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Relational authenticity in workplace friendships

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Orientation: This article focuses on the role of women's workplace friendships in eliciting relational authenticity. Women in managerial and professional positions are often in the minority at work and minority groups are likely to experience greater challenges in expressing themselves authentically at work.

Research purpose: This study aimed to examine how workplace friendships elicit relational authenticity among women in professional and managerial positions in the private sector in South Africa.

Motivation for the study: Workplace authenticity is important for well-being, social fit at work and performance, but can be difficult to attain due to the risks involved. The study proposed that workplace friendships encourage authenticity, providing spaces where women feel accepted and able to express themselves authentically.

Research approach/design and method: A qualitative research design was followed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 women.

Main findings: The key finding was that authentic self-expression becomes embedded in high quality workplace friendships where women can self-disclose. These friendships offer acceptance, self-verification and enhanced social fit.

Practical/managerial implications: Organisations need to consider how they can encourage friendships and other workplace relationships that facilitate relational authenticity and enhance employees' social fit in the changing world of work.

Contribution/value-add: The study expands authenticity research beyond the individual, team or followership contexts to informal relationships with friends at work. It provides a deeper understanding of how workplace friendships facilitate relational authenticity through self-verification and social fit. These processes could be applied to other workplace relationships to enhance authenticity and its benefits to different work arrangements.

Keywords: relational authenticity; workplace friendship; social fit; self-verification; women at work.

Introduction

Research on employee authenticity at work has focused mainly on individual rather than relational authenticity (Cha et al., 2019). However, it is important to understand how authenticity is experienced in relation to other people. Understanding which types of relationships facilitate authenticity at work would be beneficial for organisations in establishing more accepting relationships and reaping benefits such as improved employee well-being, performance and organisational effectiveness (Sias & Shin, 2019). This study focuses on relational authenticity in workplace friendships in a sample of professional and managerial women.

Orientation

A state approach to authenticity implies that it is easier to express oneself more authentically in some relationships than others, with authentic self-expression being more difficult with work colleagues than family members and friends (Robinson et al., 2013). People are most likely to experience high subjective authenticity in relationships that encourage aspects of self-disclosure and mutual support (Didonato & Krueger, 2010) and which have a low degree of conflict (Neff & Harter, 2002). Relationships in the workplace vary in terms of these aspects. For example, the power dynamics with one's manager, subordinates, teammates and workplace friends vary (Robinson et al., 2013). The varying power dynamics suggest that employees are more likely to experience higher levels of authenticity with certain colleagues than others. There is a risk of negative outcomes when expressing themselves authentically in situations where their views

differ from dominant views or role expectations, or where power dynamics are involved (Emmerich et al., 2019).

Research on authenticity in relationships has generally found higher authenticity in close relationships where attachment is secure (Chen, 2019). For example, in romantic relationships, higher levels of dispositional authenticity were related to healthy relationship behaviours and other beneficial outcomes, such as well-being (Brunell et al., 2010; Wickham, 2013). However, the types of relationships studied in previous research generally differ from workplace relationships which tend to be more instrumental than those outside of work (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2008). In the workplace, limited research has been conducted on authenticity in different types of relationships. Exceptions to this include research on authenticity with teammates (e.g. Emmerich et al., 2019), coworkers (Robinson et al., 2013; Tang et al., 2022) and leaders (through the lens of authentic leadership, e.g., Gardner et al., 2011), where authenticity was usually found to enhance relationships although aspects such as duration of the relationships and power influenced this association (Tang et al., 2022). Robinson et al. (2013) found that authenticity was lower with coworkers than with partners, friends outside of work and parents.

The type of relationship this study focused on was workplace friendship. Although there is growing research on workplace friendships, at the time of writing no studies had been found which examined whether and how authenticity is embedded in workplace friendships. This study proposes that high-quality workplace friendships create spaces where employees feel free to express themselves authentically. The study focused on professional and managerial women in the private sector for two reasons. Firstly, minorities and those with undervalued identities find it challenging to be authentic in the workplace (Phillips et al., 2018). Similarly, achieving authenticity at work may be difficult for some women, particularly those who are in the minority, in management or other traditionally male roles, or organisational cultures where they are not comfortable revealing all aspects of their identities. There are many reasons for this, including gender stereotypes and perceptions that aspects of their identities are devalued (Faulkner, 2009).

Women are underrepresented in senior positions in the private sector in South Africa (Commission for Employment Equity, 2020) and are therefore in the minority at senior levels. Although this study's sample did not consist exclusively of women in senior management positions, the authors viewed women in professional and other management positions as potentially progressing into senior positions in the future. Cultivating positive relationships, including workplace friendships, could be seen as part of their career development into more senior positions and could assist them in achieving person-environment fit. Secondly, there are indications that men and women seek different outcomes from their workplace friendships (Morrison, 2007). An in-depth understanding of the role of

women's workplace friendships in facilitating authenticity was therefore appropriate.

