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Resistance modification vacillation: revealing intersectional responses to identity imposition in professional work settings

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Introduction: This paper examines the complex processes involved in responding to identity imposition, the misinterpretation of one's identity, by others, thereby leading to difficulty reconciling self-identity. We employ an intersectional analysis focused on British professional women of African, Asian, and Caribbean (AAC) ethnic backgrounds to address the gap in understanding, concerning responses to identity imposition at the nexus of racio-ethnicity and gender. Drawing on an intersectionality perspective, the study goal is twofold: (1) to contribute to theoretical research on identity and identity formation and (2), to broaden understanding of how intersectionality shapes women's experiences and responses to externally imposed identity narratives in professional work settings.

Methods: The study engages an interpretivist approach to inquiry, through a qualitative methodological approach utilizing in-depth semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 30 British professional women with AAC ethnicity.

Results: Our results reveal that AAC women encounter distinct forms of identity imposition rooted in prevailing discriminatory identity narratives at the intersection of gender and racio-ethnicity. We identify three dominant behavioral responses: modification of self-aspects, resistance against incongruent imposed meanings, and vacillation between modification and resistance, pushing them into a state of liminality.

Discussion: The study illuminates the various responses that AAC women recruit as they navigate identity imposition within their professional working environment, underpinning the importance for UK organizations to prioritize training and development initiatives that empower managers and employees to move beyond behaviors that adversely affect minoritized employees.

KEYWORDS

gender, identity imposition, intersectionality, organizations, professional identity, racio-ethnicity, responses, women

Introduction

The organizational literature on identity asserts that identity is constructed by individuals and groups within social contexts (Alvesson, 2010; Nkomo and Al Ariss, 2014), from resources and opportunities provided by locally available discourses within which they maneuver actively as they engage in identity formation and maintenance

(Brown and Coupland, 2015). This means that identity is implicated in the way that one experiences the work organization, and the embedded hierarchies of power and privilege, such as those based on ethnicity, race, gender, and class (Pender et al., 2022). This suggests that access to necessary resources and opportunities will differ in quantity and quality across identity groups (i.e. class, ethnicity, race, gender, etc.)

For instance, professional women encounter greater disparities and unequal treatment within organizations compared to men (Pender et al., 2022). These inequalities are exacerbated for racially marginalized women, who contend with increased forms of inequality such as gender and race/ethnic pay gaps (Woodhams et al., 2023), restricted access to social networks (Akpinar-Sposito, 2013), and higher rates of unemployment (Wong et al., 2022), in contrast to their white female counterparts. These disparities are informed by their particular identity and thus, underscore the need to explore the specific nuances of their identity experiences, and their responses to how others construe and re-construe their identity in workplace settings (Opara et al., 2023a).

Nevertheless, the exploration of responses to identity imposition remains relatively unexplored within professional identity and workplace inequality research. Early scholarship that considers identity imposition, dates back over two decades (see Jipson et al., 1997), their research addresses the ways that professional women self-impose labels like "mother" or "nurturer". Opara et al. (2020), focused on the imposition from others onto self, they found that identity imposition encompasses the challenges of navigating preconceived notions held by colleagues and clients, resulting in difficulty reconciling an intersectional identity (of minoritised race and gender) within an organizational culture deeply entrenched in white prototypicality. Consequently, in this paper we seek to close the knowledge gap within professional identity and workplace inequality scholarship, by further developing the concept of identity imposition within the professional context and particularly at the individual *and* interpersonal levels. We acknowledge that identity is construed at group, organizational, interpersonal, and individual levels (Rodriguez et al., 2024). Nevertheless, our primary focus is on individual and interpersonal identity rather than group or organizational identity, as we seek to contribute specifically to the subjective (or personal) identity bodies of literature (see for examples: Alkhaled and Sasaki, 2022; Benschop et al., 2016; Brown, 2019). We concentrate on *responses* to identity imposition at the intersection of racio-ethnicity and gender; therefore, it is crucial to understand:

> *How do professional British women, of African, Asian, and Caribbean (AAC) ethnic origin, respond to racialised and gendered experiences of imposed identity narratives in UK professional work settings?*

Our study discusses conceptualisations of subjective identity. Then we adopt an intersectional lens to frame our focus on the imposition of identity narratives toward AAC professional women, from colleagues and clients, at the intersection of racio-ethnicity and gender. We aim to understand the experiences of individuals with multiple marginalized identity facets (such as race/ethnicity and gender) and highlight the specific responses employed when subjected to the imposition of identity (Pender et al., 2022). Studying the experiences of individuals with multiple marginalized identities is important because identity imposition operates differently and often more intensely at the intersection of race/ethnicity and gender categories. While prior research has documented negative outcomes of marginalization (see Opara et al., 2020; Doldor and Atewologun, 2020), less is known about how individuals actively respond when others define or impose misconstrued identity narratives on them.

Understanding these responses has clear practical value. For organizations, leaders, and managers, it highlights how everyday interactions and norms can unintentionally impose identities and undermine inclusion efforts, informing more effective leadership practices, and inclusion initiatives.

By drawing from existing literature on identity and identity imposition (Alvesson, 2010; Benschop et al., 2016; Ellis and Ybema, 2010), as well as intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Doldor and Atewologun, 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2024; Tariq and Syed, 2018; Thrasher et al., 2022), our study contributes to the broader understanding of how AAC women navigate and respond to imposed identity constructions within professional settings. Through a thematic analysis, we theorize the responses to these impositions—resistance, modification, and vacillation. This study contributes to the theoretical identity literature and provides new insights into the dynamics of identity formation and imposition faced by AAC women in professional organizations.

Theoretical framework

Identity

There are several lines of theorizing around identity and particularly professional identity dynamics (see: Atewologun et al., 2016; Brown, 2022; Crenshaw, 1991; Opara et al., 2020; Paring et al., 2017). In accordance with Brown (2015: 20) Identities denote people's subjectively construed understandings of who they were, are and desire to become, and are implicated in, and thus key to understanding and explaining, almost everything that happens in and around organizations. A practical example of identity interplays in organizational life can be seen in an employee who is promoted from colleague to manager. While others now view her as a leader, she may still see herself as "one of the team". These shifting understandings of who she was, who she is, and who she wants to be influence how she leads, communicates, and makes decisions, these identity dynamics also extend to how one sees the facets of their identity, *e.g. race, gender, class, etc.,* within the context of the organization. As Brown (2015) argues, such subjectively constructed identities are central to understanding everyday behavior within organizations (Brown, 2023).

Describing and interpreting a subjective concept such as identity is inherently challenging (Alvesson, 2010). The "self" lacks the rigidity and distinctness of an object which is pliable to direct description or explanation (Ellis and Ybema, 2010). The choice of theoretical framework and specific terminology shapes our understanding of how we conceptualize identity. This said there are manifold lines of identity theorizing, including social identity theory, which specifies the circumstances under which

individuals think of themselves as group members (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Social categorization theory, the process through which we group individuals based on their social information (e.g. age, race; Hogg and Turner, 1987), discursive assumptions of identity, which concerns how one signals identity in the moment, and how these signals are interpreted and recognized over time (Foucault, 1972), and subjective identity, which is the individual sense of self (or self-image) as produced through various cultural, political, organizational formations, and colors the way you see self and others (Alvesson, 2010; Brown, 2023).

