exciting for me to see. Okay. [my younger siblings] can go back to school. Somewhere I've been, I could tell them stories about my school journey, and it was quite exciting. It took me out of that worry zone. I could again relive my school years, and I think it was nice seeing them buying new things."

Others experienced moments of realisation when they no longer had to prepare for school. Participant 3 recounted, *"There was, like, a moment like, oh, my word, I must still pack my bag, right? And then I'm like, duh. Duh. And then I remember the morning of the night before. I was, like, telling my sister then, guess who doesn't have to wake up tomorrow morning? Something like that. And then I helped them prepare the lunches the morning off, and then everybody left, and I was just like, okay, now what do I do with myself now? And, like, the school adverts keep coming on in, and I still had my school uniform. I gave some of, like, my blazers I had and stuff away, but I still had, like, my shirts and stuff, and I was just looking."*

The nostalgia for school-related activities had been tied to familiar commercial rituals. Participant 5 poignantly described the impact of not participating in the back-to-school shopping tradition:

"It made me feel very sad, you know, because, like, PEP is advertising back to school, the shoes. And usually in January, I think the 11th or the 12th, my mom would, like, take me and my sister to PEP for our shoes and our books and everything. But this year, I wasn't going to PEP. You know, I was usually one of the first kids in my road to come back from PEP with a big bag, back to school, with all my school equipment in. But it was so different, honestly speaking. Like, I just missed going to the store, and then my mom would, like, get maybe an extra chocolate or, you know, something sweet for me. But it was so different, and I felt like I missed it. Like, I was like, am I really this big?... [my first] job ended on the 6th. January the 8th. I started a new job. Yes. So that morning when I woke up and I went to the taxi rank, seeing all those school kids, I was like, thank God my journey ended. You know, no more orals and essays. But then one thing I missed was the privilege of when you go to the taxi and you are a school kid, you get first in the taxi no matter who's there. And I also, like, felt like, can't I just be a school kid and get into the taxi? Or, like, can't I just wear my uniform again, you know?"

And I think that's just because I was so used to this, like, routine, and now it's just broken. And it was just like, wow. Like, I'm not gonna do that again. And it was so. Such mixed emotions with it, actually, because on one hand, it was like, I'm an adult, but on the other hand, it was like, I'm an adult."

Reconciling Past and Present

Participant 15 shared, *"I'm someone I always usually look out for the next year going to a new grade. So, it felt different. It felt weird. But I had to make peace with the fact that I'm no longer going back to school because buying stationery getting new things was always very exciting for me as a child in school. So, this was, like, strange. But I had to tell myself that I have to make peace with the fact that I'm no longer a pupil at school. I'm an adult now entering into adulthood, just waiting on the results."*

Participant 10 also felt left out from these rituals, expressed, *"I felt left out. I was literally saying, can I get a bag too? And then my aunt was like, no, you can't. And I was like, can I get a smaller one? And then she's like, no, school's over for you... You're going to have to think of what you do next... Then at the end of the day, she actually bought me a small bag that I'm actually using now."*

Participant 12 reflected on her change, sharing a poignant moment from her last day before final exams, *"So the last day before we started with our final exams, then we had this thing where the whole school, they made, like, an arch, so they would stand on two sides, so we would walk through them, and they would be chanting. And it was so beautiful, but I don't know, I didn't feel anything. Maybe because I'm not sure how I felt, but I didn't feel anything walking down there. I was just laughing and smiling with everyone, but I'm not sure how I felt. But going back after that [with my sister] and going into the school like, this is not where I belong anymore. Like, this used to be like, my life for five years, spending it there and making bonds and friendships and whatever."*

These varied experiences underlined the complexity of emotions that accompany such a significant life change. The beginning of the new school year served as a stark reminder of the end of one chapter and the uncertainty of what comes next. For many, it was a time to reconcile their past routines with their new reality, finding ways to adapt and redefine their sense of self outside the familiar structure of school. This process of adaptation was ongoing and marked by both challenges and opportunities for personal growth. This period of change set the stage for the next significant milestone: receiving their final high school marks, a moment that would further shape their futures and solidify their journeys beyond the school gates.

4.3.4 Receiving Final Results



Figure 15 - Receiving Final High School Result (Generated by OpenAI's ChatGPT using DALL-E)

This section explored the pivotal and catalytic moment of receiving final high school results, a significant event in the sudden social identity change for the participants. The anticipation of receiving graduation results was a shared experience among the participants. This period was marked by sleepless nights, nervousness, and a mix of emotions as they awaited the outcome of their high school efforts. The structure follows a chronological order, and features extended quotes, to capture the emotions and experiences leading up to, during, and after receiving the results. Themes such as anxiety, hope, communal support, and individual reactions were highlighted to provide a comprehensive understanding of this transformative period.

The Night Before

The night before receiving the final results was a period of intense anticipation and anxiety for many participants. As the reality of their imminent graduation results loomed, emotions ran high, blending hope with fear. The night was characterised by sleeplessness, emotional vulnerability, and a deep sense of communal and familial tension.

Participant 19 highlighted the collective nervousness within her family, especially her mother, who was deeply concerned about the possibility of another failure in the family:

"So, my parents had, my parents was mainly, my mother was concerned that I wasn't gonna make it either. So it was that nerve. So, everybody was nervous for my results because just now, another daughter of these doesn't make it too much, then they will think, what did they did wrong? Why aren't they making matric and stuff like that?" The weight of familial expectations and the fear of disappointment created a tense atmosphere in her household. She shared, *"I was also nervous because I was scared of disappointing my parents after everything, they've done for me during my matric, I didn't want to disappoint them with my results. So, yeah, and there was also a higher expectation for me because my older sister didn't make it."*

Similarly, Participant 16 spent the night before watching videos on TikTok of her class, feeling emotional about the uncertain future that awaited her and her friends. *"And the night before, I was laying, and I was watching TikToks of me and my class, and I was so emotional because I was like, some of us will make it, and some of us will not make it. And it wasn't really a nice*

thing because a lot of my friends didn't make it, and some of my friends just made it. So, it was very emotional for me."

Participant 8 experienced intense anxiety, resulting in only two hours of sleep:

"I was laying on my bed. I didn't even sleep. In fact, I slept for like, 2 hours because I was thinking, maybe I'm gonna be late to go fetch the results. I just get it. And I also didn't want to get it because I was scared if I failed, how am I gonna take a fail, especially after I've worked so hard? Because I can say that I did work hard in... November, and I did, like, work. I've never studied like that in my entire life, and I'm not one to lie about that, because me, I don't like studying, and I actually did. And for me. If the results was, like, failed, it would have seemed like I didn't, like, I'm not enough to, you know. So, I had, like, this mindset of saying, if I pass, then good for me, and I'm gonna be happy about it. If I failed, I'm going back to school... And if I didn't get the pass that I wanted, then I'm rewriting again. And I didn't want to let that change. Nobody was gonna change my mind when I said that I was gonna achieve either one of those."

Participant 6 had also faced a sleepless night, consumed by the anxiety of waiting for the results:

"I couldn't even sleep because I was on TikTok because I saw the IEB students got their results, and they were just posting like their reactions, and they were posting their statements, and I was watching the news as well. And I woke. I didn't even sleep even, being honest, I didn't sleep. I woke up from bed and I just started cleaning to like, just for like the time to go quick." This participant's story reflects the impact of social media on the emotional experiences of students awaiting their results.

The fear of checking results online added another layer of anxiety for some. Participant 17 avoided accessing her results through a shared link, opting instead to receive them at school:

"There were a lot of chats about the marks that are coming up and. This one girl, she sent a link on the group. She's like, you can go into this link here and you'll get your marks. But I didn't want to because I was scared. So, I waited that out and I let them talk and I just, I waited until it was time for me to go to the school and get my results. That was the initial plan, but my parents got my results, and they told me. Probably by the same link that girl sent on the group. I was like, oh, why did you have to tell me now? But anyway, they did, and I asked them, how many distinctions did I get? So, they said two. And I said, for what subjects? So, they said geography and physics. We're very proud of you. But I'm like, that moment I just felt completely down. It's like my heart just like dropped and like, yeah, I'm not getting into varsity."

Her reaction highlighted the immediate impact of academic results on future aspirations.

The night before receiving the results was marked by a mix of sleeplessness, anxiety, and emotional vulnerability. Participants grappled with their fears and hopes, reflecting on the significance of the upcoming results. This intense anticipation set the stage for the emotional experiences of the following day.

The Morning Of

The morning of receiving the results had brought a renewed wave of anxiety and anticipation. Participants had navigated a complex emotional landscape as they prepared to face their academic fate. The morning was characterised by nervousness, last-minute preparations, and emotional conversations with family and friends.

Participant 7 and her best friend provided mutual support as they walked to school together, taking breaks to discuss their fears: *"We were, like, stressing so bad. We took breaks, like, along the way, like, sitting down to, like, talk about what we're going to do if we fail and all this nonsense."* The shared anxiety and solidarity exemplified the communal nature of this pivotal moment. In preparation for the day, Participant 6 found herself emotionally vulnerable, reacting sensitively to her mother's comments about her appearance:

"I was changing clothes because I wanted, I was looking for something to wear. And then she was like, your hair doesn't look right. And I just looked at her and asked her why would you say that? I was so emotional and angry. I just felt like whatever anyone said, I felt like no one should talk to me, no one should ask me anything because I'm just not in this space because I was so nervous. Like, I was nervous. And it's not even like I'm gonna just like, wow. Like, all those years I spent in high school, all those years that I spent in high school, all of that, like, it just felt like a lot, because now I'm getting all my work, all the hard work. So, after five years... in that school, throughout the five years, it's all amounting to one moment when I open an envelope, and I look at it. So, it was just a lot."

Recalling the events of that morning had brought about feelings of overwhelming anxiety and irritability as a result of fear of failure.

Some participants chose to face the nerve-wracking moment with the support of friends. Participant 7 and her best friend walked to their school together, taking breaks along the way to discuss their fears and plans if they failed:

"My best friend came over because we were gonna go get our results together. It was like we didn't want to go alone. So, we walked to the school. This is fairly close. So, we walked together. The whole way there, we were, like, stressing so bad. We took breaks, like, along the way, like, sitting down to, like, talk about what we're going to do if we fail and all this nonsense. It's not a long walk. It's like a five-minute walk. So, like, [we would] get by one stop street, and then you just sit down and start, like, thinking about life. Like. That's how bad the stress was."

The morning of receiving the final high school results was a period of intense emotional turbulence for the participants. Characterised by heightened anxiety, nervousness, and a palpable sense of anticipation, this time highlighted the profound impact of the impending results on their lives. The shared experiences of support and solidarity underscored the communal nature of this pivotal moment. Conversely, the heightened sensitivity and emotional vulnerability reflected the personal struggles each young woman faced in confronting their academic fate. The next section will delve into the participants' experiences upon receiving their results, capturing the mix of anticipation, anxiety, and eventual relief that marked this significant milestone in their educational journeys.

Moment of Receiving Results



Figure 16 - Moment of Receiving Results (Generated by OpenAI's ChatGPT using DALL-E)

Reuniting with classmates after the December break added another dimension to the experience. The anticipation reached its peak as participants gathered at their schools to receive their results. This moment was marked by a mix of nervousness, excitement, and a sense of finality.

Participant 11 noted the changes in her peers' appearances and the mixed emotions in the air as they waited for their results:

"It was nice seeing everybody again after that December holiday for break. Everybody looked so different. Some people had lost weight; some people had gained weight. Some people were prettier than before. I was like, wow, what's this? And my friends were there. They were excited. So, we didn't give us our result right away. We had to wait until, I don't know, like a certain amount of time before we get our results. Yeah, everybody was excited. They were quiet. They were not talking, like can't you see these guys are nervous. Then the new, the 2024 matriculants came to say hi, how are you guys doing? How you guys feeling? And we felt replaced too quickly."

Participant 7 was the first to receive her results via a text message, which had led to an intense moment of disbelief and relief:

"There was this thing. You can put your matric number, your, I don't know, your ID. And then they will send your results. So, while were all outside, I was the first person to get this message. And I showed my friend, I'm like, no way. I just got a message from DBE. And I was like, this cannot be my results. Like, no one else got a message. I'm the only one there. I'm like, oh, my gosh, I failed. Why am I the only one getting this message? I was stressing, so I made her open the message on my phone, and it said that, like, I got a bachelor's and then, like, there in the middle of the whole crowd, it's just me busy,

like, screaming and cheering and me and her busy jumping up and down the whole time, like, just so happy. And then she finally got the message as well."

Her story reflected the sudden shift from fear to joy that many students experienced upon learning of their success.

For Participant 18, the process of receiving results was marred by her family's premature discovery of her scores online:

"And then we got to the moment of actually standing in the line to fetch results. It was very scary. But going into the school, my brother was not allowed to go with into the school. Keep in mind, I told my mother not to go with, but she was actually the first person to find out the results because it went out online and I was still standing in the line. And then, she was quite forward and went to go look online. And then everybody knew my results before I even knew about it. And then as I was standing in the line, my mommy sent my brother my results, and he sent me the picture of the results, but he covered the pass. He covered that I couldn't see, but he just showed that everybody has my results, and I don't. So, when I actually got my results and I saw that, okay, I passed, and it was quite a relief. And everybody else, like, my friends were also, like, in shock and proud because obviously they also didn't expect me. Like, I didn't expect myself to pass during that time. Because of what I went through. So, I didn't get much studying done. So, everybody else was like, oh, wow, she actually made it."

Participant 16 vividly recalled the emotional reaction of her parents upon seeing her bachelor's pass:

"And I look at my name, and I see a B next to my name for bachelors. And my mom looks at me, and my dad looks at me, and my mom starts crying. And I ask her, but why are you crying? So, she said, no. My eldest daughter is finished with school now."

The tears of joy from her mother had underscored the significance of this achievement for the entire family.

Participant 1 experienced a moment of pride and relief when her father rushed to congratulate her:

"Before I got my results, my dad went to go and check the wall and then he came rushing back to me, running to me, turning, looking for me. And then when he finally saw me, like grab me and pull me hugging me, like saying. Like, I'm happy for you, my child, and everything else. Like, okay, I'm glad I that I passed. And then I got my certificate, and I looked at and I was thinking. Like, well, I tried. And I read the comment below and it's like, oh, it's a bachelor's. Okay, I did try. I got something... My father's smile was so big. I've never seen him smile so big. And it's like, as he took the picture, he was realising my firstborn finished school, finished high school. And then people started clearing out... I didn't even have to wait for the night or the next morning, my father went straight to the phone, like, oh, she got a bachelors' pass and everything to the family chats and everything. So, we're just getting all of congratulations... there was a lot of nice wishes. And frankly, I felt like, this is my birthday. I was confused. I was like, oh, I didn't know so many people cared if I passed. And, yeah, it was. It was nice. People

were wishing me well. They were like, saying hope that I find, like, give myself a good future, study or get a good job."

This familial validation reinforced the value of her hard work and dedication.

The scene at the school was a mix of emotions, as Participant 5 described, with students reacting differently to their results:

"So, we all went to our class and then we had a mini assembly, and then we got our results. And it was like a bomb that exploded. Like, some was crying, some was laughing, some was jumping, some was angry. I don't know if it was tears of joy or tears of disappointment, but it was mixed emotions. But for me, I was happy. I was jumping, I was crying, I was screaming because I fell off. And it was amazing. Honestly speaking. It was like we couldn't stop hugging each other and saying, we made it. Our statement was given to us, individually. It was given in a brownish envelope, and you'd know if you passed. If you got the pen with the envelope. If you didn't pass, you didn't get the pen. Like, it's two pens, but they are fancy and expensive pens, so if you got those two pens, you'd know you passed. And when they called my name and I saw the envelope and the pens, I was jumping like a kangaroo up and down."

Participant 3 initially hesitated to check her results, overwhelmed by the anxiety of the moment:

"And then the principal tells us the names are on the walls, we can go look about it. So, everybody jumps up to go around and look. And I'm sitting there. And I'm looking and I'm just looking at everybody going up, and. So, my priest sister tells me, she says, you can go. You should go look and whatever. I know it's gonna be there, but you should still go to reassure yourself and whatever. And I'm like, I'm gonna go. But I couldn't move. And one of my friends who is also my church, who was sitting behind me. And she says, look there, if dinges can make it, if his name is there, you know, our names have to be on there. And I laughed. I was, like, true. So, I got up and my Ms was standing at the front, and I just looked at her. She was handing out the certificate of the marks. And then I just went to the wall when everybody cleared up and I just skimmed, and I just saw my name. And the relief I felt like yoh I can't even describe it. And I turned around, and she was waiting there for me. I went outside and I called my mom, and I just said, mommy, I made it. And then I started, I burst out crying, mommy, I made it."

This highlighted the intense emotional rollercoaster students faced.

Participant 2 also struggled with the anxiety of checking her name on the results sheet but found joy and relief upon confirming her success:

"I was like, I don't want to go look at the sheet. I don't want to see my name. I don't want to look anything. I'm going to wait. And then I was the first one to get up. I was like, okay, I'm just going to do it. I'm going to do it. And I searched for my name, and I was like, oh, no, I don't see my name. Did I make it? Didn't I make it? And I was like, okay. And I saw my surname. I was like, okay, I'm the only one with this surname, so it must be. And I saw my name, and I ran to my mommy, and she's like, I told you you were gonna make it. And I was like, but I still felt like I could have done before. And my Ms started crying. And I started crying."

Her mother's reassurance and the subsequent emotional release were moments of shared triumph.

Participant 4 faced her results alone due to her parents' work commitments, preferring to manage her expectations privately:

"I went by myself. My parents had worked that day. I didn't want the pressure. Like, if I didn't get what I expected, I didn't want, like, you know. And then when I got home and then when my, both my parents came and then I showed them, they were happy that I did, great in all my other five subjects. But the two weren't so good. And, like, even if I wanted to apply for what I wanted to study, it wouldn't allow me. I did, and [my parents] suggested that I could rewrite or go back to high school and change the subjects and put other subjects. But then I saw that if I wanted to go to high school and change the subjects, I wouldn't be happy when I go to university and end up studying something that I do not love. So, I decided that I'll go back home [to Zimbabwe]."

Despite some disappointment, her decision to stay true to her passions over resitting her final exams with different subjects reflected a mature approach to her future.

The moment of receiving their final high school results was a defining experience for the participants, characterised by a blend of anticipation, nervousness, and eventual relief or joy. The emotional spectrum ranged from Participant 7's immediate disbelief and exuberance upon discovering her bachelor's pass via text message, to Participant 16 witnessing her parents' pride and tears of joy. These narratives stress the significant emotional and social impact of this milestone, not only on the students themselves but also on their families and communities. These experiences can be seen as mastery experiences, which are a critical component of self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977). The validation of their hard work and dedication through their achievements bolstered their self-efficacy, as evidenced by the pride and relief felt by both the students and their families. This increased self-efficacy likely enhanced their confidence in facing future challenges and pursuing further goals. The next section explored how these newly graduated young women navigated the period following the receipt of their results. This includes breaking the news to their families, celebrating their achievements, and in some cases, experiencing the absence of celebration. This exploration shed light on the varied personal and social dynamics that followed this significant milestone in their lives.

Post-Results Activities

Post-results activities varied widely among participants. These post-results activities ranged from personal celebrations and being celebrated by others, to feelings of disappointment and instances where the event was perceived as insignificant. This section delves into the diverse ways participants navigated the aftermath of receiving their results, highlighting the interplay between their emotional responses and their social contexts.

Participant 5 had returned to work immediately after receiving her results, sharing her success with her colleagues and receiving congratulations and tips:

"I just went to fetch my results and then I had to go back to work, but my other classmates ended up going drinking alcohol, you know, smoking, you know, doing all types of things. But I had to go back to work because I only took like, 2 hours off and I had to be back in 2 hours. I couldn't focus. I like went straight to my boss and I was like, look here, ma'am, I passed, and I put it in her face right there. And I was so

ridiculous. I don't know. I, like, took my result and pasted it on the door. So, everybody came and actually saw, and they were like, oh, congratulations, you know? They were like, well done, Miss [Participant's Surname]. Well done, [Participant's First Name]. Congratulations, ma'am. And I got showered with money that day. Like, the tips was incredible...my boss was, like, asking me if I want to, like, be a beauty tech full-time. And then I said no. Unfortunately, I was honest. I was just doing it for the experience and for the money. I had no interest of being a beautician full time."

