“We laugh and cry together”: How do hairstylists experience the provision of social support to their clients?

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Statement of Originality and AI Disclosure

I hereby declare that, except where specific reference is made to the work of others, the contents of this thesis are original and have not been submitted in whole or in part for consideration for any other degree or qualification at this, or any other, university. This thesis is my own work and contains nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration with others, except as specified in the text and Acknowledgements.

I declare that Generative AI tools were utilised during the preparation of this thesis. Specifically, ChatGPT was used to assist with grammar and language checking.

I confirm that the final text, critical arguments, and qualitative conclusions are entirely my own, and that I take full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the work.

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List of Abbreviations

CoP - Counselling Psychology

CoPs - Counselling Psychologists

GETs - Group Experiential Themes

GT - Grounded Theory

IPA - Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

PETs - Personal Experiential Themes

TA - Thematic Analysis

Abstract

Hairstyling extends beyond aesthetic practice, encompassing elements of social support, emotional labour, and informal caregiving. Research indicates that clients often disclose personal problems to hairstylists that closely resemble those presented to mental health professionals, suggesting that individuals may engage with this informal support channel prior to, or instead of, formal mental health channels. Despite the intimate and trusted nature of the hairstylist-client relationship, little is known about how hairstylists experience their supportive role. This study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of six UK-based hairstylists and how they experience and manage the provision of social support to their clients. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Four group experiential themes were created: 1: Fulfilment in the Hairstylist-Client Relationship, 2: The Emotional Weight of Social Support in Hairstyling, 3: Managing Social Support in Hairstyling, and 4: Professional Recognition and Institutional Support in Hairstyling. Across these themes, participants described the hairstylist-client relationship as deeply meaningful and mutually rewarding yet emotionally demanding. Participants reported relying largely on self-taught strategies to manage the impact of providing support, highlighting a lack of formal training, recognition, and systemic support for this aspect of their work. These findings both align with existing literature and offer novel insights into the emotional labour of hairstyling, whilst underscoring the importance of greater institutional recognition, training, and professional validation, and offering valuable implications for mental health professionals seeking to better understand and support this underrepresented caregiving profession.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

1.1 Introduction

The hairdressing industry is a personal service sector in which hairstylists engage in physical contact with clients to deliver services including cutting, styling, treating, and colouring hair (Barnes, 2001; Wolkowitz, 2002; Cohen, 2010; Garzaniti, et al., 2011). In the United Kingdom (UK) the hairdressing industry is unregulated, with no requirements for hairstylists to hold specific qualifications (Conway, 2025). Most hairstylists get into the role through a college course, an apprenticeship or by starting as a trainee hairstylist in a salon (National Careers Service, 2023). There are approximately 162,000 hairstylists in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2018), with this number rising year on year (PolicyBee, 2022). These statistics include barbers, who will be included in reference to hairstylists throughout this literature review.

Hairstylists frequently engage in in-depth conversations with their clients, and have been ranked fifth on the list of most trusted professionals in the UK (Ipsos MORI, 2016). This puts them above the police, clergy, civil servants, and lawyers. Accordingly, hairstylists regularly offer a confidant role to their clients with whom they discuss personal matters (Sattler & Deane, 2016; Mbilishaka, 2018), with research noting that individuals often attend the hairdressing salon for reasons other than just receiving hair services (Barry & Roper, 2016). Certainly, hairdressing is a profession that has the scope to support individuals in a multitude of ways other than just

hairstyling, yet the industry is often regarded as low-skilled and low-paid, which may minimise the actual contribution of the profession (Eayrs, 1993; Cohen, 2010).

Hairstylists' roles are consistent with the principles of social support, which is the perception that an individual feels cared for by their support network (Taylor, 2011). This comes in the form of informational support, practical support, emotional support, and camaraderie (Ditzen & Heinrichs, 2014). According to research by Taylor (2011), hairstylists support their clients in all four areas. The buffering model of social support highlights how social support may defend against distress that individuals experience and positively influence their mental and physical health (Ditzen & Heinrichs, 2014). Indeed, the supportive aspects of hairstylists' work encompasses many factors that can be understood as emotional labour, the regulating or managing of one's emotions as part of their work (Hochschild, 1983). Therefore, whilst hairstylists may aid in maintaining their clients' physical appearance, they may also be helping to maintain their psychological wellbeing through the social support they provide.

Moreover, clients often feel comfortable discussing intimate details about their lives with their hairstylist, with research suggesting that these conversations can overlap considerably with those brought to mental health professionals. This indicates that people may use naturally-occurring channels of support prior to, or instead of, more costly and less accessible formal mental health services (Cowen et al., 1981; Page et al., 2022). This may be even more relevant for certain populations who might experience increased difficulty in accessing mental health support. Research has found this to be the case with older adults (Anderson et al., 2010),

men (Ogborn et al., 2022; Seager et al., 2014), black men and women (Barry & Roper, 2016; Shabazz, 2016; Mbilishaka, 2018) and LGBTQIA+ individuals (McCann, 2022).

Research suggests that the unique relationship between hairstylist and client may be shaped by several factors, including its often long-term nature, frequent and repeated interactions, and the central role of conversation as the primary mode of engagement during extended appointments (Eayrs, 1993; Garzaniti et al., 2011). Thus, this relationship may predispose informal caregiving interactions to take place. Informal caregivers are those who are voluntarily caring for another who may be facing a physical or mental health condition (Schulz & Tompkins, 2010). Across the literature, it is generally trusted that being an informal caregiver puts an individual at risk of poorer mental (Pottie et al., 2014; Sallim et al., 2015) and physical health (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2003; Capistrant et al., 2012). In fact, according to contemporary research, poor mental health is the number one challenge faced by hair professionals, with 65% of hairstylists having experienced anxiety, burnout, or depression at some point during their career (L'Oréal Professionnel, 2023).

In spite of this, reasonably little is known about how hairstylists experience and interpret their roles of social supporter, emotional labourer, and informal caregiver. Certainly, even less is known about this from a Counselling Psychology (CoP) perspective. Therefore, reference will be made to CoP and counselling psychologists (CoPs) when reviewing the literature.

As this study employed a critical literature review approach, the literature search process was iterative and exploratory in nature. Literature searches were conducted using the university library search engine, Google Scholar, and EBSCOhost databases, including PsycINFO and PsycARTICLES. Search terms included combinations of hairstylist, hairdresser, social support, emotional labour, and informal caregiving. Given the limited literature available on the topic, additional sources were identified through reference list and citation searching. Where material was unavailable online, texts and journal articles were accessed through the British Library and university repository services.

1.2 Critical Literature Review

1.2.1 Hairstylists as a Source of Social Support

Hairstylists providing social support to their clients has been a topic that has garnered interest in the field of psychology since the 1970s (Gershon & Biller, 1977; Cowen et al., 1979; Seaberg, 1979; Wiesenfeld & Weis, 1979). Such research came about as a result of growing interest in social support and informal caregiving which gained popularity following Gurin et al.'s (1960) survey in the United States of America (USA) which highlighted that only 18% of their sample sought support for emotional difficulties from designated mental health professionals. This research came as a surprise and lead to later surveys replicating it (Gottlieb, 1976). Whilst such research did not exactly duplicate Gurin et al.'s (1960) findings, it did confirm that those who were not mental health professionals fielded most of their participants' interpersonal distress. For example, it reported that hairstylists often

adopt a role that supports individuals, including those experiencing mental health difficulties (Cowen et al., 1979; Seaberg, 1979; Cowen, 1982). Indeed, some of the first studies on the topic noted that hairstylists often serve as informal caregivers for their clients, listening to their personal issues including relationship difficulties, health troubles, and financial worries (Cowen et al., 1979; Cowen et al., 1981).

Research at the time also reported that the personal problems that hairstylists supported with were similar to, and as diverse as, those fielded by mental health professionals (Cowen et al., 1979). Hairstylists were even referred to as lay counsellors (Seaberg, 1979), therapists (Gimlin, 1996), and psychologists (Bertoia, 1985). In response to clients communicating their difficulties, it was noted that hairstylists applied many of the skills that are practised by mental health professionals (Milne & Mullin, 1987). Research also noted that hairstylists are often the first to hear of such problems owing to the social and psychological barriers of seeking professional help (Gershon & Biller, 1977; Cowen et al., 1979; Cowen, 1982).

More contemporary research has corroborated such findings (Anderson et al., 2010; McLaren et al., 2010; Sattler & Deane, 2016; Mbilishaka, 2018; Beebe et al., 2018). For example, a study by Page et al. (2022) noted that clients often discuss topics with their hairstylist that are similar to those raised with mental health professionals. Similarly, McCann (2022) reported that hairstylists often describe themselves as ‘makeshift counsellors’ and Barber (2008) noted that hairstylists participate in ‘informal therapy’ with their clients and are regularly trusted with sensitive disclosures (Anderson et al., 2010; DiVietro et al., 2016). Such research

implies that emotional labour is a key part of hairstylists' work (Cohen, 2010; Garzaniti et al., 2011; Sheane, 2012; Yoo et al., 2014; Harness et al., 2021) which may offer a way of buffering the psychological distress that clients may feel (Taylor, 2011; Ditzen & Heinrichs, 2014).

This type of social support may be as relevant now as it was when research on the topic began given that approximately 25% of people in the UK experience a mental health problem every year (McManus et al., 2009), with reports from England (McManus et al., 2016) and Wales (Welsh Health Survey, 2015) suggesting that only 12.5% of adults with a mental health problem are presently receiving treatment. What is more, waiting lists for mental health services in the UK can be long, with waits of up to 18 weeks frequently reported (Punton et al., 2022). This has been linked with a multitude of negative psychological responses, thus, highlighting the importance of informal social support today.

This may be even more relevant for certain populations who might experience increased difficulty in accessing mental health support. For example, Anderson et al. (2010) surveyed 40 hairstylists and determined that they provided substantial social support to their older adult clients. However, it is worth noting that the sample used in this study consisted of mostly middle-aged, white women from South Carolina who had many years of experience in hairstyling. This lack of diversity may impact the ability to generalise the findings from this study.

Nevertheless, research investigating certain populations who may experience increased difficulties accessing mental health support has reported similar findings.

For instance, research has looked at men, who are less likely to seek support for their mental health than women (Tamres et al., 2002; Addis & Mahalik, 2003), and discovered that they often utilise barbers as a form of social support (Ogborn et al., 2022; Seager et al., 2014). Moreover, research has shown that black men, who are even less likely to seek help from mental health professionals than white men (Seager et al., 2014), also use barbers as a form of social support (Barry & Roper, 2016; Shabazz, 2016).

Similar findings have been present with black women (Mbilishaka, 2018) and LGBTQIA+ individuals (McCann, 2022) who have reported using hairstylists as a form of social support. Moreover, women experiencing intimate partner violence who often prefer, and are more likely to, disclose this to informal helpers have utilised hairstylists in a similar way (Beebe et al., 2018). It is noted that this may be due to social isolation which can make accessing support difficult, and that the hairdressing salon may be one of the few settings where a person experiencing abuse is permitted to go by themselves (Beebe et al., 2018).

Research suggests that the unique relationship between hairstylist and client may result from several factors including the often long-term nature of such relationships, and the fact that the two may see each other regularly, in lengthy contacts (Eayrs, 1993; Garzaniti et al., 2011). This is evidenced by research which asserts that self-disclosure is more present in conversations with long-term clients (Bertoia, 1985). This is also in line with research that notes that, as two people get to know one another, they disclose progressively more personal information about

themselves (Argyle, 1994). Indeed, Hargie et al. (1994) regard self-disclosure as critical to the development and maintenance of long-term relationships.

The importance placed upon the relationship between client and professional is something that hairstyling (Garzaniti et al., 2011) and CoP (Jones Nielsen & Nicholas, 2016) have in common. Certainly, CoP positions relational practice at its core and, consequently, one of the primary ways in which psychological difficulties are understood and alleviated (Jones Nielsen & Nicholas, 2016). Correspondingly, CoP recognises the development of a trusting relationship as critical to the progress of therapy and vital to the client expressing their thoughts and feelings, aiding in facilitating the therapeutic process (Laughton-Brown, 2010).

Similarly, the sharing of personal information has been identified as a key factor in developing trust between hairstylists and clients, with clients often positioning hairstylists in the role of confidante (Bertoia, 1985). Garzaniti et al. (2011) conducted one of the few studies in the field that utilised a client sample to investigate this relationship and noted that clients felt comfortable engaging in discussions of a personal nature with their hairstylist, with over half indicating that conversations with their hairstylist were critical in developing the hairstylist-client relationship. Though, it is worth noting that this research is highly contextualised as it studied encounters in a single hairdressing salon only. Additionally, it explored perceptions of the relationship between hairstylists and clients from the perspective of only one of those parties, though this is common for much of the research in the field. However, for the majority of such research, this is done predominantly from the

viewpoint of the hairstylist, whereas Garzaniti et al.'s (2011) research is done from the vantage of the client.

Despite the main means of interaction between hairstylist and client being conversation (Sharma & Black, 2001; Cohen, 2010; Garzaniti et al., 2011), and the fact that such conversation can foster friendship and build rapport (Page et al., 2022), research indicates that the physical contact between hairstylist and client may also help to foster rapport and a sense of friendship (Barnes, 2001; Garzaniti et al., 2011). This is in line with social psychology literature which maintains that proximity is one of the factors that is conducive to the development of a relationship (Argyle, 1994). Moreover, Page et al. (2022) noted that, as hairstylists are permitted to physically touch their clients, the profession is classed as an intimate contact service, with this aspect frequently observed in formal caregivers such as doctors and other health professionals (Barnes, 2001; Cohen, 2010; Garzaniti et al., 2011).

Whilst literature that disputes that hairstylists provide social support to their clients is sparse, Cowen (1982) has queried the level of support that hairstylists actually provide, noting in their study that hairstylists only play a minor helping role. In accordance with this, Milne et al. (1992) questioned those reporting that hairstylists provide a similar level of support to their clients as mental health professionals. Their study examined four different sources of social support including friends, relatives, hairstylists, and psychologists. They reported that hairstylists were perceived by participants to provide the least frequent level of social support out of the four sources, with psychologists regarded as providing the most adequate support. What is more, whilst hairstylists did appear to support their clients in all four

areas of social support (Taylor, 2011; Ditzen & Heinrichs, 2014), the proportions of such support were different within the sources, with psychologists offering a significantly different help profile than hairstylists. For example, psychologists offered more in the way of informational and emotional support than hairstylists (Milne et al., 1992). Milne et al. (1992), consequently, disputed the notion that the social support provided by hairstylists and psychologists is as similar as previous literature may have suggested (Cowen et al., 1979; Seaberg, 1979; Bertoia, 1985).

More contemporary research, which focused on adult female hairstyling clients in the UK, revealed that nearly 60% of participants felt that their hairstylist genuinely cares about them, while around 40% reported a bond with their hairstylist that goes beyond the provision of a hairstyling service (Kao, 2022). These findings indicate that, although clients may frequently turn to hairstylists for social support, this practice may be less widespread than earlier studies suggested (Anderson et al., 2010; Harness et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, when working with hairstylists it is important that CoPs are aware of the emotional labour involved in their work as it is important to understand the individual within their own setting and base interventions on their subjective experiences (Douglas et al., 2016). Other core values of CoP are also relevant, as they are grounded in a philosophy and practice that respect individuals' social contexts and processes of meaning-making, while also acknowledging them holistically (Jones Nielsen & Nicholas, 2016).

1.2.2 Client Disclosures

Research indicates that clients often disclose serious matters to their hairstylists (Anderson et al., 2010; DiVietro et al., 2016; McCann, 2022). Topics discussed have been found to be comparable in nature and severity to those raised with mental health professionals (Sattler & Deane, 2016; Page et al., 2022). Cowen et al. (1979) noted that over half of the issues discussed with hairstylists are carried across multiple appointments, and sometimes over long periods of time. They, consequently, highlight a similarity in not just the content, but also the continuity of personal problems brought to hairstylists and mental health professionals. Indeed, Cowen et al. (1979; 1981) estimated that hairstylists spend 33%–56% of their time with clients engaged in discussions concerning moderate to serious personal problems. However, it is worth noting that the hairstylists studied may have different criteria to mental health professionals as to what constitutes a moderate to serious problem, which may result in an overestimation or underestimation of problem significance.

More specifically, hairstylists note that clients often disclose information about their families including topics related to relationship issues, affairs, marital problems and family conflict (Anderson et al., 2010; McLaren et al., 2010; Beebe et al., 2018). In addition, research has noted that clients' personal identity is regularly disclosed to hairstylists. For example, topics like ageing and being a part of the LGBTQIA+ community are disclosed, along with discussions around how clients feel about these aspects of their identity (Anderson et al., 2010; McCann, 2022). Hairstylists have also revealed that politics and religion are talked about, but that they are often wary

of discussing such topics as they are reluctant to encounter conflict or criticism regarding differing views (Page et al., 2022).

Additionally, research has shown that clients have disclosed experiences of physical, financial, verbal, and emotional abuse to their hairstylist (Sattler & Deane, 2016; Page et al., 2022). What is more, Page et al. (2022) noted that some of the hairstylists in their study had even been asked by their clients to support them in leaving abusive relationships. Studies have also noted that child and sexual abuse have been disclosed, with some clients revealing that that they had not told anyone but their hairstylist but felt comfortable doing so as they knew their hairstylist would keep this information confidential (Sattler & Deane, 2016; Page et al., 2022).

Health was another topic that hairstylists report clients discuss with them. This includes topics such as medication, substance misuse, cancer, death, stress, anxiety, depression, and suicide (Anderson et al., 2010; Sattler & Deane, 2016; Page et al., 2022). Hairstylists have also revealed that clients disclose information about sex, abortion, menopause, menstruation, miscarriage, and pregnancy, topics which are often considered taboo but are, nonetheless, discussed with them (Page et al., 2022). It is pertinent to highlight that clients' disclosures of topics related to abuse and suicide may raise issues around confidentiality and safeguarding. Whilst, for example, CoPs have governing bodies which provide guidance on such topics (Health and Care Professions Council, 2016; British Psychological Society 2017), this is not something hairstylists have. This may mean that hairstylists feel unsure about what to do following such disclosures, with serious issues going unreported.

1.2.3 Hairstylists' Responses

Hairstylists have been reported to respond to client disclosures in ways that are similar to those of mental health professionals (Page et al., 2022). More broadly, research has identified several ways in which hairstylists respond to clients that align with responses characteristic of how CoPs might respond. For example, research has observed that hairstylists respond to their clients by being client focused. This includes trying to make clients the centre of attention, allowing their clients to talk about what they want, keeping discussions focussed on the client, and actively listening to them (Anderson et al., 2010; Sattler & Deane, 2016; Page et al., 2022). Similarly, it has been argued that hairstylists provide a safe space for their clients where they can discuss what they want without judgement (McFarquhar & Lowis, 2000; Anderson et al., 2010; Page et al., 2022). Moreover, hairstylists report that they read and monitor clients' body language, alongside their own, when responding to clients (Page et al., 2022). In addition, they maintain the importance of keeping the discussions they have with their clients confidential (Page et al., 2022), whilst acknowledging when further support may be required and, subsequently, signposting their clients to professionals (Anderson et al., 2010; Sattler & Deane, 2016).

Conversely, Sattler and Deane (2016) conducted quantitative research with hairstylists in Australia and noted that several of the techniques hairstylists utilise when responding to client disclosures differ to mental health professionals, such as CoPs. For example, they observed that many techniques involved light-hearted denial, avoidance, and passive engagement. Similarly, studies have reported that hairstylists respond to client disclosures by treating clients like friends or family

(Anderson et al., 2010; Garzaniti et al., 2011; Page et al., 2022). This may involve trying to cheer up their clients and take their mind off the problem, providing them with advice and sharing their own stories, (Cowen et al., 1979; McLennan & Greenwood, 1987; Anderson et al., 2010; Sattler & Deane, 2016). Whilst the use of self in therapy is a value of CoP, some CoPs may not feel as comfortable engaging in self-disclosure in the way hairstylists might given the possible ethical issues associated with this such as blurring professional boundaries, shifting the focus away from the client, and creating unintended dependence within the therapeutic relationship (Henretty & Levitt, 2010; Audet, 2011; Wosket, 2016).

Moreover, research notes that hairstylists may use physical contact as a way of comforting clients when they are disclosing personal information (Page et al., 2022). Whilst there are no exact guidelines for the use of touch in therapy by CoPs, research indicates that physical touch is not regularly used with clients by psychologists in the UK given potential ethical and legal reasons (Kertay & Reviere, 1993; Harrison et al., 2012), Indeed, a study from the USA reported that close to 90% of psychologists reported rarely or never touching their clients (Stenzel & Rupert, 2004).

A similar difference between how hairstylists and CoPs may respond to client disclosures comes in the form of boundaries. Whilst CoPs should always aim to maintain boundaries (British Psychological Society, 2017), some hairstylists have noted that they blur the boundary between hairstylist and friend when responding to client disclosures and have even assisted clients outside of the salon (Page et al., 2022). Correspondingly, Sattler and Deane (2016) expressed that, if hairstylists are

to be included in training to develop their role as informal caregivers, they ought to be cognisant of maintaining appropriate boundaries.

Likewise, whilst Milne et al. (1992) reported some overlap in the support provided by hairstylists and mental health professionals, they also noted that there were significant differences in the form and function of the support provided. For example, they remarked that hairstylists and psychotherapists speak to their clients in considerably different ways. They recounted that the hairstylists in their study asked their clients more questions, reflected more, disputed more, and provided more information to their clients than psychotherapists. On the other hand, psychotherapists provided more reassurance, whilst making greater use of strategies involving feelings. This research is of note as Milne et al. (1992) utilised direct observations in hairdressing salons rather than self-report data, which makes up much of the research in the field. Therefore, while the results of this study may be less susceptible to biases associated with self-report data, they may still be influenced by other forms of bias, such as observer bias or the Hawthorne effect, in which individuals alter their behaviour when they are aware of being observed (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2016).

Furthermore, Bechtoldt et al. (2019) compared the expectations of clients in psychotherapy and hairdressing contexts. Their findings suggest that psychotherapy clients tend to seek cognitive support aimed at altering cognitions, whereas hairdressing clients are more likely to seek socio-affective support, such as comfort and validation (Pauw et al., 2018). It has been reported that socio-affective support is helpful for temporarily alleviating emotional distress whereas cognitive support tends

to provide longer term recovery (Brans et al., 2014). Accordingly, hairdressing clients were more satisfied with hairstylists incorporating high emotion recognition with high empathic concern, whereas psychotherapy clients were more satisfied with psychotherapists integrating high emotion recognition with low empathic concern (Bechtoldt et al., 2019). Consequently, it may be counter-productive for hairstylists to respond to their clients in a similar manner to CoPs, with the social support hairstylists provide complementing, rather than replacing, the support provided by mental health professionals, such as CoPs (Milne et al., 1992). Indeed, Milne et al. (1992) comment that hairstylists may have the potential to reach a larger number of individuals who may be struggling with their mental health, but that this is a complementary route to support rather than an alternative one.

1.2.4 Training Programmes

With growing awareness of the unique relationship between hairstylists and clients, programmes have emerged globally which aim to train hairstylists and utilise this relationship. Such initiatives can be seen in Africa, Australia, Europe, and North America and are often centred around training hairstylists; in basic counselling techniques, to identify when clients might be experiencing mental health problems, on topics such as sexual assault and domestic violence, in suicide prevention, and on how to connect clients to relevant services (McLaren et al., 2010; Barry & Roper, 2016; Jackson, 2018; Mbilishaka, 2018; McCann & Myers, 2023).

Both older and more contemporary research has demonstrated the positive impacts of training hairstylists in such a way. For example, Milne and Mullin (1987)

and Wiesenfeld and Weis (1979) observed that educational interventions were effective in increasing the helping skills of hairstylists in areas such as empathic listening, reflecting feelings, and referring for formal support. Similarly, McCann and Myers (2023) reported an increase in confidence and knowledge in the hairstylists in their study pertaining to appropriately responding to and referring clients following training. However, limitations in such research exists in that these studies were predominantly reliant on self-reporting and, therefore, an increase in skills may be subjective. Furthermore, such research often does not utilise actual clients and, therefore, the setting can be argued to be somewhat artificial. Similarly, there are conflicting beliefs in the field of mental health as to the most effective approach for supporting individuals and, therefore, one ought to be cautious about imposing explicit techniques on informal caregivers. Moreover, as Gottlieb (1974) remarks, in interfering in such a way there runs a risk of negatively modifying systems that are already operating effectively.