However, it would be reductive to view all identity scholarship through the lens of one framework and discourse, at all times. When seeking to extend the distinct and subjective phenomenon of identity imposition we need to adopt a subjective identity perspective. Therefore, it is crucial that we can cultivate a nuanced thesis that goes beyond group-based conceptualisations and discursive notions of identity in the moment, thus we interpret the identity imposition phenomenon through a subjective identity lens.

Brown (2015, p. 20) defines identity as, *"people's subjectively construed understandings of who they were, who they are and who they desire to become, [. . .], thus, are key to understanding and explaining, almost everything that happens in and around organizations"*. From the subjective perspective, identity is commonly conceptualized as a dynamic, multi-layered collection of significant elements used to navigate and position oneself within the world (Ullah, 2024). One line of academic thesis argues that identity and identification raise the questions of "who am I?" and therefore "how am I to act?" "How do I interact with others?", and "How should I shape my life?" (Knights and Clarke, 2017). The answers to these questions, are not easily gleaned or assembled, as aspects of identity are not always consciously or intentionally constructed and emerge both through introspection and through intricate interpersonal social exchanges with those who may endorse or completely misconstrue our perceptions of self (Brown, 2019). Much of the discourse surrounding identity revolves around fundamental assumptions that underpin what are often perceived as complex and unyielding debates (Alvesson and Robertson, 2016). Therefore, organizational, psychology, and management scholars have deemed the notion of identity worthy of exploration within workplace settings (Brown, 2019, 2022), as it serves as a focal point for numerous interconnected interactions and experiences—in other words, as we do not get to leave our identity at home when we go to work, understanding who we are at work, and how identity shapes our workplace experiences, is crucial, especially when we consider employee wellbeing, connections and sense of attachment to the organization (Alo et al., 2023).

We differentiate between organizational or corporate identity and professional work identity in accordance with Slay and Smith (2011), who assert that a professional identity denotes an individual's self-concept as a professional, comprising attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences. While organizational identity reflects where individuals work (Moake and Robert, 2022), professional identity indicates the type of work they do and their advanced training and skills (Pratt et al., 2013). This role-based identity emphasizes specialized skills and knowledge unique to the professional (Meliou et al., 2024). Although we discuss professional identity as an individual-level construct, we recognize its formation through social interactions. For simplicity, we refer to "professional identity" in the singular but acknowledge its complexity. Additionally, we acknowledge the constraints of our research, as we do not distinguish between professional industries or specific job roles, this would be an interesting focus for future research, to further expand our understanding of identity imposition in professional settings. Professional identity is important as it provides individuals with a sense of meaning, influencing their work attitudes, and behaviors (Yang and Yang, 2023). Therefore, an individual's professional role significantly shapes their self-definition and sense of identity fit.

We know that a lack of identity fit is likely to have negative implications for a range of workplace outcomes, including workplace retention, based on the research findings of Peters et al. (2012). Within their study they state that, identity fit dynamics are general processes that influence the occupational outcomes of anyone, male or female, who feels they do not fit the masculine occupational prototype in male-dominated fields. Furthermore, their findings highlight that professionals' comparisons of themselves with prototypical members of their occupation (typically white men, in Western professional work settings) can subtly reinforce or corrode their occupational identification. Similarly, Sealy and Singh's (2010) theorizing demonstrates that in Western societies, leadership is inherently gendered, with authority and power predominantly linked to male characteristics, and often going unnoticed and therefore, by extension unquestioned (Thrasher et al., 2022).

"Minority" professionals are likely to confront various insecurities, relative to their identity, including cultural, social, inter-relational, and psychological—rendering identity experiences inherently precarious and rendering identity facets inherently vulnerable to the imposed assumptions of others such as colleagues and clients within professional work settings (Reese et al., 2023). In addition, it is important to explore the simultaneous dynamics of various identity dimensions, such as race/ethnicity, class, and gender, etc., in relation to cultural, social, organizational and professional contexts (Rodriguez et al., 2024). This type of examination calls for the application of intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991).

Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality originated to explain the complex ways in which an individuals' identity dimensions, such as gender, race/ethnicity, and age, and their associated meanings coalesce to create qualitatively unique and often discriminatory experiences, which shape, employment outcomes, and interactions within organizational settings (Thatcher et al., 2023). The term was coined by legal scholar Crenshaw (1991), who highlighted how Black women face discrimination not merely as the sum of racial and gender biases but through unique experiences specific to their intersectional identity. Crenshaw argued that Black women's experiences of discrimination differ fundamentally from those of white women or Black men, necessitating a perspective that accounts for multiple, intersecting social identities (Ponce de

Leon and Rosette, 2022). She critiqued the dominant single-axis framework in anti-discrimination law and broader social theories for failing to address these complex realities (Crenshaw, 1991; McCall, 2005).

Intersectionality has motivated other studies that have examined dimensions of multiple marginalized identity experiences, inequality and power dynamics experienced by those who regularly experience intersectional and manifold identity experiences, such as AAC women. Specifically, and similarly to Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality conceptualization, Jones and McEwen (2000), created the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI), which draws attention to the importance of multiple identities through their discussion of multiple oppressions. They provide examples of how individuals might deal with their multiple oppressions and extend research on the self-perceived identities and the multiple dimensions of identity from the perspective of women college students. Nonetheless, what sets intersectionality apart from Jones and McEwen's (2000) MMDI, is that the latter serves as a framework for understanding the interplay of multiple identity dimensions in relation to work and employment experiences, having evolved along three distinguishable trends. These trends encompass individual, organizational, systemic, and structural levels, and extend to broader labor market contexts (Rodriguez et al., 2024; Thatcher et al., 2023).

Intersectionality: three theoretical emphases

It is crucial to clarify the three distinct approaches to studying intersectionality in work and organizations and situate our study within one approach. According to Rodriguez et al. (2016, 2024), the first theoretical approach emphasizes subjectivities, by considering the particular experiences of groups located at the point of multiple disadvantages (e.g., Sliwa et al., 2023). The second approach focuses on systemic dynamics of power, highlighting how intersectional differences are entrenched within organizational structures, power dynamics and privilege and therefore, highlights the need to make these dynamics of systemic inequality visible for analysis (Rodriguez et al., 2016; Atewologun and Sealy, 2014). The third theoretical approach of intersectionality, extends to the much broader macro context of labor markets, allowing us to address wider intersectional disparities that contribute to overall income inequality and economic stratification, such as wage gaps. This approach highlights the need for nuanced and inclusive approaches to policy-making and organizational practices that account for the diverse experiences shaped by intersecting social identities (Hudson et al., 2024; Kim and Lee, 2023; Meliou et al., 2024).

It is within the first approach that our study is situated, aiming to understand the subjective experiences of identity imposition amongst particularly professional British women, of African, Asian, and Caribbean (AAC) origin, and the behavioral responses that ensue. This subjective contextualization of intersectionality, which is embedded in social context and the underlying systems of domination (e.g., racism, patriarchy, apartheid, colonialism; Hudson et al., 2024), is critical for exploring the identity experiences of AAC professional women.

A key difference in professional identity development for women, and AAC women more so, is the need to reconcile multiple identity dimensions, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and professional roles. This process often leads to identity conflict in raced and gendered professional environments, dominated by norms of powerful white, heterosexual males (Sealy and Singh, 2010). To address these challenges, women engage in identity work, actively constructing a positive professional identity by negotiating racial and gender expectations and asserting competence despite biases (Brown, 2015). This study aims to explore the specific behavioral responses of AAC professional women to identity impositions—discriminatory expectations imposed by colleagues or clients based on biased assumptions (Opara et al., 2020). By integrating intersectionality and identity imposition, we move beyond shared group experiences to understand how such impositions impact AAC women in professional settings. This comprehensive approach contributes to understanding identity dynamics in organizations and highlights the need for innovative research in identity studies (Brown, 2023).