Research purpose and objectives

The aim of the study was to examine how workplace friendships elicit authenticity. The study proposed that workplace friendships encourage authenticity by allowing individuals to disclose personal information and reveal vulnerabilities, in a similar manner to that found among teammates (Emmerich et al., 2020).

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Explore the basis of professional and managerial women's workplace friendships.
2. Understand the outcomes of their workplace friendships.
3. Understand whether and how workplace friendships are perceived to elicit authenticity.

Literature review

This section of the article discusses selected previous research on authenticity, workplace friendship and the process whereby workplace friendship is proposed to elicit authenticity.

Authenticity at work

Authenticity at work is important largely because of its links to well-being (Van den Bosch et al., 2019), work engagement, performance and career outcomes (Cha et al., 2019). Being authentic is the 'Subjective experience of alignment between one's internal experiences and external expressions' (Roberts et al., 2009, p. 151). The risks involved in expressing oneself authentically in workplace friendships are probably less than in other workplace relationships, but are unlikely to disappear completely due to variations in the scope and quality of the friendships and structural aspects of the organisations in which the friendships are embedded, such as power dynamics, organisational culture (Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018), organisational level (Mao, 2006), reward systems and evaluations of different identities (Chen, 2019). The risks associated with authentic self-expression are consistent with Kock's (2020) finding of a continuum of authenticity ranging from inauthentic, to limited authenticity to authentic in other types of relationships at work.

The authenticity of the salient identity facets in friendships involves relational authenticity, which is achieving congruence between how one defines oneself and how others define one (Martinez et al., 2017). Because different facets of one's identity are activated in different contexts (Chen, 2019), the authors propose that interactions with workplace friends are likely to activate different facets of employees' identities compared with other workplace relationships (e.g. manager, mentor, peer) with different expectations and power dynamics. For example, in high-quality friendships, personal information is likely to be disclosed that would not necessarily be divulged to other colleagues.

Workplace friendships

Workplace friendships function independently of work ties and include voluntary, reciprocal, informal personal relationships with colleagues (Liu et al., 2013). Because workplace friendships are multidimensional, and vary in quality (reciprocity, commitment, trust and positive affect) and scope (duration and interactions limited to the workplace or extending beyond the workplace) (Zarankin & Kunkel, 2019), one cannot assume that they elicit authenticity to the same degree.

The basis of workplace friendships

Understanding the basis for workplace friendships is important because it could have implications for the size of the pool of colleagues who could potentially become friends. Many personal and contextual factors influence the development and maintenance of workplace friendships, such as demographic characteristics, interests, attitudes, values, personality, physical proximity, shared tasks, work-related problems, extra-organisational social events and life events (Sias & Gallagher, 2009). The theme underlying these factors is perceived homophily – being attracted to people who are similar to oneself (Zarankin & Kunkel, 2019). The nature of the similarity has implications for opportunities to develop friendships. If the similarity is based on demographic characteristics (e.g. race, gender and age), there will be fewer opportunities for minorities compared with similarity based on value-life interest. Value-life interest similarity refers to shared values and interests, such as perceiving events in similar ways, experiencing similar life phases and holding similar world views (Omuris, 2019).

It is unclear whether socio-demographic similarity is sufficient for creating authenticity, although it may consolidate group identity and promote the interests of the groups concerned. Friendships based on socio-demographic similarity for majority groups have the potential to entrench the exclusion of minorities (McPherson et al., 2001). In 1995, Ibarra made a groundbreaking discovery about how minority individuals in organisations tend to seek friendships beyond their own demographic, team and job level. This results in more diverse social networks in the workplace. It is unclear whether this still applies today as many organisations have become more diverse. This study argues that friendships based on value-life interest similarity have the potential to cut across socio-demographic characteristics, so that people become friends with colleagues with different socio-demographic characteristics from themselves. This is important in South Africa with its history of racial, ethnic and gender-based divisions. It suggests that friendships based on value-life interest similarity have the potential to enhance employees' experience of belonging at work due to the acceptance experienced in friendships with colleagues across the range of socio-demographic characteristics.

Developing relationships characterised by authenticity depends not only on individual preferences, but also on the structural opportunities available to interact with similar others (Lawrence & Shah, 2020). For minorities, the pool of people with similar salient socio-demographic characteristics to themselves is likely to be smaller than it would be for the majority group, giving them less access to supportive systems (Sias & Gallagher, 2009). However, a focus on value-life interest similarity is likely to create a broader range of friendships. Therefore, objective 1 was achieved through:

- Research Question 1: What is the basis of workplace friendships?