Her story had highlighted the intersection of academic achievement and professional life for some students.

At home, Participant 5 had playfully dramatized her results for her family, enjoying the moment of revelation and the shared joy.

"My whole family was home. So, they knew that the results were out that day, and they knew that I need to go and fetch my results, because I, like, told my sister, look, I'm going to fetch my results. Just keep things fingers crossed. Pray for me, you know, do your rituals so I can pass. And then when I got home, I looked angry. You know, I was, like, trying to confuse them, so I looked angry. And then I just went to my room, and then I slammed the door closed. Then I laid on the bed, you know, and everyone was, like, asking me, what's wrong? What happened? And I was like, I can't believe this happened to me... I passed! Nah, wanted some action. I love drama. I'm a drama queen."

Participant 6 had celebrated with her friend, both elated by their success and unconcerned with the reactions of others:

"And then I went to go find my friend. She decided to open her envelope outside because she was also nervous. And then we saw each other. We saw each other from a distance. And I asked, did you pass? I screamed; did you pass? And she said, yes. She asked me, did you pass? And I said, yes. And we ran and we screamed. We were jumping. People were looking at us. We didn't care. We were happy."

This captured the unfiltered joy of shared academic success.

Participant 14's father's happiness with her results, regardless of the pass level, highlighted the importance of parental support and unconditional pride:

"My dad came and met us there. So, he was also just happy. You know, he's like, well done. He's happy with what I got. And, you know, I think that was just important that they are happy with the results I got. You know, they were just like, you passed. They're happy with the results. No matter if it was a diploma or bachelor pass, you did your best and you did what you did."

Participant 7 had returned home to a surprise party, enjoying a poolside celebration with her family:

"When I got home, there was like, a surprise party. Like, all of my family were here. There was champagne. They were braaiing and everything. We had basically a pool party. So, it was very nice. And everyone was, like, really happy. They were just. Most of the questions that was going around is, what are you going to do now? What's your

plans? It was mostly from, like, I was mostly all the aunties, actually. Although they, like, they're the ones that worry the most. Yeah. They were just asking, like, what is my plans now? Have I gotten a job yet? And before, while I was still in school, I was getting asked that question a lot, and that was like, I hated that question so much. It was like, when someone asked me that, I was just like, shut up. Why are you asking me this? This is, like, giving me so much stress. But, like, as soon as I finished and they asked, it was like, I can answer you now because I have time to answer you now because I kind of know what I want to do, where I want to go."

This joyous occasion was punctuated by the common question about future plans, which, despite being a source of stress previously, they now felt ready to answer.

Participant 8 and her friends struggled to balance their celebrations with sensitivity towards those who didn't fare as well, often feeling unable to fully rejoice out of fear of resentment:

"[Walking home] was, it was like coughing. You could hear a pin drop. And that was the first time because we didn't know how to feel, man. Because if you rejoice, then it's gonna feel like you are discrediting the others for their work. And if you don't even speak now, then it's gonna look like you feel a bit superior because now you have a better pass than them. So, it was more like, you can do it chom. There's always a rewrite. There's always, you know, it was consoling... everybody wanted to keep [their results] a secret. Like, only, like, me and four friends were celebrating in the roads. Opposite ice cream shop. So, we bought us ice cream. [We were saying] don't forget me. And whatever you do, stay in the path. Don't, don't get pregnant. And go study further. It was so vibe. And then, yeah, it was more of, like, motivating each other and leading each other in, like, the road that's supposed to be the road. And. Even though we are saying this, we're gonna find tomorrow there's somebody who's carrying. Oh. And it's true. There's, like, two friends also."

This highlighted the solidarity and the careful navigation of emotions among peers during a critical moment in their academic journey, where those who succeeded had to temper their celebrations to avoid causing distress to their friends who did not do as well.

However, not all reactions were celebratory. Arriving home, participant 8 experienced disappointment with her family's lack of interest, underscoring the varied expectations and responses students had to manage:

"I had to tell [my family] that I got the certificate. I was disappointed, but then again, I didn't really expect much from anybody. Oh, yeah, I expected something more, as in, like, again, this is one of the first times where I actually expect something from somebody or anybody. And then it proved me why I don't expect anything from anybody. They were just like, oh, back to me again."

Participant 13 had a quiet day at home, dealing with her disappointment in solitude but finding some consolation in her eventual acceptance:

"Because my mom had to go and work, so I went with my stepdad and then I got my results and then I showed my sister, my older sister. And then I think I just, like, I think I just, like, sat at home. Like, I didn't go anywhere. Like, no one took me out or something. So, I just, like, sat at home. I think I, like, just chilled. I don't even know

what I did. Don't think I slept I don't really take naps. So, I think I just, like, sat, like, thinking. I did, no, actually, I did cry, like, after getting my results because I was disappointed. And then afterwards I was like, okay, whatever, at least I passed. And then I, like, moved on. And then I think I just, like, watched movies or whatever. I don't even remember. But I think it was something like that. Like, I didn't go anywhere, and I was in the house."

This section highlighted the diverse emotional landscapes the participants navigated as they received their final results. From communal celebrations to personal reflections, these stories paint a vivid picture of a pivotal moment in their academic journeys. The next section will delve into the intersectional experiences, focusing on the gendered and cultural perspectives of post-high school challenges faced by newly graduated girls. This marks the end of the four core memory examples—Final Exam, December Break, Schools Reopening, and Receiving Their Graduation Results—the researcher used to prompt storytelling. The remainder of the chapter consists of more general reflections on experiences spanning the period between January 19, 2024, and the day of their interview.

4.3.5 Intersectional Experiences

Intersectionality recognises that various aspects of identity, such as gender, race, and socioeconomic status, intersect and create unique modes of discrimination and privilege (K. W. Crenshaw, 2017). This section explored the intersectional experiences of the participants, focusing on gender, socioeconomic status, and the intersection of gender and socioeconomic status resulting in competition among peers. The narratives provide insights into how these intersections influence their lives and aspirations.

Gender

The participants' reflections on gendered expectations revealed the pervasive influence of traditional gender roles on their trajectories, dictating their aspirations and the support they receive from their social circles. Many discussed the impact of these roles on their views on education, career, and personal relationships.

Societal Expectations

Participant 1 highlighted familial expectations centred on traditional marital roles, indicating a wish for protection within the confines of marriage:

"They hope I get married to someone that can look after me and that don't misuse me, mistreat me, because maybe I didn't decide to study or something. There was a lot of nice wishes. It was nice. There wasn't anything about I must work."

This sentiment stresses how deeply entrenched these roles can be in shaping young women's futures.

Expanding on societal expectations, Participant 3 observed the trend of early motherhood and dependency on men among her peers:

"I see a lot of, like, statuses and that of girls my age, girls that was with me on school, but, like, they have babies and have kids and they just, like, it's kind of sad as some of them, not judging, but sad to see how some of them ended up. Because I feel like a lot of girls these days feel like our trajectory in life is having this guy. He's going to give you this life that he's promising you. That's never going to happen. Because a lot of

them, and I always say this, they get what they want and then they leave you with the child, and then it's over."

This highlighted the societal pressures and the often-unrealistic promises that shape their aspirations.

In addition, Participant 3 touched upon the influence of relationships on decision-making, noting that girls often have to consider the impact of their social connections on their safety and well-being:

"What's important that could impact a lot of decisions from that time would be, not that I have none, but I think for all of us girls, especially in general, would be like... our relationships, being with our friends, our family, spouses, you know, if they have any."

In contrast, Participant 6 reflected on the emphasis her mother placed on education and independence:

"My mom's an educator as well... I'm Xhosa. I'm, like, from the Xhosa culture, and I'm black. And my mom is a very educated woman, and she always said, make sure you educate yourself and you get a degree. And don't depend on a man. Have a plan for your life."

This perspective emphasised the importance of self-reliance and education as a means to escape traditional gender roles.

Gender Disparities in School and Work

Participant 7 recounted the gender disparities in her school, where young men received more respect and opportunities than young women:

"It was more of the males being more respected than of the females in high school. So going from, like, not getting any respect to actually getting respect and being equally treated as other males was a big change... I think it's just like the school environment. Like, males think that they're more. They're better than everyone else, but when they grow up, they mature and realise what's right and what's wrong... I feel like maybe... females, other young women, they should also be given, like, the day of light to, how can I say this? To also get the opportunity to do things in life and excel, because most young women don't get the same opportunity or attention as others to achieve bigger things in life and get bigger opportunities. Because, like, in my school, there was, like, a big thing, all the opportunities and high achievements and stuff... was... shone on by all the males in the school. Like, they were basically the big ones of the school. Like, for all the sports, they got all the opportunities to go places and all that. But for the females, it really wasn't that big. They didn't get as much of the same, like, attention or light as the males."

This highlighted the ingrained gender biases in educational settings that can hinder girl-students' agency.

Conversely, Participant 6 had noted that girls in her school had outperformed boys academically:

"From a female point of view, like, majority of the top ten students were females. And it was so good to see how females were thriving under pressure. And there's just this

misconception that females, are, like, so fragile. Like, no, actually, we thrive better than you guys. So even the females that are, like, doubting themselves, I would just say, no, guys. Like, actually, I feel like we got this."

This contradicts the stereotype that young women are less capable under pressure and highlighted their academic strengths.

Furthermore, Participant 10 highlighted the challenges women face in the labour market and the need to change societal mindsets:

"When you don't get higher than a certain amount, they won't accept you is very hard on some females because now they doubt themselves all the time. And, if you also look on like a different points of view, if you look at like work and stuff. Certain work jobs only need men because they think men are stronger so females can't find their job. That which leads to, okay, I'm a housewife, I have to stay at home. So, females must stop having this, everybody must stop having this mindset of females can't do nothing that men can do... So, we need to change that perspective of which men need to understand, I'm not going to be at your house 24/7 cleaning. Females need to understand they can push themselves to what they want to be, that we can become a lawyer, become, I don't know, anything that men can do. And we need to raise our children, future generations... to understand that females can also do what men can do, everybody can be equal."

This statement underscored the need for societal change and the breaking of gender stereotypes in professional environments.

Safety Concerns

The fear of violence and concerns about safety had profoundly influenced the decisions and freedoms of the participants, often restricting their movements and shaping their educational and career trajectories. For example, Participant 2 highlighted her mother's fears regarding her safety, which restricted her willingness to travel for work:

"And my mom is, like, not fond of me. Like, going to another [city] alone for work, like human trafficking, like that Jocelyn story. So, she's, like, very scared to send me anywhere."

This emphasises how safety concerns can limit opportunities for women.

Similarly, Participant 17 echoed concerns about safety influencing her choice of university:

"You see my options is quite limited, especially as a girl because Stellenbosch is very far away. I'm really far away... UCT is closer. So, because I'm a girl and my parents want me to be safe in all these aspects, they want me to go to UCT, which I find true because, I mean, what are they going to do if something happened to me and I'm an hour's drive away? Because my parents said, look, if you're going to live there on the premises if safety comes into play, because what kind of things are you going to have? What kind of people are you going to invite in your space? That's important, because the type of people that you let into your space are the people that are going to have the power to change it."

This highlighted how safety concerns can influence major life decisions, such as where to attend university.

The reflections on gendered roles and trajectories underscore the profound influence of traditional expectations on the participants' aspirations and opportunities. These narratives revealed how societal pressures (Iqbal & Maldonado García, 2020; Posti-Ahokas & Palojoki, 2014), educational disparities, labour market challenges, and safety concerns intersect to shape the experiences of young women. This understanding provided a foundation for exploring the next section on socioeconomic status, which further delved into the external factors influencing the participants' lives and decisions.

Socioeconomic Status

The societal challenges faced by these newly graduated girls further complicate their paths, particularly when considering limited opportunities and systemic barriers. These challenges often intersect with their gender and socioeconomic status, shaping their self-concept, life choices, and future aspirations. Destin (2019) highlighted how individuals from lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds often face marginalisation and diminished self-worth, which impacts their identity and belief in personal potential.

Lack of Career Guidance

Participant 13 had highlighted the limited options available in her school, which focused heavily on academics and athletics. She explained, *"At my school there wasn't a really broad amount of options. Like, our school was really, was very academic and athletic. Like, that was just it, that was the tool. Focus on your work and sports. Like, whatever people were in sports, they needed to stay on top and they obviously needed to do their work."* This emphasis on academics and athletics left little room for exploring other career paths, making it difficult for students like her to envision alternative futures. *"There wasn't, like, I don't think there was that many people that came, like, to our school, unless it was, like, universities that came, but that was, like, during our matric year when they would come and speak to us about what they offer. But again, it felt so limited,"* she added.

Similarly, Participant 19 discussed the lack of career guidance and options, which left many of her peers uncertain about their future paths:

"They don't know what career path to take. Okay, so they have different interests, they have different hobbies, but they're not sure what career path to take or what degree to study for. Most of them are just taking a gap year to figure out what they want to do, what they want to study, how they're gonna progress from matric now, because we didn't get that opportunity in grade eleven or grade ten even, to look at career paths and stuff like that."

This lack of early career counselling had significantly impacted their ability to plan for the future.

Participant 2 highlighted the potential pitfalls of taking a gap year, expressed concerns that it could lead to extended periods of inactivity:

"The gap year thing is not really like, my uncle also suggested, take a gap year. You did so much. You passed primary school, high school. You've been through that and this. Like, a lot of my family members didn't make it to matric or anywhere further than that. Then they want to be like, take a gap year and I was like, no man, then one gap year next to five years of being at home, where do I get then?"

The description of what participants label as a gap year seems to more closely resemble Waitthood, which will be explored later in this findings chapter.

Lack of Employment Options

The scarcity of employment options further exacerbates the challenges faced by these young women. Participant 2 had described the hurdles she had encountered in finding a job without prior experience, often facing scams and unrealistic job requirements. *"I'm open to right now, seeing that I'm not studying. And then, like, I would apply online. But then sometimes it's a scam, sometimes it's like. And then it's like, you need that certain, like, you need a lot of experience in that, like retailing or assistance or anything. Like, you need, like, experience. I was like, I felt but discouraged,"* she recounted. The need for experience even for entry-level positions creates a barrier for recent graduates seeking to enter the workforce.

High Drop-out Rates

The issue of high drop-out rates also emerged as a significant theme. Participant 12 had highlighted the wasted potential she had observed in her community, where many young people fail to realise their worth and fall into destructive patterns. *"In the area that I live, our young people, they have a lot of potential, but they don't see it. So, they don't really see the gifts that they have. So, when they finish with high school or they drop out or whatever, they just, how can I say they don't see their worth, that they can become something greater,"* she explained. This lack of self-awareness and guidance had often led to negative outcomes such as gang involvement or dependence on government aid.

Similarly, Participant 2 reflected on the societal pressures and negative influences in her community, emphasising her desire to avoid those pitfalls. *"There's a lot of people in my community where they drop out of school, and then they, like a mirror to me where I can look at, like, do I want to end up like that one day? It's like, I don't look down on people. I don't judge them. Like, but do I see myself like that? Or do I see myself, like, somewhere better in a better environment?"* she pondered. Her determination to rise above her circumstances highlighted the importance of personal resolve in navigating these challenges.

These societal challenges, combined with the pressures of gendered expectations and safety concerns create a complex web of obstacles that these young women must navigate. The lack of career guidance, limited employment opportunities, and high drop-out rates illustrate the multifaceted nature of the barriers they face. Their stories emphasise the need for comprehensive support systems that address these challenges and provide pathways to success. The next section delved into the dynamics of peer competition, rivalry, and the scarcity mindset that emerges from the intersection of gender and socioeconomic status.

Peer Competition and Social Dynamics

The competitive pressures among peers add another dimension to the intersectional challenges faced by the participants, blending gender and socioeconomic factors into a complex web of rivalry (Bourdieu, 2011; K. W. Crenshaw, 2017). This competition had frequently stemmed from academic achievements and societal expectations, impacting their self-esteem and peer relationships. For instance, Participant 2 had described the competitive dynamic within her family, where academic achievements became a point of contention. She explained, *"Like, me and my one cousin, were the only two that's the oldest. I'm older by a few months. And I was like... the oldest, but the shortest in the group. So, like, me and her [were both in]... where my grandma and her mommy would be, like... in competition. Like, she is a straight-A student,*

basically always getting diplomas, trophies, medals, and I don't know. So, then [her mommy] would be like, yeah, but my daughter is so much better than your granddaughter, like, a competition." This familial competition highlighted how academic achievements can create tension and rivalry, affecting relationships and self-worth.

Similarly, Participant 8 referred to the phenomenon of "snakes"—friends who downplay their own efforts to prevent others from surpassing them. She noted, *"When they say they didn't study, but then, you know, that child is studying. You can smell that that child [is studying], but she tells, no, I didn't study. We call them snakes. And I had multiple snakes of friends, you know. They just don't want you to reach their level. Yeah, most of them, we just walk [together] because we live in the same direction.... we all a group, every girl. So, I know it was like, you know, you and I chom, because we walk in the same road. But you know who your friends are actually."* This dynamic illustrates how competition can breed distrust and create barriers to genuine friendship and support among peers.

In addition, Participant 5 experienced both academic and social competition, noting how these dynamics affected her interactions with peers in stating, *"Some of my friends would pretend they didn't care about grades, but deep down they were always trying to outdo each other. It made it hard to trust anyone."* This competition extended beyond academics, affecting the participants' social lives and sense of belonging. The rivalry and need to outperform each other created a challenging environment for building trust and supportive relationships.

In socioeconomically disadvantaged communities with limited resources, education may be viewed as the primary means to secure a better future, intensifying competition among peers as they strive for limited opportunities. The pressure to succeed academically can exacerbate feelings of isolation and competitiveness, as students vie for recognition and future opportunities, driving individuals to see each other as rivals rather than allies, complicating the development of supportive networks (Bourdieu, 2011).

Ultimately, the intersection of gender and socioeconomic status not only shapes these competitive behaviours but also influences how young women perceive and interact with their peers. As these participants transition into new environments, whether in work or higher education, understanding these dynamics will be crucial in navigating and forming new social connections. The next section explored their experiences in these new environments, highlighting the continued impact of their backgrounds and the challenges they face in adapting to new social and academic contexts.

4.3.6 Experiences Conclusion

The experiences of post-high school events provided a comprehensive view of the transformative phase that newly graduated young women faced as they navigated their paths beyond the classroom. From the anxiety and relief of final exams to the reflective moments during the December break, each event contributed to a complex narrative of growth, challenge, and transformation. These moments were filled with anticipation and uncertainty, highlighting the tension between past routines and future possibilities. The start of a new school year brought a poignant reminder of the participants' change from students to graduates. This change prompted them to redefine their identities, both individually and within their communities. The receipt of final results was a pivotal milestone, underscoring achievements while simultaneously opening the door to future aspirations. These experiences collectively revealed the intricate interplay between academic milestones and personal development,

illustrating how significant life changes fostered resilience and self-discovery. Throughout these events, the intersectional challenges faced by the participants emerged, reflecting the profound impact of gender, socioeconomic status, and cultural expectations on their trajectories. These narratives highlighted the need for environments that supported and empowered young women, recognising the unique obstacles they encountered as they strove to carve out their own paths.

As the discussion progressed to the next section, which focuses on sudden social identity change in newly high school-graduated girls, it explores how these experiences influenced their group memberships and self-concept. This analysis sheds light on the evolving nature of their social identities and the ways in which they navigate the complex landscape of post-high school life.

4.4 SSIC in Newly High School-Graduated Girls

The shift from high school to adulthood represents a period of profound change, marked by significant shifts in social identity. This section explores the Sudden Social Identity Change (SSIC) experienced by newly graduated girls, focusing on the psychological, emotional, social, and agency-related impacts of this change, and is divided into two parts:

- The first part, Impact on Group Memberships, examined how changes in social relationships influenced the participants' identities. Drawing on the theoretical framework of social identity, this section highlighted the alterations in peer dynamics, trust, and support systems that occurred as these young women embarked on new life paths. The exploration will delve into how these transformations affect their social identities and personal growth, providing insights into the resilience and coping strategies they employ.
- The second part, Impact on Sense of Self, delved into the introspective journey that participants undergo during this change. The emotional responses associated with SSIC, such as anxiety, shame, and feelings of loss, are examined in the context of identity development. By integrating theories of identity and emotional catalysts, this section provided a nuanced understanding of how newly graduated girls navigate their evolving sense of self amidst these changes.