Identity imposition

Early scholarship on identity imposition, spanning almost three decades (Jipson et al., 1997), initially focused on how women educators self-impose labels such as "mother" or "nurturer." Boutte-Heiniluoma (2012: 18) expands this concept to consider imposition from others, defining identity imposition as "the persona assigned by outsiders to other individuals based on racialised assumptions, using appearance as its primary cue". This external imposition creates conflicts between the imposed identity and an individual's self-image (Opara, 2024). This framework sheds light on how identity misinterpretations by others intrusively disrupt individuals' sense of self. Further research highlights the pervasive negative impact experienced by "people of color" or minoritised groups due to imposed identities (Chou and Feagin, 2008). For instance, Chou and Feagin (2008) assert that white people constantly impose racialised identity narratives. They suggest that Asian Americans often grapple with the dual challenges of externally imposed and mis-construed identities, highlighting that Asians frequently express feeling caught between "two worlds". Opara et al. (2020), further reveal that identity imposition encompasses the challenges of navigating preconceived notions held by colleagues and clients of what it means to be an ethnic minority woman. Consequently, these imposed preconceptions result in difficulty reconciling an intersectional identity (of minoritised race and gender) within a professional organizational culture deeply entrenched in white prototypicality.

More recent research continues to advance our understanding of identity imposition as a multifaceted phenomenon in social and organizational settings. Rodriguez et al. (2024: 45) argue that identity imposition manifests through biased assumptions and discriminatory practices, influencing individuals' self-perception and interpersonal interactions. Similarly, Smith et al. (2023) explore how identity imposition leads to internal

conflicts and identity negotiations among marginalized groups, impacting their psychological well-being and professional trajectories. These studies underscore the intersectional nature of identity imposition, intersecting race, gender, and other social identities, which significantly shape individuals' experiences and social opportunities.

Identities research is, of course, far too substantial for any single paper to do full justice. Nonetheless, our paper extends identity imposition within a specific (professional organizational) and contemporary (intersectional) context. In addition, our paper focuses on external imposition of identity and identity expectations onto individuals based on racio-ethnic and gender-based prejudices, and stereotypes, rather than self-imposition. Moreover, recognizing the lived experience of navigating these impositions is essential for (a) mitigating the occurrences of these prejudiced impositions, and (b) fostering greater empathy for those who are regularly subjected to misapprehended narratives of who they are, and how they ought to behave. Farias and Cabezas (2015) highlight the occurrence of needing to resist representations and misrepresentations, they state that for individuals to confront their feelings of self-hatred and internalized racism means exploring their psycho-social landscapes to understand the impact of living in a culture where negative depictions of minoritised individuals are omnipresent.

The consequences of identity imposition will likely include psychological distress, cognitive dissonance, and further marginalization within the professional context. When individuals are forced to navigate their identity through narratives imposed by dominant groups, they often experience heightened levels of stress and anxiety (Jensen and Cross, 2021), as their authentic selves are invalidated or suppressed (Jones and McEwen, 2000). This conflict between internal identity conceptualization and external expectations, creates cognitive dissonance for the individual (Jensen and Cross, 2021), resulting in turmoil and confusion. Additionally, those whose identity is regularly imposed or misrepresented by others, are at risk of facing disproportionately more marginalization, due to misrepresentation and microaggressions (Cross et al., 2017). The likely outcome is that individuals who regularly navigate identity imposition, will struggle to participate fully within organizational, economic, and political life—as they are predominantly misunderstood by dominant groups (Hughes and Goodwin, 2016). Alvesson and Willmott (2002) discuss a similar concept, namely, "identity regulation" or "identity reformation", which involves the intentional influence of social practices on identity construction. For instance, where induction, training, and promotion procedures might shape and direct identity. When an organization becomes a key source of identification for an individual, their corporate identity will begin to inform their self-identity work. Although extremely valuable theorizing, this is not what we are dealing with as identity imposition is (a) not regarded as the intentional influence on identity construction, and (b) it does not exclusively occur within formal practices such as onboarding or training. Therefore, understanding identity imposition as a lived experience for AAC professional women is crucial, as it will likely highlight the constant, moment-by-moment and long-term proactive tensions the women face in navigating spaces that invalidate or undermine their intersectional identity.

The current study

The current situation in UK organizations

Much research on experiences of gender and ethnicity in UK organizations focuses on the adverse impact those referred to as "minorities", (but who in fact constitute the global ethnic majority), face in gaining access to organizations (Fletcher et al., 2023; Kenny and Briner, 2013). African Asian and Caribbean (AAC) ethnic, women, possess both gender "minority" and racio-ethnic "minority" identity facets, and thus, face a greater chance of being negatively stereotyped and being subjected to negative identity meanings in the professional environment (Okechukwu et al., 2013). Furthermore, whiteness and maleness pervade leadership in UK workplaces (Ryan et al., 2020), often reinforcing the systems that authorize control and influence over individuals that deviate from those groups (Hudson et al., 2024; McCluney and Rabelo, 2019; Nkomo and Al Ariss, 2014). AAC professional women are often constrained by tacit rules derived from whiteness and maleness (Baskerville Watkins and Smith, 2014), which determines how they should be perceived and who they are allowed to be at work (McCluney and Rabelo, 2019). These constraints result in heightened vigilance to situational cues in the workplace, more so than their white male counterparts (Baskerville Watkins and Smith, 2014), and particularly in professional settings where "minority" ethnic women make up a small proportion of the population in the UK.

The study aims to gain better insight into the experiences of British AAC professional women. It seeks to uncover the everyday ways in which identity expectations may be imposed on AAC women, and the often invisible but exhausting emotional labor the women must perform in response. Unlike the work of Jipson et al. (1997), our paper does not focus on self-imposition, but rather it focuses on external imposition onto an individual from a colleague or client, at work. When examining identity imposition, it is important to acknowledge that impositions can occur for other groups i.e. previously minoritised white groups, e.g. Irish, Northerners or those with working class accents. However, here we are focused particularly on imposition for AAC women at the intersection of gender, racio-ethnicity and professional status, to get their underrepresented voices heard.

We seek to take the subjective identity literature a step further, to not only understand the tensions of being subjected to identity imposition, but also to (a) better understand subjection at the intersection of multiple marginalized identity facets, and (b) better understand how British AAC professional women specifically, proactively respond to these identity impositions at work. Our research question asks:

> *How do professional British women, of African, Asian, and Caribbean (AAC) ethnic origin, respond to racialised and gendered experiences of identity imposition in UK professional work settings?*

Materials and Methods

This study employed an inductive, qualitative methodology utilizing semi-structured online written interviews conducted between October 2020 and September 2021. The online written interviews were facilitated using Google Docs, chosen for its ability to offer a relatively private and comfortable environment for participants to share their experiences, during the COVID-19 outbreak, and the institution of stringent lockdown measures (Liu et al., 2021). In this paper, we focus not just on AAC professional women's experiences of identity imposition, but also highlight the subtle variations and construal of their responses.