Workplace friendship outcomes

The choice of relationships is based largely on homophily enhanced connection (McPherson et al., 2001). This is likely to apply to workplace friendships. The study proposes that positive outcomes are required for deepening friendships and eliciting authenticity. However, workplace friendships can have both positive and negative outcomes. Examples of positive outcomes include emotional and instrumental support (Sias & Gallagher, 2009), job satisfaction and enhanced performance (Nielsen et al., 2000). The downsides include the emotional labour required to maintain the friendships (Choi & Ko, 2020), tensions between job and friendship roles (Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018) and reduced work performance if friendships deteriorate (Sias et al., 2004). The study sought to understand the outcomes of workplace friendships for the participants because positive and negative outcomes could have different implications for eliciting authenticity:

- Research Question 2: What are the outcomes of workplace friendships?

Friendship and authenticity at work

At the time of writing, no research had been found which examined how workplace friendships elicit authenticity. However, this study argues that when positive outcomes from friendship occur, feelings of acceptance, self-verification and social fit are likely to be experienced, enhancing authentic self-awareness and self-expression. This is based on the finding that when one's values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours are accepted and recognised by others, one's identities are affirmed (Roberts et al., 2009), providing self-verification and authentic self-awareness (Schmader & Sedikides, 2018). This is similar to the process involved in teams where authentic sharing deepens relationships among team members (Emmerich et al., 2020). The benefits of authentic sharing could apply to workplace friendships when employees self-disclose and reveal salient aspects of their identities. However, the potential mixture of positive and negative outcomes of workplace friendships suggests that not all friendships are likely to elicit authenticity to the same extent.

The study focuses on two key processes whereby workplace friendships are likely to elicit authenticity – self-verification and social fit. Self-verification refers to the need for others to know and understand one's positive and negative characteristics (Kraus & Chen, 2014). Women may strive to be

authentic with workplace friends by self-disclosing and seeking feedback that verifies how they see themselves in male-dominated private sector organisations. When employees feel accepted and verified by their workplace friends, they are also likely to feel a greater social fit with their work environment.

Social fit is defined as the extent to which other people in a particular environment accept and validate one's identity (Schmader & Sedikides, 2018). This is based on the State Authenticity as Fit to Environment (SAFE) model (Schmader & Sedikides, 2018), where the individual's fit with the environment is essential to authenticity. The SAFE model includes self-concept, goal and social fit. While all three types of fit may be relevant to workplace friendships, the authors focused on social fit, as this seemed most relevant to relational authenticity. The study proposes that employees are likely to select workplace friends with whom they 'fit' socially. This is likely to be based on homophilous characteristics that are meaningful to them. The similarity between friends facilitates acceptance and support, which is likely to enhance social fit, authentic self-awareness and self-expression. In other contexts, authentic self-expression also provides a self-regulatory break where the person can reduce self-monitoring, the related demands on cognitive resources and fatigue associated with continually monitoring one's behaviour (Emmerich et al., 2020). This is likely to apply to workplace friendships. This led to:

- Research Question 3: How are workplace friendships perceived to elicit authenticity?

Research method and design
Research approach
The study adopted an interpretivist paradigm with a qualitative approach to examining how workplace friendships elicit relational authenticity. This approach helped to explore the association between friendship and authenticity at work by talking directly to participants in the natural setting of their work environment.

Research strategy
This research adopted a qualitative descriptive design which offered the opportunity to explore perceptions in depth through rich descriptions (Kim et al., 2018).

Research setting
The study focused on women who work in the private sector in South African organisations because managerial and professional women in this sector are often in the minority (Commission for Employment Equity, 2020) and minorities are likely to experience greater challenges in expressing themselves authentically at work (Schmader & Sedikides, 2018). Based on Roberts (2005), the study defined professional as an individual who was in an occupation that applied skills based on technical knowledge, was part of a professional body, followed a code of conduct specified by a professional

body, and had advanced education and/or training. The definition included individual contributors from entry level to management roles.

Research participants and sampling methods
Thirteen professional and managerial women in private sector organisations in South Africa were interviewed in 2019. Purposive and snowball sampling were used. Firstly, invitations were placed on T.Z.'s LinkedIn and Facebook accounts. These attracted participants with similar demographic features to those of this researcher (T.Z.). Secondly, to increase the range of views, as a more diverse sample was required, snowballing was used whereby the initial participants were asked to refer potential colleagues to the researchers. Potential participants who were willing to participate were then selected based on age, race and tenure. In addition, as this was part of a larger study, four organisations in Gauteng in the transport, manufacturing and financial sectors emailed invitations to relevant employees. Employees who volunteered to participate then contacted one of the researchers, T.Z., to set up an interview.

Most participants had relatively short organisational tenure, and five interviewees were younger than 25 years of age, indicating possible bias due to snowball sampling and invitations to participate that were posted on social media (Table 1). Of the seven participants in management positions, five described themselves as being in senior positions.