By investigating the multifaceted consequences of SSIC on group memberships and personal identity, this section aimed to shed light on the complex experiences of newly graduated girls. This analysis will serve as a foundation for the subsequent discussion on their exercise of agency, highlighting their resilience and proactive efforts to shape their futures.

4.4.1 Impact on Group Memberships

Tajfel et al. (1979) assert that social identity is commonly understood as the aspect of an individual's self-concept that stems from their group memberships *and* the social categories to which they belong. Group memberships are a major contributor to social identity, influencing how individuals perceive themselves and are perceived by others. The change from high school to post-high school brings significant changes in social relationships. The participants' experiences highlight shifts in peer dynamics, trust, and support structures as they navigate new life paths. This section explored how these changes impact their social identities, focusing on observed changes in peers and the influence of these transformations on their personal growth. Following this, the section examined the sources of resilience, and coping strategies employed by the newly high school-graduated girls.

Observed Changes in Peers

The shift from high school to post-graduation life brought significant changes in peer relationships and group dynamics, prompting a re-evaluation of friendships and social circles. As individuals embarked on divergent paths, these changes often reflected the varying directions each chose to pursue.

Detrimental Life Choices

Participants also observed significant shifts in their peers' lifestyle choices and behaviours, which led to altered dynamics in friendships. For example, Participant 1 noticed that some friends began adopting new behaviours, such as *"wearing short crop tops... they went to clubs and things."* She expressed concern about these changes but felt powerless to intervene, noting, *"I was, like, thinking to myself, that's only going to hurt you in the end, but I can't go telling them that."* This divergence in life choices created a sense of distance and underscored how different paths can strain previously close bonds.

The varied post-graduation paths of peers were evident in the observations of Participant 4, who remarked, *"Others chose good paths. Others chose bad paths. Others went into drugs. Others went to study. Others got into marriages at young ages."* This recognition of diverse life trajectories highlighted the complexity of maintaining connections as life circumstances change, with some friends growing and making positive changes while others stagnated or chose less productive paths.

Participant 8 highlighted the influence of external environments and peer support structures, stating, *"I could see in most of the situations, they are surrounded by the things that they do, and their support structure is people who do the things that they're not supposed to do."* This observation emphasises the importance of having a positive and encouraging support system, as negative influences can lead to detrimental life choices.

Participant 15 observed disparities in post-graduation ambitions among her peers. She noted, *"Some of them just gave up, like, totally gave up, didn't see the meaning in to go and look for work,"* contrasting this with others who pursued education or employment. This disparity in motivation and ambition significantly altered social dynamics, as some peers moved forward while others remained static.

Parenthood

Early adulthood milestones, such as marriage and parenthood, were also noted as significant factors affecting peer relationships. Participant 16 mentioned, *"I have a friend that's getting married soon...And then I have a friend that had a baby a few weeks, like two weeks ago."* These life events contribute to shifts in social relationships, as differing priorities and responsibilities emerge among peers.

Familial pressures and external circumstances further influenced life trajectories. Participant 5 shared an example of a friend's drastic life change due to academic failure and parental influence: *"She failed and off she went to Zimbabwe, got married to the chief and has kids. Now she's like 18 with two kids already."* This illustrates how family expectations and external factors, such as academic challenges and immigration issues, can significantly affect social ties and life paths.

Waithood

A common trend among participants' peers was the decision to take gap years. Yet, this so-called gap year often more closely resembled waithood—a prolonged period of uncertainty and exploration without clear direction (Honwana, 2012). This concept of waithood can foster a sense of solidarity among peers facing similar changes but also stressed the lack of structure and guidance in their post-graduation lives.

Participant 7 explained how, in her opinion, this break from academic life allowed many to reflect on their past experiences and plan for future endeavours: *"I know the majority, like at least 60, 70% of the matrics are taking a gap year or most of them are like, they're gonna start working, they're gonna find a job and then maybe start studying in the following years."* Participant 19 concurred, saying that *"everybody experienced matric differently,"* and *"everybody has different goals,"* with around 60% of her peers taking a gap year. Moreover, Participant 8 observed that her classmates had chosen various paths post-graduation, stating, *"99% of my classmates didn't go to university or colleges. They're doing nothing."* This illustrates that for the majority of high school graduates, life after high school is often characterised by a sense of waiting and uncertainty about their next steps. This period, intended for self-discovery, often results in an extended pause in their educational journeys.

Furthermore, as previously mentioned, Participant 2 highlighted the potential pitfalls of taking a gap year, expressed concerns that it could lead to extended periods of inactivity:

"The gap year thing is not really like, my uncle also suggested, take a gap year. You did so much. You passed primary school, high school. You've been through that and this. Like, a lot of my family members didn't make it to matric or anywhere further than that. Then they want to be like, take a gap year and I was like, no man, then one gap year next to five years of being at home, where do I get then?"

Her perspective underscored the fear that a gap year without clear plans might lead to stagnation rather than progress.

Overall, the observed changes in peers and the resulting impact on friendships and social dynamics were profound. These shifts often led to a re-evaluation of relationships, where support, and shared values became critical factors in maintaining connections. The emergence of waithood, often mistaken for a gap year, further emphasised the uncertainty many face without clear guidance or structure. These dynamics have not only reshaped social circles but also highlighted the need for supportive systems that address the challenges of transitioning into adulthood. As participants navigate these changes in their social environments, they also experience a restructuring of their support systems, involving both the loss of old relationships and the gain of new ones.

Restructuring Social Environments

The transition from high school to post-graduation life often entails a significant restructuring of social environments, marking both the end of familiar relationships and the beginning of new ones. This period is a critical phase for newly high school-graduated girls, as it shapes their social identities and influences their future trajectories. The complexities of this transition highlight the dynamic nature of relationships during this formative stage.

Loss of Group Memberships

One of the most profound changes participants experienced was the dissolution of high school friendships, reflecting the inevitable drift that occurs as individuals embark on divergent life paths. For many, the transition revealed the fragility of relationships that were once maintained by the shared environment of school. Participant 2, for instance, had encountered a shift in her circle of friends, discovering that those she once relied on were not as dependable as she had believed. She explained, *"A lot of them changed, especially friends-wise. The friends I thought I could count on, I couldn't."* This realisation had led her to concentrate on a smaller group of trusted individuals who consistently supported her, emphasising the importance of trust in maintaining meaningful post-high school relationships. This theme of reevaluating friendships was echoed by many, illustrating the broader impact of this life transition.

The preference for family over friends was echoed by Participant 2, who found greater reliability in familial relationships: *"Family can be your friends...Friends I can't really rely on. They would always be stabbing each other in the back."* This shift had illuminated the need for trust and stability in social relationships during this transformative phase. For many, family emerged as a source of unwavering support and stability, providing a foundation upon which to build new connections. This reliance on family suggests a shift towards more enduring and dependable relationships.

Similarly, Participant 19 observed a reduction in her friend group size, noting, *"So my friend group, from the beginning of high school to now, after matric, it definitely became smaller."* This shrinking circle signifies the end of some connections that were once maintained by the shared environment of school, a common experience for many transitioning into adulthood. The dissolution of these relationships had often necessitated a re-evaluation of personal values and a selective approach to forming new connections. This process emphasises the need for individuals to assess which relationships are worth nurturing and which should be left behind.

This challenge of maintaining friendships is further stressed by Participant 11, who described how post-graduation life led to a natural drifting apart: *"After that, it wasn't the same, like, we grew apart. And I never saw them again, so that was like goodbye forever, I think."* The realisation that school was the primary commonality highlighted how relationships often dissolve when that binding factor is removed. This sentiment was common among participants who found themselves navigating the complexities of life beyond the familiar structures of school. The end of school often means the end of an era where daily interactions provided a foundation for friendships.

For some, however, the loss of certain friendships was seen as beneficial. Participant 1 noted, *"If you look into it deeper, you would actually be glad that the people that were in my life are no longer in my life because the life that they living now, I can see, is not what I wanted for myself."* This perspective highlighted a growing self-awareness and the importance of aligning relationships with personal values and goals. This selective retention of friendships reflected a desire to cultivate relationships that support one's evolving identity and aspirations. It also points to the importance of surrounding oneself with people who share similar goals and values.

Reflecting on the process of outgrowing certain friendships, Participant 9 described it as a painful yet necessary part of personal growth: *"I've had to outgrow certain people that were in my life previously. It has been the most painful thing."* This evolution signifies a change towards more meaningful and growth-oriented connections, highlighting the emotional complexity of

navigating changing social dynamics. As participants moved forward, they prioritised relationships that aligned with their personal development and future goals. This focus on personal growth indicates a maturation process where individuals are more selective about who they allow into their lives.

Gain of Group Memberships

While the loss of old friendships can be challenging, the post-high school phase also brings opportunities to forge new connections that better align with one's evolving identity and aspirations. This period of transition offered a chance to expand social horizons and form relationships that reflect one's changing interests and goals. The ability to form new friendships was a crucial part of adapting to new environments and life stages.

Participant 16 shared her journey of finding the right friends in a new environment: *"I always felt like I don't fit in a certain group...Then I found two friends, Amira and Daniel. They boost me, they motivate me, and they hype me up."* This process of trial and error in friendships illustrated the search for supportive and positive relationships, underscoring the importance of finding a social network that nurtures growth and self-discovery. The formation of these new connections often provided participants with a sense of belonging and validation in their post-graduation lives.

The diversity and richness of new social interactions in college were highlighted by Participant 18, who described the broad range of backgrounds and experiences encountered: *"Everybody else is obviously in a different age group...It's been different, but it's also been really nice meeting new people."* The variety of age groups and backgrounds in a college setting broadens social horizons and enriches the social experience, offering opportunities for learning and personal development. These interactions often challenged participants to expand their perspectives and embrace new ideas. This exposure to diverse perspectives can foster empathy and understanding, essential qualities in today's interconnected world.

Similarly, Participant 19 described the expansion of her social circle at campus and the depth of discussions that ensued: *"The social circle that I have now at campus is definitely bigger. There are more discussions about what's it like out there, how's everything, how do we deal with certain situations."* This environment fosters a deeper understanding of different life experiences and perspectives, contributing to personal growth. The opportunity to engage with diverse viewpoints often facilitated a richer and more nuanced understanding of the world. Such interactions can lead to the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills, which are vital for personal and professional success.

The ease of forming new connections in a new setting was highlighted by Participant 20, who recounted the positive experience of making new friends during orientation: *"That week we had orientation, just getting to know people. I actually connected with a lot of people...We also clicked instantly, and the friendship is still going strong."* The potential for meaningful and lasting relationships post-high school was evident as participants navigated new social environments. The formation of these bonds often provided participants with a sense of stability and support as they transitioned into new stages of life. This ability to form new connections suggests adaptability and resilience, qualities that are crucial for navigating life's challenges.

Overall, as participants navigated the change to new social environments, they formed new relationships that supported their evolving identities and aspirations. These experiences of loss and gain in social relationships play a vital role in shaping the participants' personal growth and social identities as they adapt to their new environments. The restructuring of social networks reflected the complexities of transitioning from high school to adulthood, where trust, support, and shared values become critical factors in forming lasting connections. The next section will explore the impact of these experiences on their sense of self, focusing on the emotional responses to the restructuring of their group memberships and the emergence of new social identities. This exploration provided further insight into how these young women adapt and thrive in the face of change, illuminating the pathways to personal and social growth.

4.4.2 Impact on Sense of Self

The transition from high school to adulthood represents a critical period marked by significant psychological, emotional, social, and agency-related changes. This process of identity development is intrinsically linked to introspection and self-reflection, allowing individuals to gain insights into their values, beliefs, and aspirations (Erikson, 1968; Hardy & Carlo, 2011). The concept of Sudden Social Identity Change (SSIC), as discussed in the focused literature review, presents a shared thread of emotional responses, irrespective of contextual differences in the abruptness and severity of events. Emotions are closely intertwined with identity development and can serve as powerful catalysts for self-reflection and exploration (Erikson, 1968). Feelings of uncertainty or dissatisfaction with one's current identity status may trigger a quest for new experiences and a reevaluation of the sense of self (Erikson, 1968). Emotional resonance with specific identity options can motivate individuals to make significant changes in their lives, aligning their actions with their authentic selves (Erikson, 1968). This section delves into the emotional and psychological experiences of Sudden Social Identity Change (SSIC) by newly graduated girls, examining the multifaceted consequences of this change.

Shame, Guilt, and Fear

Throughout the transition, participants frequently described experiencing intense emotions, including shame, guilt, and fear, as they navigated SSIC. For instance, Participant 6 had expressed significant concern about having to work after high school and share that with her high school's current grade 12 students who held her in high regard, stating, *"It's going to be so embarrassing if those students who attend my school see me... and they would be like, what are you doing now? And I'm like, oh, I'm working."* This statement revealed a deep-seated anxiety tied to social expectations and perceived personal shortcomings. Similarly, Participant 2 shared feelings of nervousness and a sense of failure, fearing judgment from former educators: *"They expected me to be studying by now, doing something and currently not doing anything... just maybe someone will throw a school reunion, then I'll go, or maybe I'll pop in."*

These narratives highlighted the emotional toll of progressing from the structured environment of school to broader societal roles. The fear of judgment and failure looms large, exacerbating feelings of shame and guilt. Participant 4 had conveyed a profound sense of uselessness, saying, *"I felt unemployed and like a burden to the nation because I was just sitting at home doing nothing [outside of rewriting]."* This theme of fear and self-doubt was echoed by Participant 10, who struggled with adapting to post-school life: *"I'm scared of everything new... I was terrified because it's something new. I'm not going back to school."* The adjustment process, marked by fear and slow acceptance, underscored the psychological challenges inherent in SSIC.

Changes in Physical Appearance

Changes in appearance and self-perception were significant for several participants. Participant 3 detailed the physical and emotional transformation: *"I'm definitely not who I was before... my hair is shorter, I've gained weight... I still had to grow up and do adult things and fill adult spaces."* This alteration in self-image reflected the broader changes in identity that accompany the change from adolescence to adulthood. Similarly, as previously mentioned in the section concerning post-high school experiences, specifically the day of receiving their final marks, Participant 11 noted the changes in her peers' appearances as they waited for their results. *"It was nice seeing everybody again after that December holiday for break. Everybody looked so different. Some people had lost weight; some people had gained weight. Some people were prettier than before. I was like, wow, what's this?"* Participant 12 similarly took pride the shift in how she presents herself, sharing, *"Now I feel like I'm showing up for myself, actually dressing up... because it's a workspace, you need to look the part."*

These changes in appearance and self-presentation highlighted the evolving sense of identity among newly graduated girls. The need to adapt to new roles and environments often necessitates a re-evaluation of personal image and self-perception, contributing to the complex process of SSIC.

Self-awareness

In addition to changes in physical appearance, participants also exhibited increased self-awareness and reflection. Participant 1 had mentioned becoming more reliable and focused on academics: *"I've become more self-observant... if I don't get something right, I will pray or calm myself down first and try and figure out what am I doing wrong."* This introspection highlighted the ongoing personal growth and adaptation during this transformative period. The development of self-awareness is necessary for navigating the complexities of SSIC, as it enables individuals to critically evaluate their actions and make informed decisions about their futures.

Independence

The shift to independence had emerged as a significant aspect of SSIC. Participants discussed the challenges and realisations associated with newfound responsibilities. Participant 7 reflected on the financial realities of adult life: *"I realised that, like, you actually need money to survive in the world... I don't always have money... I need to start making money now."* This eye-opening experience emphasises the change from financial dependence to self-sufficiency. Similarly, Participant 14 recounted the difficulty of assuming personal responsibility: *"I was more reliant on my parents... but now I cover my own staying, buy my own toiletries, sort out my transport."*

The journey towards independence involved a re-evaluation of personal capabilities and responsibilities. Participant 16 noted a rapid maturation process: *"I became very matured for my age... I do feel like I'm not completely in adulthood yet, but I know that I'm almost there."* This progression from dependence to independence is further illustrated by Participant 18, who emphasised the personal growth achieved through handling responsibilities on her own: *"I've become more independent because I've done it all on my own... the process of applying, going for open day, the interview with the music [school]."*

New Belonging, Openness, and Adaptation

Feelings of belonging, or lack thereof, were also prominent in the participants' experiences. Participant 1 described an acute sense of alienation when returning to their high school to collect her siblings: *"I felt like I don't belong here anymore... I ended up just staying in the car."* Participant 12 shared the same sentiment when dropping her sibling off at school: *"Going back after that [with my sister] and going into the school like, this is not where I belong anymore"*. This sense of displacement had been compounded by the realisation that former social ties had dissolved, leaving a void where connections once existed. The loss of a familiar social environment contributed to feelings of isolation and disconnection, underscoring the social challenges associated with SSIC.

In contrast, as noted in the previous section concerning the restructuring of social environments and gain of social group memberships, participants had made new connections in work and college environments, which gave a renewed sense of belonging. The researcher noted in her research reflection journal that participants who had gone on to higher education or employment mentioned that the change in environment—from being the oldest in the school as the grade 12 students, where everyone is young and, for the most part, less mature, to being the youngest in higher education and work environments—meant they matured due to their affiliations with people who were years older, sometimes a decade older, and had life experiences such as raising children and experiencing divorce. They noticed that the conversations they were having had matured, as well as their priorities. The experience of adapting to new environments and expectations was echoed by Participant 7, who had noted the influence of older peers: *"Being around older people really is, like, an eye-opener... I have to be more of an adult now."*

Openness to change and adaptation was a recurring theme among participants. Participant 14 emphasised the importance of adaptability: *"Being able to adjust and evolve with those changes can sometimes be crucial... you need to adjust to a different lifestyle."* This sentiment was shared by Participant 2, who described the necessity of reevaluating and altering plans: *"I need to reverse and then revolt again... take three steps back and then two steps forward."* The ability to remain open and adaptable is essential for managing the uncertainties and challenges of SSIC. By embracing change and reevaluating their paths, participants demonstrated resilience and a willingness to grow, essential qualities for navigating this period of change.

Maintenance, Comfort, and Confidence

Finally, participants discussed the need for maintenance of personal comfort and confidence. Participant 3 had recounted the reassurance of being recognised as unchanged by a childhood friend: *"He was like, you know what? You're still exactly the same... I appreciate that because a big fear of mine growing up was having to fit into this person or to fit the norms."* This continuity provided a sense of stability amidst change. Participant 5 had shared her journey of rejecting peer pressure and finding their own path: *"I realised that's not what I wanted to do... I want to do something that I enjoy, something that I'm passionate about."* This search for authenticity and passion stressed the importance of self-acceptance and confidence during periods of change. Maintaining personal comfort and confidence was important for participants as they navigated SSIC. By staying true to themselves and resisting external pressures, they were able to foster a sense of stability and self-assurance, which supported their overall well-being.

The experiences of these newly high school graduates illustrate the multifaceted nature of Sudden Social Identity Change (SSIC), encompassing psychological, emotional, social, and agency-related changes. As they navigated this critical transition, they faced significant challenges but also demonstrated resilience and adaptability. Understanding these experiences provided valuable insights into the complexities of identity formation and the factors that influence successful transitions to adulthood.

4.4.3 SSIC Conclusion

The journey through Sudden Social Identity Change (SSIC) revealed the intricate interplay of psychological, emotional, social, and agency-related transformations experienced by new high school graduates. As participants adapted to new social environments, they formed relationships that aligned with their evolving identities and aspirations. This period of transition involved both the loss of familiar connections and the forging of new ones, underscoring the importance of trust, support, and shared values in building meaningful relationships. **The restructuring of social networks during this time reflected the complexities of moving from high school to adulthood, where personal growth and social identity development were closely linked.** As these young women redefined their sense of self, they demonstrated resilience and adaptability in the face of change. The next section delved into the social sources of resilience, exploring how these relationships contribute to emotional development and enhanced agency.

4.5 Sources of Resilience and Coping Strategies

Navigating the transition from high school to post-graduation life presents significant challenges, yet various sources of resilience and coping strategies can help individuals manage these changes. Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory highlighted the importance of believing in one's ability to succeed in specific situations, highlighting key aspects such as mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and physiological and emotional states. These factors influence behaviour choices, effort, persistence, thought patterns, emotional reactions, and motivation, ultimately shaping an individual's ability to face challenges and persist in adversity.