Temporal context

The study was conducted in the context of the UK during two unprecedented events, the COVID-19 pandemic and the abhorrent murder of George Floyd in the United States. These events profoundly shaped the organizational landscape and experiences of professional women from African, Asian, and Caribbean (AAC) ethnic backgrounds. Against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, workplaces underwent rapid transformations, with remote work becoming the norm and existing inequalities exacerbated, such as heightened job insecurity and emotional exhaustion in front line health and retail employees (Alo et al., 2023). Simultaneously, the global outcry and heightened awareness surrounding racial injustice sparked by George Floyd's high-profile murder permeated organizational discourse, bringing issues of systemic racism, violence and diversity to the forefront.

Professional context

The women within the study are employed within a diverse array of professional settings, such as, human resources, accounting and finance, business consultancy, healthcare, academia, and legal professions. Many teams were said to be male dominated, particularly within finance and legal sectors, women were the minority. In contrast, those working within healthcare and academia reported more balanced gender and ethnicity representation. The organizational cultural dynamics varied, with certain workplaces emphasizing diversity and inclusion more than others. For instance, those working within human resources, psychology and academia acknowledged the cultural dissonance they experienced and referred to where they had been involved in creating supportive and inclusive working environments.

Data collection

We conducted semi-structured online written interviews with 30 professional women of African, Asian, and Caribbean ethnic backgrounds, including accountants, civil servants, consultants, educators, health practitioners, legal practitioners, social care managers and those working in leadership and advisory capacities. Study participants ranged from age 24–64 years. We asked the women to self-ascribe their racio-ethnic identity. The sample comprised African, Asian, British-Indian, Black British, British Caribbean and British Mixed-Caribbean women. Our sample size of $N = 30$, is deliberate, chosen for its depth and suitability rather than breadth. Each interview allowed for detailed exploration of the participants' experiences, interpretations, and responses, producing rich qualitative data.

We defined professional as an organizational position that requires a minimum of a university bachelor's degree (or equivalent) to practice. A mix of purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques were used to recruit the women, through online platforms such as Prolific and Facebook. The interviews varied in length from 40 min to 100 min, with the transcripts ranging from 1,500 to 28,000 words. The interviews were conducted in an open and relaxed manner, with many of the participants welcoming the opportunity to break from their newly acquired remote working routine. No interviewees declined to answer any of the questions. Furthermore, given the recency of the George Floyd murder and the heightening of organizational discourse around issues of systemic racism and diversity, many of the participants stated that participation in the interview was a much-welcomed outlet—as they were able to discuss their feelings away from the politics of their work organizations.

Each participant received an initial email invitation to join the study, which included an information sheet and a consent form outlining the study's purpose and procedures. They were told that the study considers workplace experiences, and how they experience their workplace and professional team environment on a day-to-day basis. Participants were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of the interviews. No personally identifiable information, such as names or contact details, was collected, or recorded. Only demographic data such as age, ethnicity, gender, and organizational role were retained for analysis.

Process

Initially, we considered conducting face-to-face interviews, but we later deemed this approach to be impractical, due to logistical constraints under COVID rules, and the need for confidentiality, given the sensitive nature of the topics discussed, particularly issues related to gender and race discrimination. We decided that the adoption of Google Docs as the interview medium was fitting to mitigate concerns regarding potential biases during face-to-face interactions, thereby fostering a more conducive environment for open dialogue. Furthermore, given the need to maintain social distance, we believed the use of Google Docs to conduct online written interviews, better aligned with the organizational climate at the time of virtual and online remote working (for examples of studies that used a similar approach, see: Guo et al., 2024; Opara et al., 2023a,b).

Participants were invited via email to engage in synchronous online interviews. Each participant selected a mutually convenient time slot, during which both interviewer and interviewee accessed the same Google document in real time. The format facilitated direct written interaction and rapport-building between the

interviewer and participants. We followed a semi-structured interview outline, inquiring about various aspects of workplaces experiences of identity and identity imposition. The interviews consisted of 21 open-ended written questions, delivered in a set order. Questions were typed into the Google document by the interviewer, and the participants responded sequentially. Interview topics considered identity experiences at work and treatment from others, relative to ones' racio-ethnicity, and gender identity, with probing questions such as "how does this experience make you feel", "how do you respond" or "how do you react to this?"

Data analysis

Interviews elicited 240 pages of transcripts. We conducted a thematic template analysis (Brooks et al., 2015), which emphasizes the use of hierarchical coding. Central to the technique is the construction of a coding template, usually based on a subset of data, which is then applied to further data, revised, and refined (Brooks et al., 2015). The flexibility of thematic analysis allowed adaptation to the needs of the study and its overarching subtle realist philosophical position (Brooks et al., 2015). Using NVivo, coding started with primary nodes comprising categories related to broad topics covered in interviews: job role, day-to-day workplace experiences, identity, authenticity, and identity-imposition. We first coded 10 interview scripts, resulting in 12 initial main codes. The primary researcher then ran through the subset of 10 interviews again, to organize the emerging codes into meaningful clusters and defined how each cluster related to the initial node, as is typical within template analysis. As we immersed ourselves in the data, stepping back to gain perspective, and then returning to it, we noticed participants shared experiences of resisting the misconceptions imposed on them by colleagues, and adapting their behavior to navigate these impositions. During the interviews, we also noticed some reoccurring fluctuation between when a participant exhibited resistive behavior and when they attempted to adapt behavior. This resulted in a "in-betweenness" cluster (see Figure 1).

"In-betweenness" captured contradictory assertions and submissions about the misconstrued self across the interviews, often intertwined with discussions on professional status. This highlights an ongoing psychological incongruence, whereby the internal struggle for parts of the self to be recognized and understood co-exists—beside a striving for portions of the self to be altered, corrected, or redefined. Given our theoretical objectives and prior research, our focus centers on uncovering particular and peculiar responses to identity imposition among AAC professional women, specifically, resistance, modification, and vacillation.

Finally, we applied the template to the full dataset (all 30 interview scripts). It could be argued that there is never a final version of the template, in that continued engagement with the data can always suggest further refinements to coding (King, 2012). Nevertheless, on a pragmatic basis, it felt reasonable to stop at this version of the template, as it met the needs of the study. We use participant numbers to protect the anonymity of our participants.

Results

The purpose of this section is twofold. First, we demonstrate how AAC professional women experience these situations, highlighting what they felt, what they thought and what they did. Second, we probed to find out more about the latter, the "doing" or "responding". Where there were several examples given where the women recalled only responding emotionally in the moment (reactive), here we focus on their proactive cognitive and behavioral responses.

From the coded data, three key themes emerged in relation to how British AAC professional women respond to identity impositions. These were (1) resistance (2) modification, and (3) vacillation.

Resistance

The women's narratives reveal that a common response to dealing with imposed identity narratives was to resist the assumptions placed upon them i.e. the belief that individuals of Black (African/Caribbean) racio-ethnicity only listen to genres like rap or urban music, reflecting a reductive stereotype that ignores the diversity of their musical preferences. Participants dedicated their effort and energy to developing responses to these types of negative assertions. For example, Participant 21 recalls being invited by a colleague to join an initiative to decolonise the curriculum and states:

> *"I explained to a rather vocal colleague (who had wanted me to take part in a decolonising initiative around music), that I like Katherine Jenkins rather than Stormzy. It was a lie, I listen to neither, but it stunned her into silence. She quickly proceeded to move on."* ***P21: Black British African: lecturer***

Responding to what constitutes a biased imposition of what one's behaviors should be, based on their racial identity, reflects an organizational norm that AAC women regularly come up against. Participant 8 describes a similar experience, where she opposes a misperception during a work-related encounter.