Data collection methods
Participant information sheets explaining the study's aim and methods were emailed to all participants and written consent was obtained before the interviews. Semi-structured individual interviews lasted 40 min to 60 min and were audio-recorded, transcribed and stored on password-protected computers. To ensure confidentiality, participants are referred to by number. Questions for the semi-structured interview guide were based on a literature review and focused on the basis and nature of workplace friendships, the organisation's role in the friendship formation and maintenance, benefits and disadvantages, homophily versus diversity, and whether and how workplace friendships assist in allowing authenticity. Examples of questions are 'Please tell me about your friendships at work?', 'Where would you place the boundaries of these friendships?' and 'How do your workplace friendships help or hinder you from being yourself at work?' Nine interviews were conducted in-person in a private meeting room at the participants' employing organisation and the remainder were conducted online. All interviews were conducted in English.

All three researchers conducted interviews and kept reflexive diaries to examine their influence on the data and interpretation. To ensure the integrity of the data, the first five interviews were conducted in pairs, with different combinations of the three researchers. The interviews were then discussed by all three researchers after each interview.

TABLE 1: A description of the purposive and snowball sample professional and managerial women from the private sector organisations in South Africa that were interviewed in 2019.

Participant	Age group	Race	Tenure	Role	Educational level	Management level
1	18–24	Coloured people	1–2 years	Professional only	Postgraduate degree	Not applicable
2	35–40	White people	16+ years	Managerial & professional	Postgraduate degree	Senior
3	24–34	White people	3–5 years	Managerial & professional	Postgraduate degree	Senior
4	18–24	Black people	< 1 year	Professional only	Postgraduate degree	Not applicable
5	25–34	Black people	1–2 years	Professional only	Bachelor's degree	Not applicable
6	25–34	Black people	3–5 years	Professional only	Postgraduate degree	Not applicable
7	18–24	Black people	< 1 year	Professional only	Postgraduate degree	Not applicable
8	25–34	White people	< 1 year	Managerial & professional	Postgraduate degree	Middle
9	18–24	Indian people	3–5 years	Managerial & professional	Postgraduate degree	Junior
10	18–24	Black people	< 1 year	Professional only	Bachelor's degree	Not applicable
11	35–40	White people	16+ years	Managerial & professional	Bachelor's degree	Senior
12	35–40	Asian people	< 1 year	Managerial & professional	Postgraduate degree	Senior
13	41–50	White people	< 1 year	Managerial only	Bachelor's degree	Senior

Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability strategies were considered (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was advanced through regular debriefing sessions with the research team throughout the research process to ensure credible participant data. These sessions focused on aspects such as the choice of interview probes, responses of participants, possible underlying perceptions and feelings of participants and assumptions made by the researchers. Data were independently co-coded by research team members and discussed to reach a consensus and enhance credibility and confirmability. An audit trail was maintained by making detailed notes on decisions made during the research and the research process to ensure the dependability and transferability of the research findings. The authors kept reflexive diaries which were used to reflect on the data collected, the collection process and explore the implications of their role in producing the data. This self-reflexive journaling contributed to the confirmability of the research by creating a balance between what the participant means, and the researchers' interpretation of this meaning (Williams & Morrow, 2009).

Data analysis

Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012) and Braun et al. (2014). Firstly, the transcripts were uploaded to ATLASti (version 9) and all three researchers read the transcripts and independently documented potential codes. Secondly, the three authors independently assigned codes to passages, quotations and single words in the raw data. These codes were both deductive (where codes were used based on the literature review) and inductive (where codes were developed from the data). The authors then discussed any differences and reached a consensus on deductive and inductive codes, resulting in a codebook. Thirdly, the authors conducted a more in-depth analysis and independently categorised the codes into themes. One of the researchers added codes, themes and exemplar quotations to the codebook, after which all researchers reached consensus on the codebook during a meeting. The meeting minutes served as an audit trail to track emerging impressions of the data and relationships between themes, based on Nowell et al. (2017). Lastly, the authors compared the data with previous literature and grouped the themes into aggregate dimensions. During this phase, another meeting was held to review the coherence of data structure in relation to the research questions.

Reporting style

The themes that were generated are described in the findings section. The findings are presented for each of the research questions. Some of the findings corroborated previous research, while others differed, thereby making a theoretical contribution to the current body of knowledge.

Ethical considerations

Ethics approval was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee (non-medical) of a higher education institution to undertake the study (Clearance number MORG/19/01 IH).

Results

The themes that were developed for the research questions are presented below.