The role of self-efficacy is further enhanced by robust coping skills and a positive attitude toward identity change, allowing individuals to transform challenges into opportunities for growth and development (Iyer et al., 2009, 2010). Aspirations are often motivated by the support and expectations of family and community networks, as communal ties provide encouragement and accountability, helping individuals strive for higher achievements despite obstacles. Coleman's (1988) concept of social capital emphasised the foundational role that communal support systems play in fostering resilience and ambition. This section explored the diverse mechanisms that the participants relied on, including support from peers, parents, educators, faith, faith leaders, and role models.

Peers

Peers played a significant role in providing emotional support and fostering resilience among the participants. For instance, Participant 3 had highlighted the multifaceted support system she had, which included friends, family, youth groups, church, and religious leaders. *"My friends, my family, my youth, my church, my priest, and my priest sister. It's like all of them...friends who would teach me resilience, gracefulness...how great it is to be with people that get you and that you can just be yourself with,"* she shared. This comprehensive support

network helped her build the necessary coping mechanisms to navigate the challenges of post-high school life.

Similarly, Participant 10 had reflected on the camaraderie and mutual support among her friends during Grade 12. She described her time in school as a collective adventure: *"We all had an amazing adventure in grade 12, but we also had struggling moments. So, through the struggling moments, we always had fun. We always made each other laugh. So, grade 12 was like a breeze with them."* This bond extended beyond academic support to a familial level, forming a tight-knit group that collectively faced challenges and celebrated successes. *"If I got into trouble, we all get into trouble...we all helped each other during the exams,"* she added, emphasising the depth of their connection.

Further illustrating the power of peer support, Participant 13 recounted how her friends provided emotional support and encouragement during stressful times, particularly when academic pressures mounted. She shared an incident where a friend called her before a math exam, urging her not to give up, saying, *"No, you're going to keep studying."* This push from friends often made the difference between giving up and persevering, highlighting the vital role of peer encouragement.

In addition to friendships, family ties offered another layer of support. For Participant 16, family bonds, especially with cousins, provided a significant source of comfort and resilience. She expressed, *"I'd be going through a tough time, and I just see my cousins, and then I'm okay."* The presence of cousins, even if unspoken, played a crucial role in her emotional well-being and coping strategies.

Overall, peers provided a crucial buffer against the stresses of progressing from high school to post-graduation life. The support from friends and family fostered a sense of belonging and shared resilience, enabling participants to navigate their new environments with confidence. In addition to peer and family support, parents and other seniors played a significant role in providing stability and guidance during this transformative period.

Parents and Other Familial Seniors

Parental and guardian support emerged as a significant pillar of resilience for many participants. For instance, Participant 1 had described a shift in their parents' approach from high expectations to unconditional support, which helped her become calmer and more confident. *"They said, 'We believe you're trying your best. As long as you know you are trying your best, we are happy with whatever you bring home,'"* she recalled. This change in parental attitude fostered a more supportive and less stressful environment, allowing her to approach her academic responsibilities with a clearer mind and greater self-assurance.

Building on this theme of parental support, Participant 13 had highlighted the balanced approach of her parents, particularly her father's pragmatic advice about studying abroad and not pressuring her into pursuing something she was unsure about. *"His main goal for me is just to get out of the country and work somewhere that's gonna pay me well,"* she noted. This emphasis on practical and supportive guidance helped alleviate pressure and provided a clear direction, making the change smoother and more manageable.

Similarly, Participant 14 spoke about her father's understanding of different learning abilities and the emphasis on doing one's best within one's capabilities. *"Not everybody's performed in that way. So, he always told us, 'You do the best you can because you know who you are,'"* she

recounted. This understanding and acceptance of individual differences helped build self-confidence and resilience, encouraging her to focus on her strengths rather than feeling overwhelmed by comparisons.

Furthermore, Participant 7 illuminated the importance of consistency instilled by her parents, which became a key factor in her personal growth. *"To be able to grow, you need to stay consistent,"* she said, reflecting on the structured support from her parents and grandparents that kept her on track. The disciplined environment provided by her family ensured that she remained focused and diligent in her studies, fostering a sense of responsibility and perseverance.

In addition to immediate family support, the influence of extended family members also emerged as a significant support mechanism. Participant 2 shared how her aunts played a significant role in her educational journey by providing access to resources like laptops and encouraging her to persevere despite setbacks. *"My aunts helped me, like, getting into varsities because they have laptops...My granny told me she's very proud of me because I was her only granddaughter that passed primary school without failing,"* she explained. This extended family support system reinforced the participants' determination and provided her with practical assistance and emotional encouragement.

Overall, parental and extended family support provided a stable foundation, enabling participants to navigate their post-high school changes with greater confidence and resilience. Alongside family support, educators also played a pivotal role in shaping the participants' resilience and coping strategies.

Educators

Educators were frequently mentioned as pivotal figures in the participants' lives, providing both academic and emotional support. For example, Participant 5 credited her teachers with shaping her into the person she today. *"Despite having naughty boys smoking weed on school, the motivation was there...My teachers shaped me into the woman that I am today,"* she affirmed. This enduring impact underscored the significant role educators play beyond the classroom, influencing their students' personal development and future aspirations.

Expanding on this theme, Participant 10 shared how a teacher formed a fatherly bond with her, providing guidance and support beyond the classroom. *"He kind of formed a fatherly bond with me...he is still helping me while I'm out of school now,"* she mentioned, highlighting the lasting impact of this relationship. The support from this teacher extended beyond academic assistance, offering emotional stability and practical guidance during her change from school to adulthood.

In a similar vein, Participant 8 recounted her experience with a compassionate Grade 4 teacher who helped her adapt to a new environment and overcome shyness. *"She was one of the best...she would make the...I'm gonna get emotional because that lady just touched my heart,"* she recalled, emphasising the profound influence this teacher had on her confidence and social integration. This teacher's nurturing approach helped her feel valued and supported, laying a foundation for her future resilience.

Overall, the guidance and support from educators were pivotal in helping participants navigate the challenges of their academic and personal lives, fostering resilience and self-belief. The positive impact of these relationships emphasises the importance of compassionate and

dedicated educators in shaping students' futures. Transitioning to another significant influence, faith also emerged as a substantial source of resilience, providing spiritual and emotional sustenance during challenging times.

Faith and Faith Leaders

Faith emerged as a prominent source of resilience for many participants, offering both spiritual and emotional sustenance. To illustrate this, Participant 1 described how becoming more religious helped her stay calm and focused during stressful times. *"I used to pray a lot more because I knew, hey, that study, at least let me go ask the one on top to help me,"* she said, reflecting on the calming effect of her faith. This reliance on spiritual practices provided a sense of peace and assurance, helping her manage her stress and maintain her focus.

Similarly, Participant 3 credited her church community for keeping her on the right path and providing valuable life lessons. *"My church is just...it keeps me on the path, and it just shows me, it teaches me so much,"* she noted. The support from her church community offered a sense of belonging and moral guidance, reinforcing her values and helping her navigate life's challenges.

Moreover, Participant 12 shared how fasting and prayer helped her navigate uncertainty and maintain hope. *"I am a strong believer. I believe that God has a good future for me...I know that he still has a plan for my life,"* she stated, highlighting the importance of faith in her coping strategies. Her belief in a higher purpose provided a source of strength and optimism, enabling her to persevere through difficulties.

In addition, Participant 15 described how her faith and belief in her abilities, bolstered by daily meditation on religious texts, provided a strong foundation for resilience. *"I knew that this year is gonna be a year where I'm gonna grow...reading the word daily and meditating on it,"* she mentioned. This practice of daily reflection and spiritual engagement helped her stay grounded and motivated, reinforcing her commitment to personal growth.

Through these narratives, it is clear that faith provided a strong foundation for resilience, helping participants to remain hopeful and grounded during uncertain times. Their spiritual practices and beliefs offered both emotional support and a sense of purpose, guiding them through their changes. Alongside personal faith, faith leaders also played a significant role in providing guidance and support.

Participant 8 had spoken about her Bible study mentor, who offered invaluable advice and companionship. *"She's wonderful and she listens...she's just making my life a bit happier,"* she shared, highlighting the positive impact of this relationship. This mentor provided not only spiritual guidance but also emotional support, helping her navigate challenges with greater ease.

Furthermore, Participant 6 recounted how her pastor, who also served as her karate sensei and tutor, stepped into a fatherly role after her father's passing. *"He kind of just stepped up, like, as my father, basically,"* she said, emphasising the multifaceted support provided by this faith leader. The guidance from her pastor extended beyond spiritual teachings, offering practical advice and emotional stability during a critical period of her life.

Overall, faith leaders provided not only spiritual guidance but also emotional and practical support, helping participants navigate their changes with greater resilience. Their multifaceted

roles in the participants' lives stressed the importance of having supportive and nurturing figures who can offer guidance and stability. Role models, both within and outside the family, also provided inspiration and guidance.

Role Models

Role models served as important sources of inspiration and guidance for the participants, offering a glimpse into their possible social identities. For instance, Participant 2 admired their aunt, a lawyer, who provided encouragement and built their self-confidence from a young age. *"She always used to tell me I'm a mini version of her...she encouraged me when I felt, like, down the most,"* she said. This aunt's achievements and support offered a powerful example of what she could aspire to, reinforcing her self-belief and determination, and shaping a possible identity as a successful professional.

In a similar vein, Participant 5 was inspired by the motivational talks given by various speakers at their school, which fuelled their desire to become a public speaker and mentor. *"I always knew that I wanted to stand on that stage and talk to a crowd one day...they inspired me,"* she reflected. The influence of these role models provided a clear vision of their aspirations and motivated her to pursue their goals with confidence, envisioning a possible future identity as a leader and influencer.

Moreover, Participant 6 described how their pastor's dominant and unapologetic personality served as a model for self-assurance and independence. *"If there was a picture of someone who was unapologetically themselves, he would be the picture,"* she remarked, underscoring the impact of this role model on their personal development. This example of self-confidence and independence provided a powerful blueprint for their own growth and resilience, contributing to their possible identity as self-reliant and empowered individuals.

Overall, role models provided valuable examples of success and resilience, inspiring participants to pursue their goals with confidence and determination. The guidance and inspiration from these figures not only helped shape their aspirations but also played a significant role in shaping individuals' self-concepts and behaviour (Cinnirella, 1998).

These diverse coping strategies and sources of resilience—encompassing peer support, family guidance, educator influence, faith, faith leaders, and role models—collectively helped the participants navigate the change from high school to post-graduation life. As they moved through this critical period, the support and inspiration from these various sources enabled them to develop the resilience and coping mechanisms needed to face new challenges. The following section delved into the concept of Sudden Social Identity Change (SSIC) in newly high school-graduated girls, exploring the psychological, emotional, social, and agency-related consequences of this change, as was examined in the literature review for other cases of SSIC.

4.6 Exercise of Agency

The change from high school to adulthood is a pivotal period for newly graduated girls, marked by various challenges and opportunities. This section examined how these individuals exercise their agency, particularly in resistance of being classified as NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training). Through their post-high school experiences, changes in group memberships, and sources of resilience, these girls demonstrated proactive strategies to navigate their futures. This section highlighted their actions, resilience, and determination to avoid becoming a *"statistic,"* despite the intersectional challenges they face.

Studying

For many newly graduated girls, further education represents a significant avenue for exercising agency and shaping their futures. Participant 1 had found joy in the newfound freedom and autonomy that college life provided. She recounted, *"I've had, like, maybe three good days that I could say is like something I would smile upon. And that would be the first or second week of attending college."* These moments included driving with cousins, leaving campus for meals, and making new friends. The ability to leave college without restrictions, unlike high school, was liberating: *"We just left. And I was thinking, like, aren't they gonna knock us down for this? Aren't they gonna kill us for this? And I realised, no, it's college. They don't care what you do."* These experiences highlighted her sense of agency in a less structured environment, illustrating how newfound autonomy can be a source of empowerment and motivation.

Similarly, Participant 6's journey to university was marked by perseverance and resilience. Initially, she faced uncertainty about her acceptance into Stellenbosch University due to a lack of communication from the administration. She had described her determination: *"I had to email the faculty recruiter my results and my proposed programme. And then the day before the classes started... I went there."* Her persistence paid off when she was accepted on the spot, a moment she shared with her family: *"My brother's girlfriend hugged me, and then my brother, like, we did a handshake."* This experience highlighted her proactive approach to overcoming administrative hurdles to secure her education, demonstrating the importance of persistence and family support in navigating higher education pathways.

Progressing from high school to higher education often involves adapting to unexpected circumstances. For Participant 18, this meant finding a new path when initial plans did not materialize. Despite passing with a certificate, she did not meet university admission requirements and had to reconsider her plans. She shared, *"I was at home for, like, until the beginning of March, and then I was obviously tired of sitting at home because it becomes boring."* Her resilience shone through as she enrolled in a college law programme, despite it not being her first choice. She reflected, *"Meeting new people has been a very nice thing... it became like something I started liking, which I actually thought of continuing next year."* Her story illustrates adaptability and finding new paths when initial plans do not materialise, emphasising the role of flexibility in achieving long-term goals.

Rewriting

In addition to pursuing further education, some participants chose to rewrite their final high school exams as a means of improving their academic standing and expanding their future opportunities. Participant 3's response to being waitlisted by her preferred college was to rewrite her exams, demonstrating a commitment to improving her academic standing. She recalled, *"I got waitlisted and I remember I felt so bummed about it... I passed, but I knew I could do better, so I was like, okay, let me, I'm gonna rewrite to get better marks and apply for something else."* While preparing for the exams, she remained active in her community, participating in events like *"Bale"* during Easter weekend, which brought together local soccer teams. These activities provided a sense of normalcy and continuity, helping her stay connected with friends and community during a challenging time. Her proactive decision to rewrite exams showcased a strategic approach to overcoming initial setbacks and maintaining academic aspirations.

Similarly, Participant 4 faced a significant change by enrolling in a boarding school in a different country. She described the experience as *"very different because the system that I was used to then, South Africa, is very different from here."* The academic workload was more demanding, yet she embraced the challenge, highlighting her independence and resilience. Her journey to the new school was a unique experience: *"I boarded the bus. After I boarded the bus, I was in the bus for four and a half days... I was excited to experiencing the world by myself for the first time."* This narrative underscored her courage in adapting to new environments and educational systems, illustrating the role of self-reliance in navigating changes.

Interning/Working

Brief periods of being NEET were a common experience among participants who chose or were forced to enter the workforce after high school, but they found ways to navigate this phase through persistence and support networks. Participant 13 felt a sense of stagnation while waiting for a job response after deciding against further studies. She described, *"I didn't end up going to study... I didn't hear back from [the company] until, like, close to, like, middle or, like, end of February."* Despite this, she eventually secured employment, reflecting her adaptability in finding work and overcoming the feeling of being *"stagnant."* Her experience highlighted the importance of persistence and the willingness to explore different opportunities while waiting for desired outcomes.

Similarly, Participant 15 took proactive steps by creating a CV and networking within her community. She shared, *"I asked around in my community, in my family, that if they maybe know of a work opportunity, they should let me know."* This initiative paid off when she received a job referral from her cousin, illustrating the importance of leveraging social connections. She expressed gratitude for the opportunity: *"I think 2024 started bad. But for me now... I can say that though the has turned out much more brighter than I ever expected it to turn out."* Her story emphasised the significance of community support and proactive job-seeking strategies in overcoming initial employment challenges.

Participant 12 had faced disappointment after university rejections but found solace in faith and family support. She recalled, *"I was just at home and then my godmother, she just told me that maybe I should just start working and just see what happens."* Eventually, through her mother's connections, she secured a job, demonstrating the role of social networks in providing support during uncertain times. This narrative highlighted the interplay between personal networks and resilience in navigating career pathways.

Participant 5 excelled academically, achieving excellent final high school results, which opened multiple career options. However, she initially faced pressure to follow conventional career paths such as teaching or law. She reflected, *"I realised that's not what I wanted to study... it was peer pressure."* Instead, she chose to pursue her passion for motivational speaking, showcasing her assertiveness in defining her career goals. She shared her journey and motivation: *"I love talking... I'm passionate about talking... it didn't stop me from finishing my matric. It just gave me more power, motivated me, that for me to get out of the situation I have to do well in school."* Her story emphasises the importance of self-awareness and the courage to pursue one's passions, despite external pressures.

The narratives of these newly high school-graduated girls illustrated their remarkable resilience, adaptability, and agency in navigating the complex post-graduation landscape.

Through their experiences in further education, rewriting exams, and entering the workforce, they demonstrated a steadfast commitment to their futures, leveraging support networks and personal determination to resist becoming NEET. These stories highlighted the importance of proactive decision-making, community support, and the courage to pursue one's passions, ultimately showcasing their collective resistance to being mere statistics in a challenging societal context. The next chapter addresses the findings limitations of this research.

4.7 Findings Limitations

This study aimed to understand how post-high school experiences, occurring over a short period (five to six months), influence the social identities of newly graduated young women through the loss, gain, and maintenance of group memberships and social support structures. However, several limitations might have impacted the findings and interpretations of this research:

Sample Selection

The study's sample had been limited to participants who were able-bodied and comfortable expressing themselves in English. This criterion might have excluded individuals who communicate in other languages or have disabilities, potentially narrowing the diversity of perspectives captured. Additionally, participants needed access to a smartphone and a WhatsApp profile to participate, which might have further limited the sample to those with specific technological access and capabilities.

Research Design

The hermeneutic phenomenological approach relies heavily on storytelling, requiring participants to articulate their experiences in a narrative form. Not all young women of colour may be natural storytellers, especially given the limited time available for interviews. This might have affected the depth and richness of the data collected, as some participants might have struggled to convey their experiences fully within the constraints of the interview format.

Time Constraints

The study was conducted within a specific timeframe, which might have restricted the ability to collect data or explore certain aspects in more detail. The time limitations might have prevented a more comprehensive examination of the participants' experiences or hindered the opportunity to conduct follow-up interviews to clarify or expand upon initial findings.

Data Collection

Data was collected using WhatsApp video calls, which presented several challenges. The medium lacked non-verbal cues, which are often crucial for interpreting emotions and nuances in participants' stories. Additionally, potential connectivity issues and sound problems, especially with older model phones, might have affected the quality of the data and the ease with which participants could share their experiences.

Data Collection Environment

As mentioned in the description of the research context, while most participants secured private spaces such as their bedrooms or dormitory rooms for the interviews, a notable subset participated from communal environments, including sitting or TV rooms, and even workspaces. These less private settings might have influenced the depth and openness of participants' responses, potentially impacting the quality of the data collected. This limitation was acknowledged as it could introduce variability in the participants' comfort levels and

willingness to share sensitive information, which in turn might have affected the richness of the data.

Participant Honesty and Recall

The reliability of the data is contingent upon participants' honesty and their ability to accurately recall past experiences. There is always a possibility that participants might have omitted or altered details due to forgetfulness, social desirability, or discomfort with certain topics. These factors could impact the authenticity and reliability of the narratives collected.

Despite these limitations, the study provided valuable insights into the experiences of newly high school-graduated girls of colour, highlighting the need for further research to address these constraints and expand upon the findings. Future research should aim to include a more diverse sample, consider alternative data collection methods that allow for richer non-verbal communication, and potentially extend the study period to capture more detailed and varied experiences.

4.8 Findings Conclusion

The findings chapter provided a nuanced and comprehensive exploration of the experiences of newly high school-graduated girls, illuminating the diverse challenges and opportunities they faced as they transitioned from high school to adulthood. This journey was marked by a series of critical events and processes that shaped their evolving identities, aspirations, and social networks.

Starting with the description of participants and research context, the chapter highlighted the intricate interplay of socioeconomic and educational factors that influenced the trajectories of these young women. The diverse backgrounds and high school achievements of the participants, alongside their motivations and aspirations, stressed the complex realities they navigated. By examining the research setting and employing a rigorous methodology, the study ensured that the data collected was rich and reflective of the participants' lived experiences. This foundation set the stage for a deeper exploration of the post-high school experiences that defined their transition to adulthood.

The experiences of post-high school events revealed the emotional and psychological shifts that accompanied this transformative phase. From the anxiety and anticipation surrounding final exams to the reflective moments during the December break, each event contributed to a complex narrative of growth, challenge, and transformation. Participant 3 described the December break as a time of "*constant worry*" about the future, yet also found it to be an opportunity to connect with friends and family. These moments were filled with tension between past routines and future possibilities, highlighting the participants' resilience and adaptability. The receipt of final results served as a pivotal milestone, underscoring their achievements while simultaneously opening the door to future aspirations. Participant 5 recounted her relief and excitement upon receiving her bachelor's pass, which motivated her to apply for university. These experiences collectively illustrated the profound impact of academic milestones on personal development and self-discovery, emphasising the importance of understanding these events within the broader context of gender, socioeconomic status, and societal expectations.