Nevertheless, it has been reported that hairstylists could benefit from, and show interest in, training programmes to help them better support their clients (Sattler & Deane, 2016). Indeed, much of the research in this area highlights the potential of training hairstylists to act as mental health paraprofessionals, with many noting that hairstylists may act as a cost effective and easy to utilise support system which may bridge the gap for those with less serious mental health needs, and those who are less likely to seek formal support (Solomon et al., 2004). However, McCann (2022) argues that this may be asking a lot of hairstylists who are often paid low wages and seen as low-skilled. Certainly, it may be reasoned that hairstylists did not necessarily sign up to offer support in such a way when choosing their profession. It

is therefore essential that those implementing initiatives are aware that, whilst they may be benefiting clients, this may come at a cost to hairstylists who may feel that they are being taken advantage of and not adequately compensated. Additionally, whilst much of the research hints that hairstylists are interested in such training (Anderson et al., 2010; Sattler & Deane, 2016; Page et al., 2022), it is important to note the potential for sampling bias, as hairstylists who perceive themselves as providing informal caregiving and who hold positive attitudes toward this role may be overrepresented (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2016).

1.2.5 Hairstylists' Feelings about Providing Social Support

Research exploring how hairstylists feel about providing social support to their clients is relatively sparse. However, research by Page et al. (2022), which took place in South Australia, is one of the few studies that has investigated this phenomenon, though this was not the focal point of their research. They used thematic analysis (TA) and a sample consisting of hairstylists of various ages, genders, and years of experience, working in a range of salons, including high-end, medium, low-end, and home salons. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling with passive snowballing whereby participants were encouraged to pass on the researcher's information to others who may be interested. Consequently, it could be reasoned that the sample may be impacted by both researcher and sampling bias. This may be particularly relevant as Page, the lead researcher, is also a hairstylist, meaning that there may be bias in terms of the sample used, but also the manner in which the interviews were analysed owing to potential insider/outsider bias (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2016). Indeed, this is something Page et al. (2022)

comment on, maintaining that, as the sample was self-selected and based solely upon data gathered in one country, their findings could be strengthened by further research utilising a range of different participants and contexts. Moreover, future research employing a different method may be considered as, although TA is flexible, this can lead to variation in how themes are generated and defined. This may result in inconsistencies or reduced coherence in theme development where analytic procedures are not applied systematically or transparently (Holloway & Todres, 2003). However, this limitation is not inherent to TA; rather, coherence depends largely on the researcher's interpretive rigour and reflexive practice.

Nonetheless, Page et al.'s (2022) study both replicated previous findings and proposed novel findings. For example, their study revealed that hairstylists sometimes felt emotionally drained by their work. This is consistent with research which suggests that hairstylists may be prone to burnout as a result of the emotional labour required in their role (Sharma & Black, 2001; Cohen, 2010). Burnout is a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion triggered by excessive and prolonged stress, which is often linked with work involving people (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). It is perhaps unsurprising that hairstylists may experience burnout as Pisaniello et al. (2012) report that the role of hairstylist entails many of the same emotional demands as healthcare professionals.

Indeed, the emotional content of client disclosures requires hairstylists to navigate both their clients' emotions and their own. This can involve maintaining positive interactions by avoiding political and religious conversations and, at times, overlooking racist, homophobic, or other negative comments (McCann, 2022).

Research informs us that employees can become drained of energy and fatigued if they are perpetually subjected to situations requiring emotional regulation. To cope, employees may display negative attitudes toward others and exhibit indifferent responses, which, successively, can lead to low work satisfaction and a negative view of themselves (Jeung et al., 2018).

Certainly, research into emotional labour more generally notes that supressing genuine emotions is associated with stress and fatigue, but also that the provision of emotional labour may result in burnout and compassion fatigue when caregivers are unsupported (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Gérain & Zech, 2019). This may be particularly relevant for hairstylists who are often not trained to support clients in this way and, consequently, may be at risk of burnout from both the burden of responsibility and the process of emotional repression. Further research has linked emotional labour with job dissatisfaction, memory loss, depersonalisation, increased risk of psychological distress, hypertension, heart disease, and even the exacerbation of cancer (Jeung et al., 2018).

What is more, hairstylists have articulated that they feel undervalued as a profession and underacknowledged for the support they provide (Page et al., 2022). Consequently, it is feasible to anticipate the results of one study which noted that three of the top four feelings hairstylists reported when managing clients' personal problems were helplessness, discomfort, and upset (Cowen et al., 1981). It has been acknowledged that such feelings may be exacerbated further as a result of wider societal issues. For example, increased burnout associated with heightened emotional labour among hairstylists during the COVID-19 pandemic has been

reported in Australia (McCann, 2022). Similarly, following the September 11 attacks in the USA, hairstylists in New York were found to have acted as informal caregivers within their communities, which was associated with experiences of distress, vicarious traumatisation, and compassion fatigue (Lieberman et al., 2010).

Likewise, it has been reported that some hairstylists may struggle with their role more than others, with younger hairstylists in particular feeling overwhelmed due to a perceived lack of preparation during their training for the role of ‘incidental counsellor’ (McCann & Myers, 2023). What is more, research has highlighted that being a female caregiver has been correlated with increased burnout, and issues with identity and self-esteem (Hochschild, 1983; Truzzi et al., 2012). Research suggests that, globally, women are the predominant providers of informal care, with women spending significantly more time providing care than men, often due to societal and cultural demands (Kim & Woo, 2022). This may be particularly relevant for hairstylists in the UK as 83% of them identify as female (PolicyBee, 2022), and, thus, may be providing informal care both at work and at home.

Research that demonstrates the difficulties hairstylists may face comes from a study which highlighted certain behaviours hairstylists engaged in to try and counter the emotional labour they perform (Short, 2013). This research was conducted in five hairdressing salons across the UK and utilised photo-interviews. It noted that hairstylists found spaces, such as the bathroom or the pavement outside of the salon, that they could use to find temporary respite. Moreover, some reported using the sound of the hairdryer or water from the tap as a way of escaping momentarily from client conversations.

Accordingly, it has been reported that hairstylists covet emotional support for themselves (Page et al., 2022). This is consistent with early research which reported that hairstylists wanted more mental health support available to them (Cowen et al., 1979). Indeed, according to research on emotional labour, stress management programmes to moderate the adverse effects caused by emotional labour are important (Wolkowitz, 2002; Pisaniello et al., 2012). Likewise, it has been reasoned that there are benefits in providing support to hairstylists to help buffer against potential emotional labour related psychological distress (Jeung et al., 2018). However, in McCann and Myers' (2023) research they noted that none of the hairstylists in their sample discussed any formal debriefing mechanisms at work. They stated that, although some salons have such practices in place, this seems to be the exception as opposed to the norm. The hairstylists they interviewed divulged that the lack of supervision and debriefing mechanisms available to them led to burnout. Relatedly, Page et al. (2022) documented that hairstylists did not have anyone they could offload to at work regarding client disclosures.

It could, therefore, be reasoned that hairstylists' experiences of the emotional labour they perform may be comparable to those of CoPs (Simpson et al., 2019). However, it may be argued that these experiences are buffered by CoPs engaging in supervision and reflective practice, having appropriate training, and knowing that this would be a part of the job they signed up for. Nevertheless, the hairstylists in Page et al.'s (2022) study noted that they love their job, have high job satisfaction, and enjoy supporting their clients. This is similar to prior research with hairstylists (Sharma & Black, 2001; Hill & Bradley, 2010; Sheane, 2012), but at odds with literature on emotional labour which suggests that engaging in emotional labour, experiencing

burnout and feeling emotionally drained can lead to a lack of job satisfaction (Hochschild, 1983; Wolkowitz, 2002; Cohen, 2010; Pisaniello et al., 2012; Jeung et al., 2018). Indeed, it is generally trusted that being an informal caregiver puts one at risk of poorer mental (Pottie et al., 2014; Sallim et al., 2015) and physical health (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2003; Capistrant et al., 2012). Moreover, according to a survey carried out across six countries, poor mental health is the number one challenge for hair professionals, with 65% of hairstylists having experienced anxiety, burnout, or depression at some point during their career (L'Oréal Professionnel, 2023). Although this research cannot establish cause and effect, it presents a curious juxtaposition to the high levels of job satisfaction reported by hairstylists.

It could be argued that this phenomenon is not only related to the nature of the role but reflective of a self-selecting positive bias in the research samples, as well as the possibility that participants might respond in socially desirable ways (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2016). Nonetheless, the relatively sparse research in the field suggests that, whilst hairstylists may feel emotionally drained by their work, they experience high job satisfaction. This may be of particular interest to CoPs given the emphasis in CoP on working with the subjective experiences of individuals, and the focus on how wellbeing and distress are conceptualised (Douglas et al., 2016).

1.3 Conclusion

In summary, hairstylists providing social support to their clients has been a topic that has garnered interest in the field of psychology since the 1970s (Gershon & Biller, 1977; Cowen et al., 1979; Seaberg, 1979; Wiesenfeld & Weis, 1979), with

research reporting that hairstylists often adopt a role that supports individuals, including those struggling with their mental health (Cowen et al., 1979; Seaberg, 1979; Cowen, 1982). More contemporary research has corroborated this with a study by Page et al. (2022) noting that clients discuss problems with their hairstylists that overlap considerably with those taken to mental health professionals, which is in line with research that suggests that people use naturally-occurring channels prior to, or rather than, costly, less available formal mental health channels (Cowen et al., 1979; 1981). Research has argued that this may be even more likely for certain populations who face increased difficulty in accessing mental health support (Anderson et al., 2010; Seager et al., 2014; Barry & Roper, 2016; Shabazz, 2016; Mbilishaka, 2018; McCann, 2022). Consequently, it could be reasoned that the social support hairstylists provide may complement that provided by mental health professionals, such as CoPs (Milne et al., 1992).

Research into hairstylists' experiences of providing social support to their clients highlights both the rewarding and challenging aspects of this role. For example, studies have reported that many hairstylists value their relationships with their clients and experience high job satisfaction, yet also emotional strain (Page et al., 2022). Like other professions involving emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), hairstylists may be vulnerable to stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue (Sharma & Black, 2001; Cohen, 2010; Gérain & Zech, 2019), particularly as they are often untrained in this aspect of their work. Indeed, studies suggest that hairstylists may feel undervalued, unsupported and overwhelmed in their role (Page et al., 2022; McCann & Myers, 2023). At the same time, they report strong enjoyment of their work and satisfaction in supporting clients (Sharma &

Black, 2001; Hill & Bradley, 2010; Sheane, 2012). Such research highlights a paradox: while emotional labour is linked to burnout, psychological distress, and health risks (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Jeung et al., 2018; Wolkowitz, 2002), hairstylists often describe their profession positively.

1.4 The Present Research

Although there is increasing recognition that hairstylists often provide social support to their clients, little is known about how they experience and manage this responsibility. Understanding this is significant not only for appreciating the wellbeing and relational practices of hairstylists, but also for informing how best to provide support within this profession. As a key feature of CoP is to consider the needs of underrepresented groups and explore a phenomenon which has received little attention (Douglas et al., 2016), this profession is well placed to obtain a greater understanding of how hairstylists understand and experience their role. Furthermore, given the emphasis CoP places on how wellbeing and distress are conceptualised, research which illustrates such experiences aligns with the field (Douglas et al., 2016), as does the emphasis CoP places on understanding individuals holistically, in their own settings and on their own terms (Jones Nielsen & Nicholas, 2016).

Professional guidance further underscores the relevance of such research with both the Health and Care Professions Council's guidelines for practitioner psychologists (2015) and the British Psychological Society's (BPS) CoP guidelines (2005) stressing the role of research in guiding professional and ethical practice. Given the limited attention hairstylists have received in psychological research,

investigating their experiences is essential to informing practice among CoPs and other mental health professionals working with this population (Douglas et al., 2016).

In conclusion, the limited knowledge pertaining to how hairstylists experience social support provision to their clients, in conjunction with the potential related challenges they may face, such as emotional strain and mental health difficulties, indicates the importance of gaining knowledge of their experiences. Attaining such insight may contribute to well-informed, contextually sensitive practice, potentially enhancing both professional support and mental health outcomes for hairstylists. Therefore, the proposed research question is: ‘how do hairstylists in the UK experience the provision of social support to their clients?’, with the aim of exploring the lived experience of hairstylists providing social support, emotional labour, and informal caregiving to their clients.

1.5 Reflexive Statement

Reflexivity has been identified as a vital component of CoP training (Donati, 2016) and is similarly important in CoP research, where it can enhance awareness of the researcher’s biases and assumptions (Willig, 2021). Reflexivity encourages researchers to consider how their own involvement may influence and inform the research process (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999). This is particularly relevant within CoP research which pays distinct attention to how researcher subjectivity can impact the research process (Kasket, 2012). Consequently, researchers are encouraged to engage in an ongoing reflexive process that brings assumptions, expectations, and personal interests into conscious awareness in order to better account for their

influence on the research (Kasket, 2012). Accordingly, as a Trainee Counselling Psychologist and Researcher, I offer reflexive accounts throughout this research to provide transparency to readers as to how I may have influenced it.

Finlay and Gough (2003) express that what steers research is a researcher's interest. Consequently, it seems pertinent to disclose what attracted me to this topic. I first became interested in the subject area whilst I was at the hairdressing salon. As I was waiting for my appointment, I overheard my hairstylist's client updating him on her relationship. I noticed that she seemed quite distressed, and my hairstylist was responding in a similar way to how I would with one of my clients. I could not help but draw parallels between the work my hairstylist was doing and the work I do as a Trainee Counselling Psychologist. I, subsequently, spoke with my hairstylist about what I had observed. He informed me that he often felt like he was an unofficial therapist to his clients. He noted that he enjoyed this aspect of his job, but that he did sometimes feel exhausted and overwhelmed after listening to client disclosures and that he felt unable to discuss such disclosures with his colleagues as he wanted to maintain his clients' confidentiality. We spoke about this further and I began to feel excited about the potential prospect of researching this phenomenon.

I realise that this enthusiasm, the meaningful relationship I have with my hairstylist, and the fact that I use my hairstylist as a form of social support may create a bias in terms of my literature review and the ensuing research. For example, at first I noticed that my assumptions led me to be enticed towards literature which resonated with the points that my hairstylist and I had spoken about. Certainly, I was drawn to research which indicated that all hairstylists provide their clients with social

support and that this results in negative consequences for them. Upon reflection, and conversation with my research supervisor, I noticed that this was leading to an unbalanced literature review, with alternative views missing.

What is more, after discovering a dearth of literature in the field, I felt a pull to defend hairstylists as worthy of CoP research, to show that hairdressing is a profession that can support individuals in many ways other than just hairstyling. Such beliefs and biases, I reflected, could lead to the potential to ignore the diversity in experiences of hairstylists' providing social support. Indeed, during my initial literature search I noticed that, at times, I had paid closer attention to literature which highlighted the importance of the role that hairstylists play as social supporters.

Accordingly, as Nightingale and Cromby (1999) report that it is unachievable to remain outside of the subject matter, I engaged in reflexivity to explore how my interest and presuppositions may impact areas such as my literature review and identification of the research question. For example, throughout the literature review process I consciously reflected on why certain papers resonated more strongly with me than others and actively sought out literature that challenged my assumptions regarding hairstylists as providers of social support. Discussions within supervision also encouraged me to question whether my developing interpretations and framing of the research question privileged a particular narrative regarding hairstylists' experiences. Reflexivity allowed me to reflect on these assumptions and endeavour to limit the ways in which my personal material impacted the development of the literature review and resulting research. I attempted to minimise this by engaging in the process of bracketing (Spinelli, 2005; Smith et al., 2009). Some of the ways I did

this include maintaining a reflexive journal, in which I documented my emotional reactions to literature, assumptions regarding hairstylists' roles, and reflections following supervision discussions, alongside making use of supervision and personal therapy, and communicating with friends, colleagues and peers about the research. In doing so I found I was able to approach the literature more freely, with an inquisitive and critical mindset, permitting myself to be open to whatever I discovered.

Whilst I endeavoured to engage in the process of bracketing, I am aware that any attempt to bracket my personal material is limited and that I cannot entirely separate my experience and beliefs from my research (Ratner, 2002; Finlay & Gough, 2003). Certainly, a key feature of qualitative research is that there will be involvement of my own personal subjectivity (Willig, 2021). Consequently, I also engaged with reflexivity throughout the ensuing research to become cognisant of how my biases may have impacted upon recruitment, data collection, and data analysis.

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 Ontological and Epistemological Considerations

Research involves the exploration of phenomena and the generation of knowledge about them. In psychological research, the aim is to attain a clearer understanding of behaviour, cognition, emotion, and lived experience. As a scientific process, psychological research commences with the identification of a research question and a consideration of the methods most appropriate for investigating it (Kasket, 2012). Willig (2021) contends that prior to embarking on a research project it is essential for the researcher to consider both the sort of knowledge they are endeavouring to generate and the assumptions they hold about the nature of the world and reality, through an understanding of their ontological and epistemological positions. Ontology refers to the study of being, existence, and reality, whilst epistemology relates to how knowledge is acquired (Bright & Harrison, 2013).

Realist concepts of knowledge maintain a single, shared reality, whereas relativist stances argue for multiple realities which are constructed by individuals, often through societal, linguistic and cultural structures. I find relativist conceptions appealing because they emphasise the diversity of experience. Yet, despite my acknowledgment that one's experiences will be impacted by factors such as their individual situation, social standing, and relationships, I suspect the existence of a single underlying reality. Accordingly, this research assumes that the experiences detailed by its participants are based upon real events. As such, this research adopts a critical realist ontology (Willig, 2021).

In my view, whilst grounded in real events, experiences are accessed and understood through interpretation, indicating that knowledge of reality is mediated by personal, social, and cultural factors. This research, therefore, adopts an interpretative epistemology, which acknowledges that our understanding of participants' experiences is shaped by the contexts in which they are lived and reported (Ponterotto, 2005).

Thus, this study adopts a critical realist ontology and an interpretative epistemology, recognising both the existence of an underlying reality and the role of interpretation in accessing and representing it. With this in mind, I aim to illustrate my participants' experiential perceptions, whilst uncovering the underlying structures and social processes which inform such experiences. While I appreciate that my own worldview will impact upon my interpretations of participants' experiences, I will endeavour to make myself conscious of this by implementing a reflexive stance throughout the research process (Ponterotto, 2005). These philosophical assumptions informed the selection of appropriate methodological approaches, which are considered in the following sections.

2.2 Rationale for a Qualitative Methodology

Psychological research is commonly categorised according to its use of either qualitative or quantitative research methods (Kasket, 2012). These categories are distinguished by quantitative research's utilisation of numerical data and statistical analysis, and qualitative research's employment of non-numerical data, such as linguistic, visual, or other interpretive forms of data. Quantitative research often

involves experimental manipulation, particularly in laboratory settings, but it can also include non-experimental methods such as surveys and secondary data analysis. In contrast, qualitative research frequently utilises more naturalistic settings. While quantitative research is characteristically associated with measuring behaviour, qualitative research often focuses more on meaning and lived experience (Bright & Harrison, 2013).

A further distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods is their contrasting philosophical foundations, specifically related to their ontological and epistemological positions. Regarding ontology, quantitative research is linked with objectivism, which considers reality as singular and objective. Whereas qualitative research is connected with constructivism, which comprehends reality as innumerable, socially constructed and continuously shifting (Sale et al., 2002). Regarding epistemology, quantitative research is commonly associated with positivism, which highlights the significance of empirical methods and the objective status of knowledge (Bright & Harrison, 2013). Conversely, qualitative research is grounded in interpretivism, which stresses the value of understanding the views and subjective experiences of participants (Morgan & Smirchich, 1980).

Whilst I am of the impression that certain aspects of human behaviour may be measured and quantified, I posit that one's meaning-making and subjective experiences are more fully realised through a qualitative methodology. As this research is focused on the subjective experiences of participants, a qualitative methodology will be adopted. Additionally, it has been indicated that a qualitative methodology is particularly valuable when the participant group is underrepresented

(Sale et al., 2002). As little is known about hairstylists' experiences relating to the research question, it further seems appropriate for a qualitative methodology to be employed.

2.3 Rationale for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Having opted for a qualitative research approach, I aimed to determine an appropriate research methodology for this phenomenological research. Willig (2021) recognises two categories of phenomenological research: descriptive and interpretative. Descriptive research strives to adhere closely to participants' accounts and acknowledge the data as it appears, with the intention of accurately capturing participants' experiences as they personally understand them. Interpretative research, on the other hand, endeavours to contribute an additional layer of meaning to participants' accounts by identifying underlying themes that participants may not be consciously aware of. This deeper level of meaning is what this research seeks to explore (Willig, 2021). Additionally, interpretative research is often better aligned with a critical realist stance as it recognises that while reality exists independently, our understanding of it is mediated through participants' interpretations and the researcher's analytical lens (Fletcher, 2017).

Having established that an interpretative approach was most appropriate for this research, inductive methodologies were subsequently prioritised. In contrast, to deductive approaches, which are guided by existing theory and seek to confirm or refute predetermined ideas, inductive research allows meanings and themes to developed from the data itself. This was considered particularly valuable given the

limited existing literature surrounding this research topic, as it enabled a more open and nuanced exploration of participants' experiences (Reid et al., 2005; Smith & Osborn, 2015).

Given the philosophical, epistemological, and methodological considerations outlined above, several qualitative methodologies were considered, including TA, grounded theory (GT) and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). TA was initially considered given its use in similar research (Page et al., 2022). While it is a flexible approach that can be used in both descriptive and interpretative ways (Braun & Clarke, 2006), it was ultimately not selected as other approaches were considered more explicitly aligned with the study's aim of producing an in-depth, idiographic exploration of participants' lived experiences of providing social support to their clients. Although TA can be used to examine subjective meaning, a more interpretative methodology was judged to better foreground this focus.

Therefore, I looked to more interpretative methodologies and considered GT and IPA. GT is a methodology that looks to generate theories through codification of qualitative data (Willig, 2021). GT is concerned with social processes, their structures, codes of conduct and procedures and seeks to develop theories from data that explain these social processes (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). IPA, alternatively, intends to generate detailed examinations of personal lived experience. It produces accounts of lived experiences in their own terms, rather than one prescribed by pre-existing theoretical ideas. IPA recognises this as an interpretative endeavour as the researcher attempts to make sense of the participant attempting to make sense of what is happening to them (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

GT shares some commonalities with IPA in that data collection involves the researcher gathering the narrative as provided by the participant. Additionally, both IPA and GT incorporate the notion of the researcher bracketing their own assumptions throughout the research process (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). However, IPA emphasises lived experiences and the abstract interpretations of such experiences, whilst GT focuses on how societal systems impact the way in which matters are experienced through a particular framework of social interactions (Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

Although GT and IPA share some similarities, a characteristic that differentiates them, and makes IPA preferable for this research, stems from the way in which IPA explores experiences considering all their diversities, in contrast to reducing them to a singular theoretical stance (Willig, 2021). Indeed, some research proposes that GT is not appropriate for all psychological investigations owing to the complexity of individual lived experiences (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). My rationale for utilising IPA is based on the research aim, which is to explore hairstylists' lived experiences. IPA strives to understand the common features of lived experiences, whilst appreciating that there may be no defined conclusion, recognising instead the complexities of phenomena (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). How hairstylists experience the provision of social support to their clients is subjective, and an individual's social, historical and cultural conditions will impact how these are experienced. Such intricacies indicate that providing a platform for those experiencing this particular phenomenon is more feasible than restricting several concepts into one theory (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

What is more, IPA is an appropriate and popular methodology in CoP research owing to its idiographic focus and emphasis on extracting depth and detail (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Certainly, IPA seeks to generate thorough examinations of participants' individual lived experiences, as opposed to those imposed by established theoretical preconceptions (Smith et al., 2009). This is in line with the principles of CoP which are based on honouring an individual's social context and meaning-making, whilst prioritising their subjective experiences. This focus on lived experience makes IPA suitable for CoPs who incorporate subjective experiences, social aspects and relational factors into their understanding of their clients (Douglas et al., 2016).