Basis of friendships

This section describes the basis of the friendships (Research Question 1). Life-interest value similarity formed the basis of high-quality workplace friendships. Participant 1 (professional, non-manager) summed this up: 'It actually just depends on who you click with'. Interviewees were concerned with having friends who shared their value

systems. For example, Participant 4 explained, 'I think we have similar morals … When it comes to work, you expect that people are out for themselves … So, I think it's refreshing to keep meeting people like you'. This quote also suggests the importance of having friends who 'Have your back' at work. Shared interests and activities (e.g. reading tastes, computer games) allowed participants to develop stronger friendships beyond the workplace: 'If I say you are my friend, we do the same kind of things' (Participant 1).

Most participants stated that there was a range of socio-demographic characteristics among their workplace friends, including similar and different characteristics from themselves. However, age and religion created the foundation for similar values, life philosophies and interests for some participants. Likewise, joining the organisation in the same cohort led to similar experiences regarding socialisation into the organisation and developing careers in parallel. This also reflected difficulty integrating into existing, established friendship networks. Some participants noted that the organisation's demographic composition influenced the pool of people with similar or different socio-demographic characteristics from themselves with whom they could form friendships.

Outcomes of workplace friendship

This section presents the findings for Research Question 2 concerning the outcomes of workplace friendships. Benefits included companionship, emotional and instrumental support. Friends provided a 'Human connection' (Participant 6) and contributed to meeting social needs in the workplace, making work 'Bearable' (Participant 11). Friends provided emotional support for work and personal issues. Participant 5 said that 'Friends help you deal with the stress and pressures'. Instrumental support included advice regarding work roles, navigating organisational politics and career development. For example, Participant 4 said 'When you have friends, they can be like, "Hey, just be careful with this person, they work this way, and it will lead you into trouble"'. This participant went on to describe how her friendships acted as a resource for coping with the negative organisational culture by guarding each other's interests and giving each other the heads-up: 'Like, hey dude, you forgot to do this'. These benefits were often underpinned by self-disclosure, listening and acceptance which enhanced authenticity, as elaborated upon in the next section.

Some participants perceived their workplace friendships as providing greater empathy and understanding regarding work matters than their family members and other friends were able to do: 'Those school friends, they are not [*profession*] … They can't relate … to the issues that I'm experiencing at work … It's helpful to have friendships at work because there's a more in-depth understanding about what you do' (Participant 9).

This highlights the unique value of workplace friendships. Because these friends have a similar understanding of the organisation and work-related issues, they can validate participants' views or challenge them where necessary. This enhanced the degree to which they were willing to self-disclose and express themselves authentically.

The key disadvantages of workplace friendships were role conflict and spillover from interpersonal conflict. A Participant said:

> 'Sometimes I do have more of a disciplinarian role. And that can be difficult, when you have to go to someone who is a friend and say: "Look, you are not toeing the line."' (Participant 2)

Participant 3 referred to role conflict when she said, 'If you've got stuff in that friendship that's not working out, you cannot bring that to work'. These quotes illustrate how expressing one's concerns authentically is at times awkward with workplace friends, especially when there is conflict between work and friendship roles. Additional disadvantages included misperceptions of the friendships by other colleagues (e.g. allegations of favouritism), gossip and the potential abuse of information shared with friends.

Workplace friendship and authenticity

This section addresses the third research question regarding workplace friendship and authenticity. To understand the context in which friendship and authenticity occur, participants were asked about their authenticity at work before asking about authenticity in their workplace friendships.

The degree to which participants expressed themselves authentically at work varied across interactions, revealing three forms of authentic self-expression at work (authentic, limited authentic and inauthentic, as per Kock, 2020). Examples of quotes that illustrate a high degree of authenticity at work include 'I am very much genuine. What you see is what you get' (Participant 11), and 'I am 100% myself all the time in any environment that I find myself in' (Participant 9).

Contrasting with this, a participant explained the limited nature of her authenticity at work:

> 'I can be myself but there are times when I do question if myself is enough and if I can be myself … [*b*]ecause I have grown up in spaces that were mixed in terms of race and class and ethnicity … Moving into a space [*workplace*] which is predominantly black, because I don't have the same lived experiences as a lot of people here … [*People think that*] you have a sense of superiority … I'm now expected to act 'More Black'. I'm now expected to have experiences of the township or the homelands that I don't have.' (Participant 7)

Some participants experienced inauthenticity at work, for example:

> 'I feel like I can't express myself … [*b*]ecause of the different ways that people respond to me … [*m*]aybe it's because they

don't know me and in turn, I feel like I don't know myself.' (Participant 5)

I don't feel like myself [*at work*]. Perhaps it's because they [*colleagues*] don't share (Participant 12).

These quotes highlight the relational nature of authenticity and the trend towards more authentic self-expression in situations of greater social fit at work.