The concept of Sudden Social Identity Change (SSIC) offered a framework for understanding the psychological, emotional, social, and agency-related transformations experienced by the

participants. As they adapted to new social environments, they encountered both the loss of familiar connections and the formation of new ones, underscoring the importance of trust, support, and shared values in building meaningful relationships. Participant 8 noted the shift in friendships after graduation, stating, "Some friends I used to rely on drifted away, but I found new ones who shared my interests and goals." The restructuring of social networks during this time reflected the complexities of moving from high school to adulthood, where personal growth and social identity development were closely linked. The participants demonstrated resilience and adaptability in the face of change, as they navigated the challenges of redefining their sense of self and establishing connections that aligned with their evolving identities and goals.

The chapter also delved into the social sources of resilience that enabled participants to navigate the complexities of post-graduation life. These sources of support, including peers, family, educators, faith, faith leaders, and role models, provided the encouragement and guidance needed to face new challenges with determination and agency. The diverse coping strategies employed by the participants highlighted their ability to leverage support networks to resist being labelled as NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) and pursue their aspirations. Through their experiences in further education, rewriting exams, and entering the workforce, the participants showcased their commitment to their futures and their capacity for proactive decision-making.

In conclusion, the findings chapter offered a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the transition from high school to adulthood for newly graduated girls. It captured their resilience, adaptability, and agency in navigating a complex socioeconomic landscape, highlighting the importance of supportive environments that empower young women to pursue their goals. As the study transitions to the Discussion chapter, it explores the broader implications of these findings, delving deeper into how post-high school experiences impact the social identities and agency of newly graduated girls. This analysis provided a comprehensive understanding of their strategies for success, offering insights into the factors that contribute to their resilience and empowerment in the face of societal challenges. By examining these dynamics, the discussion illuminated the pathways to success for newly graduated girls and the critical role of supportive networks in fostering their growth and development.

5 Discussion

The shift from high school to adulthood represents a pivotal phase in the lives of newly graduated girls, characterised by a profound transformation of their social identities. This chapter delves into the findings of the study, exploring how post-high school experiences shape these young women's identities and influence their ability to navigate the complexities of their new circumstances. By examining the factors that empower these individuals this discussion provided valuable insights into the mechanisms that foster resilience and agency during this critical life stage.

In exploring the Changes in Social Identities, this chapter draws on theoretical frameworks such as Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) and Identity Process Theory (Breakwell, 2014) to illuminate the dynamic processes of identity formation and adaptation. As participants leave the structured environment of high school and enter new social spheres, they encounter

a range of challenges and opportunities that reshape their social identities. The discussion highlighted the interplay of gender and socioeconomic status in influencing identity development, offering a nuanced understanding of the unique obstacles and prospects faced by these young women.

The subsequent section, Sources of Resilience and Coping Strategies, examined the multifaceted support systems that enable participants to effectively manage the transition from high school to post-graduation life. The analysis underscored the importance of self-efficacy, social capital, and community support in promoting resilience and agency. By highlighting the diverse sources of support and inspiration, such as peers, parents, educators, faith and faith leaders, and role models, this section emphasises the crucial role of social networks in facilitating positive identity development and empowering young women to overcome adversity.

Moving on to the Exercise of Agency, the chapter investigated how participants exercise their agency to actively shape their futures and resist being classified as NEET. Through their pursuit of further education, engagement in rewriting exams, and entry into the workforce, these young women demonstrated a remarkable commitment to their personal and professional growth. This section explored their proactive strategies, resilience, and determination, underscoring the significance of agency in navigating the post-graduation landscape and achieving their aspirations.

Finally, the chapter concluded with a discussion of the Implications for Research, Practice, and Policy, highlighting the theoretical and practical contributions of the study. By offering insights into the factors that influence social identity development and agency, this research informs strategies for supporting newly graduated young women in their construction of a productive adulthood. The findings emphasise the need for inclusive environments and supportive systems that empower individuals to pursue their goals and thrive in their future endeavours.

In synthesising the study's findings, this discussion chapter provided a comprehensive analysis of the transformative journey from high school to adulthood, shedding light on the interplay of identity, agency, and resilience. By understanding the experiences of newly graduated young women and the factors that enable their success, educators, policymakers, and communities can better support these individuals in their quest for empowerment and achievement.

5.1 Post-High School Experiences

<p>Self-Led/Traumatic</p> <p>(SL/T)</p> <p>e.g., “coming out”; surviving a suicide attempt</p>	<p>Non-Self Led/Traumatic</p> <p>(N-SL/T)</p> <p>e.g., suicide loss; moral injury; acquired impairment; debilitating illness; diaspora; displacement</p>
<p>Self-Led/Non-Traumatic</p> <p>(SL/N-T)</p> <p>e.g., studying abroad; dramatic weight loss; post-high school experiences of newly graduated girls</p>	<p>Non-Self Led/Non-Traumatic</p> <p>(N-SL/N-T)</p> <p>e.g., NHCWs sudden zero-to-hero change in social status during the COVID-19 pandemic</p>

Figure 17 - SSIC Event Categories including *The Impact of Post-High School Experiences of Newly Graduated Girls* (created by Author)

As newly graduated girls navigate the sudden changes in their social identities, they encounter a range of emotional experiences that significantly impact their feelings and responses. This section examined these findings, providing a foundational understanding of the emotional impact of these sudden shifts. The discussion addressed the research sub-question: “*What are the post-high school experiences of newly graduated girls?*” by exploring how experiences influence the emotional landscape of the participants.

The act of graduating from high school, at face value, appeared to be neither self-led nor traumatic, as it is a universally anticipated and socially celebrated milestone. It was therefore been initially assumed that the sudden social identity change (SSIC) experienced by newly graduated girls would fall into the non-self-led/non-traumatic (N-SL/N-T) quadrant of SSIC events, aligning with experiences of the zero-to-hero transformation observed in National Healthcare Workers (NHCWs) during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (Hennekam et al., 2020), and characterised by feelings of incredulity and concern for societal expectations. The expectation had been that these young women would experience a sense of incredulity and anxiety regarding their promised future and societal expectations. However, this assumption did not fully capture the complexities and emotional nuances of their experiences during this period.

In the context of newly graduated girls, it was also anticipated that the transition from high school would be a period of self-discovery and exploration, devoid of significant distress or

trauma. The emphasis was on the collective societal expectation that graduation marks the beginning of newfound freedom and opportunity. However, this perspective overlooked the individual emotional and psychological challenges that can accompany anxiety about future prospects and pressure to meet societal expectations – that being the sudden loss of familiar routines and social structures.

Schools Reopening

As the participants had approached the start of the new school year, a period from which they were excluded from back-to-school rituals, their experiences were not dissimilar to the non-self-led/traumatic (N-SL/T) experiences of diaspora, as identified by Gursoy (2021). The diaspora experience was characterised by feelings of grief, loss, and disorientation, as individuals navigate the challenges of being uprooted from familiar environments and communities. Similarly, these **newly graduated girls found themselves in a state of limbo, unable to exert their agency, whilst waiting for their academic fate to be determined while observing what seemed to be the rest of the world move forward with their lives.**

This period of waiting and uncertainty was marked by a profound sense of disconnection and isolation. Participants 12,13, and 15 reported feeling left behind as their peers transitioned into the next phase of their lives, whether through continued education or entering the workforce. The exclusion from the traditional start of the school year highlighted their changed status and heightened their awareness of the uncertainty surrounding their future paths. The emotional toll of this liminal state had been significant, with many participants having experienced feelings of grief for the loss of their established social roles and identities as students.

The emotional challenges faced during this period are indicative of the broader societal pressures and expectations placed upon these young women. The shift from being a student to navigating the uncertainties of post-graduation life is a complex and multifaceted process, involving not only practical considerations but also deep-seated psychological and emotional adjustments. The experiences of the participants during this time reflect the intricate interplay between personal aspirations, societal norms, and the realities of their changing circumstances.

Receiving Graduation Results

In the lead-up to receiving their final high school results, the experiences of the participants mirrored self-led/traumatic (SL/T) events, such as the act of coming out, as described by Hollier (2023). This phase, which for Participant 4 began midway through her December break, was **characterised by intense psychological distress, including anticipation, as well as fear-induced anxiety and pre-emptive shame** experienced by Participants 2,6,7,8,16, and 19, and Participants 3,6, and 12, respectively. The tension between hope and dread regarding their fate was displayed in seeking comfort in company or solitude. An exception to this was Participant 7 who did not exhibit these emotions and instead closely observed her peers with a sense of calm. The waiting period before the release of exam results was fraught with uncertainty and heightened emotions, as the participants grappled with the implications of their performance for their future trajectories.

The psychological distress experienced during this time was rooted in the high stakes associated with academic success and the societal emphasis on educational achievement as a determinant of future opportunities. The participants expressed concerns about meeting parental and societal expectations, as well as fears of disappointing themselves and others. The

pressure to perform well was compounded by the knowledge that their results would significantly influence their options for higher education and employment.

The emotional intensity of this period is comparable to the experiences of individuals undergoing significant life transitions that involve personal disclosure and vulnerability. The act of waiting for exam results is akin to a form of social coming out, where individuals must confront the reality of their achievements and the potential for both acceptance and rejection. This emotional turmoil illuminated the deep connection between educational outcomes and self-identity, highlighting the profound impact of academic milestones on personal development and self-perception.

Post-Results Experiences

After receiving their final results, the experiences of the participants had shifted to more closely align with and settled in the self-led/non-traumatic (SL/N-T) quadrant, similar to events such as drastic weight loss, which involve restructuring one's social environment and increased awareness of societal expectations (Rubin et al., 1993). This phase had been **characterised by a process of adaptation and re-evaluation of identities by Participants 2,7,12, and 14, such as by feelings of disconnection to the high school environment and finding a new sense of belonging in higher education and workplace environments** and among their mostly older peers. An exception to this was Participant 10 who exhibited feelings of fear regarding life after high school and a delayed acceptance of the loss of her high school student identity.

Participant 7, for example, noted the influence of older peers: *"Being around older people really is, like, an eye-opener... I have to be more of an adult now."* This exposure to diverse perspectives and experiences facilitated the participants' transition into more adult roles, encouraging them to redefine their self-concepts and social identities. The process of adapting to new environments and expectations fostered personal growth and resilience, as the participants navigated the complexities of their evolving identities and aspirations.

This transition highlighted the dynamic nature of SSIC and the fluidity of identity formation during significant life changes. The participants demonstrated a remarkable capacity for resilience and adaptability, drawing on their experiences and newfound self-awareness to navigate the challenges of post-graduation life. The process of restructuring their social environments and redefining their roles within them emphasises the importance of agency and self-efficacy in managing the psychological and emotional impacts of SSIC.

The experiences of the participants throughout this transition period underscore the initial point made at the close of the literature review, highlighting a **shared thread of emotional responses irrespective of contextual differences in the abruptness and severity, that is the degree of trauma, of events**. The dynamic nature and range of psychological and emotional impacts of SSIC for newly graduated girls were evident in their varied experiences and coping strategies.

While the transition from high school to adulthood is often perceived as a mostly positive and empowering milestone, the findings reveal the complex emotional landscape that accompanies this change. The emotional challenges faced by the participants during this transition period were reflective of the broader societal pressures and expectations placed upon them. The shift from being a student to navigating the uncertainties of post-graduation life is a multifaceted process, involving not only practical considerations but also deep-seated psychological and emotional adjustments. The participants' experiences reveal the intricate interplay between

personal aspirations, societal norms, and the realities of their changing identities, highlighting the profound impact of SSIC on their emotional well-being.

SSIC in Newly High School-Graduated Girls Event Categorisation

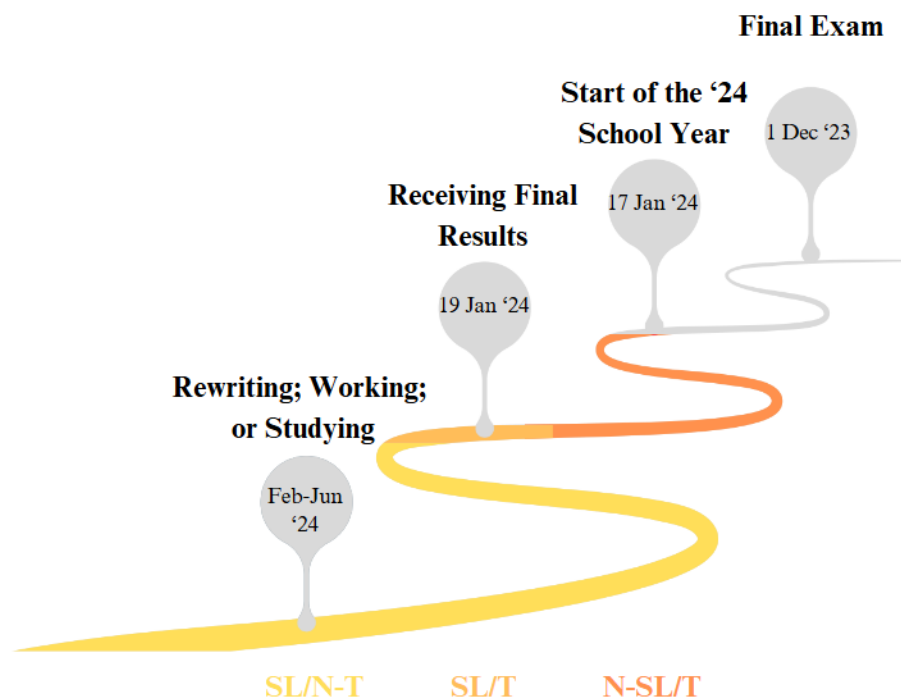


Figure 18 - SSIC Categorisation of Post-High School Experiences (created by Author)

The case of SSIC settling in the self-led/non-traumatic (SL/N-T) quadrant had been attributed to the successful completion of high school, which provided a sense of self-efficacy and mastery experience, thereby fostering a sense of confidence and control. According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy is a key determinant of motivation and action, influencing how individuals not only respond to challenges but, perceive them as well. This finding suggests that **it is not whether an event is technically self-led or not, but rather whether it is experienced as self-led, that ultimately influences the categorisation, understanding, and consequences of SSIC.** The participants' ability to exercise agency and exert control over their post-graduation trajectories was a significant factor in their experiences of SSIC, shaping their perceptions of the transition and their responses to its challenges.

The participants' experiences highlighted the importance of self-efficacy and perceived control in managing the psychological and emotional impacts of SSIC. The ability to exercise agency and exert control over their post-graduation trajectories was a significant factor in their experiences of SSIC, shaping their perceptions of the transition and their responses to its challenges. The findings emphasise the need for supportive environments that empower young women to develop self-efficacy and resilience, enabling them to navigate the complexities of post-graduation life with confidence and agency.

Post-high school experiences of newly graduated girls revealed the multifaceted nature of SSIC and the dynamic interplay of psychological, emotional, social, and agency-related changes that accompany this transition. The findings highlighted the importance of understanding the diverse range of emotional responses and psychological impacts associated with SSIC, as well as the critical role of self-efficacy and perceived control in shaping these experiences.

The participants' journeys through the post-graduation landscape highlighted the complexity of identity formation and the challenges of balancing societal expectations with personal aspirations. The dynamic nature of SSIC was evident in the shifting quadrants of self-led and non-self-led, traumatic and non-traumatic experiences, illustrating the adaptability required to navigate this transition. Additionally, practical recommendations for supporting these transitions would need to be tailored based on the specific quadrant in which individuals find themselves during the transition period.

As the discussion progressed it explored how these experiences have influenced changes in the social identities of newly high school-graduated girls in response to SSIC. By examining these factors, the discussion will provide clarity on the resulting self-concepts of these young women navigating the complexities of post-graduation life and the pathways to success that empower them to thrive in the face of societal challenges.

5.2 Changes in Social Identities

The transition from high school brings about significant changes in group memberships and social support structures for newly graduated girls. This section explored the findings related to these shifts, shedding light on how their social identities have evolved during this period. In doing so, it addressed the research sub-question: *“How do these experiences influence changes in the social identities of newly graduated girls?”*

The high school graduation event marked a significant change in social identities for newly graduated girls. This shift involved complex interactions between gender, socioeconomic status, and societal expectations, which collectively shape the participants' evolving social identities. The understanding of these changes provided valuable insights into how these young women navigate the challenges and opportunities that come with adulthood.

The change in social identities of newly graduated girls was not merely a transition from one life stage to another but involved a deep restructuring of their self-concept and group affiliations. Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Tajfel and Turner (2004), suggests that individuals derive a sense of self from their group memberships, which significantly influences their behaviour and interactions. For these newly graduated girls, the move from high school to post-graduation life necessitated a re-evaluation of group memberships, prompting a reconsideration of their social identities. This adjustment often involves navigating new environments such as higher education institutions or workplaces, where different social norms and expectations prevail.

Influence of Gender on Social Identities

Gender played a critical role in shaping the social identities of newly graduated girls. Traditional gender roles, deeply embedded in societal norms, impose specific expectations on women, such as prioritising caregiving roles or adhering to certain standards of behaviour and appearance. These expectations can create tension as these young women strive to assert their independence and pursue their aspirations. Research has indicated that gender stereotypes can negatively impact self-esteem and confidence, as women may internalise societal messages that devalue their capabilities (Abo-Zena, 2019; Andres et al., 1999; Iqbal & Maldonado García, 2020; Lipsitz Bern, 1981). Such stereotypes can affect their willingness to take risks or pursue leadership roles, ultimately shaping their social identities.

The participants' narratives, such as the treatment and perceptions of women as the weaker gender, revealed instances where gender expectations influenced their decisions and interactions with others. For example, Participant 1 shared that her family wished for her nothing more than a “good husband” in her life after high school, where in contrast Participant 6’s mother reinforced the importance of independence as a woman. Participants 6,7, and 10 elaborated on observed gender disparities in their high school and work environment, where women’s talents were less recognised or rewarded. Concerns regarding safety for Participants 2 and 17 highlighted how the fear of being the target of violent crime, purely because of their gender, impacted the restrictions they and their families placed on where they could work and study.

The concept of intersectionality, introduced by Crenshaw (2017), offered a useful framework for understanding how gender interacts with other social identities such as race and socioeconomic status. This approach highlighted the unique challenges and opportunities faced by individuals with multiple intersecting identities. For newly graduated girls, the intersection of gender with other identities can amplify the challenges they face, influencing their self-perception and social interactions.

Socioeconomic Status and Social Identity

Socioeconomic status was another significant factor influencing the social identities of newly graduated girls. Access to resources, educational opportunities, and social capital varies based on socioeconomic background, affecting the trajectories and aspirations of these young women. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds may encounter additional barriers, such as financial constraints or limited access to higher education, which can impact their self-concept and sense of agency.

In addition to these societal and economic challenges, Participants 2, 13, and 16 shared experiences of lacking exposure, awareness, and crucially, the necessary preparation for education and opportunities. These factors posed further obstacles, highlighting that the issue is not merely about creating opportunities but also about equipping individuals to seize them. This theme is further explored in the practical recommendations section of this chapter, where strategies for addressing these gaps were discussed.

Bourdieu's (2011) concept of social capital is relevant in understanding how socioeconomic status affects social identity formation. Social capital encompasses the networks and connections individuals can draw upon for support and opportunities. Participants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may experience a lack of social capital, limiting their access to valuable networks and resources that can facilitate personal and professional growth. This lack of social capital can hinder their ability to establish new social identities aligned with their aspirations, further perpetuating existing social inequalities.

The theoretical framework of Identity Process Theory (IPT) (Breakwell, 2014) provided insight into how socioeconomic factors influence identity formation. IPT suggests that identity is shaped by cognitive and affective processes influenced by social context and personal experiences. As newly graduated girls navigate the complexities of post-graduation life, their socioeconomic status plays a crucial role in shaping their identity processes, impacting their self-esteem, continuity, and distinctiveness.

Theoretical Implications and Alignment with Existing Research

The changes in social identities experienced by newly graduated girls provide substantial contributions to several theoretical frameworks discussed in the literature. This research enhances understanding within the domains of Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) and Identity Process Theory (IPT) (Breakwell, 2014), offering valuable insights into how individuals navigate identity shifts and the factors that influence their self-concept and behaviour.