Whilst I consider IPA an appropriate methodology for this research, I am cognisant of its limitations. For example, while researchers may utilise IPA owing to its appreciation of the role of the researcher in the analytic process, its subjective constitution has presented questions in terms of authenticity. Indeed, researchers may inadvertently bring preconceptions to the data based on their lived experiences (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Similarly, notwithstanding the idea that IPA researchers are not concerned with testing preconceived hypotheses but, rather, conducting in-depth exploration of phenomena (Smith & Osborn, 2015), it can be reasoned that the researcher likely has some prior awareness of existing literature relating to the research topic that may influence the data analysis (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

Moreover, given IPA's reliance on the representational validity of language, it has been maintained that language may not necessarily describe, but rather construct, an individual's reality and, therefore, the resulting data might contribute

more insight into how an individual communicates an experience, rather than providing insight into the experience itself (Willig, 2021). What is more, IPA's reliance on language may have implications for participants, and their ensuing data, when language may impact upon their engagement with their inner experiencing (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Lastly, whilst IPA can generate detailed accounts of participants' experiences, it may lack explanations as to why such experiences occur and why there may be discrepancies between participants' phenomenological descriptions. Thus, it may inhibit access to selected facets of phenomena (Willig, 2021).

2.4 Theoretical Underpinnings of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IPA integrates three main philosophical components: phenomenology, the study of lived experience; hermeneutics, the art and science of interpretation (Smith et al., 2009); and idiography, the concept of understanding individuals in depth (Ponterotto, 2005). Husserl (1950) applied the word phenomenology in reference to his attempts to comprehend how we experience objects (Spinelli, 2005). Husserl's phenomenology asserts a shift away from external objects to one's interpretation of said objects (Smith et al., 2009). Phenomenological research aims to comprehend lived experience through the classification of human experience in relation to phenomena. This presents the space to speak honestly about experiences, without the recognition of a final truth (Spinelli, 2005). A premise of the phenomenological perspective is that such data can reveal things about individuals' involvement with the world and how they make sense of it (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl's work shaped the foundations of IPA. He emphasised the concept of bracketing, the necessity of researchers attending to their own perceptions through the process of reflection.

Within IPA is Husserl's notion of bracketing existing knowledge to engage with the essence of the phenomenon in question (Smith et al., 2009).

Heidegger (1962), a student of Husserl's, branched off from this focus by arguing that bracketing is an unrealistic task owing to researchers being immersed in their own worlds (Langdridge, 2007). Heidegger, subsequently, became a prominent individual in the development of IPA given the way in which he linked Husserl's notion of phenomenology with the concept of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation and one of the theoretical components of IPA, appreciates that understanding originates from an interpretative perspective in that researchers are attempting to make sense of participants endeavouring to make sense of their experiencing. This is known as double hermeneutics (Smith & Osborn, 2015). A focal theme of hermeneutics is the hermeneutic circle which characterises IPA's multidirectional and iterative method. This conveys that researchers engage with analysis incrementally whilst also moving backwards and forwards through the analysis in various ways. This may incorporate reading and re-reading the data and examining it from different viewpoints, whilst bearing in mind the researchers own relationship to the data and the influence this may have on analysis (Smith et al., 2009).

Furthermore, IPA utilises an idiographic mode of inquiry. This signifies that it focuses more on making specific comments about the experiences of individuals, as opposed to making general statements about certain populations (Smith & Osborn, 2015). As such, IPA is committed to creating in-depth and detailed analyses on how phenomena may be understood from the perspective of a certain individual in a

particular context (Smith et al., 2009). Consequently, within IPA, the idiographic emphasis leads the researcher to closely study individual cases before forming any generalised accounts (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

2.5 Recruitment

IPA researchers seek to obtain a purposive, homogenous sample. Therefore, this study employed purposive sampling, meaning that the researcher recruited participants based upon a set of specific, predetermined criteria. This was done in the hopes of achieving a homogeneous sample, which involves selecting participants with certain characteristics in common to investigate a particular phenomenon (Willig, 2021). IPA research is reliant on quality over quantity in its data collection. Therefore, this study aimed to recruit six participants which falls within the range of four to ten recommended by Smith et al. (2009) for professional doctoral research. Participants were deemed appropriate to participate in this research if they met the following criteria:

- Participants reported that they feel that they provide social support to their clients
- Participants were hairstylists catering to all gender identities
- Participants worked in a hairdressing salon in London
- Participants were over the age of 18
- Participants spoke fluent English

The inclusion criteria were designed to ensure a homogenous, purposive sample. Participants were required to identify as providing social support to their clients to

ensure they had direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation. Restricting the sample to hairstylists working in London salons catering to all gender identities also helped maintain contextual consistency across participants' experiences. Additionally, participants were required to be over the age of 18 and fluent in English to support ethical practice and facilitate rich, detailed data collection. Those who met the above criteria were not subject to any further exclusions.

Participants were recruited through various London hair salons. I chose several areas in London, such as Shoreditch, Soho and Canary Wharf, and searched online for the hair salons in those areas that catered to all gender identities. I then created a list of these salons and went into each salon to introduce the research and that I was seeking participants. I left recruitment posters (see Appendix A) at the salons for the staff I managed to speak with but also for other hairstylists who work at the salon but were not available at the time. If I passed other salons along the way I also entered them to not preclude any that did not have an online presence or that I may have missed in my internet search. I only entered salons if there was someone available to speak with at the time, and if everyone in the salon appeared busy with customers I would not go in. A few days later I would email each salon that I visited to thank them for their time and send them a copy of the recruitment poster. I would also email those that I had not entered due to a lack of available staff.

In total around 50 hair salons in London were either visited in person or emailed. Snowballing sampling was also utilised whereby research participants were encouraged to share the poster with any other potential participants (Punch, 2000). All recruitment and interviews took place between May and September of 2024 and

stopped when enough suitable participants were interviewed. Once a potential participant had emailed me, I would reply with a copy of the participant information sheet (see Appendix B) and consent form (see Appendix C). The inclusion criteria were made clear in the recruitment poster and information sheet and discussed with participants prior to participation. If they wished to proceed after this, we arranged an online interview via Microsoft Teams.

In their similar research, Page et al. (2022) noted difficulties recruiting hairstylists within their desired timeframe and suggested that offering compensation may support recruitment. Therefore, participants in this study were offered a £20 multi-retailer eGift card as reimbursement for their time and contribution. Research highlights ethical considerations in compensating human participants, emphasising that informed consent and the right to withdraw without penalty must be upheld (Head, 2009). These considerations were recognised and incorporated into the design of this research.

Additionally, Grant and Sugarman (2004) reported that the use of incentives to recruit research participants is harmless in most cases. However, there are some cases where it may not be. They state that incentives may become problematic when the participant is in a dependent relationship with the researcher, when risks may be high, when the research may be demeaning, when the participant is likely to only consent if the incentive is high due to a participant's disinclination towards the research, and/or when this disinclination is an ethical one. As none of these factors were relevant in this study, it was reasoned that the use of incentives should not lead to any ethical issues (Grant & Sugarman, 2004).

I found recruitment to be quite challenging in that the hairstylists I spoke with in the salons all seemed very interested and enthusiastic about the research. However, this did not translate to many of them reaching out to express their interest in participating. Nevertheless, I was contacted by a total of nine individuals during the recruitment phase. However, three of those individuals did not end up participating in the study. One individual confirmed that the hair salon they worked at was not in London, one disclosed that they did not yet have experience of working in a salon, and another did not attend their scheduled interview.

2.6 Participants

All six participants identified as women. They were aged between 25 and 46 years, with an average age of 39.5 years. Whilst this sample is not reflective of the wider population, it is reasonably representative of hairstylists in the UK, of whom 83% identify as women and over half are aged between 16-34 years (PolicyBee, 2022). Participants had worked as hairstylists for between 7 and 28 years, with an average of 17.5 years' experience. They worked across Southeast, East, and West London. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

One participant had recently qualified as a psychotherapist and intended to work alongside this role in addition to hairstyling. This information emerged at the beginning of the interview after recruitment had taken place. As the participant still met the study's inclusion criteria and had no substantial experience of psychotherapy practice beyond training, the interview proceeded. Although this participant occasionally drew comparisons between formal therapeutic support and the informal

support provided within hairstyling, her responses did not substantially differ from those of the other participants.

Participants worked across a range of salon types, including independent salons, local chain salons, and a global chain salon. In this study, independent salons referred to one-off salons operating from a single location, local chain salons referred to salons with multiple branches across London, and global chain salons referred to salons with branches nationally and internationally. Participants also worked across salons with differing price ranges. In this study, value salons referred to salons offering lower-cost services, moderate salons referred to mid-range pricing, and luxury salons referred to higher-end pricing. These categories were based on participants' own descriptions of their salon pricing.

Demographic questions were optional and presented to participants via a demographic information form (see Appendix D) prior to the interview starting. This information was gathered in order to confirm that participants fit the inclusion criteria, to check the homogeneity of the sample and to add context to the interviews. They were asked to provide their age and gender, but information relating to personal characteristics such as cultural background, social class, ethnicity and educational status were not collected as they were not deemed relevant to this study. Such information can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: *Participant Demographic Information*

Pseudonym	Age (years)	Job Title	Length of Time as a Hairstylist (years)	Salon Type	Salon Price
Hope	46	Salon Owner and Hairstylist	15	Independent	Moderate
Jas	43	Style Director and Hairstylist	28	Global Chain	Luxury
Georgie	38	Manager and Hairstylist	22	Local Chain	Luxury
Christine	25	Manager and Senior Hairstylist	7	Local Chain	Moderate
Benjamina	41	Senior Hairstylist	12	Independent	Value
Tammy	38	Director and Hairstylist	21	Local Chain and Independent	Luxury

2.7 Data Collection

Once a suitable date and time for a one-to-one interview was established, the researcher sent a Microsoft Teams invitation to the participant. Interviews were conducted online for the convenience of both the researcher and participants. These were recorded and transcribed automatically using Microsoft Teams. The invites were for a one-hour meeting, as is recommended with IPA interviews (Alase, 2017). Typically, the first 15 minutes were spent introducing the interview, defining social

support, signing the consent form and answering any questions, with the remaining 45 minutes taken up by the interview and debriefing.

Prior to the interview questions starting, I introduced myself, discussed the aims of the research and my interest in the topic. Smith et al. (2009) caution that interviewer disclosure should be handled with caution. I was, therefore, mindful of not disclosing too much information about my interest in the topic in the knowledge that this may impact the participants' responses. A reminder of some of the information in the information sheet, such as how data would be stored and protected, that all data would be treated confidentially with identifiable information changed, and that one could withdraw from the research without penalty whilst participating and up to four weeks after, was covered.

Participants were encouraged to keep their cameras on for the entirety of the interview but were advised to let the researcher know if they would like a break from having their camera on at any point. A plan for if the participant, or researcher, unexpectedly left the interview due to technical issues was also discussed. Participants were presented with the consent form again, with the contents of the form repeated verbally, before participants were encouraged to ask any questions they may have prior to written consent being obtained. They were then asked to fill out a brief demographic information form before moving onto the interview questions.

Eight interview questions were asked, as six to nine are recommended for IPA research (Creswell, 2003). The interview schedule (see Appendix E) was developed utilising the protocol outlined by Smith et al. (2009) and drafted based on gaps I

identified in the literature where little was known about how hairstylists understand and experience their role of providing social support to their clients. The interview schedule focused on participants' lived experiences, and interpretations of such experiences.

Smith et al. (2009) maintain that collecting good quality data for IPA research involves asking open-ended questions, whilst upholding a balance between guiding and being guided by participants. Therefore, the interview schedule was made up of open-ended questions, starting with more general questions which allowed participants to set the parameters of the topic (Willig, 2021). This was done in an attempt to avoid the researcher imposing their understanding of the phenomena onto participants (Smith et al., 2009). Additionally, as the first couple of questions were more general, this tended to ease participants into the interview by allowing them to discuss something they were perhaps more familiar with.

Similarly, semi-structured interviews were utilised as they are considered exemplary for IPA research owing to their ability to enable the researcher to modify questions in response to participants' responses (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). On reflection, I was perhaps more hesitant to deviate from the schedule in earlier interviews. However, as I began to settle into my role as a researcher, I found that I was more comfortable adjusting the questions, prompting and tentatively probing for further exploration in accordance with participants' replies.

I attempted to make my participants feel comfortable by clarifying that there were no correct or incorrect answers, and that I was interested in hearing about their

experiences. I also endeavoured to ensure that the questions were clear, jargon-free, and not leading (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Example questions from the interview schedule include ‘how do you feel about providing social support to your clients?’, and ‘if you have noticed an impact of providing social support to your clients, how do you manage this?’. Smith et al. (2009) stress the significance of establishing a good rapport with participants. I, consequently, endeavoured to utilise the skills I have gained as a Trainee Counselling Psychologist, such as actively listening and remaining non-judgemental throughout the process. Through this, I aimed to make participants comfortable, while collecting thorough and relevant data.

Following their interview, participants were debriefed and provided with the opportunity to ask questions and remark on the interview. Most post-interview discussion involved participants asking further questions about the researcher’s interest in the topic. These conversations took place after the formal interview had ended and were therefore not included in the interview transcripts or subsequent analysis. Participants were also presented with a debrief form (see Appendix F) expressing gratitude for their time and contribution and presenting them with the details of external support networks, should they need them. Additionally, the researcher’s contact details, and the researcher’s supervisor’s contact details, were provided. In the case of the first few interviews I explained that I was still looking for participants and that I would appreciate them sharing the research poster with anyone that might fit the inclusion criteria. After being debriefed, participants were thanked for their participation and dismissed. Their eGift card was then sent to them. Following each interview, I took some time to consider how I felt it had gone, and ways in which I could improve the process moving forward.

2.8 Analytic Procedure

While the interviews were transcribed automatically by Microsoft Teams, the transcriptions were not perfect. Therefore, I replayed the recorded interviews one by one whilst following the transcriptions. I did this once to correct any issues with the text and a second time to add punctuation. The transcripts were then anonymised by removing any identifiable information. As IPA mainly derives meaning from the content of participants' interviews, prosodic aspects, including pauses and non-verbal sounds, were granted less attention than spoken words (Smith et al., 2009). This exercise proved to be a good opportunity to reflect upon the interviews from an observational outlook, studying them in their entirety. No formal cross-coder checking or independent double-coding was conducted on the data. However, I participated in a supervised training exercise in which a portion of an interview transcript from my dataset was independently coded by myself, my supervisor, and doctoral peers, followed by group discussion and comparison of interpretations. This informed my analytic approach, although the final analysis was conducted independently.

Smith et al. (2009) outline IPA as featuring room for flexibility and creativity in its model, though they do recognise that this may be better suited for more experienced researchers. Considering that this was my first instance conducting IPA in full, I adhered to the process outlined by Smith et al. (2009) that incorporates six steps for analysing data which I have outlined below. I have amended the language within these steps to incorporate the newer IPA terminology as proposed by Smith et al. (2022). Whilst these changes are primarily semantic, for example 'emergent

themes' being referred to as 'experiential statements' and 'superordinate themes' being termed 'group experiential themes', Smith et al. (2022) advise employing the new terminology if one is beginning their analysis after the new terminology has been disseminated.

Step 1: Reading and re-reading

To immerse myself in the data, I read over the first transcript several times, playing the recording whilst following the transcript. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) suggest that doing so can facilitate the researcher in recalling the atmosphere of the interview and assisting in their endeavour to enter the participant's world. Whilst it felt difficult to refrain from making notes at this point, it was necessary to do so to aid in bracketing my own assumptions and ideas.

Step 2: Exploratory noting

The second step of analysis involved making initial notes in the transcript. I did so by inputting the transcript into a table in Microsoft Word. I noted details that I thought were important, interesting or of note, whilst bearing in mind similarities, differences, repetitions and contradictions throughout the transcript (see appendix G for an example of this). These exploratory notes considered three groups: descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. The descriptive notes were primarily associated with identifying the content of small sections of the transcript, regularly employing text from the transcript itself. The linguistic notes incorporated commentary on the way in which the participants gave their accounts. The conceptual notes involved my initial attempts to make interpretations. This stage was

time-consuming, as Smith et al. (2009) predicted, but it allowed for both exploratory and interpretive connection with the data.

Step 3: Formulating experiential statements

The next step involved identifying and formulating experiential statements. This involved the analytic focus moving beyond the original transcript to the exploratory notes and was done in the same table as the exploratory notes. These statements tended to reflect the participant's remarks, as well as my own interpretations (see appendix G for an example of this). At times, formulating experiential statements felt reductionistic and, consequently, as though I was interfering in the experiences of the participants. However, I was reassured that Smith et al. (2009) remark that each stage of the analytic process takes you further away from the participant and incorporates more of the researcher. Nevertheless, I attempted to stay aligned with the experiences of the participants with the aim of generating analyses that combined the collaborative efforts of both myself and the participants. I found that using a single table that combined each participant's original transcript, exploratory notes and experiential statements helped to do this.

Step 4: Clustering experiential statements to form personal experiential themes

The fourth step involved identifying connections between experiential statements, grouping them by conceptual comparisons, and creating a descriptive title for them (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This intended to group the experiential statements together in a way that would highlight the most important and relevant aspects of the transcript. While I recognise that Smith et al. (2009) state that

frequency does not necessarily signify importance, it may be suggestive of the relevance of the theme for the participant. Therefore, I quantified the usage of experiential statements within the transcript, finding numeration a useful method of drawing connections. I also engaged in other methods of clustering the experiential statements, notably by examining them one-by-one and grouping them on a like-for-like basis according to shared meanings, emotional content, contextual similarities, and references to comparable lived experiences or perceptions expressed by the participant. It became apparent at this point that some experiential statements held less significance regarding the research question and were, therefore, discarded. Once I felt satisfied with the clusters, I organised them into a table of personal experiential themes (PETs) (see appendix H for an example of this).

Step 5: Moving to the next case

Upon completing these stages for the first participant, I proceeded to the subsequent transcript. Though it was unavoidable that what I had previously done would impact my succeeding approach, I attempted to explore each transcript in isolation to ensure that I remained open to the emergence of new themes and fully appreciate the uniqueness of each transcript. I recognised this part of the analysis as challenging as I endeavoured to bracket the existing knowledge that I had gained. However, I attempted to stay within the IPA framework by remaining reflexive throughout the process by revisiting the raw transcripts regularly, keeping reflective notes regarding my assumptions and interpretations, and consciously questioning whether emerging themes were grounded in the participant's account rather than influenced by themes identified in previous transcripts.

Step 6: Looking for patterns across cases

Following the analysis of each individual transcript, I started searching for thematic patterns across cases. I utilised sticky notes for organisational purposes to help manage the large number of PETs. I began by reviewing the PETs and grouping them together by similarity, as opposed to participant. This process consisted of revisiting the PETs and making comparisons. Additionally, the concepts of abstraction and numeration were implemented at this level of analysis, where I endeavoured to identify shared experiences and qualities across participants. I grouped related themes together to observe the frequency with which particular themes came up and how many transcripts they were in (see appendix I for an example of this). Following this, I spent time renaming and reconfiguring the themes. This process continued until I was satisfied that the themes coherently reflected the participants' accounts and could not be meaningfully refined further (Willig, 2021). At this stage, it was evident that certain PETs were less relevant to the research question and were, subsequently, excluded. Whilst at times I experienced narrowing down PETs as overwhelming, it was an essential undertaking to achieve a deeper, more complete and synthesised analysis. I also endeavoured to streamline the quotes demonstrating the themes to avoid presenting too many short, descriptive quotes, which has been noted to result in a lack of depth of data (Smith et al., 2009). The resulting themes were compiled into a table of group experiential themes (GETs) along with the quotes which best exemplified them.

2.9 Validity and Reliability

Though validity and reliability are terminology more frequently associated with quantitative research, they too have a key role in qualitative research. Yet, the manner in which they are measured in relation to qualitative research is profoundly different to quantitative research (Silverman, 2006). Indeed, Yardley (2000) suggested that qualitative researchers ought to abide by a series of guidelines in order to establish validity and reliability. These are: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, coherence and transparency, and impact and importance.

Smith et al., (2009) argue that a good quality IPA research project will demonstrate sensitivity to context through: socio-cultural sensitivity, data sensitivity, an awareness of existing literature and acknowledgment of data collection as interactional. I endeavoured to demonstrate this throughout recruitment, data collection, and analysis. While conducting the interviews, I attempted to be mindful of participants by making them feel comfortable, displaying empathy, and thoughtfully managing any communication challenges. Throughout the analysis, I immersed myself in the material, ensuring that any interpretations were supported by direct quotes. Lastly, I established sensitivity to context by utilising my knowledge of the existing literature to present a solid justification for the research and to discuss the findings.

I sought to observe the tenets of commitment and rigour during the recruitment, data collection, and analysis phases. I exhibited this by selecting an appropriate and homogenous sample, carrying out considerate and comprehensive

interviews, and conducting a thorough and extensive analysis. Additionally, in an attempt to achieve methodological competency, I continually engaged with IPA literature, supervision, and peer-supervision (Smith et al., 2009).

I sought to meet the conditions of coherence and transparency by offering a detailed narrative of every phase of the research process. This involved descriptions of how participants were recruited, how the interviews were administered, and how the analysis was conducted. I aimed to provide coherence by presenting a write-up that was intelligible and accessible (Smith et al., 2009). Additionally, the write-up was constructed to highlight my involvement with the research; this was done by explicitly defining each phase of the research process and incorporating reflexivity to demonstrate how I may have influenced the study (Yardley, 2000).

Lastly, I observed the values of impact and importance by aiming to conduct research that readers would find both valuable and interesting (Yardley, 2000). Throughout the introductory chapter I described the contribution I consider this research will make to the field of psychology, envisaging that this may yield practical implications for mental health practitioners and professionals in the hair industry, while opening up new ways of understanding this phenomenon.

2.10 Ethical Considerations

Ensuring ethical practice is a crucial and enduring component of the research process. Ethical implications were contemplated at every phase of the research process in accordance with the BPS's Code of Human Research Ethics (2021) and

London Metropolitan University's Research Ethics Policies and Regulations (2021). I observed its direction on the protection of human research participants including deliberation of concerns such as potential harm, sensitivity, and anonymity. Additionally, I followed the guidelines of the Data Protection Act (2018) which recognises that everyone has the right to protection of their personal data.

It was presumed that risks to participants would be minimal in this research. However, due to the subjective nature of experiences, I was unable to anticipate potential emotional outcomes of participation. Thus, I aimed to minimise and manage possible participant distress by engaging with literature on distress protocols in responding to emotional distress expressed during interviews (Draucker et al., 2009). As it was presumed that risks to participants would be minimal, I focused on literature by Cocking (2008) which outlined distress protocols in responding to mild distress (see Appendix J). To identify mild distress from participants, I looked for indications such as weepiness, voices becoming choked with emotion, and participants becoming distracted or agitated. If any of those indicators were noticed, I had planned to respond by asking participants if they would like to continue, offering them a break, and reminding them that they can cease the interview at any time. However, I did not need to follow this distress protocol as no participants showed emotional distress during the interviews. I did, however, endeavour to maintain a respectful, nonjudgemental, and empathetic approach throughout.

In addition, as outlined in the data collection section of this chapter, signed consent was acquired from participants before data collection. Participants were informed that their participation was not mandatory and that they were free to

withdraw from the study. They were also informed of the aims and purposes of the study and provided with a debrief form, which included information regarding external support networks should the need arise post-interview. Thorough consideration to matters such as potential harm, sensitivity, and anonymity were discussed with my research supervisor prior to data collection and this research was approved by London Metropolitan University's Ethics Committee (see Appendix K).

2.11 Reflexive Statement

Willig (2021) encourages qualitative researchers to recognise that they actively and continually impact the research process. Indeed, reflexivity is a crucial and continuous process within IPA as outcomes are dependent on researchers' interpretations of participant responses (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, it is imperative that researchers adopt a reflexive stance as this aids them in understanding the role of themselves, including the impact of their own biases, beliefs, interests and personal experiences, in the generation of knowledge, and how this may shape the research (Willig, 2021). Therefore, reflexivity aids in understanding the limitations of the generated knowledge, resulting in more valid and rigorous research (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

Consequently, I attempted to reflect upon, question, and evaluate the influence that I may have had on the research process including data collection and analysis. To maintain reflexivity, I engaged with my research supervisor, addressed issues that arose in personal therapy, spoke with my doctoral peers and colleagues, and utilised a reflective journal and analytic notes throughout the research process to

compartmentalise and critically engage with my perspectives on the research (Shaw, 2010). Following each interview, I recorded reflections on my emotional responses, assumptions, and any perceived influence of my professional identity on participant interactions. Through this, I became aware that my positionality as a Trainee Counselling Psychologist, including my perceived age, gender, and relative lack of professional experience, may have influenced the interview dynamic and the extent to which participants felt comfortable elaborating on their experiences. These dynamics may have differed had the interviews been conducted by a researcher with a different identity or professional status. In response to this awareness, I remained attentive during interviews to signs of discomfort, hesitation, or over-compliance, and made a conscious effort to use prompts and clarification questions to encourage elaboration and reduce the risk of assumptions being shaped by my own perceived position.