Organisational culture influenced the degree of authenticity at work. Some participants described how organisational culture facilitated authentic self-expression:

'I think that the [*organisational*] culture enables you to voice your disagreements freely, to do things in your own way as long as the outcome is the right outcome, allows you to bring your own personality to the table, you are enabling authenticity … If you've got an environment where you are open to debate and talk, all of a sudden you feel like you can be yourself.' (Participant 3)

'This workplace has made me more confident and comfortable with who I am because it's very accepting of different personalities and so, you know, being able to be myself and there's very little judgment … people who appreciate you and accept you for who you are.' (Participant 8)

These quotes illustrate how the acceptance and recognition of individuals, and their contribution allow employees to express themselves and create authentic relationships and experience social fit.

The demands of job roles limited the authenticity of some participants:

'At work I have to push the introvert a little bit to one side. I have to be a little more, I wouldn't say forceful, but yeah, be a little bit more in charge taking decisions than I probably would not naturally be. I think that's just the function of being in a senior management position.' (Participant 2)

This participant experienced limited fit with her role as a manager and this appears to have decreased her authenticity when communicating decisions at work.

The degree of authentic self-expression at work also varied according to the expectations and motives of the people involved. For example, one participant said:

'Because there are people who actually are very open, very good listeners and they don't judge, they are very understanding. And then you feel like you can express certain aspects about yourself to them. And then there are other people who like, sort of dislike you and they wanna keep you all cornered, and people who feel that you shouldn't express and pursue your interests as well.' (Participant 5)

This quote illustrates how social fit varies across interactions with different people and how authentic self-expression is embedded in social fit.

Some interviewees referred indirectly to expectations of conformity to societal norms regarding their social

identities, and this influenced their authenticity at work. Although societal norms were not mentioned directly, diversity in society was at times brought into the organisation. For instance, this participant shared:

'I'm not of the same [*social*] class [*as my colleagues*], I don't have the same experiences and so for me, I feel like I don't have the right to claim my identity as a black woman in those spaces. So, to just avoid further confusing myself, and avoid discomfort, I see myself as non-gender, non-race, non-age. I'm just an intern. It's outside of work that I'm very happy to own my social identities … but in the workspace I don't.' (Participant 7)

This participant experienced a lack of acceptance of her social identities (class, race and gender) at work which decreased her social fit, resulting in the suspension of authentic self-expression at work.

As with other relationships at work, varying degrees of authenticity were reported in workplace friendships. Trust and the degree to which participants shared personal information formed the basis for authenticity in the friendships. As a participant explained:

'[*To*] a friendly colleague I might say 'Hi, how are you? How was your weekend?' … [*S*]urface things … But the ones who I consider friends are the people who I'll talk to if there's something tough going on at home … In the knowledge that they are going to keep it between the two of us.' (Participant 2)

Participants described how certain workplace friendships provided acceptance, self-verification and social fit, allowing them to express themselves more freely:

'They help me be more of myself … You don't have to keep putting up this façade.' (Participant 7)

'Having that support of [*friends*] saying 'You know, you're doing a really good job' and knowing that they are being genuine about it … I think it has given me a lot more self-confidence in saying 'Who I am is actually good enough' and I can be myself in the workplace.' (Participant 2)

'I can actually … just go and be myself with my friends. And they will kind of encourage me to be myself and to be more confident in being myself with the rest of the business.' (Participant 8)

'I have an ability to show to show myself, to appreciate myself, and I feel like I'm actually appreciated [*with my workplace friends*].' (Participant 9)

Non-judgmental friendships allowed participants to take self-regulatory breaks, expressing themselves with relatively little self-monitoring. A participant said:

'She let me rant and rave … [*a*]nd then I felt better … She was totally there for me … [*a*]nd I think having that no-judgment support space is hugely valuable. I feel like I've got someone who has my back all the time no matter what, and that's very important for me.' (Participant 3)

Some of the factors that limited authenticity in the workplace were also perceived to restrict authentic self-expression with workplace friends, such as job roles (especially those that

required information to be treated confidentially) and occupying positions at different levels in the organisational hierarchy. Participants in these situations mostly limited their authenticity with workplace friends by avoiding discussions about colleagues, matters that could impact negatively on work, confidential information, and certain personal information about themselves. For example, Participant 9 said 'I do not overshare on my personal life'. Similarly, Participant 10 said 'I don't discuss anything that has to do with files of personnel … I've always made that clear'. At times this led to asymmetrical relationships regarding the degree of information that was shared, where participants shared less information than was shared with them. This suggests that in some friendships, one person expressed themselves more authentically than their friend.