> *"Coming back from a business meeting. I traveled to Leeds. When I came through the immigration, the guy asked where my husband was? I took opposition to such a comment, I said "he is at work. I don't take my husband to work with me!"*

P8: British of Indo-Portuguese origin: food safety and agriculture inspector

The imposed narrative suggested that she should not travel without her husband, a form of discrimination rooted in her identity as an Asian woman, rather than recognizing her professional identity as a food safety and agriculture expert. This led Participant 8 to actively challenge the treatment she received. Many participants recounted similar experiences of resisting such discriminatory treatment to demonstrate to colleagues and others that such behavior was unacceptable. Resisting as a response strategy involved interrupting fixed and stereotypical notions of

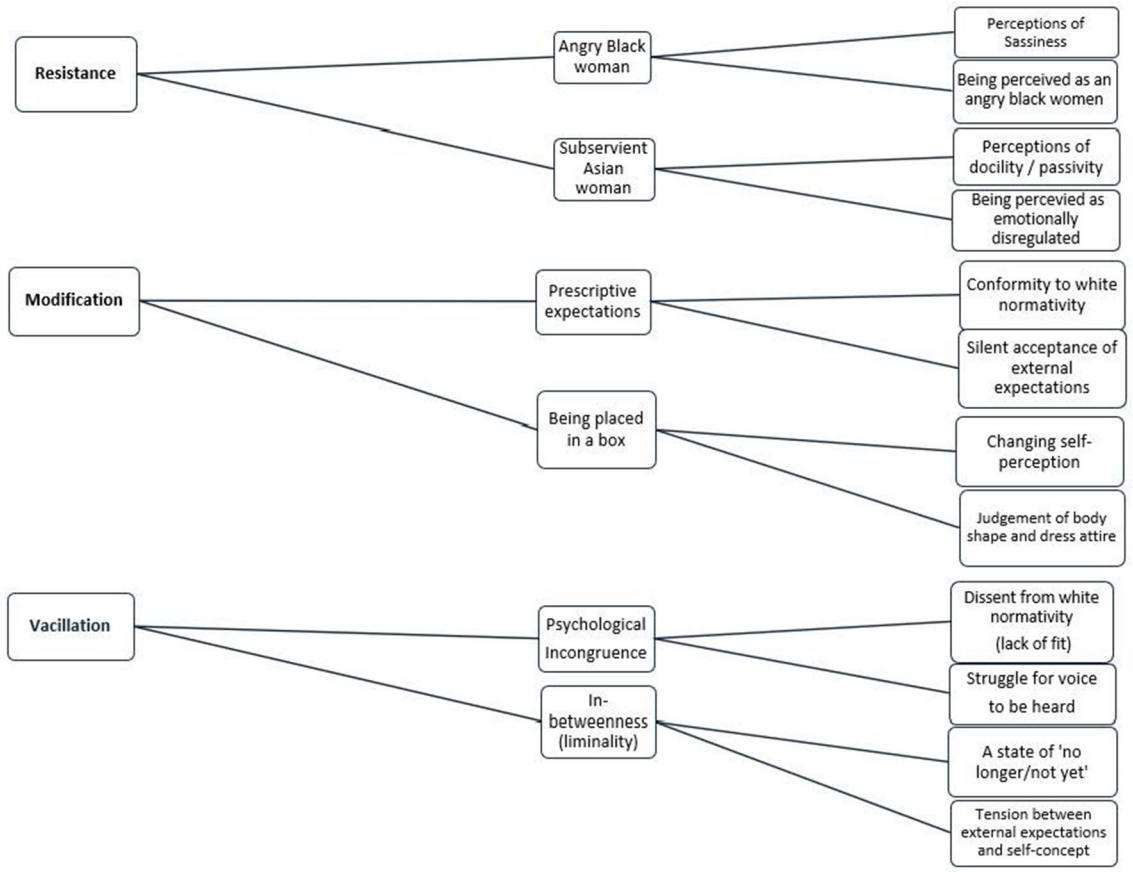

FIGURE 1
Initial codes, theoretical clusters and higher-order codes.

how a woman with an AAC ethnic identity ought to behave. This took the form of counteracting the comments or offering a rebuff:

> *"Sometimes people have remarked about my good English, my response is often, "as though it is somehow unexpected for an academic to have a good command of English."... They then get shocked when I explain who I am, this infuriates me."* ***P21: Black British African: lecturer***

Participant 19 describes the frustration that comes with having to frequently resisting others' assumptions about who she ought to be and what her likes and interests therefore ought to be:

> *"People have assumed I must like reggae music because I am Black, specifically Bob Marley, people have assumed I would not be interested in going to the theater with a group of colleagues because supposedly Black people do not go to the theater...Now I confront them, sometimes I laugh, other times I remain silent."* ***P19: Black British Caribbean: senior lecturer***

Participants' comments suggest that resistance necessitates significant emotional labor. Thus, choosing to resist these misconceived identity impositions also compelled professional women to limit empathy, connection, and interaction with their colleagues for self-protection. The interview discourse emphasizes the importance of AAC professional women maintaining a sufficient level of detachment from their colleagues to remain psychologically regulated, when needing to resist their colleague's behavior.

> *"I find it easier to take the backlash that comes from speaking out, when I am being my true self, than having to live with the stress of not being myself.... I find the inability to be myself at work very frustrating, it is stressful. When I remind myself of this...I find the courage to respond to the actions of white colleagues. Then I remove myself, I disconnect, at times, both physically and psychologically"* ***P22: Black British African: forensic psychologist***

Participant 2 also highlights that there is labor involved when deciding to resist, and in the same vein resilience maybe an unintended by-product of constantly having to resist, for those who "choose" this particular response:

> *"I find it harder to let things go without challenging it. Things that I would have mulled over years ago, now just trigger a reaction and I respond almost automatically. I am not sure I will seek to stay in [higher] education in the long term. Short*

> *and medium term yes, but I do not want to be putting up with this treatment in my 50s or 60s."* ***Participant 21: Black British African: lecturer***

She continues to say:

> *"In the short term it has made me determined to force the conversation and be more outspoken. I am more proactive in supporting BAME colleagues and speaking out given my legal background."* ***Participant 21: Black British African: lecturer***

These extracts highlight the women's awareness of how their colleagues' treatment influenced their workplace behaviors, necessitating a greater effort to manage the tension between speaking out and suffering in silence, both for themselves and others. This is indicative of a shift from internalizing to externalizing the issue (i.e. that the individual should not assume sole responsibility for it). However, the frustration and stress accompanying resistance is likely to inform another dimension of AAC professional women's work experiences; that of negative well-being implications (Ravalier et al., 2021). In sum, whilst the additional emotional labor required for acts of resistance may eventually lead to greater resilience, such resistance cannot be considered as a positive situation, as it results from unfair treatment toward the AAC women.