During analysis, I documented reflexive notes alongside initial coding and theme development, particularly where I identified potential preconceptions influencing interpretation. These entries were revisited iteratively to support ongoing bracketing and to make visible how interpretations were being shaped over time (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Reflexive engagement was further supported through supervision, where emerging analytic decisions and interpretations were discussed and critically examined, enabling me to consider alternative readings of the data and refine developing themes. Engaging in this process of reflexivity enabled me to be more mindful of my own subjectivity and gain further insight into the research process and my connection with it (Kasket, 2012).

A phase of the research process in which I leaned heavily on reflecting with my personal therapist and doctoral peers was recruitment, having found the length of time it took to reach the required number of participants frustrating. I wondered whether it was evident to my potential participants that I was an outsider to their experiences and if this was having an impact on potential participant interest. I questioned whether this would make them less likely to trust me or perhaps my attempts to understand their world would be seen as intrusive. These reflections were not discussed directly with participants at this stage, but formed part of my ongoing reflexive engagement during recruitment. I then reminded myself that Page et al. (2022) struggled to recruit even though the lead researcher used to work as hairstylist. I subsequently considered whether a relatively low level of compensation may have contributed to limited participant responses; however, I was mindful of the ethical considerations associated with increasing payment levels (Grant & Sugarman, 2004). I pondered whether I was the only one out of my doctoral peers who was struggling to recruit and, upon speaking with them about this, discovered that they also experienced difficulties recruiting participants.

Once I had recruited some participants, I was able to speak with them about my difficulties recruiting. They mostly informed me that hairstylists are very busy and work long and unsociable hours and this was likely impacting my ability to recruit. After spending some time reflecting on this, it became clear that I had set myself an overly ambitious timeframe in which I had hoped to recruit and interview participants. I reflected that this unrealistic timeframe likely resulted from my MSc research project where I was able to recruit the necessary number of participants in a matter of days. However, this research was quantitative and required much less of a time

commitment from participants. Upon reflection, it became clear to me that my failure to recruit participants within this timeframe was leading to my feelings of exasperation. Once I had accepted that this timeframe was unrealistic I was able to let go of my frustrations and, shortly after this, managed to recruit the remaining participants.

Another stage in which I utilised reflexive thinking was data collection. I was aware of the challenges that can come with the dual role of researcher and Trainee Counselling Psychologist and, resultingly, noticed that in my earlier interviews I was tentative to stray too far from the interview schedule in case I was engaging in a way that aligned more with my role as a Trainee Counselling Psychologist, as opposed to a researcher (McLeod, 2011). I spoke with my research supervisor and doctoral peers about this to explore how others were managing this. These conversations, alongside engaging with literature on the topic, provided me with a deeper understanding of the interplay between science and practice. This learning enabled me to feel more confident in deviating from the interview schedule whilst ensuring I remained in the role of researcher. I did this by maintaining clear boundaries with participants and reminding them, and myself, that I was acting solely as a researcher during the interviews (Etherington, 2004). In reflecting on my concerns about the challenges that can come with this dual role, I was able to reduce my anxiety and explore the associated opportunities of this. I noticed that my CoP skills aided in fostering trusting relationships with my participants, encouraging them to feel comfortable, whilst staying attuned to issues of power dynamics, confidentiality and participant welfare. This allowed me to stray from the interview schedule whilst

ensuring that the research was ethically sound, meaningful and insightful (Fassinger & Morrow, 2013).

A further phase of the research process in which I relied heavily on reflexive thinking was the analysis. While in this phase, I was cognisant of my responsibility to the participants and the importance of accurately representing their experiences. Consequently, I worried that I may be having too great an impact on the findings or that my interpretations might fail to accurately reflect the participants' subjective experiences. To feel more confident in making interpretations I reflected on my anxieties and reminded myself that this is a key part of IPA. I kept a reflexive analytic log and wrote brief notes alongside theme development to document how interpretations were being formed and to identify where my assumptions may have influenced analysis. These notes were revisited iteratively to support reflexive bracketing and ensure interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts (Shaw, 2010; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). This reflexive process formed a consistent trail throughout the analysis, allowing my interpretative decisions to be tracked and revisited over time rather than being based on isolated reflections. In reflecting in this way, I was able to acknowledge that the effect I have on the research process is an intrinsic aspect of IPA. Therefore, I sought to ensure that my interpretations were contemplated, tentative, and considerate in the hopes that they would accurately reflect the participants' subjective experiences.

This reflexive process continued throughout later stages of analysis, particularly when I struggled with condensing the quotes for the analysis write up. My hesitation stemmed from the concern that, in choosing certain quotes over others, I

was taking something away from the participants' accounts. My subsequent reflection involved asking myself why I had selected certain quotes over others. In doing so, I aimed to better recognise my thought processes, motives, and potential biases. To facilitate this, I documented my decision-making process in a reflexive log and revisited these notes during theme development to consider whether my selections remained grounded in the participants' accounts. While I personally experienced some quotes as more interesting than others, I remained conscious of the importance of accurately portraying participants' descriptions, preserving their voices, and staying guided by both the research process and the data itself.

Although I found conducting the analysis challenging, I was taken aback by the extent to which enjoyed it. In particular, I found the phase in which I was looking for connections across cases and compiling and combining themes to be stimulating and thought provoking. I found that being able to engage with the data in this way provided me with the opportunity to exercise creativity in a way that I had not experienced with my quantitative MSc research project.

Chapter 3: Analysis

3.1 Introduction

Following an analysis of the interviews, four GETs were created: GET 1: Fulfilment in the Hairstylist-Client Relationship, GET 2: The Emotional Weight of Social Support in Hairstyling, GET 3: Managing Social Support in Hairstyling, and GET 4: Professional Recognition and Institutional Support in Hairstyling. There were ten subthemes within these four GETs with three each in GETs one and two, and two each in GETs three and four. Illustrative quotes from all six participants were included across GETs, but not within each GET. GETs one and two include quotes from all six, while GETs three and four incorporate quotes from five out of six participants. This is due to some quotes illustrating themes more effectively than others rather than divergence among participants as all engaged with each of the four GETs in their accounts. This chapter will present the themes in a table and narrative analysis to maintain the conditions of coherence and transparency (Smith et al., 2009). Table 2 illustrates each GET and subtheme.

Table 2: *Group Experiential Themes and Subthemes*

GET 1: Fulfilment in the Hairstylist-Client Relationship **Subtheme 1a:** Joy and Gratification in Caregiving **Subtheme 1b:** Growing Through Relational Exchange **Subtheme 1c:** Mutual Support in the Hairstylist-Client Relationship
GET 2: The Emotional Weight of Social Support in Hairstyling **Subtheme 2a:** Overwhelm and Emotional Fatigue **Subtheme 2b:** Multitasking in Emotional Labour **Subtheme 2c:** Unintended Consequences
GET 3: Managing Social Support in Hairstyling **Subtheme 3a:** Boundary Negotiation and Conversation Management **Subtheme 3b:** Coping Strategies and Self-care
GET 4: Professional Recognition and Institutional Support in Hairstyling **Subtheme 4a:** Professional Recognition **Subtheme 4b:** Institutional Support

3.2 Group Experiential Theme 1: Fulfilment in the Hairstylist-Client Relationship

3.2.1 Introduction

The first GET, Fulfilment in the Hairstylist-Client Relationship, describes the sense of meaning and fulfilment participants derive from providing social support to

their clients. Across accounts, participants spoke of how the salon is more than just a space designated to hair but, rather, a site of relationality, intimacy, and emotional exchange. Indeed, the data indicates that the act of providing social support is not just an extension of participants' roles, but often constitutes a source of joy, growth and mutual support. Subtheme 1a, Joy and Gratification in Caregiving, depicts participants' experiences of enjoyment and connection derived from interactions with clients. Subtheme 1b, Growing Through Relational Exchange, illustrates how engaging with clients expands participants' perspectives, highlighting that providing social support can foster personal development. Subtheme 1c, Mutual Support in the Hairstylist-Client Relationship, demonstrates how support can be reciprocal, with participants also receiving support from their clients. United, these subthemes illustrate that participants providing social support to their clients is not just a by-product of hairstyling, but an aspect of the work that makes their lives feel more meaningful.

3.2.2 Subtheme 1a: Joy and Gratification in Caregiving

A notable feature across accounts was the joy participants experienced in connecting with their clients. Georgie captured this sentiment when she expressed:

> *"I like going to work and…I like listening to people…having a conversation with someone and being able to interact in that way, you feel like you've got some kind of connection with them…" (Georgie, 12-14).*

Here, Georgie situates listening as a valued part of her job, rather than an obligation or duty, where the act of conversing with clients becomes a source of connection and

a cause of enjoyment at work. This demonstrates how the social support aspect of hairstyling is not just tolerated by participants but recognised as key to job satisfaction.

For Tammy, this enjoyment extends further into inspiration:

> *“I love being able to connect with people in a chair…I've met some incredible people…it’s so inspiring and I wouldn't get to do that if that social care and connection part of the job wasn't there.” (Tammy, 184-188).*

For her, social support generates inspiration and admiration for her clients. Indeed, she further mused:

> *“I think people that I've been able to offer support to are the ones I've built a really good bond with and, actually, they've become like I guess really important people that I am inspired by...” (Tammy, 224-226).*

The ‘incredible’ and ‘important’ people she meets are more than just clients; they become significant people in her life. This suggests that Tammy experiences her role not solely as a service provider but as a recipient of emotional enrichment.

What is more, several participants observed that long-term relationships with clients can be particularly rewarding, with Benjamina commenting that such bonds are often unexpected:

> *“I don't think I really would would necessarily realise how much…connection and bond you would get with some of the people that you do their hair for. I think I've got…a deep and close relationship with with people that I do hair for, which is quite unexpected…I class*

> *people as, they almost become sort of friends…you feel like you know them quite well because you know all the details." (Benjamina, 25-31).*

Benjamina suggests that initially transactional relationships between herself and clients may develop into something akin to friendships which are charactised by disclosures that develop a sense of familiarity. This speaks to a blurring of boundaries which may hint at complications in the hairstylist-client relationship, yet Benjamina positions this as a positive, and unexpected, aspect of her work.

Likewise, Hope illustrates the intimacy that can be derived from hairstylist-client relationships owing to the regularity and length of hairstyling appointments:

> *"Whereas hairdressing, you've got this long-term relationship, we see our clients more often than we see our family…I see some of my clients every four weeks for three hours at a stretch, and so it is a much deeper relationship, a much longer lasting relationship and much more solid relationship." (Hope, 35-39).*

Hope's comparison of hairstylist-client relationships to family relationships highlights the intensity of such relationships, indicating that the salon may become a site where meaningful connections are established in an almost inevitable way through repeated encounters.

Moreover, several participants spoke of experiencing not just joy, but personal gratification, as a result of providing social support to their clients:

> *"I really enjoy talking to people…I enjoy that element of it. If someone's asking sort of advice and help, I feel it kind of rewards,*

> *rewards me personally if I've felt like I've come away from it thinking 'hopefully that person feels a bit better'." (Benjamina, 42-45).*

Here, Benjamina demonstrates how providing social support to her clients creates feelings of validation and enhanced self-worth. This sense of fulfilment may speak to a deeper psychological need for validation and belonging, suggesting that the hairstylist-client relationship may contribute to her sense of self-worth and professional identity.

Hope makes this sentiment even more explicit when she says:

> *"I feel [providing social support] probably gives me value as a person…I'm probably actually going 'no, but they need me, I can fix them'. I'm very much a fixer." (Hope, 372-374).*

In this extract, Hope suggests that her sense of identity is connected to providing social support. Her description of being 'needed' implies value, integrating the provision of social support into her self-concept. This indicates that she may experience not only joy in connecting and providing social support to her clients, but personal fulfilment. Indeed, the emphasis on feeling valued throughout participant accounts may reveal how caregiving acts reinforce participants' self-image as capable, empathetic, and worthwhile. This suggests that the meaning derived from these connections may extend beyond professional task satisfaction, touching on a personal desire to feel significant in the lives of others.

3.2.3 Subtheme 1b: Growing Through Relational Exchange

Along with joy and gratification, participants recounted that learning and personal growth takes place through client interactions. Benjamina, for example, outlined how such interactions can broaden her worldview:

> *"It gives you a really sort of wider view on the world and…it makes you feel…maybe my life isn't as bad or…everyone's got other things going on…I feel like I've gained, you know, knowledge and personal skills, and I've gained a lot from it…I think it it sort of makes you feel quite, you know, humble and good about yourself." (Benjamina, 153-159).*

Benjamina's musings highlight that client interactions can offer different perspectives from her own and even aid in reframing her own struggles, evoking humility and appreciation. This suggests that the provision of social support is not one directional from herself to clients but, rather, an educative experience that enables personal growth.

Indeed, Georgie outlines the dichotomous nature of such interactions:

> *"Some days can be quite heavy if it's quite a heavy subject, but actually…hearing someone else's point of view on a similar situation is…I think it's insightful." (Georgie, 205-210).*

Though Georgie recognises the emotional strain of providing social support to her clients, she acknowledges that the same interactions can also act as openings for insight. Such dualism showcases how social support provision may support her through expanding her awareness.

Jas builds upon this notion by identifying clients as educators:

> *"…it does all kind of come around and help you in a way. So, it's almost like your clients are coming and educating you a bit really." (Jas, 280-282).*

Jas's repositioning of the hairstylist-client dynamic outlines the reciprocity of relational exchange. As opposed to orienting clients exclusively as recipients of social support, she portrays them as contributors to her own personal development.

Hope reflects this sentiment:

> *"For every time I've felt drained or provided knowledge and support to somebody and an opinion, there's been someone else who's given that to me, I've learnt something from them." (Hope, 439-441).*

The levelling of 'drained' with 'given' communicates a flow of give and take which suggests that even the tiring properties of social support provision may be balanced by moments of growth and insight. Findings from these accounts propose that participants do not leave client interactions unchanged. Instead, they are shaped and expanded through the relational encounters that they help facilitate. This process of giving and receiving insight could reinforce feelings of competence and emotional maturity, linking growth through relationships to a broader sense of self-development and worth.

3.2.4 Subtheme 1c: Mutual Support in the Hairstylist-Client Relationship

The theme of reciprocity becomes further prominent in accounts of mutual support in the hairstylist-client relationship. Hope described this as:

> *"…sometimes it's a two-way thing. Sometimes they're therapising me. I can use them as sounding boards as certain clients that I'll discuss stuff with to get their opinion." (Hope, 117-119).*

Hope's account illustrates the inversion of roles, where clients become the ones providing social support. This acknowledges that support does not flow in one direction.

Indeed, Jas described like patterns:

> *"…when you know people, when you're doing their hair a long time…sometimes I talk about what's going on with mine, where I've got issues at home." (Jas, 56-58).*

In her account, Jas suggests that the longevity of the hairstylist-client relationship cultivates enough trust for the hairstylist to disclose their own difficulties, indicating that intimacy formed over time can lead to more relational symmetry in the hairstylist-client relationship, positioning the salon as a site where emotional openness may be shared.

Tammy corroborates this:

> *"I think people that I've been able to offer support to are the ones I've built a really good bond…and then it kind of becomes in some ways a bit of a two-way therapy thing, which is actually really lovely." (Tammy, 224-228).*

Her use of the word 'lovely' articulates affection and appreciation for such exchanges. This suggests that mutual support is not merely accepted but valued as a nourishing aspect of the hairstylist-client relationship.

Christine expands on this by presenting her relationship with certain clients as a trusted support system:

> *"…I use my clients for support also. I think, because we've got such a massive backlog of regular clients and people who have known me since I was like 15 years old and have seen me grow up… I have shared stuff about my breakups, I've shared like things that have happened in my life…ailments that I've had and like, not not into huge detail because I think there is a level of it being unprofessional…but I definitely lean on my colleagues and clients for support as well." (Christine, 408-417).*

Christine's perspective showcases both the extent of her disclosures to clients but also an awareness of her professional boundaries. By not going 'into huge detail' she speaks to a bargaining between vulnerability and professionalism when utilising clients as a source of social support.

Georgie offered a similar point of view when she provided an example of a client offering her comfort:

> *"I had a friend who was particularly poorly and then I had a client whose…family member was in the same situation and actually it was…a heavy conversation to have. It was quite nice because I thought it kind of gave you like a little bit of relief as to like what's going on. Almost like a little bit of hope…" (Georgie, 211-215).*

Despite their shared pain, Georgie derived 'relief' and 'hope' from her client's similar experience. This reveals that mutual social support may not always be light or uplifting but may emerge through shared stresses, shifting sorrow into solidarity.

Similarly, Benjamina depicted a notable role reversal:

> *"On the flip side, you know, it is a two way…sometimes it's me and…I'm the one saying, 'oh my God, I'm freaking out…'. You know, I've got engaged and I'm planning a wedding and then one of the girls I had in had not long been married so I was picking her brain of everything. So, it was a…role reversal and that was the first time in a long time I thought 'well, actually I'm the one having been counselled for a change because I've got loads of help, information, advice'…and that doesn't normally happen..." (Benjamina, 124-131).*

Benjamina highlights that it is not the norm for her to be the socially supported as opposed to the social supporter. Indeed, the novelty of this experience indicates that participants may predominantly be the providers of social support and, when this is flipped, it proves to be notable and significant, highlighting a potential imbalance that may define the hairstylist-client relationship. Yet, even within this imbalance, participants seem to locate a sense of mutual recognition that fulfils their own relational needs.

3.2.5 Conclusion

This GET, Fulfilment in the Hairstylist-Client Relationship, illustrates that providing social support to clients is often experienced as a deeply meaningful aspect of participants' work. Across accounts, the act of caring for clients appears to bring joy and gratification, yet it may also extend beyond immediate satisfaction to shape participants' sense of self and professional identity. Through relational exchange, participants described being inspired, educated, and emotionally

sustained by their clients, revealing the reciprocal nature of connection within the salon. These mutual interactions appear to blur the line between professional duty and personal fulfilment, creating relationships that often feel friendship-like in depth and significance. Collectively, these findings suggest that the fulfilment participants experience is not only emotional but existential, grounded in the ways care and connection affirm who they are and what they contribute.

3.3 Group Experiential Theme 2: The Emotional Weight of Social Support in Hairstyling

3.3.1 Introduction

While the first GET outlined the fulfilment participants derive from providing social support to their clients, the second GET, The Emotional Weight of Social Support in Hairstyling, captures the costs of such engagement. Subtheme 2a, Overwhelm and Emotional Fatigue, presents the emotional toll participants experience as a result of providing social support to their clients. Subtheme 2b, Multitasking in Emotional Labour, illustrates the challenges they face in simultaneously performing technical and relational work. Subtheme 2c, Unintended Consequences, depicts how the consequences of such relational work may extend into participants' personal lives, impacting relationships and behaviours. Together, these subthemes demonstrate that, for the hairstylists in this study, providing social support to clients can be a particularly demanding aspect of their role.

3.3.2 Subtheme 2a: Overwhelm and Emotional Fatigue

Across accounts, participants described experiencing emotional overwhelm in their roles, highlighting that they are routinely cast as untrained supporters in deeply sensitive topics. Benjamina portrays the emotional complexity intrinsic in the hairstylist-client relationship, positioning the salon as a space that holds both light-hearted and immensely serious exchanges:

> *"…how serious it can be and…fun as well…we laugh and cry together with our hair clients." (Benjamina, 352-353).*

Here, Benjamina depicts the vast emotional range inherent in hairstyling. She describes that instances of joy coexist with shared vulnerability, leading to a relational environment that is both enriching and draining. This duality of emotional highs and lows suggests that Benjamina may be constantly navigating affective complexity whilst hinting at an innate unpredictability present in the hairstylist-client relationship, underscoring how she must manage both pleasure and pain within the same interaction.

Georgie highlights this when she stresses the intensity and surprising nature of such interactions:

> *"Sadly, you have to have the really, really like bad conversations like whether that's like someone's life experience of like sort of things going on…that you've never been exposed to and and you just think 'oh my goodness'." (Georgie, 373-376).*

Georgie's testimony portrays the disorientating impact of being exposed to clients' trauma. Her account articulates a strong emotional response, indicating that the

provision of social support may not solely be a cognitive undertaking, but an overwhelming and embodied experience, revealing the emotional vulnerability inherent in her role.

Likewise, Benjamina recognises that prolonged proximity to clients' emotional difficulties can be emotionally exhausting:

> *"It can be quite draining sometimes if you've had back-to-back people that are going through quite hard times and/or are feeling quite negative. And then it's…challenging and quite hard." (Benjamina, 48-50).*

In this extract, Benjamina highlights the cumulative effect of supporting distressed clients consecutively. Her description of the work as 'draining' suggests that the emotional demands of remaining attentive and supportive throughout these interactions can contribute to emotional fatigue.

Similarly, Hope chronicles the cumulative effect of sustained emotional involvement, resulting in burnout:

> *"I've burnt out twice…when it just felt like every single client had needed to draw my energy out of me to support their own mental health. And so, it was exhausting…I had had enough." (Hope, 221-231).*

Hope emphasises the persistent and cumulative properties of social support provision. In doing so, she hints at an absence of support structures available to replenish her emotional reserves, accenting the personal cost of sustained support provision.

Christine offers further insight into emotional overwhelm, notably for younger or less experienced hairstylists:

> *"There's definitely been times when I've been in the depths of a conversation with someone that's getting really, really deep and…really pouring out every single detail about this gory situation in their life, and I do sort of think like 'oh my God, like, I actually don't know what to say to you. I have never experienced this in my life. I feel too young to know some of this stuff. I do not know you', and you almost want to be able to tell someone to be like…'reel it in a little bit, this is a lot'." (Christine, 165-171).*

Here, Christine narrates a tension between empathy and self-preservation. She reports being confronted with exhaustive, and emotion-laden disclosures that surpass her capacity to respond, demonstrating the inherent assumption that she, as a hairstylist, will act as a confidante and social support provider irrespective of age, experience or preparation.

She recalls a particularly memorable experience with a first-time client who began divulging a multitude of intense stressors to Christine, further revealing the cognitive and emotional management required to navigate client interactions:

> *"I was thinking one, 'I don't…I actually don't have time for this', without being horrible two, 'so not qualified for this', three, I I actually…I felt really sorry for her, but I was thinking 'I don't even know you, I've never met you before, you've never been to the salon before and…it was just, it was quite tragic. And I just I think it was more that I didn't know what to do, I didn't know how to respond… that was one of the*

> *most…memorable times when I was like, I'd really rather just like not talk about this right now…" (Christine, 228-235).*

This account emphasises the improvisational nature of such exchanges where participants may be required to respond empathetically without any formal training or assistance. This reflection draws attention to the emotional strain experienced through being unexpectedly positioned in a supportive capacity, particularly for those still developing their professional confidence.

Tammy highlights an additional instance in which social support provision can feel especially taxing; when exchanges with clients feel forced or constrained, with inauthentic interactions leaving her feeling more depleted:

> *"…I think you get a small part of clients, which I wouldn't go as far as saying that I dislike at all, but that I would never speak to in any other capacity or probably have anything in common with outside of them being in my chair. And so, it could be some of their opinions, it could be sometimes kind of politically charged conversations that might come up…and it can sometimes almost feel somewhat pre-scripted because it's kind of a bit like 'I know what you're going to say. I know what I want to say, but I know you don't want to hear that and that I can't say that. So, I'm going to say the thing that just kind of keeps this conversation going on the same track that it always does'. And I think that's what drains me because it feels less authentic, and so I feel more wiped from those type of clients." (Tammy, 62-76).*

Christine provides another example of certain client exchanges that can cumulate in overwhelm and emotional fatigue, when client disclosures trigger personal experiences:

> *"…as all workplaces, you know, we've had…people who have lost relatives, people who have been through divorces, breakups and people who have had like injuries, illnesses and…things that have happened to us as staff and I guess it can be quite triggering for people if you bring that up …it's really hard to be able to police that. I don't actually know how you would. You can't put out a message and say, 'by the way, please don't come in and talk about this, that and the other'." (Christine, 350-359).*

Christine's account positions herself as both a witness and silent sufferer, underscoring the potential that providing social support to clients can evoke personal distress. This also indicates a lack of structural guidance and boundaries, leaving her to navigate heightened emotional contexts unaided.