SIT, as outlined by Tajfel and Turner (2004), and IPT, as developed by Breakwell (2014), elucidate the processes by which newly graduated girls adapt to new social environments and roles. These frameworks highlight the importance of group memberships, social context, and personal experiences in shaping identity development. The findings of this study aligned with existing research on social identity changes during life transitions, such as leaving school or entering the workforce, which often require individuals to reassess their self-concept and adapt to new roles and expectations (Arnett, 2000).

Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) (Turner & Reynolds, 2012), an extension of SIT by Tajfel and Turner (2004), emphasises the cognitive mechanisms involved in forming social identities. SCT underscored the role of social identity salience, where the relevance of a particular identity becomes prominent in specific contexts. For newly graduated girls, entering new social environments may lead to changes in identity salience, prompting them to adopt new group memberships that reflect their evolving aspirations and goals.

The participants' exposure to new environments and connections aligns with Solomon's (2012) theory of vertical and horizontal identity. As these young women engage with diverse social settings, they experience both vertical identity shifts, which were inherited and familial, and horizontal identity shifts, which were acquired and influenced by peer groups and broader societal contexts.

Furthermore, the concept of possible identities, as discussed by Cinnirella (1998), which suggests that individuals form possible identities based on their social contexts and perceived future opportunities, guiding their behaviour and decisions, is expanded upon in this research. This study emphasised the critical role of role models in shaping aspirations and agency, particularly for youth from less privileged backgrounds. Exposure to positive role models broadens these individuals' range of possible social identities, influencing their aspirations and enhancing their capacity to exercise agency in various social contexts.

This research also contributes to the scholarship on socioeconomic factors and opportunities, as explored by Destin (2019), who found that socioeconomic status (SES) significantly shape individuals' perceptions of their future opportunities, subsequently affecting their motivation and behaviour. This study underscored the profound influence of socioeconomic status on social identity formation and transformation, highlighting the necessity for equitable opportunities that foster agency and growth. The participants' experiences reveal unique challenges and opportunities at the intersection of gender, socioeconomic status, and societal expectations, creating a distinct context for identity development.

Overall, the insights from this study demonstrated the complex interplay between social contexts, identity processes, and socioeconomic influences. Understanding these changes in social identities offered valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by newly

graduated girls. Theoretical frameworks such as Social Identity Theory, Identity Process Theory, Self-Categorization Theory (Breakwell, 2014; Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Turner & Reynolds, 2012), and possible identities (Cinnirella, 1998) discourse provide comprehensive insights into the processes of identity formation and adaptation. The participants' experiences highlighted the importance of supportive environments that recognise and address the diverse factors influencing social identity development.

By understanding these interactions, educators, policymakers, and communities can better support newly graduated girls in their shift to adulthood, ensuring that they were equipped to navigate the complexities of modern society. This research contributes to the discourse on social identity by revealing how young women from diverse backgrounds manage their identity transitions and exercise agency in the face of societal challenges. It highlighted the need for supportive environments that foster resilience, aspiration, and empowerment, ultimately aiding in the development of well-rounded, self-assured individuals. By recognising the impact of social identity changes on their self-concept and behaviour, educators, policymakers, and communities can better support these young women as they navigate adulthood. The next section delved into the social sources of resilience, exploring how these relationships contribute to identity development and enhanced agency.

5.3 Sources of Resilience and Coping Strategies

Navigating the transition from high school to post-graduation life presents significant challenges, yet various sources of resilience and coping strategies can help individuals manage these changes. As newly graduated girls embark on this journey, they draw upon a range of resources to adapt to their new realities, including self-efficacy, social capital, faith, and role models. To address the research sub-question section, *“What sources of resilience and coping strategies do newly graduated girls employ in response to these changes?”*, explores these sources, highlighting their critical role in enabling young women to manage challenges and embrace new opportunities.

Self-Efficacy and Resilience

Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory emphasises the role of belief in one's capabilities as a critical factor in achieving success and overcoming challenges. This theory is particularly relevant to the experiences of newly graduated girls as they navigate post-high school life, where self-efficacy becomes a cornerstone of resilience and adaptation. The participants' narratives illuminated the importance of self-efficacy in navigating post-high school shifts.

Mastery experiences, or personal accomplishments, were pivotal in building self-efficacy, as they provide individuals with a sense of competence and control over their circumstances. Participants demonstrated this through their persistence in educational and personal goals, despite challenges (Bandura, 1977). The experience of successfully completing high school serves as a powerful mastery experience, reinforcing the participants' belief in their abilities and providing a foundation of confidence as they face new challenges in higher education and the workforce.

Vicarious experiences, where individuals observe others successfully navigating similar challenges, also enhance self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). Participants cited the influence of peers who overcame difficulties, which inspired them to tackle their own challenges with determination. Observing role models, such as older siblings or friends who have successfully transitioned to adulthood, further reinforced the belief that they too could succeed. These

observations provide a roadmap for navigating similar situations, bolstering the participants' confidence in their abilities.

Social persuasion, including encouragement from parents, educators, and peers, further reinforced self-efficacy by instilling a belief in one's abilities and potential for success (Bandura, 1977). Participants frequently mentioned the positive impact of supportive words and encouragement from their social networks, which helped them to maintain motivation and persevere in the face of adversity. This support not only enhances self-efficacy but also provided a buffer against the challenges and uncertainties of post-graduation life.

Physiological and emotional states also played a significant role in influencing self-efficacy. Positive emotions and a sense of well-being contributed to higher self-efficacy, while negative emotions undermined confidence development (Iyer et al., 2009, 2010). Participants noted that managing stress and maintaining a positive outlook were crucial in sustaining their self-efficacy during challenging times. This highlighted the importance of emotional regulation and self-care as part of the broader strategy for building resilience.

Social Capital and Communal Support

Social capital, defined as the networks and relationships that provide individuals with access to resources and support, played a crucial role in fostering resilience. Coleman's (1988) concept of social capital highlighted the importance of communal support systems in facilitating personal growth and achievement. Participants had frequently mentioned the significance of familial and peer support in their narratives, emphasising how these relationships provided emotional sustenance and practical assistance.

Parents and guardians emerged as pivotal sources of support, offering guidance and reassurance during times of uncertainty. For example, Participant 1 described a shift in parental approach from high expectations to unconditional support, which helped them become calmer and more confident. Such changes in parental attitudes fostered a supportive and less stressful environment, allowing participants to approach responsibilities with a clearer mind and greater self-assurance. Similarly, practical advice and resources from family members helped alleviate pressure and provided a sense of direction, aligning with the concept of social capital as articulated by Coleman (1988).

Extended family members, such as aunts and cousins, also played a significant role in offering emotional support and resources. This extended family support system reinforced the participants' determination and provided them with practical assistance and emotional encouragement. The presence of extended family members not only offered additional resources but also contributed to a sense of belonging and community, which is vital for resilience. The importance of such communal support is further emphasised by Ng et al. (2018), who discuss how cultural contexts, particularly in collectivist societies, influence the formation and utilization of social capital to foster resilience.

Peers, too, served as vital sources of resilience, offering camaraderie and understanding. Participants frequently mentioned the support they received from friends who shared similar experiences and challenges. This bond extended beyond academic support to a familial level, forming a tight-knit group that collectively faced challenges and celebrated successes. The mutual support among peers provided a sense of solidarity and shared resilience, enabling participants to navigate their new environments with confidence. Ng et al. (2018) also highlight

the critical role of peer support in building resilience, particularly in challenging environments, underscoring the shared experiences that bind individuals together.

Bourdieu's (2011) concept of social capital further elucidates how socioeconomic status can impact access to networks and resources. Participants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often had faced additional barriers to accessing social capital, such as limited networks or resources. However, those who were able to leverage social capital from their families and communities found it to be a vital source of support and opportunity. This underscored the importance of fostering social capital as a means of enhancing resilience and promoting social mobility.

Faith and Spiritual Support

Faith emerged as a profound source of resilience, offering spiritual and emotional sustenance during challenging times. Participants had highlighted how religious beliefs and practices provided them with comfort, guidance, and hope. This reliance on spiritual practices provided a sense of peace and assurance, helping them manage stress and maintain focus. Pargament (2001) discusses how religion serves as a crucial coping mechanism, particularly during periods of significant change, by offering meaning, control, and community support. He emphasised that faith communities and religious leaders play a vital role in reinforcing social identity and resilience, providing both emotional and practical support that helps individuals navigate identity transitions. This perspective aligns with the experiences of participants in this study, who found strength and stability in their faith as they adapted to new social identities.

Faith communities, including churches and religious leaders, also played a significant role in providing support and guidance. The support from these communities offered a sense of belonging and moral guidance, reinforcing participants' values and helping them navigate life's challenges. The collective nature of faith communities provided a network of support that extended beyond individual relationships, offering a broader sense of community and shared purpose.

Faith leaders, such as pastors and mentors, provided both spiritual guidance and emotional support. These mentors offered invaluable advice and companionship, helping participants navigate challenges with greater ease. The multifaceted role of faith leaders highlighted their importance in providing holistic support, addressing both spiritual and practical needs.

Faith not only offered solace and comfort but also provided a framework for understanding and coping with life's challenges. Participants often described their faith as a source of strength and motivation, guiding their decisions and providing a sense of purpose. This spiritual foundation contributed to their resilience, enabling them to face challenges with confidence and optimism.

Role Models and Inspiration

Role models, both within and outside the family, had served as sources of inspiration and guidance for participants. These individuals exemplified qualities and achievements that participants aspired to emulate, providing motivation and direction. Cinnirella (1998) emphasises the importance of role models in shaping aspirations and self-concept, particularly during formative life stages.

Participants 5 and 8 had mentioned educators who had had a lasting impact on their lives, offering both academic guidance and personal support. This enduring impact stresses the significant role educators play beyond the classroom, influencing their students' personal

development and future aspirations. Educators who served as role models provided a vision of what could be achieved, inspiring participants to pursue their goals with confidence and determination (Bandura, 1977).

Family members, such as aunts or older siblings, also served as role models, demonstrating resilience and success in their own lives. These role models provided tangible examples of what was possible, offering both inspiration and practical advice. The participants' admiration for these role models highlighted the powerful influence they have in shaping aspirations and guiding behaviour. The concept of possible social identities, as discussed by Cinnirella (1998), is relevant in understanding the role of role models. Possible social identities represent potential roles and identities that individuals may adopt in the future. These identities influence behaviour and motivation, as individuals strive to align their actions with their aspirations. Role models provide a concrete representation of these possible social identities, illustrating the paths that participants may choose to pursue.

In summary, the diverse sources of resilience and coping strategies employed by newly graduated girls reflect a multifaceted approach to managing post-high school shifts. The interplay of self-efficacy, social capital, faith, and role models provided a robust foundation for navigating challenges and pursuing personal growth. These sources of support enable young women to harness their strengths, maintain a positive outlook, and confidently navigate the complexities of their new environments. As they continue to develop resilience and coping skills, these young women were better equipped to embrace opportunities and overcome obstacles in their journey towards adulthood. The next section will delve into the exercise of agency and NEET-resistance, exploring how these young women assert their autonomy and resist becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) as they forge their paths into adulthood.

5.4 Exercise of Agency

The transition from high school to adulthood represents a critical juncture for newly graduated girls, marked by numerous challenges and opportunities. This section examined how these individuals exercise their agency to resist becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training). Through their post-high school experiences, changes in group memberships, and sources of resilience, these young women demonstrated proactive strategies to navigate their futures. Their actions highlight a collective resilience and determination to avoid becoming mere statistics in a challenging societal context.

Exercising Agency Through Education

For many newly graduated girls, pursuing further education serves as a significant avenue for exercising agency and shaping their futures. The narratives collected in this study highlighted how higher education is perceived as a pathway to independence and self-fulfilment. Participant 1, for example, had expressed a newfound sense of freedom and autonomy in college, where the absence of rigid high school restrictions allowed her to explore new aspects of her identity and social interactions. This transition to a more self-directed learning environment illuminated the role of education in empowering young women to take control of their trajectories.

The pursuit of higher education also reflected a broader societal expectation that links academic success with future opportunities. However, as evidenced by Participant 6's experience, accessing these opportunities often requires navigating complex bureaucratic systems. Her

proactive approach in securing her university placement, despite administrative hurdles, illustrates the resilience and resourcefulness necessary to overcome systemic barriers. This highlighted the importance of agency in education and the role of self-efficacy, as articulated by Bandura (1977), in motivating individuals to pursue their goals despite obstacles.

Resilience in Adapting to Educational Setbacks

The participants' narratives also revealed the importance of adaptability and resilience in the face of educational setbacks. For instance, Participant 18's decision to enrol in a college law programme after initially failing to meet university admission requirements exemplifies a willingness to explore alternative pathways. This adaptability aligned with existing research that emphasises the significance of flexibility and resilience in achieving long-term educational and career goals (Iyer et al., 2010).

Furthermore, the decision of some participants to rewrite their exams demonstrated a commitment to improving their academic standing and expanding their future opportunities. Participant 3's choice to retake her exams after being waitlisted by her preferred college highlighted a strategic approach to overcoming initial setbacks. This decision underscored the value of perseverance and a growth mindset, which were critical components of agency and resilience (Iyer et al., 2009, 2010).

Employment and Community Engagement

In addition to education, entering the workforce and engaging with community initiatives represented important forms of agency for newly graduated girls. The experiences of participants who sought employment after high school illustrate the proactive measures taken to avoid prolonged periods of inactivity. Participant 13, for example, had navigated a period of uncertainty while waiting for a job response but ultimately secured employment through persistence and adaptability. Her experience emphasises the significance of agency in exploring different opportunities and leveraging social connections to access employment. The importance of social networks and community engagement is further emphasised by Participant 15's proactive approach to job-seeking. Her decision to create a CV and network within her community demonstrated an understanding of the value of social capital in accessing job opportunities. Coleman's (1988) concept of social capital stresses the foundational role of communal support systems in fostering resilience and ambition, highlighting the importance of community connections in supporting newly graduated girls in their transition to adulthood.

Navigating Societal Expectations and Pursuing Personal Passions

The narratives of newly graduated girls also reflect the tension between societal expectations and personal aspirations. Participant 5's journey exemplified the courage to pursue her passion for motivational speaking despite external pressures to follow conventional career paths. Her assertiveness in defining her career goals highlighted the importance of self-awareness and the ability to resist societal norms that may not align with individual aspirations. This capacity to exercise agency in pursuing personal passions is indicative of a broader trend among the participants to define success on their terms. By prioritising their interests and values, these young women demonstrated a commitment to crafting futures that reflect their authentic selves. This aligns with identity theory, which emphasises the importance of aligning one's actions with personal values and identity to achieve a sense of fulfilment and self-actualisation (Erikson, 1968).

Intersectional Challenges and Collective Resilience

The participants' experiences of exercising agency and resisting NEET status were shaped by intersecting challenges related to gender, socioeconomic status, and societal expectations. These factors create unique barriers that require resilience and determination to overcome. The narratives reveal a collective strength among the participants, as they navigate these challenges with the support of family, peers, educators, and community networks.

This collective resilience was underpinned by the participants' ability to leverage their social networks and draw on diverse sources of support. The role of social capital, as articulated by Coleman (1988), is evident in the ways participants utilise their connections to access educational and employment opportunities. Moreover, the presence of supportive figures, such as role models and mentors, reinforces the importance of having positive influences that inspire and guide young women in their pursuits.

The findings demonstrated that newly graduated girls successfully avoid dogmatism and dispersion, instead fully embracing the moratorium phase described by Marcia (1966) and Honwana (2012). This moratorium allows for exploration and identity experimentation, enabling them to resist the state of waithood—a prolonged period of uncertainty without clear direction. By actively engaging in this phase, the participants leverage their agency to explore various opportunities, aligning with Marcia's (1966) identity status model and Honwana's (2012) discourse on youth agency.

The findings of this study have significant implications for understanding how newly graduated girls exercise their agency and resist becoming NEET. By highlighting the proactive strategies employed by these young women, this research contributes to the broader discourse on youth development and the importance of fostering supportive environments that empower individuals to pursue their goals.

Future research should continue to explore the intersectional challenges faced by young women in their transition to adulthood, with a focus on identifying effective strategies for supporting their agency and resilience. Additionally, policymakers and educators can draw on these insights to develop targeted interventions that address the specific needs of newly graduated girls, ensuring that they have the resources and support necessary to thrive in their post-high school journeys.

5.5 Implications for the Research

The findings of this research have significant implications for theoretical frameworks, practical applications, and policy development concerning the social identity development, agency, and youth empowerment. By exploring the complex interplay of post-high school experiences, identity formation, and ultimately the ways in which agency is exercised, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the factors that influence young women's transitions into adulthood. The implications of this research were multifaceted and address the needs of individuals, communities, and systems involved in supporting young women through these critical transitions.

Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to the theoretical understanding of Sudden Social Identity Change (SSIC), by drawing attention to non-traumatic triggering events, and challenging existing categorisations of identity transformation. The case of SSIC observed in this study, which

settled in the self-lead/non-traumatic (SL/N-T) quadrant, highlighted the importance of perceived agency in shaping self-perception. **While the change from high school to adulthood is not typically classified as a self-lead event, the participants' experiences suggest that their sense of self-efficacy and mastery over their circumstances significantly influenced their perceptions of the change.** This aligns with Bandura's (1977) concept of self-efficacy, where individuals' beliefs in their capabilities impact how they experience and respond to life events. The study highlighted the importance of understanding how young people perceive their agency and control during transitions, as these perceptions ultimately shape their identity formation and emotional responses. The research findings also aligned with what the focused literature had uncovered – that there is a **shared thread of emotional responses, irrespective of contextual differences in the abruptness and severity (i.e., the degree of trauma) of events.**

This research advances the intersection of identity theory and socioeconomic opportunity by examining how young women navigate their lives in the context of both identity transformation and economic challenges. As Destin (2019) suggests, exploring the relationship between identity and socioeconomic factors provides valuable insights into how individuals from marginalised and disadvantaged backgrounds construct their identities and pursue opportunities. This study demonstrated how socioeconomic status (SES), societal expectations, and gender roles intersect to influence identity formation, highlighting the need for theoretical frameworks that account for these complexities. The study also contributes to identity theory by emphasising the role of socioeconomic factors in shaping identity development, suggesting that socioeconomic status can act as both a barrier and a facilitator of identity exploration and agency.

Additionally, the research provided new insights into the role of social identity complexity in young women's transitions. Roccas and Brewer's (2002) concept of social identity complexity, which refers to the degree of overlap and integration among an individual's multiple social identities, is expanded in this study. The findings reveal that managing multiple identities is a critical component of the transition from high school to adulthood. Participants demonstrated varying degrees of social identity complexity, with some perceiving their identities as integrated and others experiencing them as distinct and non-overlapping. For example, Participants 1,2,9,11, and 19 experienced difficulties in maintaining friendships from high school, perceiving those relationships as distinct from their new identities as university students or workers, indicating non-overlapping identities. On the other hand, those like Participant 3 successfully incorporated their past friendships into their new experiences (e.g., finding common ground with new peers while maintaining old friendships) demonstrated a more integrated sense of identity. This variation in identity complexity highlighted the importance of flexibility and adaptability in navigating the challenges of adulthood.

Inclusive Innovation and Agency Enablement

This research was conducted as part of a Masters' programme in Inclusive Innovation and as such acknowledges the agency of newly graduated girls. It sought to provide insights into how their agency can be enabled and supported through inclusive innovation. By examining their post-high school experiences and the changes in their social identities, this study offered a nuanced understanding of how inclusive innovation can serve as a framework for empowering marginalised groups, such as young women transitioning into adulthood. The findings highlight the importance of recognising and fostering individual agency within these transitions, aligning

with the broader goals of inclusive innovation to ensure that all individuals, regardless of their background, have the opportunity to actively participate in and benefit from societal progress (Heeks et al., 2013).

Practical Contributions

The practical implication of this research challenges the traditional "build it and they will come" approach to addressing youth unemployment. It is insufficient to merely create job and training opportunities; the findings illuminate the importance of building supportive social environments that nurture the healthy social identity development of newly graduated girls. This involves creating spaces where young women can explore their identities, build confidence, and develop a sense of agency, thereby positioning them to take advantage of available opportunities or create their own.