Modification—Appearance/attire

During our interviews, the women frequently described how imposed identity assumptions by others evoke a sense of incongruence between their self-perception and the professional environment. In response, they modified aspects of themselves, reconstructing their identities to counter pervasive misperceptions. To consciously differentiate themselves from potential racialised stereotypes, such as the assumption that a Black woman is a member of the cleaning staff rather than a professional, women adjusted their work attire to avoid these prejudiced assumptions. In this sense modifying oneself, by always wearing formal work attire, provides women with "another skin", or "coat of armor" to protect against work colleagues prejudice beliefs. For example:

> *"I try not to 'dress down' because I feel I am held to a different standard than my white colleagues [. . . .] I often ask my colleagues, why they are not interrogating others about their work attire?"* ***P24 Black Caribbean: digital marketing specialist***

Within the interview discourse, some of the Asian women gave examples of dressing to mitigate the imposition of a subservient or unintelligent stereotype. Participant 14 holds a Ph.D. and is employed at a senior level within her organization. Despite this, she describes this concern of not wanting to be seen as disheveled and/or uneducated for the job:

> *"I do sometimes realize that I must be particularly clear, smart and need to be sort of on show to kind of "dazzle" because otherwise I am at risk of being ignored or my views dismissed. I suspect in the back of my mind I am mindful of how those who aren't smartly turned out are perceived as being slovenly or not intelligent enough, even if that's not the case! Does that make sense?"* ***P14 South Asian British/Sri Lankan***

Concerning appearance, Black women expressed concerns regarding being subjected to hypersexualised stereotypes. This connects to the racist portrayal of Black womanhood (to white audiences) in ways that define the Black female body as exotic and alluring. Throughout history Black women have been depicted (by white individuals for white Western audiences) in a hypersexualised manner, in ways that conform to racist colonial fascinations with both the male and female Black African/Caribbean physical form (Sowemimo, 2023).

> *"I am not keen to dress in a way that could be considered oversexualised which I guess is a gendered concern. I have literally had to change my wardrobe, I feel that not doing this I would perhaps be treated less seriously. . . I feel this is gendered, but also raced, as this concern is more common for "Black women" where there is an existing tendency within society to hypersexualise us."* ***P15 –Black British Caribbean: educational psychologist***

Black women of African/Caribbean ethnicity are particularly told to modify aspects of themselves (e.g., straighten hair; alter how they speak to stay away from words that may be prevalent within their sub-culture) to comply to the white hetero-prototypicality, white-femininity and white normative beauty standards (Sanger, 2009). They are simultaneously hypersexualised to a greater extent than their white counterparts, a perception that continues to shape their organizational experiences. Another participant, identifying as Black Caribbean, describes the identity work required to ensure her work attire does not subject her to such hyper-sexualised racist treatments. She details how she has modified aspects of her appearance, yet still faces the imposition of discriminatory narratives by others:

> *"As a Black woman, sometimes due to the way our bodies are shaped, the clothes we wear can often be labeled as 'revealing' or 'too much.' As sad as it sounds due to being naturally quite curvaceous, I am very conscious of the clothes I wear, which has resulted in me wearing a different style of clothing to cover up as much as possible. In a previous job role, whilst wearing a tighter-fitting dress, I was advised by a senior colleague not to wear it again as it simply didn't look good. When I asked him to explain why, he could not give me an explanation although on many occasions I've seen my white colleagues wear similar dresses and not get penalized for it. Because my body shape is different, I did":* ***P9 Black British Caribbean: civil servant***

Modification—Appearance/hair

Unfortunately, it is not only aspects of work attire that AAC professional women must modify. For Black African and Caribbean women there is also a need to alter the

natural appearance of their hair. This is due to a long-entrenched colonial narrative which has seen Black peoples' hair described as unwieldy, unrestricted, and unprofessional (Opie and Phillips, 2015). In addition, the Afro-hairstyle (which is the natural hairstyle of many Black women) has been co-opted as a symbol of diasporic Black resistance and Afrocentrism, within Western contexts. Therefore, Black hairstyles have been historically devalued, as one of the more visible stigmata of Blackness. The women in our study reported grappling with the need to modify their hair to conform to what is considered "acceptable" or "professional" within the work environment. One woman, identifying as Mixed Black Caribbean and White British, states:

> *"Something that really surprised me was when I attended my interview, I straightened my hair, after I had resumed someone on the interview panel later made a comment about this, she said that she had thought my hair was naturally straight. This really spoke out to me, and has put me under pressure to maintain a certain look, which involves complying to the standard of straight hair"* ***P11 Mixed Black Caribbean and White British: school safeguarding officer***

These experiences relating to hair, highlight one qualitative distinction between the forms of modification that African/Caribbean women may engage in, compared to that of Asian ethnic women. Asian women in our sample did not face such treatments relative to hair, even though their hair is uniformly different, by which we mean all Chinese individuals' hair may be more like each other than to the hair of Indian individuals' hair, etc. Nonetheless, the hair of Asian women overall, has been depicted as like "European hair" possibly because of the media's portrayal of one hairstyle (i.e., straight hair) as acceptable and desirable.

This inability to simultaneously exhibit your hair in its natural form (as a Black/Mixed woman) and retain the image of a professional employee within the work context is harmful, adding additional pressure particularly on Black African, Caribbean, and Mixed women. Participant 11, referred to instances where she had worn her hair to work in its natural form and texture, signaling her racio-ethnic background, and this attracted harmful treatment from her boss:

> *"There was once a spillage at work, and I was told by my boss that I could clean it up with my mop head. I found this offensive. I called in sick because I was upset about this, I eventually confronted him on this comment, and he did apologize. However, this has led me feeling reluctant about wearing my hair down"* ***P11 Mixed Black Caribbean and White British: school safeguarding officer***

The women reported that having to constantly respond to colleagues' assumptions about their work attire and their hair was laborious in nature. These invasive experiences led to frustration. Participant 29's comment is particularly interesting because it shows how subjection to identity imposition is proving to be harmful, with implications for self-esteem, reflecting the ongoing struggles that the women face, when working out how best to ensure their personal well-being:

> *"I don't wear my natural hair to work - it is usually in a protective hairstyle that I feel is mutually accepted. In the past when I have worn my natural hair, lots of people wanted to touch it. Many colleagues said I look different followed by but… and a positive adjective. One colleague gestured at how big my hair was with his hands and made a comment that wasn't positive."* ***P24: Black Caribbean: digital marketing specialist***

Modification—Behavior and voice

Interviewees also discussed modifying behaviors, mannerisms, or accents. This modification, intended as a form of self-protection, highlights the fine line between resisting and perpetuating identity impositions. By altering themselves, individuals may inadvertently reinforce negative stereotypes and discriminatory social norms. For instance, if a woman internalizes the belief that women are unsuited for leadership roles and thus refrains from applying for such positions or subconsciously disregards other women seeking to undertake a leadership role, she unintentionally perpetuates that stereotype, limiting opportunities for herself and others. Therefore, by modifying their actions and decisions to fit in, individuals essentially validate and legitimize these imposed narratives. Participant 25 exemplifies this delicate balance between resisting and perpetuating identity impositions through the lens of self-modification:

> *"I modify my behaviors, I find that some people appear concerned if you appear to be different to them, so the easiest option is to put them at ease by simply modifying yourself…I do feel that I must be all things to all people. I adapt myself according to the situation that I find myself, in a way I know that other largely "white" colleagues don't seem to do this. They speak the way they do; they act the way they do in all situations and there is no consequence for them".* ***P25: British Asian: data and research assistant***

Participant 15 makes a similar comment, highlighting her acceptance to navigate the clash between her ethnic identity and further legitimize white-prototypical dominance, she notes:

> *"I feel that there is a level of advantage to presenting with an ethnically 'neutral' identity, or more prototypically "British" within the workplace, when adopting more typically white female characteristics within my particular role...I am able to navigate some certain situations with greater ease.....I perhaps am less expressive in a work context, e.g. through my non-verbal behaviors - I tend to use my hands a lot and my face can be very expressive when taking amongst friends, whereas I am more measured in a work capacity"* ***P15: Black British Caribbean: educational psychologist***