Similarly, Benjamina offers an account of the emotional residue of her clients' suffering, describing a lingering psychological weight that stays with her beyond the salon:

> *"Obviously it can be quite tough… If someone has got quite a serious issue or has something quite sad has happened…you can really take that on…it can be quite hard and quite difficult to, yeah, to sort of process and deal with that and then you know, then go home and be happy and cheery knowing that, you know, someone that you've done hair on is actually having a really hard time… You don't just leave it,*

> *they don't just walk out the door and then you think 'ohh that's, that's done,'. So, it can have quite a heavy, heavy impact and… weighs on your mind..." (Benjamina, 177-190).*

Benjamina's account of the enduring psychological weight associated with social support provision highlights the pervasive nature of emotional labour in hairstyling, demonstrating that relational work extends beyond the salon into participants' ongoing emotional experience.

3.3.3 Subtheme 2b: Multitasking in Emotional Labour

Across accounts, participants spoke of the demands of the simultaneous cognitive, physical and emotional labour required in their roles which creates a complex model of multitasking, distinguishing it from many other helping professions. An example of this comes from Jas who considers her early career and how her attention was largely consumed with technical skill mastery, leading to limitations in her ability to engage with the more interpersonal aspects of the role:

> *"…when I was first qualified, I felt I just didn't want to talk to people to be honest, I just thought, you know, you're coming here for the haircut, not to chat." (Jas, 29-30).*

In her account, Jas hints at the developmental pathway of herself as a hairstylist in which her primary focus was marked by technical competence and that the provision of social support, whilst present, was initially experienced as secondary, or even onerous. Her contemplation highlights a gradual incorporation of relational skill into her professional identity, an adjustment that required both learning and adaptation.

This indicates that professional competence may not only be measured in technical skill but also in one's capacity to integrate emotional labour.

Jas noted that such dual demands can be burdensome and described the friction between providing social support to clients and sustaining technical accuracy:

> *"…they're asking this stuff and you're like 'I'm trying to concentrate', it's quite hard to like, you know, when you first start cause you're thinking 'oh God, oh God, you know, have I done it too short', so sometimes your mind's elsewhere a little bit, so sometimes when you first start it is harder to concentrate on what people's problems are..." (Jas, 394-398).*

Jas's account describes how cognitive load may interact with emotional engagement leading to difficulties maintaining skilled precision under the pressure of relational engagement. Such multitasking demands continuous attention shifts and emotion regulation, suggesting unique challenges experienced in hairstyling compared to other caregiving professions where relational labour may be more regulated and contained.

Tammy provides a unique perspective on this having recently qualified as a psychotherapist whilst working as a hairstylist. She emphasises the unique difficulties involved in providing social support while performing hair services:

> *"I think I've noticed since the therapy training that I actually find…the therapy work easier than being a hairstylist because it's very much…you're in a room, the time is very boundaried but, if you're getting locked into a conversation with a client and you're doing a full*

> *head of highlights, well, the last section you do is the top. So, you can't just be like 'oh, OK, sorry, we're going to, you know, we're running to an end'. It's…you still have to get that colour done." (Tammy, 176-183).*

Here, Tammy describes the difficulties she experiences whilst multitasking in hairstyling where she is required to maintain relational engagement whilst performing time sensitive technical work. She maintains that, unlike formal therapy, hairstyling lacks time boundaries due to the non-negotiable nature of the technical responsibility that coexists with the provision of social support. Her reflection suggests that the lack of temporal and relational boundaries in hairstyling intensifies emotional strain, demonstrating how the structural factors of the job shape the experience of social support provision.

Tammy further highlights the strain that time pressure, resulting from social support provision, can place on her. She reflects on how she absorbs this to maintain service quality for clients:

> *"…because people don't necessarily understand the pressure that comes with the timing aspect of it, what will happen…is that your service won't suffer, my stress levels will. So, you'll still get exactly what you're in for, I'll just run behind… Like I'll try and make time up where I can; I actually don't book lunch breaks…So, it's it's something that…managing it, I think because we're very good at masking, as we should be, you know what I mean? Like you guys don't need to know that like everyone's stressed out because we're running behind, but it just means that we take on that extra level of it." (Tammy, 129-141).*

Here, Tammy suggests an invisible burden of social support provision where her stresses remain hidden to preserve client experience. This indicates that she copes with such stresses internally rather than through institutional support systems.

Benjamina further comments on the demands of this dual role:

> *"You give advice, but you're also trying to concentrate and focus on your job, what you're doing…you know that this is such an underrated profession, hairdressing in terms of the formulas and the process, there's so much that actually goes into it that you do have to really concentrate and sometimes, you know, if I'm mixing or if I'm doing a certain point, I'll say 'I'm sorry, I can't…I literally can't talk for a few seconds because, you know, if I get this wrong, you're going to end up with with black hair'. So… it's quite tiring because there's a lot of mental work going on." (Benjamina, 208-215).*

In her account, Benjamina also highlights the cognitive and emotional complexity of hairstyling, and the impact social support provision can have on the technical aspects of hairstyling and, consequently, her stress levels. She reinforces that hairstyling requires constant mental and affective juggling, positioning the role as cognitively demanding in ways that are often unacknowledged.

3.3.4 Subtheme 2c: Unintended Consequences

Some participants explained that prolonged exposure to the emotional demands of hairstyling extended into their personal lives, leading to unintended relational and

behavioural consequences. For example, Tammy spoke about the impact such work has on her romantic life:

> *"I think the skills that it teaches you actually can make it incredibly difficult to date as well because you just become very in tune with being able to connect to anybody because you're in the chair with somebody for an hour or three hours, and so actually I think you can, not necessarily lead people on, but I think people can feel more of a connection than you do because you can so easily go into that mode… So, I think it's great, but it can definitely throw some kind of roadblocks up in other areas of life as well." (Tammy, 208-214).*

In this extract, Tammy draws attention to the transfer of professional relational skills into personal contexts by describing her ability to connect with others quickly and intensely. While this may be beneficial within the salon, she suggests that it can blur interpersonal boundaries in her personal life as it may be interpreted by others as genuine personal or romantic interest. Therefore, the communicative and affective skills she has developed in her role may create misunderstandings in relationships, where interactions that feel routine or professionally enacted may be experienced as emotionally significant by others. This illustrates how the emotional labour of hairstyling can extend beyond the salon and complicate intimate relationships by making it difficult to separate professional modes of connection from personal ones.

Hope describes similar difficulties occurring as a result of the relational aspects of her job:

> *"I don't date…partly because to finish work and then go on a date would feel like I'm just seeing a new client for the first time. Again, it's*

> *the same fucking conversations…and I would run a date the same way if I meet new people. If I have to meet new people in a meeting environment or a a function or something, the hairdressing head goes on." (Hope, 289-295).*

Hope's account demonstrates that the performative emotional labour present in her role carries over into her personal life. Certainly, she explains how her emotional resources can become depleted, leaving her unable to engage authentically with others outside of the salon. This indicates that the performative nature of social support provision may shape participants' capacity for personal connection. She described relying on alcohol as a response to emotional depletion:

> *"It felt just draining…I drink quite a lot, and I think part of that's definitely a response to overwhelm. Come home, shut the brain off, stop thinking about everything that everyone's just piled on top of you…it's probably led to a dependency on alcohol…so I'll drink at home alone because then I'm not required to perform and sometimes providing all the therapy is a form of performance." (Hope, 265-300).*

Tammy adds context to this by situating the use of substances as a coping mechanism utilised within broader salon culture:

> *"…hairdressers definitely had a reputation for being like absolute party animals and I think, because you can go into hairdressing mode and be socially wiped by the end of the day; I'm convinced there's some form of link between the alcohol intake and substance use of hairdressers in being able to keep that bar set once you're out of the*

> *salon because you're so drained, and that was definitely something I did for a long, long, long, long, long, long time." (Tammy, 233-238).*

In this extract, Tammy described substance use as both an occupationally normalised and personally adaptive response to the emotional exhaustion inherent in the social dimensions of hairstyling. Her account suggests that the sustained emotional labour she experiences can give rise to coping strategies that, while initially functional, may become maladaptive over time.

Tammy further notes that reliance on these strategies may intensify during particularly busy periods:

> *"You often have to have the same conversation, especially around Christmas, about 20 times in one day…And so, I think because the performance level of stylists…meant that we would need help. And so, you know, it would be that if we were finishing work, getting ready in the salon, then going straight out, of course, I was going to need a line of coke before I went anywhere…you would then just lean into drugs and alcohol to almost kind of like be your support through that because you've kind of got nothing left to keep yourself holding up for like your friends after work or a Christmas party or whatever." (Tammy, 329-355).*

Here, Tammy emphasises the intensity of the relational and performative demands of the role and how such emotional labour can extend beyond the salon into behavioural consequences, reflecting the hidden costs of sustained relational labour and the blurred boundaries between professional and personal self-care.

3.3.5 Conclusion

The second GET, The Emotional Weight of Social Support in Hairstyling, revealed that, for participants, the provision of social support in hairstyling can be experienced as profoundly taxing. Participant accounts revealed how emotional labour is woven into the fabric of hairstyling, requiring them to balance technical precision with deep relational engagement. Repeated exposure to client disclosures can create a cumulative strain that extends beyond the salon, blurring the boundary between professional empathy and personal wellbeing. The intertwining of technical and emotional work leaves little space for recovery and, in the absence of structural or institutional support, participants may rely on personal, and at times maladaptive, coping mechanisms to manage their emotional exhaustion. Taken together, these findings highlight that participants experience hairstyling as an occupation where care and creativity coexist with vulnerability and fatigue.

3.4 Group Experiential Theme 3: Managing Social Support in Hairstyling

3.4.1 Introduction

While GET 2 highlighted the emotional exhaustion that can result from providing social support, the third GET, Managing Social Support in Hairstyling, speaks to the nuanced procedures participants utilise to manage and sustain the provision of social support within their work. This includes actively managing and regulating relational demands, with coping strategies emerging as a direct response to the impacts described in GET 2. Subtheme 3a, Boundary Negotiation and

Conversation Management, describes how participants negotiate conversational and emotional boundaries to protect themselves against overextension. Subtheme 3b, Coping Strategies and Self-care, highlights the range of coping mechanisms participants employ both during and after salon hours to regulate the demands of their role.

3.4.2 Subtheme 3a: Boundary Negotiation and Conversation Management

A recurrent theme across participant accounts was the need to establish boundaries within hairstylist-client contacts. Such boundaries appear to develop as a result of experience, age, and professional identity rather than formal learning. Certainly, Tammy spoke of her own professional maturation, correlating increased boundaries with age and length of service:

> *“I think I am much more mindful of monitoring how much I offer now than I used to…because I'm that bit older and I've been in the salon for a long time, I think my boundaries have become better… if somebody, for example, comes in a little bit late and I'm still trying to squeeze them in and then something big comes up my response is usually…I'll just try and be as kind as possible, but I won't necessarily open up for a massive conversation.” (Tammy, 150-162).*

Here, Tammy positions herself as an active participant, rather than a passive recipient, of clients’ needs. Such intentionality proposes that she constructs boundaries to moderate the tone of the encounter and protect herself, balancing kindness with personal preservation.

Georgie also spoke about the self-taught and experiential nature of such skills:

> *“I think…learning where your kind of boundaries lie is a good thing, but I think that comes with time and with kind of going through the process and maybe having a few probably quite awkward conversations.” (Georgie, 334-337).*

She hints at a lack of formal training in social support provision within hairstyling, suggesting that boundaries are not externally enforced but, rather, fostered through trial, error and challenging experiences. This self-directed development of boundaries highlights an absence of formal organisational guidance. Indeed, the fact that Georgie must construct her own rules for engagement suggests a workplace culture that implicitly relies on individual emotional labour rather than institutional support structures. In this way, boundary setting may become both a personal coping mechanism and a professional expectation.

Georgie further described that, with time, her professional identity has become more intentional and controlled in client interactions:

> *“After sort of like working in the industry for a long time and…as I've got older, I've learned what I want to give people, rather than something like them drawing out of you.” (Georgie, 35-37).*

Her reference to clients ‘drawing out of you’ suggests a previously passive experience of emotional labour, in which responses were shaped by clients’ demands. In contrast, ‘what I want to give people’ indicates a shift towards greater agency, where emotional expression is consciously managed and selectively offered.

Similarly, conversation management was reported by participants as a strategy that is learnt along the way to help regulate the demands of the hairstylist-client exchange. Chrstine, for example, contrasted her initial bewilderment at client disclosures to a developed capacity to guide interactions:

> *"…when I first became a stylist…I actually experienced a lot more conversations where I felt like I had to lend like emotional support or like some sort of level of counselling or therapy. I think the way that that's kind of evolved for me…I'm kind of able to lead those conversations a little bit better that suit me…I'm able to kind of…walk around that conversation and steer it somewhere else and change it. Whereas before I would kind of just have my jaw on the floor… I think experiencing that has impacted me professionally by giving me the tools to like move around it..." (Christine, 246-257).*

Christine speaks to an initial unreadiness to provide social support to her clients. She notes that, over time, she has developed the skills to allow her to balance client needs with her own capacity to offer support.

Likewise, Hope explained how she regularly deflects invasive questions through conversational redirection:

> *"But some clients…they'll want to interrogate you…And so I will, in those circumstances, I will see if I can push the subject away from me onto, I don't know, 'what did you watch on telly last night?'. And so I will, rather than being battered with questions… I will change the subject. I will guide it…" (Hope, 334-343).*

Hope positions certain client interactions as invasive, however, her response is not confrontational, but rather she uses conversational strategies to create socially acceptable ways of gaining control over such exchanges.

Georgie also depicted herself as directing conversations:

> *"…unless I can really feel like someone needs to just like really unload, I kind of feel like I will just very gently kind of just start to steer it. I wouldn't completely change the conversation matter, but I would try and sort of spin it a touch so it kind of just veers it maybe into a slightly more positive light if it's a negative conversation." (Georgie, 313-317).*

Here, Georgie demonstrates how she utilises conversation management to strike a balance between protecting her own wellbeing and ensuring clients still feel heard and supported. This balancing act may reflect an alignment between self-imposed boundaries and the broader expectation of service-oriented professionalism. Thus, while these boundaries are self-learned, they may also be shaped by the tacit demand to remain approachable and emotionally available.

Occasionally, however, participants described that their capability to enforce boundaries was hampered by fatigue or the nature of certain clients. Indeed, Hope recounted an instance in which she felt unable to utilise her usual conversational skills and, instead, asked a client for a silent appointment:

> *"I have once asked a client for a quiet appointment and it was on a day when every single client had drained everything out of me, and if it had been a different client that had come in, I would have taken a*

> *deep breath, and probably another coffee, and gone 'I can do this', but because of the client that was in…she doesn't require the energy demand off of me. So, she walked in, I said 'I'm really sorry…but I think I can trust you to ask this, do you mind if I have a silent appointment? I'm absolutely exhausted'. And she was like 'that's fine'. And so, I've done it once, I would do it again with a client I was comfortable with." (Hope, 398-405).*

This seemingly unusual act of self-advocacy highlights the precariousness of self-care in Hope's role. Here, silence acts as a form of boundary setting, however it can only be requested with certain clients who are deemed safe enough. This selective application indicates that participants may be required to constantly navigate between self-care and the unwritten expectation to be emotionally accessible. Consequently, participants' autonomy over self-protection may be described as partial and situational.

3.4.3 Subtheme 3b: Coping Strategies and Self-care

Whilst boundary negotiation and conversation management signify in the moment approaches to regulating emotional demands, coping and self-care strategies transcend beyond immediate client interactions. Participants depicted several tactics, both in and out of the salon, that enable them to rest, recover, and maintain their ability to provide social support to their clients. Indeed, small rituals in the salon emerged as anchors for emotional recalibration. For example, Benjamina spoke of the importance of breaks during the day to aid in managing the load:

> *“Just taking that break and walking away and going to make a cup of tea and just having a, you know, having a breather.” (Benjamina, 280-282).*

Such fleeting moments of withdrawal provide Benjamina with a momentary reprieve from the persistent requirements of client interactions. By carving out personal pauses, she creates her own adaptive informal mechanisms of emotional regulation.

Similarly, Georgie describes how she processes client interactions in brief intervals throughout the working day:

> *“When you finish like a service and you sort of take a moment to, I don’t know, whether it’s like making a coffee or if you go to the toilet or something you kind of take a moment to sort of like…have a quick think about it and then I mean, sadly, unless you're sort of on your lunch you’re almost on to…your like next client…So, it's like a…it's like a notepad so you then turn over and you're like, ‘OK, cool clean slate’.” (Georgie, 267-275).*

In this extract, Georgie illustrates the fragmented nature of emotional processing within the fast-paced structure of salon work. The ‘notepad’ metaphor conveys a form of compartmentalisation, where each client interaction is mentally recorded and then ‘turned over’ to allow her to reset before the next appointment. This suggests a need to rapidly regulate and compartmentalise in order to manage successive client interactions.

Christine also speaks of ways in which she manages survival throughout the day. She describes that, in the absence of formal or institutional support structures, peer support among colleagues becomes key:

> *"I think the best way to kind of manage it it's…probably my…team really… you kind of can go into the back and someone might be having their lunch, someone might…be waiting for their client and you kind of just go 'ohh my God, so this is intense. Is anyone hearing what's going on here?, and they'll be like 'oh my God, yeah I heard that'. And almost just having that little bit of like camaraderie in the staff room… But it's kind of just knowing that they're there or also like hearing other people's stuff and being and like 'gosh, that was heavy, I could hear what you were saying', and just like lending support to each other in the back…I would say the best way to manage it throughout the day is by sharing." (Christine, 286-311).*

Likewise, Tammy spoke of the longstanding salon culture of shared humour and resilience:

> *"I think the old joke kind of in the salon was, you know, 'you have a breakdown in the staff room and then you're all smiles and you go on the on the salon floor', and that is to a degree still the same." (Tammy, 320-322).*

Here, Tammy describes the juxtaposition of a private breakdown and a public performance. This dynamic illustrates emotional resilience as a shared occupational norm, where vulnerability is acknowledged privately but masked publicly to maintain professional composure. This captures the emotional duality of hairstyling and aids

in explaining how, for many participants, coping extends into non-working hours, where the absence of the salon environment allows space to decompress and recharge.

Certainly, Hope illustrated the importance of silence and solitude post-work:

> *"…when I am in the salon, I can keep up a steady stream of energy but the second the last client leaves the radio goes off, that's the first thing. Silence at home…I sit in silence…I live alone, I have no background noise on, and I need the peace." (Hope, 285-289).*

Hope's account accentuates the intensity of her work, where social and sensory demands accrue throughout the day. The intentional process of switching off from both noise and company reveals a technique of balancing and restoring herself. Here, silence is an active form of self-care, one which reclaims space following the continuous strains of attending to clients.

Other participants used physical activity and self-care practices as a way to manage the emotional demands of their work. For instance, Benjamina explained:

> *"I try to make sure that I exercise…I do yoga and things like that just to try and just generally just to keep good mental health and wellbeing." (Benjamina, 230-232).*

She describes physical exercise as an intentional strategy for maintaining mental wellbeing. Her emphasis on 'keeping' good mental health suggests that these practices function both preventatively and restoratively, helping her to manage the cumulative emotional strain associated with her work.

For Georgie, unwinding takes place within the liminal space of her commute, which acts as a buffer between work and home life:

> *“My commute is like quite long, but like that's my like decompression time. At the start I can just sit there and just watch people and be like, cool, that's it, that's me done for the day.” (Georgie, 433-435).*

In people watching during her decompression time, Georgie communicates a shift from intimate one-on-one encounters to a more anonymous witnessing of others. Her commute acts as both a physical and psychological shift, aiding in shedding the weight of the day before returning to her personal space.

Additionally, some participants spoke about relational strategies being a fundamental aspect of self-care post work, with Georgie noting the value of having trusted confidantes to offload with:

> *“I'm very grateful that I have a housemate on bad days that I can come home and go ‘blah blah blah’, and I get it all out and then it's done and…I have a friend that I can call on the way home and I have a quick like 20 minutes…” (Georgie, 419-422).*

Here, Georgie reveals how she depends on informal opportunities to unload as a means of drawing a line under emotionally laden client interactions. Indeed, talking to others broadens the relational aspect of care into participants’ own support networks, depicting how the burden of social support provision may be balanced through receiving support elsewhere.

Likewise, Benjamina, illustrated the supportive role her partner plays in managing the impact of social support provision:

> *“I normally would speak to my partner and often share with him. I might not go into detail, but I'll say ‘…I was doing someone's hair and they're going through this and it just made me, you know,’. …I'm lucky that I've got someone I can share that with…talking about things and voicing it with other people I think helps because also…you second guess like ‘have I said the right thing? You know, I've advised this person, I've sort of said this, but maybe I shouldn't have’.” (Benjamina, 200-207).*

In her account, Benjamina suggests that recuperating is not solely about unloading but also about seeking reassurance. This indicates that her supportive role often carries uncertainty, with friends and family acting as sounding boards to help reduce the burden of self-doubt. This reliance on personal networks further underscores the lack of formal mechanisms for emotional management within the salon.

Alongside friends and family, some participants looked for validation from broader communities. Benjamina recounted the use of online communities in easing feelings of seclusion:

> *“I do hear from a lot of…groups and forums and through friends where people post they ‘have just had enough today’…‘it's gone too far’, and having a community…I'll read those things and think ‘OK, yeah…this is impacting other people as well’, so that makes you also feel a little bit like…it's a worldwide thing, it's not just affecting or impacting, you know, your day.” (Benjamina, 238-244).*

In reading online posts, Benjamina is reminded that her experiences are shared within the industry. For her, even passive engagement offers comfort that the

emotional intensity of hairstyling is not experienced as a personal shortcoming, but a collective experience.

To conclude, Hope provided a notable description of seeking formal therapy as a much-needed measure following burnout:

> *“I burnt out because when my mental health is bad…then clients were coming in…going ‘ohh but my life’, and I was like ‘right, OK…I'll lock that door for a second. Talk me through it. Let's do this’,…and eventually I just went ‘I have to talk to a therapist. I can't keep holding all of this’. I just need to be able to…go ‘for fuck’s sake, you hold it for a while, you look after it, it's not mine’.” (Hope, 241-246).*

Hope conveys the heavy burden of accumulated social support provision and the acute necessity for formal support. Unlike the more routine coping mechanisms described in other accounts, Hope highlights how, in the absence of institutional support, professional therapy became vital for survival in her role.

3.4.4 Conclusion

The third GET, Managing Social Support in Hairstyling, reveals how participants navigate the emotional demands of their work through an interwoven process of boundary setting, conversation management, and self-care. Rather than separate strategies, these practices form a continuous cycle of regulation that enables participants to remain emotionally available while protecting their own wellbeing. Such self-taught emotional management highlights both participants’

agency and an absence of institutional support, reflecting a workplace culture that depends on individual resilience to sustain care within the salon environment.

3.5 Group Experiential Theme 4: Professional Recognition and Institutional Support in Hairstyling

3.5.1 Introduction

Building on participants' strategies for managing the emotional demands of hairstyling, the fourth GET, Professional Recognition and Institutional Support in Hairstyling, considers how these experiences relate to professional recognition and institutional support by revealing a tension between the role participants play in providing social support and a lack of systemic provision to sustain this. Subtheme 4a, Professional Recognition, depicts participants' desires for hairstyling to be recognised as a profession that demands both significant technical and emotional skill, whilst navigating stereotypes that reduce hairstyling to a purely aesthetic profession. Subtheme 4b, Institutional Support, articulates participants' unmet needs for training and formal assistance that may support their wellbeing and confidence.