The research highlighted the significance of fostering resilience and agency among young women, emphasising the need for practical interventions that support their development. By focusing on enhancing self-efficacy, building social capital, and providing mentorship and role models, practitioners can empower young women to navigate the complexities of the change from high school to adulthood. These strategies can help young women overcome barriers related to socioeconomic status, gender expectations, and societal expectations, enabling them to pursue their aspirations with confidence and determination. As Coleman (1988) argues, social capital is a vital resource for achieving social mobility, and this study reaffirms the importance of fostering social networks and support systems that enable young women to access opportunities and resources.

Moreover, the study underscored the importance of addressing the emotional and psychological aspects of transition. Practitioners can play a critical role in providing emotional support and guidance to young women as they navigate identity shifts and new social roles. This includes offering counselling and mental health services, as well as creating safe spaces for young women to express their concerns and explore their identities. By addressing the emotional dimensions of transition, practitioners can help young women build resilience and develop coping strategies that enable them to thrive in their new environments.

Policy Contributions

The findings of this research have important policy implications, particularly in the context of addressing youth unemployment and supporting the changes of newly graduated girls. Policymakers should prioritise the development of comprehensive support systems that recognise and address the unique challenges faced by young women in their change to adulthood. This includes designing policies that provide access to resources, mentorship, and networks that can facilitate their entry into education, employment, or training.

Policies should focus on creating inclusive environments that promote diversity and equality, ensuring that young women from marginalised backgrounds have equitable access to opportunities. This involves addressing systemic barriers and biases that may hinder their progress and developing targeted interventions that empower young women to exercise their agency and resist becoming NEET. As Crenshaw (2017) argues, intersectionality is a critical framework for understanding the complex interactions between race, gender, and class, and policymakers should adopt this perspective to create more equitable and inclusive policies.

Furthermore, educational policies should prioritise the development of social and emotional skills that support identity formation and agency. By integrating these skills into curricula and extracurricular activities, educational institutions can play a pivotal role in preparing young women for the challenges and opportunities of adulthood. This holistic approach to education and policy development can contribute to the long-term success and well-being of newly graduated girls as they navigate their futures. Arnett's (2000) concept of emerging adulthood emphasises the importance of this life stage in shaping individuals' identities and trajectories, and this study underscored the need for policies that support young women in navigating this critical period.

In addition, policies should recognise the importance of community-based initiatives that support young women's transitions. Community organisations can provide valuable resources and support networks that enable young women to access education, employment, and training opportunities. By partnering with community organisations, policymakers can develop targeted interventions that address the specific needs and challenges of newly graduated girls, fostering a supportive environment that encourages their personal and professional growth.

This research offered valuable insights into the social identities and agency of newly graduated girls, providing theoretical, practical, and policy contributions that can inform future research and interventions. By recognising the importance of perceived agency, social support, and socioeconomic factors in shaping identity experiences, this study highlighted the need for comprehensive strategies that empower young women to navigate their changes with confidence and resilience. As policymakers, educators, and practitioners work to support these changes, the insights from this research can guide the development of initiatives that foster the healthy social identity development and agency of young women, ultimately contributing to their success and empowerment in a rapidly changing world. The study emphasises the importance of a holistic approach that integrates theoretical insights, practical strategies, and policy interventions to support young women as they navigate the complexities of adulthood.

5.6 Research Limitations

This study explored the impact of post-high school experiences on the social identities of newly graduated girls. While providing valuable insights, several limitations warrant consideration regarding the research's broader implications and generalisability.

Theoretical Implications

The findings contribute to the understanding of Sudden Social Identity Change (SSIC) and its impact on agency, but the study's focus on a specific cohort in a particular socioeconomic context may limit the applicability of these theoretical insights to other populations. The experiences of these young women may not fully represent those of individuals from different backgrounds, potentially influencing the broader generalisability of the SSIC framework (Destin, 2019). Future research should consider diverse socioeconomic contexts to explore the universality of these findings and refine theoretical models of SSIC.

Methodological Reflections

The use of a hermeneutic phenomenological approach provided rich, narrative-driven data but might have constrained the study's ability to capture the full depth of participants' experiences. This approach relies heavily on storytelling, which may not suit all participants, potentially affecting the richness of the data (Van Manen, 2023). Future studies might employ mixed-methods approaches or incorporate longitudinal designs to explore identity changes over time,

allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of SSIC and its long-term effects (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Generalisation and Transferability

The sample selection criteria, including the requirement for participants to be able-bodied, English-speaking, and have access to specific technology, may limit the generalisability of the findings. These criteria potentially exclude diverse perspectives, affecting the transferability of the results to broader populations. Expanding the sample in future research to include participants with varied linguistic, physical, and technological capabilities could enhance the representativeness of the findings (Patton, 2014)

Practical and Policy Implications

The practical contributions of this research highlight the importance of creating supportive social environments that foster healthy social identity development. However, the study's limited scope may not fully capture the diverse challenges faced by all newly graduated girls, potentially limiting its applicability to policymaking. Future research should engage with a broader array of stakeholders, including educators, policymakers, and community leaders, to explore how these findings can inform effective interventions for youth development and support (Coleman, 1988), extending the research scope, or exploring additional populations or variables.

In conclusion, while the study offered valuable contributions to the understanding of SSIC, acknowledging its limitations is crucial for interpreting the findings within the appropriate context and guiding future research efforts. Addressing these constraints in subsequent studies will further enrich the understanding of the complex dynamics influencing the social identities and agency of newly graduated girls.

5.7 Recommendations for Future Research

Building upon the findings and limitations of this study, several avenues for future research were recommended to enhance the understanding of Sudden Social Identity Change (SSIC) and its implications for newly graduated young women. These recommendations aim to address the identified gaps and broaden the scope of the research, offering deeper insights into the complex dynamics of social identity and agency.

Comparative Research Across Diverse Groups

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of SSIC, future studies should consider conducting comparative research across different demographic groups. This could include examining the experiences of individuals across various genders, socioeconomic backgrounds, and educational outcomes, such as comparing those who have graduated with those who have failed or dropped out of high school. Additionally, comparing the experiences of high school graduates with those of higher education graduates would provide valuable insights into how educational attainment influences social identity development and agency. Such comparative analyses would help validate and refine theoretical insights, ensuring that the findings were applicable to a broader range of individuals (Destin, 2019).

Future research should also strive to expand the diversity of the sample to include participants with varied linguistic, physical, and technological capabilities. This expansion would enhance the generalisability and applicability of the findings, ensuring that the research reflected a wider range of experiences and perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2016). By including participants who

communicate in different languages or have disabilities, future studies can provide a more inclusive understanding of SSIC and its impact on diverse populations. Additionally, considering participants with varying levels of access to technology would offer insights into how technological disparities influence identity development and agency.

Exploring Peer Competition and Social Dynamics

While this study touched upon the intersection of gender and socioeconomic factors in shaping peer competition and social dynamics, future research could delve deeper into this area. Investigating how peer competition influences agency and NEET-resistance among newly graduated young women would provide valuable insights into the social pressures and expectations they face. Understanding the role of peer dynamics in shaping identity and decision-making processes could inform interventions aimed at fostering supportive environments that empower individuals to overcome challenges and pursue their aspirations.

Addressing Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality, as proposed by Crenshaw (2017), highlighted the importance of considering multiple intersecting identities in understanding individual experiences. Future research should explore how intersectionality influences SSIC, particularly focusing on the intersections of gender, race, socioeconomic status, and cultural background. By examining how these intersecting identities shape social identity development and agency, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities faced by diverse groups of newly graduated young women.

Implications for Policy and Practice

In addition to academic research, future studies should consider the practical implications of SSIC for policy and practice. Engaging with educators, policymakers, and community leaders can help translate research findings into actionable strategies for supporting newly graduated young women. By developing interventions that address the identified challenges and foster healthy social identity development, stakeholders can create environments that empower individuals to thrive in their post-graduation lives. Collaborative efforts between researchers and practitioners can ensure that future research contributes to meaningful changes in educational and social policies, ultimately enhancing the well-being and agency of newly graduated young women.

Future research should build on the insights gained from this study by exploring diverse perspectives, employing innovative methodologies, and addressing the complex interplay of factors influencing SSIC. By expanding the scope of research and engaging with practical applications, scholars can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of social identity development and agency, ultimately supporting the empowerment and success of newly graduated young women as they navigate their paths into adulthood.

5.8 Discussion Conclusion

The journey from high school to adulthood is a complex and multifaceted process for newly graduated young women, encompassing significant changes in social identities. This discussion has illuminated the intricate dynamics at play, highlighting the myriad of challenges and opportunities which influence the evolution of self-concept for young women, as they navigate their paths beyond high school. Through a detailed examination of the findings, it became evident that the interplay of social identity, resilience, and agency is crucial in shaping their trajectories

A key theme that emerged from the analysis is the impact of post-high school experiences on **social identity formation**. The transition from the familiar environment of high school to the broader societal context necessitated a re-evaluation of self-concept and group memberships. The findings demonstrated that gender and socioeconomic status significantly influence this process, shaping how these young women perceive themselves and their roles within their communities. Theoretical frameworks such as Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) and Identity Process Theory (Breakwell, 2014) provide a lens through which these changes were understood, highlighting the dynamic and evolving nature of identity during this life stage.

Resilience emerged as a critical factor in facilitating the successful navigation of post-graduation challenges and identity development. The diverse coping strategies and sources of support identified in the study stress the importance of social networks and self-efficacy in fostering resilience. Peers, family, educators, faith, faith leaders, and role models play instrumental roles in providing the emotional, social, and practical support necessary for these young women to adopt positive social identities and thrive. The presence of strong support systems not only bolsters their confidence and motivation but also equips them with the tools to pursue their aspirations despite adversity.

The exercise of **agency** is another central theme, with participants demonstrating proactive efforts to shape their futures. Through their pursuit of further education, engagement in rewriting exams, and entry into the workforce, these young women showcase a steadfast commitment to achieving their goals. Their stories highlighted the significance of agency in navigating the complexities of the post-graduation landscape, emphasising the importance of determination, adaptability, and community support in overcoming socioeconomic challenges.

The implications of this research extend beyond individual experiences, offering valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and communities seeking to support newly graduated young women. The findings highlight the need for inclusive environments and supportive systems that recognise the diverse factors influencing identity development and agency. By fostering conditions that empower young women to pursue their aspirations and build meaningful futures, society can contribute to the creation of more equitable and opportunity-rich environments.

As this discussion draws to a close, it sets the stage for the dissertation's final conclusions, which will synthesise the overarching themes and contributions of the research. By reflecting on the transformative journey of these young women, the dissertation conclusion will provide a comprehensive overview of the study's findings, implications, and recommendations for future research and practice. Through this exploration, the dissertation aimed to contribute to the broader discourse on youth development and educational transitions, offering insights that can inform strategies for empowering young women and fostering their success in an ever-evolving world.

6 Conclusion

This research set out to explore the post-high school experiences of newly graduated girls in Cape Town, South Africa, with a particular focus on how these experiences impacted their social identities. The study was motivated by the recognition that, while identity development has been a central theme in social psychology, there is a significant gap in the literature

regarding sudden social identity change (SSIC) in non-traumatic contexts, such as the transition from high school to adulthood.

The research was guided by the main question: *How do post-high school experiences impact the social identities of newly graduated girls?* To answer this, three sub-questions were addressed:

1. What are the post-high school experiences of newly graduated girls?
2. How do these experiences influence changes in the social identities of newly graduated girls?
3. What sources of resilience and coping strategies do newly graduated girls employ in response to these changes?

Through a qualitative study involving interviews with participants from historically marginalised communities in Cape Town, this research uncovered the complex interplay between post-high school experiences, identity transformation, and agency. The findings revealed that the transition from high school to adulthood is marked by a series of critical events that shape young women's evolving identities, aspirations, and social networks. These events are not merely passive experiences but are actively navigated by the participants, who draw on a variety of resilience strategies to assert their agency in shaping their self-concepts, and in turn, their futures.

Summary of Key Findings

The findings chapter provided a comprehensive exploration of the challenges and opportunities faced by newly graduated girls as they transitioned from high school to adulthood. The study highlighted the significant role that socioeconomic, educational, and gendered factors play in shaping the trajectories of these young women. The participants' experiences revealed the emotional and psychological shifts that accompany this transformative phase, from the joy and sadness surrounding final exams to the reflective moments during the December break and the anticipation and anxiety of receiving final results.

The concept of Sudden Social Identity Change (SSIC) was central to understanding the participants' experiences. The study found that, contrary to initial assumptions, the SSIC experienced by these young women did not fit neatly into pre-existing categories of identity change. Instead, the participants' sense of self-efficacy and perceived control over their circumstances played a crucial role in shaping their experiences of SSIC. This finding underscores the importance of agency in managing the psychological and emotional impacts of identity change.

The study also shed light on the social sources of resilience that enabled the participants to navigate the complexities of post-graduation life. Support from peers, family, educators, faith leaders, and role models played a critical role in helping the participants develop the positive social identities, resilience, and agency needed to navigate life after high school. The diverse ways in which participants exercised their agency included pursuing further education, rewriting exams, and entering the workforce and highlighted their commitment to their futures and their ability to leverage support networks to achieve their goals.

The findings emphasised the importance of supportive environments that empower young women to navigate their transitions with confidence, resilience, and agency. The study provided

valuable insights into the factors that contribute to successful identity change, particularly for newly high school-graduated girls from marginalised backgrounds.

Implications of the Study

The implications of this research are multifaceted, spanning theoretical contributions, practical applications, and policy development. By exploring the intersection of post-high school experiences and identity formation, this study offers significant insights that can inform future research and interventions aimed at supporting young women during this critical period.

Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to the theoretical understanding of Sudden Social Identity Change (SSIC) by challenging existing categorisations of identity transformation. The study found categorisation of participants' experiences of SSIC, which eventually settled in the self-led/non-traumatic (SL/N-T) quadrant of events, was significantly influenced by their sense of agency and perceived control over their circumstances. This finding aligns with Bandura's (1977) concept of self-efficacy, which emphasises the importance of individuals' beliefs in their capabilities in shaping their experiences of life events.

The study also advances the intersection of identity theory and socioeconomic opportunity (Destin, 2019) by examining how young women navigate their lives in the context of both identity transformation and economic challenges. The findings suggest that socioeconomic status, societal expectations, and gender roles intersect to influence identity formation, highlighting the need for theoretical frameworks that account for these complexities. This research underscores the importance of understanding how young people perceive their agency during transitions, as these perceptions ultimately shape their identity formation and emotional responses.

Additionally, the study provides new insights into the role of social identity complexity (Roccas & Brewer, 2002) in young women's transitions. The findings reveal that managing multiple identities is a critical component of the transition from high school to adulthood, with some participants perceiving their identities as integrated and others experiencing them as distinct and non-overlapping. This variation in identity complexity highlights the importance of flexibility and adaptability in navigating the challenges of adulthood.

Practical Contributions

The practical implications of this research challenge the traditional "build it and they will come" approach to addressing youth unemployment. The findings emphasise the importance of creating supportive social environments that nurture the healthy social identity development of newly graduated girls. This involves creating spaces where young women can explore their identities, build confidence, and develop a sense of agency, thereby positioning them to take advantage of available opportunities or create their own.

The research highlights the significance of fostering resilience and agency among young women, emphasising the need for practical interventions that support their development. By focusing on enhancing self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), building social capital (Coleman, 1988), and providing mentorship and role models (Cinnirella, 1998), practitioners can empower young women to navigate the complexities of the transition from high school to adulthood. These strategies can help young women overcome barriers related to socioeconomic status, as well as

gender and societal expectations, enabling them to pursue their aspirations with confidence and determination.

Moreover, the study underscores the importance of addressing the emotional and psychological implications of transition (Haslam et al., 2009; Jetten et al., 2012), even when non-traumatic. Practitioners can play a critical role in providing emotional support and guidance to young women as they navigate identity shifts and new social roles. This includes offering counselling and mental health services, as well as creating safe spaces for young women to express their concerns and explore their identities. By addressing the emotional dimensions of transition, practitioners can help young women build resilience and develop coping strategies that enable them to thrive in their new environments.

Policy Contributions

The findings of this research have important policy implications, particularly in the context of addressing youth unemployment and supporting the transitions of newly graduated girls. Policymakers should prioritise the development of comprehensive support systems that recognize and address the unique challenges faced by young women in their transition to adulthood. This includes designing policies that provide access to resources, mentorship, and networks that can facilitate their entry into education, employment, or training.

Policies should focus on creating inclusive environments that promote diversity and equality, ensuring that young women from marginalised backgrounds have equitable access to opportunities. This involves addressing systemic barriers and biases that may hinder their progress and developing targeted interventions that empower young women to exercise their agency.

Furthermore, educational policies should prioritise the development of social and emotional skills that support identity formation and agency. By integrating these skills into curricula and extracurricular activities, educational institutions can play a pivotal role in preparing young women for the challenges and opportunities of adulthood. This holistic approach to education and policy development can contribute to the long-term success and well-being of newly graduated girls as they navigate their futures.

In addition, policies should recognize the importance of community-based initiatives that support young women's transitions. Community organizations can provide valuable resources and support networks that enable young women to access education, employment, and training opportunities. By partnering with community organizations, policymakers can develop targeted interventions that address the specific needs and challenges of newly graduated girls, fostering a supportive environment that encourages their personal and professional growth.

Final Reflection

The study of post-high school experiences of newly graduated girls in Cape Town has provided profound insights into the complexities of sudden social identity change during a critical transitional period. This research began with the intention to explore an underrepresented area of non-traumatic events in the existing literature, focusing on the intersection of gender, socioeconomic status, and the unique challenges faced by young women in historically marginalised communities. Throughout this journey, the narratives of these girls illuminated not only the difficulties they encountered but also the remarkable resilience, adaptability, and strength they demonstrated in redefining their identities and shaping their futures.

The study underscored the importance of understanding the individual and collective experiences of these young women, particularly in how they navigate the sudden loss of their student identities and the uncertainty that follows graduation. The findings revealed that while these transitions were marked by moments of anxiety, fear, and uncertainty, they were also characterised by growth, empowerment, and the exercise of agency. The participants' stories highlighted the critical role of supportive environments, social networks, and individual resilience in facilitating positive identity development.

In conducting this research, the researcher was reminded of the importance of giving voice to those who are often underrepresented in academic discourse. The stories of these young women, their struggles, and their triumphs provide valuable lessons not only for academia but also for policymakers, educators, and practitioners who are tasked with supporting youth during these pivotal life stages. This study has reaffirmed the need for holistic approaches that consider the psychosocial and socio-economic contexts in which identity is formed and exercised, and it has highlighted the potential for inclusive innovation to empower marginalised groups.

This study has also been a personal journey of growth and learning for the researcher. Engaging with the participants and understanding their lived experiences has deepened the researcher's appreciation for the resilience of young people, particularly in challenging socio-economic contexts. It has also emphasised the importance of conducting research that is not only academically rigorous but also socially relevant and impactful. The lessons learned from this research will undoubtedly inform the researcher's future work and commitment to contributing to social change through research and advocacy.

Closing Statement

This research has brought to light the profound impact that post-high school experiences have on the social identities of newly graduated girls, particularly in contexts marked by socioeconomic challenges. The study has shown that while the transition from high school to adulthood can be fraught with difficulties and emotional turmoil, it is also a period ripe with opportunities for growth, self-discovery, and empowerment (Marcia, 1966). The participants in this study demonstrated that even in the face of significant challenges, young women possess the strength, resilience, and agency to shape their self-concepts and futures.

The findings from this research call for the rethinking of how young women are supported during this non-traumatic yet critical transitional period. It is not enough to create opportunities; we must also create environments that nurture identity development, build confidence, and empower agency, so to position youth to take advantage of opportunities. As we move forward, the insights gained from this study should inform the development of policies, educational practices, and community-based initiatives that are inclusive, supportive, and attuned to the realities of young women from marginalised backgrounds (Coleman, 1988).

In conclusion, this study has provided valuable contributions to the understanding of non-traumatic, yet critical, sudden social identity change and the challenges faced by newly graduated girls in Cape Town. The research highlights the importance of creating supportive environments that enable young women to navigate their transitions with confidence, resilience, and a sense of agency. As educators, policymakers, and practitioners, we have a responsibility to ensure that these young women are not only supported in the development of

positive social identity but empowered to take charge of their futures and contribute to a more equitable and inclusive society.