We must consider the role of normative "whiteness" and "white" racial identities in understanding the internal conflicts and responses that identity imposition triggers for professional women in our sample. "Non-white" identities often lack the

privileges of normativity and are frequently perceived as inferior or marginal (Bonnett, 1997, p. 188). These dynamics prompt behavioral responses, such as altering one's reality or appearance to counteract imposed identities, often at significant personal cost. Participant 23 describes her behavioral response through changes in her voice and accent:

> *"I am conscious of not losing myself, so I try to stay authentically myself as much as possible. Although, for example, I might overemphasize my British culture and understanding to fit in with the crowd. Sometimes speaking in a way that is more appealing to them etc. This will allow you to be more accepted but, that's not me, so, I try to avoid it for the most part."* ***P23: Black British: educational psychologist***

Not all experiences were shaped by negative identity impositions. Participant 29 recounts an instance where she had a conversation with a fellow AAC client, who was a Nigerian-born woman, whereas Participant 29 was not. She states:

> *"When I am boxed into who I am not, it leads to frustration. You can only take it so many times, until you finally challenge the person and often with anger. I was asked by a Nigerian client "should I treat you like a white person, or like a true born African, like me?" … I simply answered, "I am none of these things, I am an African born in the UK, why not treat me this way?" […] If you are not careful it can really play with your self-esteem"* ***P29: Black African British Born: business consultant***

Vacillation

Within participant's narratives, we uncovered a struggle which derives from the tension of not wanting to modify oneself, but neither wanting to outrightly resist the impositions of others. This stems from a delicate balance between personal attitudes, and the expectations imposed onto the women within their professional environments. Some women in the study vacillated between resisting identity impositions and modifying their behaviors or mannerisms as a protective response, highlighting the narrow margin between opposing identity impositions, and propagating them further, through modification. This vacillation underscores a complex psycho-social process where women navigate a liminal space—an incongruent domain of both defiance and compliance. On one hand, they pushed back against distorted identity impositions, striving to assert their authentic selves. On the other hand, they modify aspects of their self-presentation, such as their voice, mannerisms, or appearance, to avoid reinforcing negative stereotypes. For the following participant, we see an example, of vacillation, involving being situated within this mysterious gap of modifying oneself and resisting others:

> *"Most times I know in my mind how I am going to react if a comment is made by someone with a different nationality or ethnicity to me. I find myself wanting to challenge their behavior by countering the comment, it does get exhausting […], but ultimately, I might not, but I will still change my voice or my appearance, to either become quieter or to be dressed in what others have referred to as middle class attire."* ***P24: Black Caribbean: digital marketing specialist***

Contravening imposed identity assumptions and privileging "resistive" behavioral responses was often effective, but at the same time proved unrewarding. For instance, one's professional image may be damaged by revealing behaviors that are seen as hostile or resistant in nature. This would likely reinforce racist imposed narratives for Black women, due to Blackness often being associated with ideas of aggression, or unrestrained behavior. For Asian women it would lead to greater penalties for being seen as disrespectful for pushing back and violating socially imposed sanctions, such as the pervading subservient imposition of identity. The following participant reinforces the fluctuation between exhibiting resistive behavior and simply changing aspects of self as a protective mechanism to avoid conflict, or contrasting with expectations of colleagues and clients:

> *"I will do it anyway; I am willing to exert the energy to have my voice heard. I think, I do this thing where I say my point (so that brings stress), but then I say to myself, I no longer need to have any meaningful interaction with that person, and I guess at that stage, I modify my behavior, as I will typically distance or move on. I move on physically, long before I move on mentally, so you are left in a vague head space, where things play repeatedly in your mind – if not monitored, you become resentful"* ***P12: British Born Nigerian: art practitioner***

Therefore, vacillation allows women to navigate the obligatory duality of either modifying or resisting, she goes on to say:

> *"Knowing what decision to take can be stressful and I used to overthink these things, but I am at a place now where I am learning to accept not being in control of how others choose to behave"* ***P12: British Born Nigerian: art practitioner***

Thus, it appeared that the response of vacillation acts as a burdensome middle ground, where women linger when they are uncertain of what their response ought to be.

Discussion

In this section we consider how our study both addresses our research question and contributes to the extant literature in various ways. First, we demonstrate how professional work settings serve as arenas for the construction, formation, and distortion of employees' identities. We evidence the case of UK AAC professional women, who face misconstrued identity narratives and imposed behavioral expectations by colleagues and clients within UK professional environments. We have evidenced that AAC women adopt three types of responses to identity imposition: (1) resistance, (2) modification, (3) vacillation. Second, we show how women who must contend with identity imposition, perform increased amounts of emotional labor, and frequently report feeling emotional exhaustion. The value of recognizing the link between identity imposition and emotional exhaustion

is that it focuses attention on, and assists the analyses of, a particular identity phenomenon (identity imposition) within the context of professional sites, professional processes and formation of professional identity for (underrepresented) intersectional professionals. By extension, our study findings highlight the importance of fostering supportive professional environments and policies that mitigate these challenges.

Types of responses to identity imposition: resistance, modification, and vacillation

We identify three distinct responses that AAC women adopt in responding to identity imposition by co-workers. We highlight resistance, modification, and vacillation, which offers a structured understanding of the various coping strategies and behavioral responses exhibited by AAC women.

First, many women actively resist imposed identity constructions, to re-educate colleagues, and to mitigate the harmful impact of such impositions. This resistance can be emancipatory, enabling them to control their self-narratives and seek greater alignment between their self-generated identities and external expectations. While this process often leads to frustration and exhaustion, women perceive this strategy effective when seeking to avoid placating others' discomfort (Liu, 2018) and simultaneously manage colleagues' perceptions of them.

Second, some women cope by modifying aspects of themselves to pre-emptively reduce the likelihood of facing imposed identity expectations. This strategy involves revising, redefining, and altering their self-presentation, consistent with identity work literature that emphasizes impression management among stigmatized individuals (Slay and Smith, 2011).

Additionally, a third response of vacillation, occurs when women are caught in a state of "in-betweenness", continually negotiating their reactions to identity imposition amidst external and internal pressures; that is, the external pressure to comply to the expectations of others *vs.*, internal pressure to speak up for self.

The disaggregation of African, Asian, and Caribbean professional women

African, Asian, and Caribbean women were seen to have different responses to identity imposition. Our findings contribute to considerable prior research on the separate and specific racial and gendered stereotypes of women leaders (Rosette et al., 2016) and disaggregation in analysis of identities, identity work and identity impositions (Bardon et al., 2016). Arguing inductively from our data, the nuanced responses to identity imposition, seem to be driven by the unique cultural and social contexts that shape their particular identities. For example, African women may be stereotyped as loud or aggressive, Asian women as submissive and passive and Caribbean women may face stereotypes related to being overly sexual or promiscuous (Rosette et al., 2016). This led to subtle nuances in the women's responses to identity imposition. For instance, African ethnic women resisted and challenged the identity imposition, more so (though not exclusively) than they seem to modify self, which inadvertently could perpetuate the loud or aggressive stereotype. Asian ethnic women were more inclined to conform by modifying, to avoid backlash – though some also resisted (for example, participant 8's, re-buff about traveling back to the UK without her husband, after work-related travel). Many of the Caribbean ethnic women were prone to navigate their identity in more complex ways, which we refer to as vacillation. This could be due to both the African and European influence within Caribbean culture; thus, blurring the line that women believed they ought to tread. It is important to understand the subtle difference in responses to identity imposition, in-order to understand the professional experiences of the women represented within the AAC category and avoid subjecting them even further to these impositions of identity (Opara et al., 2023b).