3.5.2 Subtheme 4a: Professional Recognition

For some participants, the desire for professional recognition transcends technical expertise to include the emotional and intellectual complexity of hairstyling. Indeed, Hope directly contests the narrow public perception of hairstyling as entirely aesthetic:

> *“Across the industry, I think if there's going to be the the recognition that being a hairdresser is more than just cutting hair is a good step.” (Hope, 425-426).*

Hope’s account points to a yearning for a collective acknowledgement of the contributions of hairstylists. She goes on to express exasperation at reductive framings and her attempts to redefine hairstylists’ professional identities to incorporate the emotional labour they perform, as well as the technical skills. This suggests that participants’ sense of professional identity may be linked to public and institutional validation and, when their emotional labour is unacknowledged, they may experience tension between their perceived expertise and societal perceptions of their role.

Moreover, Benjamina noted the need for recognition is bound with the responsibility that hairstylists undertake when safeguarding clients:

> *“Sometimes you can…hear quite serious things…it's the awareness is around making sure people aren't in danger. So yeah, I suppose it's just about bringing the awareness to light of the impact we can make as hairdressers.” (Benjamina, 340-343).*

In Benjamina describing the notion of ‘bringing the awareness to light’ she suggests a societal discrepancy in which hairstylists may play a critical role in their clients’ lives; however, this operates largely in the shadows of institutional systems and recognition. This lack of formal recognition may position hairstylists in a socially undervalued space where the complexity of their work is minimised.

Similarly, Hope suggests that the technical aspects of hairstyling can often be overlooked:

> *"You're holding all of that information and…at the same time as your head is going 'right so should I use a 731 or a 713, shall I use a 6 foil or a 9 foil, where shall I place this foil'? It's a lot more complex than I think most people realise when they look at hairdressers and they go 'yeah, you're just a hairdresser'." (Hope, 57-61).*

Here, Hope highlights the unrecognised multi-faceted expertise of hairstylists and resists the trivialised understanding of being 'just a hairdresser' by explaining her work as a delicate balancing act between technical decision-making and emotional attunement. Together, these extracts unveil a collective longing for recognition, not only for hairstyling as skilled technical work, but as one with profound human responsibilities embedded within it.

3.5.3 Subtheme 4b: Institutional Support

Across accounts, participants described an absence of training to prepare them for the provision of social support. Certainly, Jas described that training structures are entirely technical:

> *"They talk about more the hair…they don't [provide any training on providing social support to clients]…I suppose the global chain* just sort of figure that you'd figure it out; but there could be more or or at least an option for people to sort of say 'I need help with when someone says this, I don't know what to say'." (Jas, 333-340).*

Jas's desire for 'at least an option' indicates modest expectations, not mandatory reform, but rather a recognition that some hairstylists may benefit from structured guidance regarding client exchanges. She later reiterates the potential benefits of such training, again positioning it as a resource for those who may experience uncertainty in emotionally charged encounters. She implies a desire not to overstate or prescribe universally but that optional, accessible training could increase professional confidence.

Tammy concurs, suggesting the importance of not only communicative skills training, but also training on self-awareness and self-limitation:

> *"…some form of communications training I think would be good, and not even necessarily on how to communicate, but to recognise when you feel like you can't anymore and how to manage that." (Tammy, 384-387).*

Tammy's shift in focus from outward skills to inward recognition indicates an important point; hairstyling requires self-regulation alongside client care. This highlights how professional identity is not just about skill but also about managing vulnerability and, without institutional support, participants are left to navigate these demands alone, shaping a role that relies heavily on individual resilience and informal learning. Indeed, her account suggests a need for training that equips hairstylists to protect their own wellbeing.

Benjamina agreed, describing that:

> *"There was no mention…of, you know, mental health impact on the actual hairdresser in terms of what you're dealing with with your*

> *clients…but I think having something in the training in hairdressing touch upon that side of things, I think it would be really useful. And there's definitely room for it." (Benjamina, 303-310).*

Benjamina's insistence that there is 'definitely room for it' positions this gap as an oversight within an adaptable curriculum. Her account highlights a disconnection whereby she routinely absorbs emotional disclosures, yet training leaves her underprepared for such work. This proposes an implicit devaluation and cultural minimisation of the legitimacy of the emotional aspect of hairstylists' roles. Such gaps suggest that social positioning within the salon may reinforce the invisibility of emotional labour, implying that psychosocial contributions are considered secondary to technical skills and less deserving of formal recognition.

Beyond training, participants envisioned other structural forms of support to aid in addressing the emotional demands of their role. Christine noted:

> *"…there definitely is room for some kind of after support or just like tools on how to deal with having to listen to that while you're at work because…the client isn't always aware and, you know, why would they know if you're trying for a baby and it's not working or if you just lost a baby or you've just had a baby and you're not doing so well or lots of different things, they're not to know that unless you share it... But you also can't expect them to not talk about their life. So, there's this really kind of grey area…but I I I do think that there's room for, I don't know what it would be or what it would look like, but there's definitely room for aftercare." (Christine, 382-397).*

Here, Christine humanises hairstylists as people who have vulnerabilities which may overlap with client disclosures. The ‘grey area’ she describes is that clients’ sharing cannot be restricted, yet hairstylists remain unprotected from it. This highlights the asymmetry of the hairstylist-client relationship and the toll this can have on hairstylists.

While Chrstine appears unsure as to what institutional support might look like, Hope suggests that industry-specific mental health support could provide recognition and relief:

> *“…maybe we need as an industry, we need better mental health support provision… If there was a more focused like specific to our our challenges, like maybe we just need, you know, discounted therapy but yeah some kind of acknowledgement that what we do and, not in a joking way, that what we do is actually quite crucial but…it comes at a price and therefore there might be the provision of support for us.” (Hope, 442-449).*

Hope’s suggestion of discounted therapy reflects an awareness of economic barriers alongside a need for tailored mental health support provision. Certainly, her phrasing that the work hairstylists do ‘comes at a price’ highlights the experiential cost of social support provision without systemic relief. Her hesitation whilst making this suggestion and insistence that recognition is ‘not in a joking way’ further suggests that she believes that hairstylists’ emotional labour is often trivialised, minimising its impact and, perhaps, offering insight as to why such support structures do not already exist. This may point to a broader systemic issue in which the absence of

structural acknowledgement minimises participants' professional status and influences how they internalise and manage the emotional demands of their role.

3.5.4 Conclusion

The fourth GET, Professional Recognition and Institutional Support in Hairstyling, highlights a paradox in which participants provide frontline social support, while their own professional needs remain unmet. Their desire for recognition extends beyond technical skill to the cognitive and emotional aspects of their work, showing how their professional identity may be tied to public and institutional validation. Similarly, gaps in training and support position hairstylists in a marginalised professional space where their emotional labour is often minimised, leading to participants feeling underprepared and overburdened in their roles. Participants' calls for training, post-interaction support, and psychological support reflect a desire for structural recognition that could legitimise the full scope of their work and promote a more sustainable practice.

3.6 Conclusion

This analysis explored how participants experience providing social support to their clients. Across accounts, participants situated the hairstylist-client relationship as deeply meaningful, with the act of listening, advising, and caring frequently defined as a source of joy, personal growth, and mutual support. However, along with such fulfilment, participants also revealed the considerable emotional toll of this work, with the provision of social support regularly experienced as tiring,

overwhelming, and extending beyond the salon and into their personal lives. In response to such challenges, participants outlined establishing an array of informal strategies to manage and maintain their capacity to provide support to their clients, including boundary negotiation, conversation management, and personal coping mechanisms. Such strategies are primarily self-taught and unsupported at an institutional level, spotlighting an absence of systemic recognition for the emotional and relational aspects of hairstyling. Consistent with this, participants articulated a desire for professional validation and formal support structures. This suggests that participants' wellbeing and sustainability in their role is contingent on personal resilience rather than institutional support.

Chapter 4: Discussion

4.1 Group Experiential Theme 1: Fulfilment in the Hairstylist-Client Relationship

4.1.1 Subtheme 1a: Joy and Gratification in Caregiving

This subtheme captured the enjoyment and fulfilment participants derive from emotionally connecting with their clients through the provision of social support. Across narratives, providing social support was described as a valued aspect of both professional and personal identity. Certainly, participants spoke about the pleasure they derive from conversation, listening, and emotional exchange, suggesting that these moments of human connection may be significant to their experience of job satisfaction.

These findings echo existing research that demonstrates that hairstylists derive fulfilment and satisfaction from the relational aspects of their work (Sharma & Black, 2001; Hill & Bradley, 2010; Sheane, 2012). Indeed, Page et al. (2022) found that participants in their study reported deep enjoyment in supporting their clients, yet the current findings extend this by revealing that such gratification is experienced as both emotional and existential. For example, the participants in this study expressed that supporting their clients provided them not only with satisfaction, but with a sense of being needed and feeling valued. Such sentiments suggest a fulfilment of belonging and self-worth.

In a similar manner, participants described that, through frequent and close contact with their clients, they develop bonds that resemble personal relationships, suggesting that the salon operates as a relational and emotional space, rather than a purely transactional one. Such descriptions of long-term and friendship-like relationships with clients aligns with research that highlights the social intimacy of hairstyling interactions (Barnes, 2001; Sharma & Black, 2001; Garzaniti et al., 2011). Therefore, it could be reasoned that the gratification that emerges from such connections might aid in explaining why hairstylists, despite engaging in emotionally demanding work, consistently report high job satisfaction (Page et al., 2022).

Undoubtedly, such positive framing of emotional labour in hairstyling sits in tension with traditional literature on emotional labour which typically associates emotional labour with decreased job satisfaction (Hochschild, 1983). Whilst, participants did acknowledge moments of emotional drain, these appeared to be balanced by gratification. Such a paradox could indicate that, within the salon context, emotional engagement may not be experienced solely as an externally imposed demand but as an authentic and rewarding form of emotional expression.

However, it is pertinent to consider that, as all participants in this study were women, their accounts of joy and gratification may not exist independently from broader patriarchal expectations surrounding traditional gender roles and emotional labour. Feminist scholars have long argued that women are socially positioned as natural caregivers, often expected to provide warmth, attentiveness, empathy, and emotional containment within both domestic and professional settings (Hochschild, 1983; Erickson, 2005). Consequently, the fulfilment participants described may

represent an internalised social expectation that women should derive satisfaction from caring for others. In this sense, the pleasure associated with supporting clients may operate both as a genuine source of meaning, and a culturally reinforced form of gendered labour.

4.1.2 Subtheme 1b: Growing Through Relational Exchange

Participants also reported that providing social support to their clients contributed to their own learning and growth. Benjamina, for instance, reflected on how her clients' experiences made her feel humble and good about herself, while Jas and Hope described how clients educated them about the world beyond their immediate experiences. This process of gaining understanding through clients' narratives proposes that hairstylists are not just passive listeners, but active participants in reciprocal exchanges that foster personal development for them.

Similarly, participant accounts revealed a dynamic of give and take in which providing social support to clients appeared to foster self-reflection and self-awareness. This reflects the potentially enriching nature of emotional exchanges in the salon and illustrates the concept of relational reflexivity, where engagement with others' experiences prompts personal growth and re-evaluation of one's own circumstances (Donati & Archer, 2015). In this way, participants' emotional labour may become transformative, contributing to a sense of perspective and empathy.

Such findings represent a novel contribution to the literature as, while previous studies have acknowledged that hairstyling involves emotional engagement

and relational care (Hill & Bradley, 2010; Sheane, 2012), few have documented how this work can promote hairstylists' own development. This identification of potential growth through relational exchange broadens the conceptualisation of emotional labour in hairstyling, suggesting that the relational environment of the salon may serve as a unique context for hairstylists' own learning and emotional expansion.

4.1.3 Subtheme 1c: Mutual Support in the Hairstylist-Client Relationship

The final subtheme indicated that emotional support within the hairstylist-client relationship may not be a solely one-way process. Participants' accounts suggested relational reciprocity whereby hairstylists may not only be providers of, but also recipients of, social support in the salon, while simultaneously navigating the boundaries between self-disclosure and professionalism. This offers a novel perspective on emotional labour in hairstyling by indicating that participants' well-being may be enhanced through social support provision. Rather than confirming traditional theories that emphasise strain and depletion (Hochschild, 1983), this suggests that mutual care and relational equality may sustain job satisfaction, even amid emotional demands.

Likewise, participants described relationships with their clients that felt genuine and balanced, challenging assumptions of emotional asymmetry in hairstyling. What is more, their narratives illustrated how such mutual support and relational fulfilment can transform emotional labour into a source of connection and growth. This is consistent with literature that maintains that reciprocal emotional exchange can reduce dissonance and burnout (Delroisse et al., 2023) and may aid

in understanding the paradox of high job satisfaction among hairstylists despite the emotional demands of their work (Page et al., 2022).

4.1.4 Conclusion

Collectively, the findings in this GET contribute novel insights by challenging the assumption that emotional labour in hairstyling is innately depleting. Instead, participants depicted a dynamic of growth, reciprocity, and personal meaning that enables emotional labour to be experienced as emotionally fulfilling. However, whilst this GET highlights such fulfilment, the positive experiences described also appear to exist alongside more depleting ones, as GET two goes on to demonstrate.

4.2 Group Experiential Theme 2: The Emotional Weight of Social Support in Hairstyling

4.2.1 Subtheme 2a: Overwhelm and Emotional Fatigue

Participants revealed that providing social support to their clients regularly left them feeling drained and fatigued, with sustained emotional engagement described as exhausting, and repeated exposure to distressing disclosures as depleting of emotional resources. This may reflect a cumulative process whereby the constant provision of emotional support becomes unsustainable over time and contributes to experiences of burnout. Such accounts align with established definitions of burnout as a state of psychological and physical exhaustion arising from prolonged work stress which can manifest in emotional depletion (Jeung et al., 2018; Page et al.,

2024). This sense of depletion aligns with existing research on emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983; Jeung et al., 2018) and burnout among hairstylists (Sharma & Black, 2001; Cohen, 2010; Page et al., 2022).

What is more, participants reported that certain aspects of social support provision led to further overwhelm and emotional fatigue. In particular, interactions perceived as forced, constrained, or inauthentic appeared to intensify feelings of depletion. This is consonant with research that reports that managing outward expressions of empathy and composure, while internally regulating discomfort or distress, heightens emotional strain, creating dissonance between felt and displayed emotions (Hochschild, 1983; Gérain & Zech, 2019). This emotional dissonance is linked to fatigue and, in some cases, symptoms consistent with compassion fatigue, including withdrawal and reduced capacity for empathy (Cocker & Joss, 2016); experiences also reported by participants.

A further aspect of social support provision that participants highlighted as being particularly overwhelming was when it was experienced by younger or more junior hairstylists. This aligns with existing research which proposes that younger workers that lack life experience, work experience or maturity, are more likely to experience burnout and compassion fatigue (Cocker & Joss, 2016; Jeung et al., 2018). More specifically to salon work, McCann and Myers (2023) reported that younger hairstylists felt particularly overwhelmed at work due to feeling as though they were not sufficiently prepared through their studies for the role of ‘incidental counsellor’. Correspondingly, participants in this study reported that the more

negative impacts of performing emotional labour, such as overwhelm and emotional fatigue, often improve with age and experience.

Another instance in which participants described feeling overwhelmed by social support provision is when client disclosures evoke distressing personal memories or experiences. Whilst previous literature has discussed burnout and compassion fatigue among hairstylists (Sharma & Black, 2001; Cohen, 2010; Page et al., 2022), the idea that client disclosures can negatively impact hairstylists because of their own personal experiences is less well-documented. Therefore, this study extends the literature by highlighting how emotional labour in hairstyling can provoke specific, individually triggered distress.

What is more, participants' accounts may highlight not only emotional fatigue, but also anxiety surrounding competence and the possibility of causing harm. Participants frequently described experiences of uncertainty, reassurance-seeking, and 'second-guessing' their responses following client disclosures, particularly when confronted with material they perceived as traumatic, complex, or beyond their expertise. This may suggest that aspects of the emotional fatigue described by participants were intertwined with anxieties regarding perceived competence, ethical responsibility, and the fear of responding inadequately. Similar tensions have been identified within broader caregiving and emotional labour literature (Huynh et al., 2008; Stansfeld et al., 2019), although this has received limited attention within informal support professions such as hairstyling.

4.2.2 Subtheme 2b: Multitasking in Emotional Labour

Alongside such experiences, the second subtheme highlighted the challenges participants face regarding the simultaneous management of technical, social, and emotional tasks during appointments with them describing having to ‘juggle everything at once’. Indeed, participants illustrated a complex dynamic of role layering where they act as artists, technicians, and confidants within a single appointment. This multi-focus reflects Hochschild’s (1983) concept of dual role strain in emotional labour, where employees are required to balance instrumental work demands with affective performance.

These findings also reinforce existing research recognising salon work as multilayered emotional labour (Gimlin, 1996; Page et al., 2022). However, this study adds nuance by demonstrating how participants actively navigate these overlapping demands concurrently. Certainly, participants described engaging in real time emotional monitoring while assessing clients’ tone and expression to decide when to listen, comfort, or divert conversation. Participants reported that such attentiveness required substantial cognitive and emotional energy, supporting Jeung et al.’s (2018) characterisation of hairstyling as ‘high burnout work’.

Moreover, participants emphasised the cognitive complexity inherent in hairstyling itself. They described challenges such as sustaining technical precision within the time-sensitive demands of their work, whilst simultaneously maintaining relational engagement with clients. This dual focus requires, what participants described as, constant mental and emotional juggling, positioning hairstyling as a

cognitively demanding profession, something that is often unacknowledged by those outside of it. This aligns with Wolkowitz's (2002) assertion that body work professions demand both technical skill and relational labour which often goes unrecognised.

The technical and emotional multitasking described by participants may also reflect broader sociocultural expectations of feminised service work. Indeed, approximately 83% of UK hairstylists identify as female (PolicyBee, 2022), and all the participants in this study identified as female, and their accounts of the complexities involved in hairstyling being underestimated resonate with Hochschild's (1983) gendered analysis of emotional labour, which highlights how women's caregiving tendencies are often culturally valorised yet structurally undervalued.

4.2.3 Subtheme 2c: Unintended Consequences

This subtheme emphasised that the demands of social support provision, outlined in subthemes 2a and 2b, often extend beyond the salon and into hairstylists' personal lives, leading to relational and behavioural consequences. For example, participants reported that their 'salon mode' of emotional availability became maladaptive outside of work, with some participants describing how the ability to rapidly connect with others, a professional strength, can complicate personal relationships, with intimate interactions sometimes feeling overly performative. This suggests that, when this blurred role transfers into hairstylists' personal lives, emotional resources can become depleted, making relationships feel transactional or

performative. Such an impact highlights a novel finding, expanding the discourse on the costs of emotional labour in hairstyling.

The costs of emotional labour, for some participants, also included behavioural consequences such as the use of alcohol and drugs. Indeed, some described using substances to manage the performative demands of salon work, highlighting the concept of emotional residue, where work spills over into personal life (Guy et al., 2014). This concept has rarely been discussed within the context of hair salons; however, it aligns with broader research linking occupational stress and emotional burden with an increased risk of substance use. For example, service workers who engage in surface acting have been shown to consume more alcohol than those who do not, as a means of emotional release (Grandey et al., 2019). Similarly, informal caregivers providing continuous emotional support under stressful conditions are at a higher risk of new or elevated substance use (Varma et al., 2024).

Workplace culture may further mediate such behaviours, with participants' accounts suggesting that collective occupational norms can shape coping responses to the social and emotional demands of hairstyling. This points to the potential role of substance use as a coping mechanism in this context, although this area remains notably understudied in the literature, with limited empirical evidence to further illuminate these dynamics.

4.2.5 Conclusion

Taken together, these findings align with existing research indicating that emotional labour in hairstyling can lead to adverse outcomes such as burnout, overwhelm, and emotional fatigue. They also extend the literature on multitasking in hairstyling by both corroborating and deepening current understandings. In addition, they offer novel insights into the relational and behavioural implications of social support provision in hairstyling. Relatedly, this subtheme introduced the notion that an absence of formal support structures may exacerbate participants' vulnerability to such negative effects. In turn, this scarcity of support appears to prompt participants to develop their own strategies for managing the demands of social support provision; a point explored further in GET three.

4.3 Group Experiential Theme 3: Managing Social Support in Hairstyling

4.3.1 Subtheme 3a: Boundary Negotiation and Conversation Management

Participants' accounts in this subtheme stressed the necessity of managing interpersonal boundaries in hairstyling. Collectively, participants demonstrated that they continually calibrate their emotional availability with clients and, in the absence of formal organisational structures to regulate emotional demands, rely heavily on personal boundary management skills to maintain the delicate balance between client expectations and their own emotional wellbeing. This is consistent with boundary regulation theory which suggests that individuals continuously adjust the permeability of their personal boundaries in response to relational demands

(Petronio, 2002). Such adaptive strategies also mirror findings in other relational professions where boundary management is essential for sustainability, yet rarely institutionally supported (McCann & Myers, 2023).

Conversation steering emerged as an important strategy participants utilised to negotiate boundaries and manage client interactions, illustrating a subtle form of emotional gatekeeping. Such practices are consistent with emotional labour theory which demonstrates how employees manage the emotional content of their interactions in order to maintain relational harmony (Hochschild, 1983). Moreover, Hope's redirection of intrusive questions from clients reflects what Grandey (2000) described as a protective manoeuvre aimed at maintaining both professional functioning and personal wellbeing. Such findings represent a novel contribution to the field, highlighting that hairstylists in this study actively engage with strategic boundary management, and not just reactive coping.

Tammy added further context to this when she reflected on how boundary setting strengthened with age and professional experience. Her decision 'not to open up for a massive conversation' when feeling emotionally depleted seems to represent a deliberate narrowing of boundaries to protect her finite emotional resources. Similarly, Georgie's observation that boundary setting skills emerged through 'awkward conversations' supports research which highlights that boundary work is often developed informally in hairstyling due to a lack of formal emotional training (Page et al., 2022).

However, while boundary negotiation and conversation management strategies appeared to aid participants in managing the provision of social support to their clients, the limits of such approaches also became apparent through participants' narratives. For example, when emotionally exhausted, participants recalled finding it difficult to skilfully uphold the boundaries they usually managed, suggesting that emotional capacity can at times become exceeded and normative expectations of sociability may give way to self-preservation. The need for trust in requesting adjustments such as reduced conversation further reflects the relational sensitivity involved in setting limits within hairstyling, where the perceived risks associated with appearing rude or unprofessional may be high. This selective enforcement of boundaries provides a novel extension of the existing literature, emphasising the situational calibration of self-protection in hairstyling.

4.3.2 Subtheme 3b: Coping Strategies and Self-care

In addition to boundary negotiation and conversation management, participants described a multitude of coping strategies they utilised to manage the provision of social support to their clients. It could be reasoned that this is to be expected as emotional labour theory suggests that sustained interpersonal engagement, particularly when it involves exposure to others' distress, requires the ongoing regulation of internal and external states (Hochschild, 1983; Grandey, 2000). Therefore, the coping mechanisms described by participants may be understood as attempts to replenish emotional resources which have become depleted by such demands. They may also reflect a form of self-protection often required to sustain long-term engagement in a role that demands recurring emotional

presence without institutional structures to buffer its psychological costs (Page et al., 2022).

Within the salon, micro-breaks, such as stepping away briefly or making a cup of tea, served as informal coping mechanisms offering momentary relief for participants. Such acts echo findings by Shortt (2013) who observed that micro-breaks among hairstylists function as vital strategies for managing the intensity of continuous conversational and emotional engagement. Support from colleagues was also reported to be an effective coping strategy for participants in this study. This may reflect the concept of the buffering effect of social support in emotionally demanding work, a notion widely supported in organisational psychology (Halbesleben, 2006). Such exchanges appear to help participants process emotionally heavy content, validate their responses, and reset before engaging with the next client. Participants also reported relying on psychological compartmentalisation in the salon. This captures the need to create emotional separation between consecutive client encounters. Certainly, compartmentalisation has been identified as a protective cognitive strategy that prevents emotional spillover and mitigates burnout in other service-based roles (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1991).

Outside of the salon, participants described utilising coping strategies such as exercising, talking with friends, and spending time alone. These practices align with recovery theory which proposes that individuals restore depleted emotional and cognitive resources through detachment, relaxation, and meaningful leisure activities (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). Participants also reported using online communities as a

form of emotional validation and reassurance. Such engagement is a novel finding, reflecting more contemporary strategies of mitigating the difficulties associated with emotional labour. Similarly, the recognition of formal therapy as a necessary intervention when informal coping strategies prove insufficient provides a novel insight into the limits of self-managed emotional regulation in hairstyling.