Participants were aware that personal information could be abused by colleagues and restricted what they disclosed about themselves in response. Although trust was important in mitigating this risk, participants used boundary management as a strategy for dealing with this. For example, one of the professional participants identified her manager as a friend but stated that she does not interact with her manager outside of work because she did not want to cross the boundary between the roles of subordinate and friend. Participant 13 explained that as she became more senior in the organisation, it was harder to maintain friendships with people at lower levels due to the need for boundaries. Participant 2 explained that her close friends at work were all other senior managers, because 'A lot of the stuff that we work with … we can't really discuss with other people, because it's confidential type of information. These are the people that we can really confide in, even on personal matters'. Although boundary management was at times used to create conditions that allowed for friendships and work performance to be maintained, it also limited friendship quality and authentic self-expression.

The findings indicate a trend towards authentic self-expression with workplace friends. High quality workplace friendships provided a space at work where participants could self-disclose and express themselves, be in touch with their identities, core feelings, values and perceptions, decrease their self-regulation and self-verify. These friendships facilitated a transition from superficial interactions to more authentic relationships characterised by self-disclosure and acceptance. However, job roles, certain organisational factors and the quality of the friendships at times limited the degree of authenticity in the friendships.

Discussion

The premise of relational authenticity is that significant others understand how one sees their authentic selves (Chen, 2019). Although organisational research has demonstrated the value of authenticity at work, limited empirical attention has been paid to the relational aspect of authenticity at work. The aim of this research was to examine how workplace friendships elicit authenticity among women in the private sector in South Africa. The study focused on women in professional and managerial positions because they are often in the minority at work and consequently might experience challenges in expressing themselves authentically. The study proposed that workplace friendships might offer a 'space' where women feel accepted, can self-verify, express themselves authentically and enhance their social fit at work. The study shows that authenticity is not only associated with the individual (Van den Bosch et al., 2019), coworkers (Robinson et al., 2013; Tang et al., 2022) and team relationships (Emmerich et al., 2020), but also workplace friendships.

The first research question focused on the basis of workplace friendship. The friendships described in this study varied in quality and scope. The authors argued that the quality of workplace friendships influences the ease of authentic expression in those friendships and found that participants described more authentic self-disclosure in higher quality friendships.

Homophily was an important aspect of workplace friendships, as found previously (e.g. Sias & Gallagher, 2009). When seeking like-minded people, participants chose friends based on value-life interest similarity rather than socio-demographic similarity. This suggests that participants valued commonalities in aspects such as values, life phases and worldviews more than demographic similarity, although demographic characteristics at times signalled possible life-value interest similarity. For example, colleagues of similar ages might have been experiencing similar life or career phases. The emphasis on value-life interest similarity suggested that participants valued being recognised and accepted for their authentic views rather than their demographic group affiliations. This increased the size of the pool from which friendships could be formed and created opportunities to form friendships with people with diverse socio-demographic characteristics. It is possible that friendships with a diverse group of people in the organisation could enhance social capital and intra-organisational allies for future career development – an area for future research.

The second research question focused on the outcomes of workplace friendship as the study argued that authenticity is easier to express in friendships with positive rather than negative outcomes. Consistent with previous research (Sias & Cahill, 1998), the friendships provided emotional and instrumental support. Emotional support provided self-regulatory breaks where participants could disclose their feelings and views authentically to friends who they trusted not to abuse the information. These self-regulatory breaks suggest that the friendships affirmed the women's identities and contributed to authentic self-awareness and self-expression. The self-regulatory breaks experienced with friends appear to function in a similar manner to those found by Emmerich et al. (2020) among teammates, where they reduced fatigue and increased coping resources. Although mutual trust was essential to the friendships, professional

boundary management was used to manage negative outcomes, such as role and interpersonal conflict. This is consistent with previous research where leaders used different strategies to create boundaries to remain friends with their subordinates (Unsworth et al., 2018). However, the boundaries reduced the degree of authentic self-disclosure (Unsworth et al., 2018).

The third research question asked how workplace friendships elicit authenticity. Participants reported that their friendships enhanced their authentic self-awareness and the authentic self-expression. However, the degree of authenticity varied across friendships, with authentic, limited authentic and inauthentic self-expression being identified. Some participants explicitly stated that their friendships enhanced their authentic self-expression at work and facilitated consistency between their behaviours, core values, attitudes and perceptions. Other participants experienced limited authenticity or inauthenticity at work. Those who experienced limited authenticity fluctuated between feelings of authenticity and inauthenticity. This nuanced understanding of authenticity supports Kock's (2020) finding regarding the bounded nature of authenticity experienced by marginalised professionals, where limited authenticity provides a sense of psychological safety at work.