AAC professional women's experiences taken together

A key finding in this study is that AAC women actively resist identity imposition, challenging misidentifications rather than passively accepting them. While this resistance allows women to control their self-narratives and confront biases (Remedios and Snyder, 2015), it does not address the broader impact of identity imposition at the group level. By resisting these impositions, AAC women demonstrate resilience and actively manage their professional identities. These responses, though not always driven by clear motivations, can be seen as forms of identity work (Goffman, 1990; Brown, 2015) aimed at protecting themselves from harmful narratives or mitigating emotional conflict. Importantly, these responses occur in interaction with others within the work environment, highlighting the responsibility of those who create such negative situations. Their actions contribute to increased emotional exhaustion and diminished well-being for those affected.

Well-being implications

Finally, our findings contribute to ongoing discussion about how identity experiences shape well-being within contemporary professional workplaces. This study has (to an extent) demonstrated that AAC women who contend with identity imposition, perform increased amounts of emotional labor, and frequently report feeling emotional exhaustion. This contribution emphasizes the psychological toll of identity imposition, supporting the theorizing that job role conflict and/or experiencing identity incongruence can impact upon the well-being of employees, leading to professional burnout (Healy et al., 2007; Ravalier et al., 2021). Scholars such as Hudson et al. (2024) support this notion of a psychological toll when resisting sexism in the workplace. Our study is particularly important as it demonstrates that experiencing cumulative psychological stress, exacerbated by the need for ongoing resistance, modification of behavior and vacillating between the two, contributes to heightened levels of emotional exhaustion among individuals or marginalized groups.

Furthermore, our findings demonstrate the intersectionality of multiple forms of oppression, emphasizing that the simultaneous resistance against racio-ethnic and gender-based discrimination requires unique expressions or responses, thus resulting in negative implications for the personal health and well-being of AAC professional women. Understanding around racial and gendered forms of oppression, is not new. However, what is new is the understanding of oppression at the intersection of these identity categories and specifically the understanding of the unique expressions or responses that these oppressive situations evoke, providing us with further contextualization of the negative implications for health and well-being of AAC professional women. High levels of work stress have been evidenced as being key contributors toward cardiovascular diseases (Roy et al., 2021) and mortality (Nyberg, 2012), making this as much of a risk factor as obesity and sedentary living (Roy et al., 2021).

Our findings are particularly relevant as they underscore the urgent need to create inclusive professional work environments that actively challenge harmful identity impositions and mitigate the psychological strain experienced by those dealing with racist and sexist discrimination. The responsibility for change should not rest with AAC professional women, as placing this burden on them would further increase their labor and perpetuate the negative impacts on their well-being (Loon et al., 2019). Rather, onus for change, needs to be placed on managers and (more so) on dominant white groups in decision making capacities, as the main perpetrators of discriminatory treatments toward AAC professional women. Nonetheless, these decisions should be informed by the lived experiences of AAC women. Specifically, managers should actively recognize and challenge identity imposition and biased behaviors when they occur, rather than leaving them unaddressed or normalized; this could be done by paying attention to situations where employees are defined or treated according to an assumption or misconception of "who they are", rather than based on their actual skills or aspirations. They should create clear reporting and accountability mechanisms for discriminatory treatment, embed intersectional awareness into everyday management practices, and ensure that performance, promotion, and feedback processes are equitable and transparent.

Limitations and future research

This study contributes to the literature that seeks to expand understanding of British AAC women's workplace experiences. However, we asked our participants to self-ascribe their racial/ethnic identity, which meant that very few women solely identified as "African" or "Asian" with participants identifying as "African-British, Black British, Black Caribbean, Igbo, Indo-Portuguese, Indian-Jamaican, Mixed Black–Caribbean and White–British, Nigerian and South Asian. One participant even acknowledged her Britishness on "paper" but rejected it as a label by which she chooses to identify, instead identifying as: "Black Caribbean, I am not British even though I was born here". This means that although the terms African, Asian, and Caribbean capture something of the ethnic and cultural background of the women, these labels do not do enough to fully articulate the vast and disparate nature of ethnic identities represented. Future research should therefore investigate experiences of identity imposition for individuals relative to their ethnic group identity, rather than a broad regional identity, such as African, Asian. Nevertheless, this paper does well to move away from the crude and non-productive "BAME" label which potentially masks the lived experiences of individual groups represented within it (Brunsma and Rockquemore, 2001). This paper moves beyond simplistic "Black" vs. "white" race labels, which limit bi-racial and multi-racial identities (Brunsma and Rockquemore, 2001). Future identity imposition research should extend beyond AAC women to include groups like AAC men, religious minorities, and stigmatized white minorities, such as traveler communities or working-class white professionals. Additionally, our study does not differentiate between professional industries or job roles, presenting an opportunity for future research to explore these factors. Expanding the focus to include other groups will deepen understanding of how varied responses to identity imposition impact individuals in professional settings. Finally, as this is an exploratory study, conducted at the micro level, considerations are predominantly those of individual experiences. Therefore, future research ought to consider the meso (organizational/institutional) experiences, as well as the macro (societal) experiences.

Conclusion

This exploratory study sheds light on the emotional and behavioral responses of British professional AAC women, to identity imposition, including the need to modify aspects of themselves, actively resist misconceived identity imposition and vacillating between both responses, resulting in a sense of unease as women try to make sense of this liminal psychological space. Our research highlights the potential "advantages" of resisting identity imposition in the moment, but also the costly long-term implications for well-being, such as increased stress, emotional exhaustion, burn-out and reduced well-being overall. Many of the women within the sample, demonstrate that despite facing exhaustion and having to perform greater amounts of emotional labor, they developed a firm resolve to resist another's attempts to impose a constraining identity narrative on them. However, this cannot be considered a long-term solution. Extra effort is needed from leaders within organizations to ensure that AAC women professionals (and other stigmatized groups) aren't perpetually harmed, by other people's expectations and assumptions of who they "ought" to be, or who they are at work.

This illumination of subtle nuances in how women respond to identity imposition also brings to light some gaps in our understanding and the constraints of our research. For example, we did not distinguish the impacts of professional industry, specific job role, and level of seniority, on women's experiences of identity imposition. These gaps open critical avenues for future research. We call for a more detailed investigation into how different professional positions and/or levels of seniority, influence experiences of identity imposition, and thus, how one might respond to identity imposition, given these shifting dynamics. Research addressing these areas should refine our initial findings and help develop more effective interventions to counter identity imposition in professional organizations.

Finally, drawing on these findings, our contribution to theory has been to extend identity imposition within a specific professional and intersectional context and to focus on the external imposition of identity and identity expectations for AAC professional women, by which such identity is authored.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

This study involving humans was approved by Bath Spa University Research and Ethics Committee, and the University of Exeter's Research Panel. The study was conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

VO: Formal analysis, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Data curation, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Software, Methodology. RS: Visualization, Formal analysis, Project administration, Supervision, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. MR: Supervision, Project administration, Validation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. CB: Project administration, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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The author(s) declared that generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. Gen AI, was used at the final stage to check grammar and correct typographical errors.

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