4.3.3 Conclusion

Together, the findings in this GET deepen existing understandings and introduce new insights into how participants manage the emotional demands of their work through an interwoven set of self-developed strategies involving boundary setting, conversation management, and self-care. These self-taught practices underscore participants' agency while simultaneously pointing to a lack of institutional support. GET 4 extends this by illustrating participants' desire for greater professional recognition and institutional support.

4.4 Group Experiential Theme 4: Professional Recognition and Institutional Support in Hairstyling

4.4.1 Subtheme 4a: Professional Recognition

Participants' accounts in this subtheme revealed a desire for hairstyling to be recognised as a profession defined not only by technical expertise, but also by cognitive, interpersonal and emotional complexity. This finding largely mirrors the long-standing notion that salon work is often socially undervalued, stereotyped as

low-skilled, and associated with low status (Cohen, 2010; Eayrs, 1993; Hanson, 2019; Sharma & Black, 2001; Page et al., 2024). Participants articulated that this undervaluation delegitimises and undermines the emotional labour they perform, making it both invisible and unsupported. Certainly, participants suggested that they do not merely desire general appreciation, but rather structural recognition that accurately reflects the intellectual and emotional labour embedded within their work. This may reflect an attempt to resist dominant cultural narratives that trivialise hairstyling by positioning the role as extending beyond technical work.

Related resistance has been noted in previous research whereby hairstylists have asserted that their knowledge of both clients' emotions and bodies resembles caring professions, such as nursing (Gimlin, 1996). Similarly, participants in this study highlighted the need for greater professional recognition given the role they play, including engagement in risk assessments more typically associated with healthcare professionals. This echoes Page et al.'s (2022) observation that hairstylists often help clients through situations such as domestic violence or suicidal ideation, with the present study illuminating the emotional weight such responsibility may carry. Certainly, participants conveyed that their role sometimes placed them in ethically challenging positions, but without the status, training, or institutional backing that such work ordinarily entails.

This tension appears to generate a degree of occupational identity dissonance in which participants are societally positioned as 'just' aesthetic workers, yet their lived experience is one of enacting complex emotional care. In participant accounts it appears as though a large part of their sense of professional identity is

contingent on public and institutional validation and, when their emotional labour goes unrecognised, contributes toward feelings of exhaustion and frustration. These findings are consistent with Page et al. (2024) who argued that a lack of recognition for the work hairstylists do contributes towards an effort-compensation imbalance and burnout. Indeed, participants in the current study conveyed that, without recognition, emotional labour can become harder to sustain and justify. This may contribute to a sense of being taken for granted which may, in turn, heighten vulnerability to burnout (Gérain & Zech, 2019). Therefore, without professional recognition, this aspect of the role can become personally costly.

4.4.2 Subtheme 4b: Institutional Support

Participants consistently reported an absence of institutional structures to support the emotional demands of hairstyling, with them purportedly feeling underprepared, unprotected, and professionally vulnerable as a result. This finding replicates decades of research documenting insufficient training for hairstylists, particularly regarding client interactions and boundary management (Wiesenfeld & Weis, 1979; McLaren et al., 2010; Page et al., 2022; Sattler & Deane, 2016). Participants emphasised that their hopes for such training are modest, reporting that they would like to be offered ‘at least an option’ to attend training that is not solely technical, rather than sweeping reforms to the current systems. This may suggest that participants are not asking the industry to redefine their role, but to acknowledge its realities, and support them accordingly.

Indeed, participants' descriptions of only being trained in the more practical elements of hairstyling implies the prioritising of technical, over emotional, skill. While previous literature has recognised this and emphasised the need for communication skills training (Milne & Mullin, 1987; Anderson et al., 2010), the present study proposed that, alongside this, participants also desire training aimed at boundary regulation and self-protection. Notably, participants emphasised that hairstylists are not only managing clients' emotions, but also a complex internal landscape, without guidance. Such narratives suggest a shift from client-oriented training to training that supports hairstylists' wellbeing. This aligns with research which emphasises the importance of stress management and emotion regulation skills for emotional labour providers (Gérain & Zech, 2019; Wolkowitz, 2002). Additionally, participants hinted at coveting training and support relating to boundary violations and ethical responsibility, issues which have been previously documented in research on informal caregiving within the salon (Cohen, 2010).

Moreover, participants also expressed a desire for post-interaction support. Their accounts captured the potential asymmetry present in the hairstylist-client relationship whereby clients may discuss sensitive or triggering topics, often unaware of hairstylists' related vulnerabilities. This asymmetry may mirror dynamics seen in formal mental health and caring professions. However, in such professions, organisational practices such as supervision, reflective practice, and debriefing may be present and may aid in preventing burnout and compassion fatigue. Yet, in hairstyling, such structures appear to be absent. This highlights a potential paradox in which hairstylists often perform meaningful caregiving work but do so without the institutional protections afforded to more formal care workers.

A contextual factor underpinning the emotional labour described by participants relates to the socio-economic realities of salon work, particularly the financial dependence on client satisfaction, retention, and gratuities. Within this structure, emotional labour may not always be freely chosen but, instead, compelled by the economic necessity of maintaining client relationships. This dynamic may render boundary-setting professionally and financially risky, as resisting or limiting emotionally demanding disclosures could potentially impact client satisfaction and, ultimately, income. This financial precarity may limit hairstylists' ability to regulate emotionally demanding interactions, as concerns about client retention or tips may restrict their capacity to set boundaries and thereby increase emotional fatigue and reduce perceived autonomy. In this sense, burnout may be shaped not only by the emotional content of client interactions, but also by the economic conditions in which those interactions occur. This suggests that individual coping strategies alone may not be sufficient as they do not address the structural drivers of emotional labour. Instead, more sustainable prevention of burnout may require broader organisational and industry-level change, such as reducing reliance on tip-based income structures, to lessen the financial pressure to maintain constant emotional availability.

Participants' suggestions of discounted therapy or industry-specific mental health provision speak to a recognition that emotional labour in hairstyling has psychological consequences. It also aligns with existing research that reports that hairstylists desire mental health support (Cowen et al.,1979; Page et al, 2022). Participants' acknowledgements that their emotional labour comes at a cost reveals how they may internalise the emotional costs of their role whilst recognising the inequity of providing care without receiving care in return. This proposes that

institutional support may not merely be desirable but essential for professional sustainability, with an absence of training, post-interaction support, and mental health support placing participants in ethically complex and emotionally precarious positions.

4.4.3 Conclusion

Collectively, the findings in this GET align with, and extend, existing understandings of how hairstylists' experiences are shaped by limited access to institutional support. Participants' calls for training, post-interaction support, and psychological support signal a desire for greater structural recognition that could legitimise the full scope of their work and foster more sustainable practice. Notably, elements of these matters have been documented in the literature since the 1970s and continue to be reported in the present research, indicating the persistence of such issues and the limited progress made to address them.

4.5 Strengths and Limitations

The present study contributes novel insights into a population whose emotional and relational work is widely acknowledged anecdotally, yet empirically understudied. While some research has explored the role of hairstylists as social supporters, comparatively little is known about how they experience and interpret this role. Certainly, even less has been explored from a CoP perspective where attention to subjective meaning, relational processes, and lived experience is central.

Therefore, by focusing explicitly on hairstylists' personal experiencing of social support provision, this study addresses a significant gap in the field.

Participants echoed this sentiment, with many describing a lack of recognition for the support they offer their clients and how rarely they are invited to articulate the personal impact their work has on them. Indeed, several participants expressed that taking part in this research was validating and meaningful, describing the interviews as an opportunity to reflect and feel heard. In this way, the research process itself aligned with the humanistic values underpinning CoP which emphasise an appreciation of individuals' subjective worlds and a collaborative process of mutual discovery (Douglas et al., 2016). Moreover, by highlighting factors that shape hairstylists' wellbeing and sense of support within their roles, these findings offer practical implications for the profession, including areas for improved training and support. As such, the findings may be relevant not only for CoPs but for educators, employers, and other mental health professionals.

Despite its strengths, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. Firstly, the sample displayed limited diversity, with all participants identifying as women and working in hair salons in London, England. Whilst the decision to recruit from a single city supported the homogeneity required for IPA, the gender composition was not intentional but a result of recruitment responses. Although women make up a significant majority of hairstylists in the UK (PolicyBee, 2022), the absence of other gender identities limits the range of experiences represented. Moreover, the study's geographical specificity further limits the transferability of these findings as all the data was collected in one city

within one country, which may differ from others in terms of salon regulations, training expectations, cultural norms surrounding disclosure, and the societal role of hairstylists. While qualitative research does not aim for statistical generalisability, these contextual boundaries remain important when considering the applicability of this study's findings.

A further limitation relates to the use of purposive sampling combined with passive snowballing, which introduces the possibility of sampling bias. For instance, this study only reflects the experiences of hairstylists who feel they do provide social support to their clients and does not capture those who reject or do not identify with this aspect of the role. Similarly, as participation was voluntary, the sample may have disproportionately attracted individuals who felt motivated to share their stories; perhaps those with more pronounced or emotionally charged experiences of providing social support, with hairstylists who felt neutral or indifferent, underrepresented. What is more, while the sample size of six participants is consistent with IPA's idiographic commitment and considered appropriate for doctoral research (Smith et al., 2009), it, inevitably, restricted the range of perspectives represented. However, though a larger sample could have broadened the data, it may have also diluted the depth of analysis and undermined the idiographic integrity of this study.

Another potential limitation relates to the decision not to undertake participant validation. While obtaining participant feedback might have strengthened perceived credibility and increased participants' involvement in the research process, several methodological and practical considerations led to its exclusion. For instance, the

interpretative nature of IPA means that findings are shaped by the researcher's meaning-making rather than constituting a direct summary of participants' words (Smith et al., 2009). Furthermore, because IPA involves integrating themes across multiple transcripts, it may have been difficult for any one participant to validate the analytic whole (Horsburgh, 2003). Moreover, time constraints rendered this impractical.

In light of these limitations, the findings of the present study should be understood as contextually situated and reflective of the experiences of this particular group. Nevertheless, when considered alongside existing literature, this research offers valuable insights into the lived experiences of hairstylists, highlights practical implications for both the hairstyling and mental health professions, and identifies important directions for further inquiry.

4.6 Implications for Practice and Research

This research yields several significant implications for practice, training, and future research. In particular, recognising the challenges that providing social support can pose for hairstylists is essential to developing practices that are contextually sensitive and responsive to the specific needs of this workforce. Certainly, gaining insight into how hairstylists experience, manage, and make sense of their role allows for a more sophisticated appreciation of their wellbeing, the relational dynamics at play in their work, and how best to support them.

Indeed, these findings highlight several ways in which CoP, and other mental health professions, can meaningfully contribute to the therapeutic support of hairstylists. For example, participants described a range of emotional and relational consequences arising from client disclosures, including the development of unhelpful coping strategies. This suggests that therapeutic support may be required not only to address overt distress, but also to assist hairstylists in developing healthy ways of processing clients' disclosures. Additionally, as participants' narratives emphasised the importance of hairstylists' own support systems, mental health professionals may work collaboratively with such clients to encourage engagement in groups or communities and the cultivation of affirming interpersonal relationships. These relational resources may help buffer against burnout, vicarious distress, and the emotional residue associated with repeated exposure to clients' difficulties.

From a CoP perspective, these findings align with the discipline's emphasis on relational processes, contextualised understanding, and the integration of wellbeing and prevention alongside therapeutic intervention. CoPs are uniquely positioned to work with individuals whose psychological difficulties arise within relational and occupational contexts, inviting understandings that move beyond diagnostic conceptualisations of distress. In this regard, CoP's focus on meaning-making, reflexivity, and the therapeutic relationship may support hairstylists in developing greater awareness of their emotional labour and in legitimising their experiences. Moreover, CoPs may extend their role beyond individual therapy to include consultation, psychoeducation, and advocacy, thereby contributing to preventative interventions and systemic change within the hairstyling industry.

Indeed, the findings of this research suggest a need for more robust structural support within the hairstyling industry. Certainly, implementing protective factors, such as consistent access to training, formal recognition of emotional labour, and the provision of appropriate mental health resources, could improve the wellbeing of hairstylists and mitigate some of the risks associated with social support provision. Undoubtedly, participants expressed a desire for training not only in helping skills but in areas such as boundary management and self-protection. Though initiatives in the UK, such as the Lions Barber Collective which equips hairstylists with the skills and confidence to initiate conversations about mental health (Here To Talk, 2025), and the Head Up program which focuses on supporting hairstylists to manage their own mental health (L'Oréal, 2020), represent promising developments in this area, these resources remain inconsistently accessible across the sector. Indeed, the results of this study imply that hairstylists would benefit from more systematic, sector-wide access to training that prioritises their emotional wellbeing, rather than solely enhancing their capacity to respond to clients' disclosures. Such a shift may help to ensure that well-intentioned programmes do not inadvertently heighten hairstylists' emotional burden by extending their supportive role without offering adequate protection, compensation, or recognition.

Similarly, a further implication concerns the importance of greater social and institutional recognition of the multifaceted work performed by hairstylists. Participants described a persistent undervaluing of both their profession and the emotional labour it entails. Enhanced structural and societal acknowledgement of hairstylists' cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal contributions may help to

legitimise their role as informal supporters and, in turn, create opportunities for improved working conditions, regulation, and wellbeing initiatives.

Beyond its implications for practice and training, this study identifies avenues for future research to further explore the multifaceted factors influencing hairstylists' experiences of social support provision. For example, investigating the longer-term psychological effects of providing support, such as potential experiences of vicarious trauma, burnout, or compassion fatigue, could help inform targeted therapeutic interventions. In addition, quantitative research using standardised measures of depression, anxiety, and burnout may complement qualitative insights and allow for broader generalisability.

Furthermore, exploring possible variances across salon types, price points, working patterns, and employment structures could allow for a more nuanced and situated understanding of how organisational culture, clientele characteristics, and workplace hierarchies shape the nature and intensity of emotional labour in hairstyling. For example, emotional labour may manifest differently within luxury salon environments, where extended appointments, exclusivity, and highly personalised service may position emotional attentiveness and relational intimacy as part of the salon's perceived value and client experience. In contrast, value salons, which may prioritise efficiency and speed, may create different relational dynamics, potentially limiting opportunities for deeper emotional engagement whilst generating alternative pressures associated with repetitive emotional performance under time constraints. Additionally, expanding research beyond London and the UK may allow for cross-cultural comparison and a clearer understanding of how regulatory, cultural,

and economic contexts shape hairstylists' roles as informal supporters. Geographic context may also influence experiences of emotional labour, as hairstylists working within smaller or more rural communities may encounter increased boundary-blurring due to greater social familiarity and ongoing contact with clients outside the salon, potentially intensifying emotional residue and complicating the negotiation of professional boundaries.

Moreover, whilst the present study offers insight into hairstylists' experiences of providing social support, it is important to recognise that these accounts reflect hairstylists' own perceptions of the support they provide and how it is received by clients. Future research could, therefore, expand understanding of this relational dynamic by incorporating the perspectives of both members of the hairstylist-client relationship. This may provide a richer and more nuanced understanding of how informal support is experienced and interpreted within the salon. For instance, future research may benefit from exploring whether emotionally supportive conversations are universally experienced positively by clients, or whether some individuals may experience them as intrusive, emotionally demanding, or socially expected within the salon. Given the relational norms of hairstyling appointments some clients may feel implicitly obligated to disclose personal information or engage in emotional reciprocity, thereby performing emotional labour themselves. Exploring these dynamics could further illuminate the nature of the hairstylist-client relationship.

Future research may also benefit from exploring the transferability of these findings across other close-contact and relational service professions, including tattoo artists, nail technicians, beauty therapists, massage therapists, bartenders,

and taxi drivers. Existing literature has identified emotional labour, relational intimacy, and therapeutic-style disclosure within these professions (Sharma & Black, 2001; Lieberman et al., 2010; Harness et al., 2021), suggesting that hairstyling may be situated within a wider group of relational service roles in which emotional support and interpersonal care are embedded within everyday service interactions. Comparisons with beauty therapy, and other touch-based professions, may be particularly valuable as physical touch has been theorised to facilitate trust and interpersonal closeness (Field, 2019). This may distinguish hairstyling from supportive professions that rely primarily on verbal interaction alone, such as taxi driving or bartending, whilst aligning it with other touch-oriented professions. Exploring similarities and differences across such professions could deepen understanding of how emotional labour operates within informal support roles and help identify both profession-specific and shared support needs for those engaged in informal emotional labour.

Lastly, given the gendered nature of both hairstyling and informal care, future research could benefit from adopting feminist methodological frameworks. With women constituting the vast majority of hairstylists in the UK (PolicyBee, 2022) and global trends demonstrating that women perform disproportionately high levels of care work (Kim & Woo, 2022), such approaches may offer valuable insight into the intersection of gender and emotional labour in hairstyling. In particular, future research could explore whether hairstylists who identify as men experience similar socio-economic and relational pressures to provide emotional support to their clients, or whether these expectations are shaped by gendered assumptions about care and emotional availability. It may also prove valuable to examine whether client

disclosures vary depending on hairstylist gender, with clients potentially feeling more comfortable engaging in emotionally intimate conversations with women hairstylists due to culturally embedded expectations of women as empathetic and nurturing. Similarly, emotional labour may differ according to client gender. Interactions with women clients may involve greater emotional reciprocity and self-disclosure due to shared gendered expectations surrounding emotional communication, while hairstylists may experience emotional labour with men as less intensive due to reduced expectations for emotional exchange. Future research could, therefore, examine how hairstylist and client gender jointly shape the nature of emotional labour within the salon.

4.7 Reflexive Statement

Post-analysis reflexivity involved considering how my prior expectations aligned with, diverged from, and were challenged by the developing themes to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts rather than preconceptions. Prior to analysis, I anticipated that the provision of social support within hairstyling would be predominantly depleting, with emotional labour likely to manifest primarily as strain and burden. While these experiences were evident, I did not anticipate the extent to which emotional strain and fulfilment would co-exist as a pronounced and integrated aspect of participants' accounts. Similarly, an unexpected and particularly salient finding was the reciprocal nature of the hairstylist-client relationship. Rather than being characterised solely by one-directional emotional provision, participants described instances of mutual exchange, in which support was also received from clients. This challenged my initial assumptions of emotional

labour as primarily depleting, contributing instead to a more relational and growth-oriented understanding of the work. Throughout the analysis process, sustained reflexive attention was required to ensure that theme development was driven by participants' accounts rather than prior expectations.

As a novice qualitative researcher, I initially found the requirement of reflecting on my potential influence on the research process to be somewhat daunting. Unlike quantitative approaches, the interpretative nature of IPA required an explicit engagement with my subjectivity, rather than allowing recourse to notions of objectivity. However, the continual practice of reflexivity embedded throughout my CoP training enabled me to become more comfortable in acknowledging my own involvement in this research and, over time, I came to understand reflexivity not as an obstacle but as an essential and valuable part of the research process. In fact, Walsh (1996) suggests that qualitative researchers often learn as much about themselves as they do about their participants and, while this study provided rich insights into the lived experiences of hairstylists, it also prompted reflections on my own assumptions, values, and role throughout the process.

For instance, during data collection I became particularly aware of the close and meaningful relationship I have with my hairstylist. In knowing that I have personally turned to him for emotional support, I questioned whether this might unintentionally bias my interpretations or lead me to expect that participant experiences would reflect my own. On the other hand, I began to consider my position as an outsider. Certainly, being outside the profession allowed me to approach the interviews and analysis without insider assumptions, fostering an open

and curious stance. However, at the same time, I remained mindful that a researcher from within the field may have been granted access to different layers of experience or been met with a greater sense of ease or rapport by participants.

Acknowledging these influences was essential given their potential to shape my approach to the interviews and engagement with participant narratives. To address this, I incorporated structured reflexive practices into every stage of the research process. For instance, during data collection I kept a reflexive interview journal documenting my expectations, emotional reactions, and interpretative tendencies. This process helped me to maintain awareness of moments when I was making assumptions based on my own experiences, prompting careful examination of my interpretations to ensure they remained grounded in participants' accounts. Moreover, when conducting the interviews, I made a conscious effort to strive for questions that were genuinely open-ended and non-directive to minimise the influence of any preconceptions I may have held.

Over time I began to view my personal experiences as both an asset to the research, enhancing my sensitivity and empathy towards participants, and a potential source of bias, which I sought to navigate with ongoing reflexivity. Therefore, rather than conceptualising my positionality as either a strength or limitation, I focused on remaining transparent and reflexive about its influence throughout the research process. Nevertheless, as an outsider, I felt a particularly strong responsibility to ensure that participants' narratives were treated with respect and care, rather than being used solely to advance my academic progression. I was mindful of the potential for participants to feel that their experiences were being

extracted without clear benefit to them. Therefore, I committed to producing an accessible summary of findings, written in clear and non-academic language, for all participants who expressed interest. I also considered how this research could contribute to practice beyond the thesis itself. As such, I intend to share the findings within practitioner-focused events and peer-reviewed publications (see Appendix L) to raise awareness of the lived experiences of hairstylists.

4.8 Conclusion

Whilst the role of hairstylists as social and emotional supporters appears to be receiving increased recognition in the literature, little is known about how they personally make sense of, navigate, and manage this. By examining the lived experiences of hairstylists in the UK, the present research sought to explore this by answering the question: ‘how do hairstylists in the UK experience the provision of social support to their clients?’. Employing IPA to do so enabled an in-depth, nuanced exploration of participants’ subjective experiences. Gaining such insight is significant in appreciating the wellbeing of hairstylists and how best to support them. Indeed, gaining insight into these experiences can inform the development of more contextually sensitive professional guidance, ultimately strengthening workplace wellbeing and broader mental health outcomes for hairstylists. This aligns closely with CoP’s values, particularly in its focus on underrepresented groups, contextualised wellbeing, and holistic understanding.

The findings of this research demonstrated both a strong resonance with existing literature and the emergence of novel insights. For example, the findings

align with previous research highlighting the relational fulfilment hairstylists gain from their work, the development of long-term, friendship-like client relationships, and the emotional fatigue associated with sustained support-giving. Additionally, participants' accounts echoed established theories of emotional labour and replicated longstanding findings that salon work is often undervalued and insufficiently supported through training and institutional structures. Moreover, hairstylists' reliance on informal micro-breaks, and their desire for their profession to be acknowledged for its interpersonal and emotional complexity, further reflect recurring themes in the literature. Overall, the results largely reaffirm the portrayal of hairstyling as multilayered emotional labour that occurs within a context of limited professional recognition and support.

Beyond these findings, this study also offers several novel contributions to the field. For instance, participants described how supporting clients facilitated their own personal learning, self-reflection, and growth, challenging existing assumptions that emotional labour is solely depleting. The findings also illustrated how hairstylists engage in real-time emotional monitoring, active conversational steering, and strategic boundary management, skills that extend beyond what has been previously captured. Additionally, new insights emerged regarding the spillover of emotional demands into personal relationships, the use of online communities and therapy as contemporary coping strategies, and the implications of limited professional training. These findings extend existing conceptualisations of emotional labour in hairstyling by demonstrating that it encompasses both vulnerability and personal development.

In conclusion, this research underscores CoP's relational, contextual, and preventative ethos by foregrounding hairstylists' lived experiences of social support provision. The findings invite CoPs to reflect on their role not only as practitioners working with individual distress, but also as consultants, educators, and advocates who can support wellbeing and promote ethical practice within occupational contexts.

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Appendices

Appendix A - Recruitment Poster

Appendix B - Participant Information Sheet

Information Sheet

You have been invited to partake in a research interview. Prior to agreeing to participate it is vital that you are aware of what this will entail.

Who is the researcher?

The researcher, Chloe Burfitt, is a student at London Metropolitan University. She is studying towards a professional doctorate in counselling psychology and, consequently, is leading the research you have been invited to partake in.

What is the research?

The motivation of the research is to explore how hairstylists experience the provision of social support to their clients, with an aim to explore the lived experience of hairstylists providing social support, emotional labour, and informal caregiving to their clients.

Why have you been invited to participate?

You have been invited to participate as you feel that you provide social support, such as informal counselling, to your clients, are over the age of 18, speak fluent English and work as a hairstylist, catering to all gender identities, in a hairdressing salon in London.

What are the benefits of participating?