7 References

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8 Annexure A – Research Permission Letter



Cape Town
3 July 2023

To Whom It May Concern

Permission to Conduct Research

On behalf of the Trustees of Great Girls Trust, I hereby give permission for Natasha Haffajee to conduct her research, in support of her masters dissertation for her MPhil Inclusive Innovation qualification, with Great Girls Trust. Our understanding is that the research will be conducted in accordance with the letter from Ms Haffajee dated 4 June 2023 setting out the scope and objectives. We hereby give permission for her to contact Great Girls participants who are currently in matric to set up and conduct interviews, taking into account all the ethical considerations as set out in her letter.

We support this research and look forward to learning from the findings about how we can better support our participants.

Yours Sincerely,

Gilse

Sofstone Biersch
Great Girls Trustee

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9 Annexure B – Informed Consent

8/31/24, 2:00 PM

UCT GSB Research - Girls' Experiences: From the Final Exam and Beyond



UCT GSB Research - Girls' Experiences: From the Final Exam and Beyond

Informed Consent Form

Introduction:

Congratulations on graduating high school! You are now invited to take part in research during April and May 2024. Please read this form carefully so you can decide if you would like to participate in a research interview. It provides you with information about the study, why it's being done, what we'll ask you to do, and your rights as a participant. If you have any questions, feel free to ask, contact information for the researcher is provided next. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time.

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8/31/24, 2:00 PM

UCT GSB Research - Girls' Experiences: From the Final Exam and Beyond

Title of the Research: Girls' Experiences: From the Final Exam and Beyond

Principal Researcher: Natasha Haffajee

Affiliation: UCT Graduate School of Business

Contact Information: +27719947326 / HFFNAT005@myuct.ac.za

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Purpose of the Study:

This research is about your experiences from your final high school exam to the present day. We want to hear about what happened in your life at certain stages e.g., after you finished your last exam; at the start of the year; when you received your results; and more. Your stories will help us understand your experiences at this important stage of life.

What You Will Be Asked to Share:

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to:

1. Share your stories about what happened in your life after you finished your last high school exam.
2. Talk about what you did and experienced at the start of the new year.
3. Share what happened during the time leading up to receiving your final results, the moment you received them, and what has happened in your life since then.
4. You may be asked to provide additional information about your experiences during the interview.

Risks and Benefits:

There are no foreseeable risks involved. You may experience some emotion when talking about your experiences, but we will do our best to make you comfortable. Should you have an extreme emotional response to talking about your experiences the researcher will refer you to free counselling services available to you. By sharing your stories, you can help us better understand the lives of young women after high school. Your story makes a difference.

Confidentiality:

Your privacy is important. Everything you share with us will be anonymous and your identity will be protected. You can also request a copy of the written record of your interview.

Voluntary Participation:

You can choose whether you would like to participate or not. You can also stop participating anytime by informing the researcher.

Consent:

1. I have read and understood the information in this Informed Consent Form.

Yes

No

2. I agree to share my stories as part of this research.

Yes

No

Qualifying Participants

3. Did you complete your final grade 12 exam in 2023?

- Yes
- No

4. Did you receive a pass mark for grade 12 in January 2024?

- Yes
- No

https://forms.office.com/Pages/DesignPageV2.aspx?prevorigin=shell&origin=NeoPortalPage&subpage=design&id=NUNFkk5Wz0ywsCREW4wD90nXhX0boFpCgMYb6R_R_41UQKVaVERHR0ZTVUZWREhMUEp... 9/17

5. This research will focus on the stories of Girls. Please confirm whether you are a Girl.

- Yes, I am a girl.
- No, I am not a girl.

6. Do you currently live in Cape Town and/or did you complete High School in Cape Town?

- I currently live in Cape Town and completed High School in Cape Town.
- I currently live outside of Cape Town but, I completed High School in Cape Town.
- I currently live in Cape Town but, I completed High School outside of Cape Town.
- I currently live outside of Cape Town, and also completed High School outside of Cape Town.

https://forms.office.com/Pages/DesignPageV2.aspx?prevorigin=shell&origin=NeoPortalPage&subpage=design&id=NUNFkk5Wz0ywsCREW4wD90nXhX0boFpCgMYb6R_R_41UQKVaVERHR0ZTVUZWREhMUEp... 10/17

Your contact information:

Your 1-2 hour interview will take place on a Whatsapp Video Call.

7. Do you have your own cellphone?

Yes

No

8. Do you use Whatsapp?

Yes

No

https://forms.office.com/Pages/DesignPageV2.aspx?prevorigin=shell&origin=NeoPortalPage&subpage=design&id=NUNFkk5Wz0ywsCREW4wD90nXhX0boFpCgMYb6R_R_41UQkVaVERHR0ZTVUZWREhMUEp... 11/17

9. What is your Whatsapp number? **Make sure to provide the correct number.**

10. If the researcher is unable to reach you via WhatsApp she will email you. **Please provide your email address.**

11. Which of the following best describes how active you are on Whatsapp.

I check my Whatsapp messages daily.

I check my Whatsapp messages a few times a week.

I check my Whatsapp messages a few times a month.

https://forms.office.com/Pages/DesignPageV2.aspx?prevorigin=shell&origin=NeoPortalPage&subpage=design&id=NUNFkk5Wz0ywsCREW4wD90nXhX0boFpCgMYb6R_R_41UQkVaVERHR0ZTVUZWREhMUEp... 12/17

Data Support

12. Will you need the researcher to provide you with data for the Whatsapp Video Call?

- Yes
- No

13. Who is your network provider? **Make sure you select the correct answer. Only one data bundle can be purchased for each participant.**

- Telkom
- Vodacom
- MTN
- CellC
- Other

Interview Dates

14. The researcher will schedule a WhatsApp video call with you during April 2024. This call will last for about 1 hour and 30 minutes. Please select an interview date **BEFORE 10 June 2024** that suits you (you can always reschedule by contacting the lead researcher).

15. Please select a time that suits you for the day you selected above.

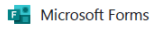
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- 2 PM

Questions

16. If you have any questions at all please feel free to contact the researcher, Natasha Haffajee, on Whatsapp (0719947326) or on email (HFFNAT005@myuct.ac.za). You can also provide your questions below, if you have any at this stage.

6 PM

5:20 PM This content is neither created nor endorsed by Microsoft. The data you submit will be sent to the form owner.



10 Annexure C – Semi-Structured Interview Format

- Introduction: [Researcher’s personal introduction and encouragement for the participant to request a pause or stop the interview if they feel uncomfortable or overwhelmed in any way.]

- Participant Confirmation Questions:
 - In which year did you complete your final high school exam?
 - Where in South Africa did you complete your final high school exam?
 - Where in South Africa do you currently live?

- Semi-Structured Interview Questions:
 1. Thinking back to the day of your last exam, what happened after the invigilators said, “pens down”?
 2. That marked the start of your December break. What were some of the most memorable events at the start, middle, and end of your December break?
 3. As the calendar turned and the new school year began, with back-to-school radio, television, and social media ads appearing, what do you remember about that time?
 4. What was the night before and the morning of the release of your results like for you?
 5. Tell me about the moment you received your results and what followed.
 6. Reflecting on the months between your last exam and today, what have been the most memorable moments, whether good or bad?
 7. What or who helped you overcome some of the challenging times during those months?
 8. Do you feel your peers have changed as people now compared to who they were as high school students? If so, in what ways? What do you think has caused these changes?
 9. Do you feel any different as a person now compared to who you were as a high school student? If so, in what ways? What do you think has caused these changes?
 10. When your high school and all schools reopened at the beginning of this year, what were you and your friends and family doing?
 11. What advice would you give to 2024 Grade 12 students to prepare them for life after high school?
 12. Is there anything else you’d like to share about your experiences that we have not yet discussed?

Closing: Thank you again for your time and for making a valuable contribution to this research. I will send you a WhatsApp message after this call with a link to free counselling if you need it, and a link for this research that you can pass on to other girls who received their pass marks at the beginning of this year. I wish you the very best of luck in pursuing your aspirations!

11 Annexure D – Pre- and Post-Interview Messages to Participants

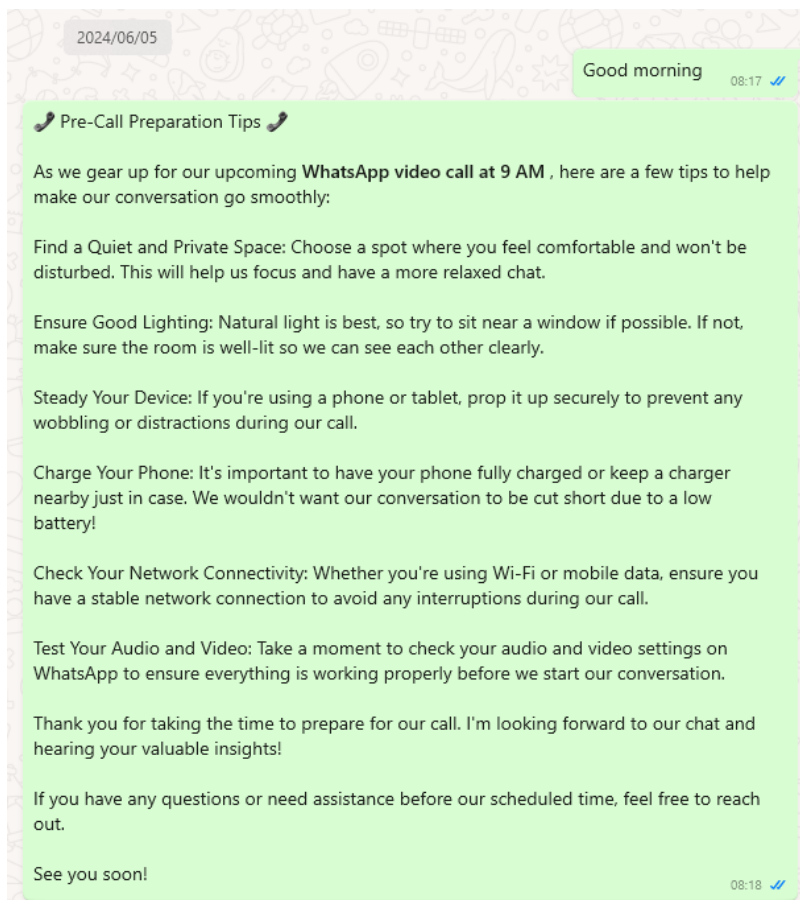


Figure 19 - Pre-Interview Preparation WhatsApp Message



Figure 20 - Post-interview WhatsApp message of Thanks and Call for Referrals (Snowball Sampling)

12 Annexure E – Reflexive Journal Entries

General Reflections

As I continue to engage deeply with the experiences of the girls who passed their final high school exams, I find myself acutely aware of certain themes that have emerged across their stories. These young women demonstrate a similar disposition towards life, marked by a determined drive and resilience. The role of faith has surfaced as a significant theme, with many participants drawing strength from their religious communities, leaders, and the shared faith among their peers. This spiritual support has provided a sense of purpose and direction, especially during challenging times.

The influence of teachers and schools has also been highlighted, particularly the encouragement and support offered by female figures within these institutions. These women serve as role models and sources of inspiration, reinforcing the importance of not becoming a mere statistic. This determination to rise above societal expectations is closely linked to the girls' desire to shed group memberships that no longer align with their aspirational identities. This shedding is not merely a rejection of past associations but a conscious step towards embracing new identities that support their goals.

I have observed a notable shift from dogmatism to moratorium among the participants, as they navigate the complexities of emerging adulthood. They are becoming more flexible and explorative, holding onto general plans while remaining open to changes along the way. This adaptability is often a hard-earned lesson, learned through personal experiences of loss, growth, and the realization that their future is in their hands. The participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of mindset, maturing, and gaining independence from both family and friends. They have come to understand that they must take responsibility for their own lives and futures.

Another significant observation is the cumulative impact of various influences over the years—whether from family, educators, fleeting encounters with motivational speakers, or even media like movies and books. As the December holiday period comes to an end, reality begins to set in for these young women, leading to a re-evaluation of their paths and goals. Many have expressed feelings of not belonging upon their return to school, along with the natural consequences of losing friendships, experiencing breakups, and dealing with family losses.

There is a heightened consciousness of the threat and stigma associated with becoming a statistic, which drives their aspirations to enter fields such as occupational therapy, education, social work, law, and IT. The pressure to succeed is palpable, yet it is balanced by a growing understanding that success is not linear and that detours are part of the journey.

Post-Interview Reflections

Each participant's story has added depth to my understanding of their post-high school experiences:

Participant 1 is pursuing Religious Studies, a path suggested by her parents, and has found solace in her faith and a new group of friends that align with her life plans. Her story underscores the importance of aligning one's social circle with one's aspirations.

Participant 2 is facing the uncertainty of being waitlisted and is actively seeking employment while applying to colleges. Her situation highlights the need for resilience in the face of rejection and the importance of having a backup plan.

Participant 3 is rewriting her exams in May after being waitlisted, illustrating the challenges of navigating academic setbacks and the importance of perseverance.

Participant 4 returned to Zimbabwe to redo her matric exams, a decision influenced by her low marks in key subjects. Her story sheds light on the difficult decisions faced by students who do not meet their academic expectations.

Participant 5 has been working continuously and is a motivational speaker in the making, determined to break generational curses with her philosophy that "FAIL" stands for "First Attempt in Life."

Participant 6 narrowly secured a spot at Stellenbosch University, becoming the first in her family to attend university. Her journey emphasizes the importance of persistence and the support of her family.

Participant 7 has experienced gender inequality throughout high school but now feels respected as a woman in her IT studies, highlighting the impact of gender dynamics on self-perception. Emphasised the impact of a change of environment—from being the oldest in the school as the grade 12 students, where everyone is young and, for the most part, less mature, to being the youngest in higher education and work environments—meant she matured due to affiliations with people who were years older.

Participant 8 is inspired to study teaching, driven by positive experiences with educators after relocating from Zimbabwe. Her story emphasizes the lasting influence of supportive teachers.

Participant 9 has shed toxic relationships from her high school years and is focused on building a life that aligns with her values. Her story reflects the importance of reflection and the conscious selection of one's social environment.

Participant 10 faced significant family responsibilities after her father's passing and has learned the importance of being flexible with her plans. Her story illustrates the challenges of balancing personal goals with family obligations.

Participant 11 has learned the importance of independence and responsibility through her post-matric experiences, reinforcing the idea that maturity often comes through adversity.

Participant 12 struggled with the disappointment of not achieving her academic goals but is exploring other fields of study with the support of her family. Her experience underscores the value of having a strong support system.

Participant 13 is navigating the uncertainty of whether to pursue higher education or gain work experience, reflecting the broader societal debate on the value of degrees versus practical experience.

Participant 14 matured significantly during her matric year, living with her aunt due to financial reasons. Her experience highlights the diverse challenges faced by students from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Participant 15 was raised by her older sisters after the death of her parents and has learned the hard lesson that opportunities must be actively pursued. Her story emphasizes the importance of initiative and seizing opportunities.

Participant 16 has been a source of support for her peers, dealing with difficult personal circumstances while maintaining her focus on her goals. Her story reflects the power of resilience and the role of supportive environments like [her employer] in fostering social identity.

Participant 17 is focused on her academic pursuits, having slowly lost her high school connections. Her experience highlights the importance of personal growth and the development of new interests.

Participant 18 dealt with the loss of her father just before her final exams and has since embraced the unpredictability of life. Her journey underscores the importance of adaptability, and the strength gained through adversity.

Participant 19 has navigated the challenges of attending an Islamic school and the pressure to succeed for her family's sake. Her story reflects the influence of cultural and religious expectations on identity formation.

Participant 20 has found a passion for design, supported by her family's background in fashion. Her experience highlights the importance of pursuing one's passions with the support of family.

Illustration Ideas Several visual metaphors emerged from these reflections:

The Tree of Life: Walking Home Together, Then Taking Different Paths - This could symbolize the shared journey through high school, followed by the diverse paths taken after graduation. Visualizing the various directions taken by the participants: rewriting exams, attending college or university, working night shifts, or pursuing other opportunities.

Friends Encouraging Each Other at an Ice Cream Shop - A scene of camaraderie and mutual support as they savour the last moments of shared experiences before embarking on their individual journeys.

13 Annexure F – Research Participant Advice to 2024 Matriculants



Figure 21 - Girls Supporting Girls: 2023 Matriculant Advice to Girls Preparing to Matriculate (Generated by OpenAI's ChatGPT using DALL-E)

During the interviews conducted for this research, participants were asked, "What advice would you give to 2024 Grade 12 students to prepare them for life after high school?" The responses they provided offer invaluable insights and have been compiled into a resource to be shared with high schools and high school student empowerment programmes. This initiative aims to support Coleman's (1988) concept of social capital, which emphasises the foundational role that communal support systems play in fostering resilience and ambition. The advice shared by the participants reflects their personal experiences and wisdom, offering current matriculants guidance on navigating the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

Participant 1:

"Don't bank everything on your friends because they're not always going to be there. They will try their best, but they won't always be there."

"Stay away from friends who always want to have fun. They may not be thinking about their future. Surround yourself with people who plan and follow through."

"Your social circle is important because they're the ones who notice when you're quiet or can't join them. Those who care about you will stick around."

"Don't expect anything from anyone or life at all. Expect something from yourself—expect yourself to get up in the morning and do something."

Participant 2:

"Always have a plan B. Don't be too sure of getting in, and if you don't pass matric, just rewrite and do it again. You'll get a better result."

Participant 3:

"It's okay if your plans don't go as you wanted. Things happen sometimes for a reason we don't know at that moment. It's your life, and that's how your story goes."

Participant 4:

"Be realistic because your final result is determined by the amount of hard work you put in. Stay away from negativity and be patient with yourself."

Participant 5:

"Set your goals now. Stay focused, be determined. Don't follow friends who might mislead you; it's your journey, your road, your destiny."

"Fail means first attempt in life. If you fail the first time, go and take that second attempt. Study smarter, not harder, and get that matric certificate."

Participant 6:

"Have a plan B just in case. Don't put all your eggs in one basket because you might break your own heart."

"Go for the easiest degree at first, then you can switch later. As long as your foot is in the door and you're passing your subjects, you're good."

Participant 7:

"You have to keep your head up. You're going to have tough times, but it's going to get better. Keep fighting for what you want."

Participant 8:

"Don't burn yourself out before you get there. Be goal-driven and set minor goals. Once you start achieving small goals, the big goals won't seem as daunting."

Participant 9:

"Start sleeping, guys. If you don't know what's going on, close your books and go to sleep. There's no point in staying up all night if you still don't know what's on the paper."

"Speak to people about what you're going through. Whether you had a great year or a tough one, talking about it helps."

Participant 10:

"Life goes on. You need to grow from the past, not into it. Build something that makes a difference in your life."

Participant 11:

"Life becomes real after matric. Everything is in your own hands. Take one step at a time. If you fail, there's always next time."

"You learn as you go, and there's no right or wrong way to learn how to be responsible."

Participant 12:

"Really show up for yourself, even if no one else does. Be there for yourself like you'd want someone else to be there for you."

Participant 13:

"Don't give up. Shoot for something you enjoy and find your passion, but also be realistic about it."

Participant 14:

"You are the Buzz Lightyear of your own infinity and beyond."

"Life is full of seasons. You'll have ups and downs, but don't give up. Know your worth and invest in yourself."

"Your decisions today determine your destiny tomorrow. Think of the consequences of your actions."

Participant 15:

"Take opportunities. Don't just take the information and leave it at home—act on it. You don't know where your blessings lie."

"Take failure as a stepping stone to success. Hard work, fighting, and believing in yourself are keys to conquering every challenge."

"Value yourself and know that your circumstances don't determine your future. You have the power to change your perspective."

Participant 16:

"Keep pushing, no matter what. At the end of the day, you won't regret it because you'll make something of your life."

"Surround yourself with the right people. Don't be afraid to ask questions, and don't regret your decisions—learn from them."

Participant 17:

"Focus on yourself and your growth. Don't compare yourself to others; focus on what you are doing and how you are growing as a person."

Participant 18:

"Nothing is impossible. Focus on what you want out of life and work hard to achieve it."

"Be open-minded. If one door doesn't open, there is another door that you can succeed through."

Participant 19:

"Results aren't everything. If you don't get the marks you want, there are always second chances. Don't cut off your social circle—make the most of your matric year."

"Listen to your gut. After you get your results, do what you want to do because it's your life."

Participant 20:

"Be prepared. Know what you want to study because life after matric is tough. Focus on your studies, but also enjoy yourself."