Factors that were perceived as influencing the degree of authenticity experienced in workplace friendships were organisational culture, status in the organisational hierarchy, tenure, role requirements and personality. Some participants contrasted their lower feelings of authenticity when interacting with colleagues with negative motives, with their feelings of greater authenticity when interacting with workplace friends. This provides empirical support for Schmader and Sedikides' (2018) conceptual model that asserts that contexts subtly signal social identities in ways that implicate state inauthenticity for minority groups, such as some of the women in this study. The quality of the friendships, position in the organisational hierarchy, organisational culture and larger societal context all influenced perceptions of the ease of being authentic in workplace friendships. This supports the theoretical premise by Chen (2019) that authenticity is experienced in the context of close relationships, hierarchical contexts and the larger cultural context, as all three levels were present in the findings of this study. With regard to the hierarchical context, the findings of the study displayed how participants in managerial positions found it more difficult to maintain friendships as they became more senior. Managerial participants felt the need to establish strong professional boundaries with their workplace friends. This finding is consistent with organisational research by Unsworth et al. (2018) who found that leaders use different strategies regarding boundaries in order to remain friends with their subordinates.

Both self-verification and social fit appear to act as mechanisms for eliciting authenticity in workplace friendships. The study's findings support self-verification (Kraus & Chen, 2014) as a process whereby authenticity is elicited, and extend this to workplace friendships. Feeling accepted by friends may facilitate mutual self-verification and exploration, which then provides individuals with psychological safety, meaning, and resources to perform at work (Emmerich et al., 2020). Workplace friendships provided spaces in the organisation where social fit was enhanced. While self-verification and person-environment fit theories propose different processes for eliciting authenticity, both incorporate feedback from other parties regarding the self-concept. The safe spaces created by workplace friendships are important but are unlikely to be sufficient in creating inclusion and acceptance in organisations. Although some workplace friendships cut across formal boundaries and roles, perceptions of inclusion within formal teams and other organisational structures and hierarchies are also important.

Limitations

Limitations of the study include the small sample size and inability to generalise to other types of employees (e.g. blue-collar workers). In addition, the study did not focus on authenticity in the context of specific types of workplace friendships, such as those between peers at the same hierarchical level or those between people at different hierarchical levels. The implications for authenticity in the process of friendship formation, and across individual (e.g. personality) and friendship characteristics (e.g. trust, closeness) and during the decline of friendships were beyond the scope of this study and are recommended for future research.

Practical and managerial implications

This study highlighted the importance of being authentic and having authentic relationships at work. Although the study focused on professional and managerial women, authentic relationships are important for other employees as well. Organisations may use this relational approach to authenticity at work to affirm gender diversity and encourage the inclusion of women across organisational levels. Organisations may need to consider whether they encourage or condone workplace friendships (Berman et al., 2002), how they can create organisational cultures that support them, and how remote working impacts on informal networks such as workplace friendships.

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic accelerated adaptation to different work arrangements and locations. Interventions aimed at encouraging the development of informal interactions that could develop into workplace friendships may be more challenging for remote and hybrid workforce. However, these need to be set up carefully to be inclusive of all work arrangements such as permanent, gig and contract workers. Moreover, these informal interactions need to be set up to be inclusive of people from minority groups so that employees attend them voluntarily rather than from a sense of obligation. Team development, collaborative projects and

structured social interactions might be more effective than formal company events (Phillips et al., 2018). The impact of office design and working arrangements on authentic relationships need to be further considered.

Theoretical contributions

This study makes three theoretical contributions. Firstly, it expands authenticity research beyond the individual (Van den Bosch et al., 2019), team (Emmerich et al., 2020) or followership contexts (Walumbwa et al., 2008) to informal relationships with friends at work. The focus on authenticity in workplace friendships offers an alternative way of addressing diversity and the inclusion of women in organisations. The study demonstrates how authentic self-expression becomes embedded in high-quality workplace friendships which provide spaces where women can self-disclose in male-dominated organisations. These friendships offer acceptance, self-verification and enhanced social fit. This provides empirical support for the social fit component of the SAFE model of authenticity (Schmader & Sedikides, 2018). Secondly, this paper presents a nuanced theoretical understanding of women's authenticity in workplace friendships in a developing market context such as South Africa. Thirdly, this study provides empirical support for the contextual nature of authenticity. The insights gained corroborate the premise that authenticity at work is experienced in close relationships, hierarchical contexts and the larger cultural context (Chen, 2019).

Suggestions for future research

This article suggests conducting more, follow-up research regarding interactions between authenticity in workplace friendships and other relationships at work, the role of goals and person-environment fit to authenticity at work based on Schmader and Sedikides' (2018) SAFE model, the effect of remote and hybrid work arrangements on relational authenticity at work and a deeper understanding of how workplace friendships and authenticity influence power dynamics in organisations and how they change over time.

Conclusion

High-quality workplace friendships characterised by relational authenticity create spaces in the organisation where women experience self-verification, social fit and feel included. This is likely to enhance their contributions to organisations. Workplace relationships are likely to become more important in the future as a way of driving human connection and contributing to the authenticity of minority groups.

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Competing interests

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Data availability

Data are not publicly available due to terms of ethics clearance.

Disclaimer

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