As a thank you for your time you will be given a digital £20 Prezzee voucher which can be redeemed at over 200 retailers such as ASOS, Boots, Costa, H&M, Ikea, Just Eat, Liberty, Lush, M&S, Sainsbury's, Selfridges, Starbucks and Wagamama. Additionally, the results of this study may be useful for understanding the lived experience of

hairstylists, as well as expanding upon research into the role of hairstylists as informal caregivers.

What are the risks associated with participating?

It is assumed that risks to participants will be minimal in this study. This research has been authorised by London Metropolitan University's Ethics Committee. The Committee's assessment has been directed by the standards of research ethics outlined by the British Psychological Society.

Will your data be protected?

Your data will be utilised in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation Act (2018). Your answers will be treated confidentially, with names and identifiable information changed. All raw data will be stored securely and will only be accessible to the researcher and her supervisor and will be destroyed by erasion five years after completion of the research.

What if you would like to withdraw?

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can withdraw from the research throughout participation and up to four weeks after. You will still be given the voucher should you wish to withdraw at any point. If you would like to withdraw after your interview, you can email the researcher at cvb0023@my.londonmet.ac.uk.

What will your participation involve?

If you decide to participate you will be asked to attend an online interview with the researcher which will take approximately 60 minutes. This will be recorded and conducted via Microsoft Teams. An example interview question is 'how do you feel about providing social support to your clients?' The results of your interview will be included in a research report which will make up part of the researcher's professional doctorate in counselling psychology. The outcomes of this research report may also be disseminated via academic journals and/or presentations.

What do you do if you have any questions or concerns?

If you have any questions or concerns relating to this study, please email the researcher at cvb0023@my.londonmet.ac.uk. If your question is unresolved, please email the researcher's supervisor, Dr. Angie Cucchi, at a.cucchi@londonmet.ac.uk.

Appendix C - Consent Form

Consent Form

Consent to participate in this research.

Topic of study: hairstylists' experiences of providing social support to their clients.

- I confirm that I have read and fully understood the information sheet for this study.
- I confirm that I have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the research at any point without penalty. I appreciate that, should I wish to withdraw my data over four weeks after completion of the interview, the researcher bears the right to utilise my anonymised data.
- I agree to have my interview recorded and for the resulting data to be used for academic purposes.
- I agree to partake in the above study.

Participant's name	Date	Participant's signature
Researcher's name	Date	Researcher's signature

Appendix D - Demographic Information Form

Demographic Questions

What is your age?

- _____
- Prefer not to state

What most closely describes your gender?

- Woman
- Man
- Non-binary/non-conforming
- Agender/I don’t identify with any gender
- Gender not listed. My gender is _____
- Prefer not to state

What are your pronouns?

- She/her/hers
- He/him/his
- They/them/theirs
- Other _____
- Prefer not to state

What is your current job title?

What is your current employment status?

- Business owner
- Full-time employed
- Part-time employed
- Self-employed
- Other _____

How long have you worked as a hairstylist?

What is the name of the salon you work at and where is it located?

Is the salon you work at…

- A chain
- An independent
- Other _____

In terms of price, would you describe the salon you work at as…

- Deluxe
- Moderate
- Value
- Other _____

Appendix E - Interview Schedule

1. How would you describe your experience of working as a hairstylist and interacting with your clients?

2. How would you describe what providing social support to your clients means to you?

3. How would you describe the relationship between working as a hairstylist and providing social support to clients?

4. How do you feel about providing social support to your clients?

5. What, if any, impact do you feel your experiences of providing social support to your clients may have had upon your working role and upon you personally?

6. If you have noticed an impact of providing social support to your clients, how do you manage this?

7. If you have noticed an impact of providing social support to your clients, do you feel that changes could be made to minimise this impact?

8. Thank you for all that valuable information. Is there anything else you would like to add that has not been addressed in this interview?

Appendix F - Debrief Form

Debrief Form

Thank you for participating in this research.

Your time and contribution is greatly appreciated. The information you supplied will contribute to our current knowledge on hairstylists' experiences of providing social support to their clients.

If you have any questions relating to this study please email the researcher, Chloe Burfitt, at cvb0023@my.londonmet.ac.uk. If your question is unresolved, please email the researcher's supervisor, Dr Angie Cucchi, at a.cucchi@londonmet.ac.uk.

If you have been adversely impacted by participating in this interview, you might find the ensuing resources useful:

Mental Health Foundation - www.mentalhealth./org.uk/getting-help

Mind - https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services

NHS - www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services

Head Up - For Hair Pro's Mental Health -
https://www.lorealprofessionnel.co.uk/head-up

Appendix G - Example of Exploratory Noting and Experiential Statements

Benjamina, a 41-year-old woman, whose job title is Senior Hair Stylist, has worked as a hairstylist for 12 years and works at an independent, value priced salon.

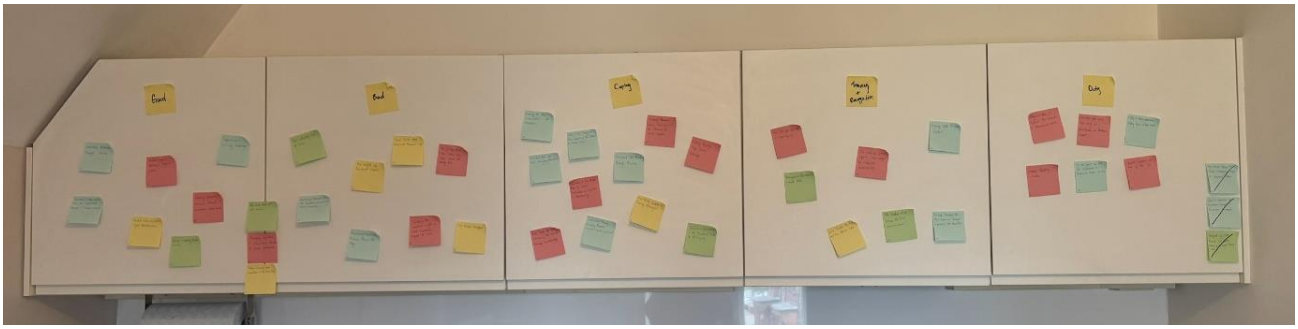
Experiential Statements	Transcript	Exploratory Noting **Descriptive** - describing the content / subject **Conceptual** - more interrogative / conceptual **Linguistic** - exploring the specific use of language *(if relates to something about the experience)*
The shifting emotional climate of the salon demands that the stylist remain emotionally flexible and vigilant, navigating each encounter with intuitive attunement.	**R** - So, the first question is, how would you describe your experience of working as a hairstylist and interacting with your clients? **B** - OK, I think sort of...sort of, again broadly, I would say that the interaction with clients can be really varied. So sometimes you get into a really deep, meaningful conversation and other times it can be light-hearted, more of a chit chat, fun and it's really varied and you never really know what...how someone's going to be on the...on the day in terms of what, you know, what gets spoken about or what gets brought up. Could you just repeat the question, just so I... **R** - Sure, yeah, it was, how would you describe your experience of working as a hairstylist and interacting with your clients?	B reflects on the unpredictable nature of client interactions, highlighting the wide emotional range from deep conversations to casual chit-chat. There's an emphasis on variability and unpredictability in daily experiences. This unpredictability suggests the emotional labour hairstylists perform is complex and requires ongoing adjustment, where the stylist must be attuned to each client's current state.

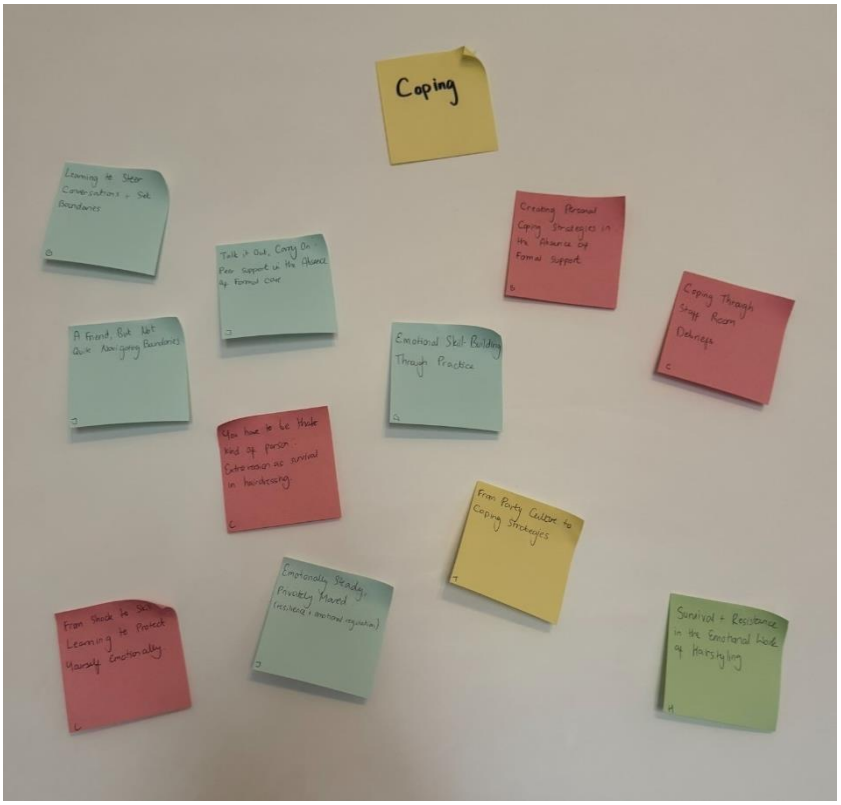
The intimacy of repeated encounters with clients fosters a deep familiarity that both blurs boundaries and builds trust, placing the stylist in a hybrid role between professional and confidante.	**B** - Yeah, so I think that every, you know, it's always very different, very varied. I don't think I really would would necessarily realise how much...how much connection and bond you would get with some of the people that you do their hair for. I think I've got, you know, on the whole quite sort of a deep and close relationship with with people that I do hair for, which is quite unexpected, but it's and it's, you know, I class people as they almost become sort of friends as well. So, you and, you know, a lot, you know, you feel like you know them quite well because you know all the details. So, but yeah, the interactions are really, really varied. It can change from like day to day, year to year, so yeah.	B is surprised by the depth of connection formed with clients, who can become almost like friends through repeated interactions. The stylist-client relationship blurs professional boundaries, with hairstylists occupying a hybrid role between service provider and confidante. The disclosure of 'all the detail' speaks to a trust that underpins informal social support, complicating the usual client-worker divide.
B finds emotional labour rewarding, drawing meaning from the supportive, interpersonal connections she forms with clients beyond the technical aspects of hairdressing.	**R** - And how would you describe what providing social support to your clients means or looks like for you? **B** - Umm, I think I really...I really enjoy talking to people anyway, and I do, I enjoy that element of it. If someone's asking sort of advice and help, I feel it kind of rewards, rewards me personally if I've felt like I've come away from it thinking 'hopefully that person feels a bit better', and again, not just, you	B expresses satisfaction from the social support aspect of her work, valuing the interpersonal connection and the positive impact on clients' wellbeing. This points to the rewarding nature of emotional labour when successful, indicating that hairstylists may find meaning in their work beyond technical skill.

Appendix H - Example of Table of PETs

Personal Experiential Themes	Experiential Statements	Quotes	Line Number
Feeling Inspired and Exhausted in the Same Day *T experiences hairstyling as simultaneously rewarding and draining, where connection and intimacy with clients can enrich but also deplete.*	T experiences hairstyling as a profession of contrasts, where the same qualities that offer connection and variety can also create emotional strain, underscoring the unpredictability of providing social support in hairstyling. The same client engagements that energise can also deplete, underscoring the tension between connection and self-preservation in hairstyling. Hairstyling is experienced as both inspiring and burdensome, with the unseen emotional labour often going unacknowledged by the wider industry.	"...rewarding and demanding. I think it's...it's super interesting and you get to meet so many different people...one nice side of it is that you get to know about them, they get to know about you on a more even keel. Umm but I think when you have a day which is more demanding with kind of expectations or conversations from clients, that can be something that would be helpful to kind of lessen...So, depending on the day, the same parts of the job can be the best thing or the worst thing." "I think people that I've been able to offer support to are the ones I've built a really good bond with and, actually, they've become like I guess really important people that I am inspired by that I have conversations with that I maybe wouldn't with other clients...So, I think it can definitely feel more special in that sense. But I think, yeah, I think like the negatives are that you can feel socially drained by the end of the day." "...I love being able to connect with people in a chair and...I've met some incredible people...like it's so inspiring and I wouldn't get to do that if that social care and connection part of the job wasn't	13-22 224-232 184-189
		there. But I think the kind of weight that can then load up on top of the reason that they're actually in the salon, really can go missed in the industry."	
Mutual Care in Client-Stylist Relationships *Long-term and reciprocal relationships with clients are experienced as rewarding, offering hairstylists not only joy but also mutual support.*	Long-term client relationships provide genuine joy and emotional enrichment, demonstrating the positive potential of ongoing connections with clients. Client-stylist relationships can evolve into reciprocal exchanges, offering mutual support.	"...there are clients that I have been doing for such a long time that I really look forward to coming in. And so, it does become a catch up and a hair appointment." "I think people that I've been able to offer support to are the ones I've built a really good bond...and then it kind of becomes in some ways a bit of a two-way therapy thing, which is actually really lovely."	173-175 224-228
The Weight of Emotional Labour *Providing social support demands preparation, self-regulation, and resilience, yet often leaves hairstylists fatigued and underacknowledged.*	The emotional burden of hairstyling is sometimes anticipated before it happens, with certain clients requiring pre-emptive preparation that contributes to exhaustion and cycles of emotional labour. Emotional labour intensifies when rapport with clients feels forced or constrained, with inauthentic exchanges leaving the stylist feeling more depleted. Unlike therapy, hairstyling requires multitasking between technical and	"...there are definitely...clients that I almost have to kind of psych myself up for a little bit before they come in because I know I'm going to be that bit more drained. You learn how to manage that I think as you go along in your career but if...if that happens to fall on a day that's already very stressful and busy, it can just wipe you." "...I think you get a small part of clients, which I wouldn't go as far as saying that I dislike at all, but that I would never speak to in any other capacity or probably have anything in common with outside of them being in my chair. And so, it could be some of	47-51 62-76

Appendix I - Example of Looking for Patterns Across Cases





Appendix J - Distress Protocols

Protocol to observe if participants become distressed whilst participating.

Developed by Dr Chris Cocking, Chair, London Metropolitan University Psychology Research Ethics Review Panel, 2008 (Cocking, 2008).

This protocol has been developed to help manage participants if they become distressed whilst participating.

Mild distress

Indications to look for:

1. Weepiness
2. Voice becoming choked with emotion and/or difficulty speaking
3. Becoming distracted and/or agitated

Action to take:

1. Ask the participant if they would like to persist
2. Offer the participant time to take a break
3. Remind the participant that they can cease the interview at any time

Appendix K - Ethical Approval

From: Louise Ryan <l.ryan@londonmet.ac.uk>
Sent: Wednesday, January 17, 2024 10:51 AM
To: CHLOE VICTORIA BURFITT <cvb0023@my.londonmet.ac.uk>
Cc: Chris Chandler <chris.chandler@londonmet.ac.uk>
Subject: Re: Research Ethics Application

HI Chloe,
I am pleased to say that both reviewers were satisfied with your revisions.
Your ethics application is now approved - please find attached.
Good luck with your research,
Louise

Professor Louise Ryan, FAcSS
Director of the Global Diversities and Inequalities Research Centre

Date of approval	17 Jan 2024
NB: The Researcher should be notified of the review outcome within two weeks of the submission of the application. If the outcome is re-submission of the application because of requests for further information or suggested adjustments of the project, a further two weeks from receipt of the re-submitted application applies, and so on. A copy should be sent to research@londonmet.ac.uk.	
Signature of RERP chair	Prof Louise Ryan

Appendix L - Publishable Paper

This appendix presents the research formatted as a publishable article prepared in accordance with the submission guidelines provided by the Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology (JOOP). JOOP was selected as a potential publication outlet due to its strong alignment with the study's occupational focus, qualitative methodology, and UK context. Certainly, the focus of this study aligns closely with the journal's interest in role demands, interpersonal relationships, emotional labour, and the psychosocial aspects of occupational practice. Moreover, by examining an under-researched service profession, this research contributes to JOOP's aim of advancing understanding of diverse occupational contexts and contemporary work experiences. What is more, the use of IPA is well suited to JOOP's emphasis on in-depth psychological exploration, enabling a detailed understanding of how individuals make sense of their work roles and responsibilities. Lastly, JOOP's UK base and affiliation with the BPS further enhance its suitability for this research.

“We laugh and cry together”: How do hairstylists experience the provision of social support to their clients?

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Abstract

Hairstyling extends beyond aesthetic practice, encompassing elements of social support, emotional labour, and informal caregiving. Despite the intimate nature of the hairstylist-client relationship, little is known about how hairstylists experience their supportive role. This study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of six UK-based hairstylists and how they experience and manage the provision of social support to their clients. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Four group experiential themes were created: 1: Fulfilment in the Hairstylist-Client Relationship, 2: The Emotional Weight of Social Support in Hairstyling, 3: Managing Social Support in Hairstyling, and 4: Professional Recognition and Institutional Support in Hairstyling. Across these themes, participants described the hairstylist-client relationship as deeply meaningful and mutually rewarding yet emotionally demanding. Participants reported relying largely on self-taught strategies to manage the impact

of providing support, highlighting a lack of formal training, recognition, and systemic support for this aspect of their work. These findings underscore the importance of greater institutional recognition, training, and professional validation, and offer valuable implications for mental health professionals seeking to better understand and support this underrepresented caregiving profession.

Keywords: hairstylists; social support; emotional labour; informal caregiving; client relationships; interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Practitioner points:

- Hairstylists may routinely engage in emotional labour with their clients yet often lack formal recognition and support for this aspect of their role.
- Sector-wide training, formal recognition of emotional labour, and consistent access to mental health resources are suggested to improve hairstylists' wellbeing and reduce the risks associated with informal support provision.
- Mental health professionals can support hairstylists not only in managing overt distress but also in developing healthy strategies for processing clients' disclosures and coping with emotional residue.

Conflict of interest statement:

None of the authors has any conflict of interest to report.

Data availability statement:

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request.

Introduction

Hairstylists' provision of social support to their clients has attracted psychological interest since the 1970s (Gershon & Biller, 1977; Cowen et al., 1979; Seaberg, 1979; Wiesenfeld & Weis, 1979). Early research identified that hairstylists frequently adopt a supportive role, including aiding individuals experiencing mental health difficulties (Cowen et al., 1979; Seaberg, 1979; Cowen, 1982). More contemporary research has corroborated these findings, demonstrating that clients often disclose concerns to hairstylists that substantially overlap with those presented to mental health professionals (Page et al., 2022). This aligns with research suggesting that individuals commonly utilise naturally-occurring, informal sources of support prior to, or instead of, formal mental health services, which may be costly or inaccessible (Cowen et al., 1979, 1981). Therefore, the social support provided by hairstylists may function as a complementary resource to formal mental health provision (Milne et al., 1992).

Social support is commonly conceptualised as the perception that one is cared for, valued, and supported within their social network (Taylor, 2011). It typically encompasses emotional, informational, and practical support, alongside companionship (Ditzen & Heinrichs, 2014). Research suggests that hairstylists may offer all four forms of support within routine client interactions (Taylor, 2011). According to the buffering model of social support, such interactions can protect individuals against psychological distress and contribute positively to mental and physical health (Taylor, 2011; Ditzen & Heinrichs, 2014). Providing this support often

requires hairstylists to engage in emotional labour which is defined as the regulation or management of emotions as part of one's occupational role (Hochschild, 1983). The distinctive nature of the hairstylist-client relationship may facilitate such support provision. These relationships are often long-term, characterised by regular contact and extended periods of conversation, with talk serving as the primary medium of interaction (Eayrs, 1993; Garzaniti et al., 2011). Such conditions may predispose hairstylists to engage in informal caregiving, described as the voluntary provision of care to individuals experiencing physical or mental health difficulties (Schulz & Tompkins, 2010). Consequently, while hairstylists may contribute to clients' physical appearance, they may also support clients' psychological wellbeing through this relational work.

Despite growing recognition of hairstylists as providers of informal social support, research examining their own experiences of this aspect of their role remains limited. One of the few studies to address this, conducted by Page et al. (2022) in South Australia, found that hairstylists frequently felt emotionally drained by this part of their work. These findings align with earlier literature suggesting that hairstylists may be vulnerable to burnout due to the emotional labour inherent in their role (Sharma & Black, 2001; Cohen, 2010), with some research indicating that the emotional demands of hairdressing may be comparable to those experienced by healthcare professionals (Pisaniello et al., 2012). Yet, hairdressing is often characterised as a low-skilled and low-paid occupation (Eayrs, 1993; Cohen, 2010). Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, hairstylists have reported feeling undervalued, unsupported, and overwhelmed in their work (Page et al., 2022; McCann & Myers, 2023).

Like other occupations involving sustained emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), hairstylists may be particularly vulnerable to stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue (Cohen, 2010; Gérain & Zech, 2019). Indeed, wider literature on informal caregiving suggests that such roles are associated with poorer mental health (Pottie et al., 2014; Sallim et al., 2015) and physical health outcomes (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2003; Capistrant et al., 2012). Emotional labour has also been linked to job dissatisfaction and heightened psychological distress (Jeung et al., 2018). These risks may be especially salient for hairstylists who are typically untrained and unsupported in providing social support yet may feel a strong sense of responsibility for clients' wellbeing (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Gérain & Zech, 2019). Consequently, they may be at risk of burnout both from the burden of this perceived responsibility and from the ongoing regulation of their own emotions.

However, at the same time, hairstylists consistently report high levels of job satisfaction and a strong valuing of client relationships, despite the emotional demands involved (Hill & Bradley, 2010; Sheane, 2012; Page et al., 2022). This highlights a paradox within the literature: although emotional labour and informal caregiving are associated with burnout, psychological distress, poorer mental and physical health outcomes, and reduced job satisfaction (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2003; Pottie et al., 2014; Jeung et al., 2018), hairstylists often describe their profession positively and describe high job satisfaction (Page et al., 2022).

Such limited knowledge pertaining to how hairstylists experience social support provision to their clients, in conjunction with the potential related challenges they may face, such as emotional strain and mental health difficulties, indicates the

importance of gaining knowledge of their experiences. Attaining such insight may contribute to well-informed, contextually sensitive practice, potentially enhancing both professional support and mental health outcomes for hairstylists (Douglas et al., 2016). Moreover, addressing this gap is important for advancing understanding of hairstylists' wellbeing and emotional labour, as well as informing how psychological support might be better tailored to this workforce. Professional guidance, including the Health and Care Professions Council's (2015) and British Psychological Society's (2005) emphasis on research-informed practice, further underscores the relevance of such investigation.

Accordingly, the present study aims to explore hairstylists' lived experiences of providing social support, emotional labour, and informal caregiving to their clients. The research question guiding this study is: How do hairstylists in the UK experience the provision of social support to their clients?

Method

Design

This study adopts a qualitative methodology to explore participants' subjective experiences. Qualitative approaches are particularly appropriate when researching underrepresented groups (Sale et al., 2002), and little is currently known about hairstylists' experiences in relation to the research question. More specifically, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is used to examine how individuals make sense of their lived experiences. IPA prioritises participants' accounts in their own terms and recognises the interpretative role of the researcher in making sense of these accounts (Smith & Osborn, 2015). It focuses on both lived experience and the meanings participants ascribe to them (Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

IPA is well suited to this research as it explores experiences in their complexity, rather than reducing them to a single theoretical framework (Willig, 2021). The approach aims to identify shared features of experience while acknowledging individual, social, cultural, and historical influences. Given the subjective nature of hairstylists' experiences of providing social support to clients, IPA offers an appropriate framework for capturing these nuances (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

Participants

All six of the participants identified as women. They were aged between 25 and 46 years, with an average age of 39.5 years. Whilst this is not reflective of the wider

population, it is reasonably reflective of hairstylists in the UK, of which 83% identify as women and over half are aged between 16-34 years (PolicyBee, 2022). The length of time working as a hairstylist ranged between 7 to 28 years, with an average length of 17.5 years. Participants worked in Southeast, East, and West London across independent, local chain, and global chain salons, as well as value, moderate, and luxury salons. Independent salons operated from a single location, local chains had multiple London branches, and global chains had national and international branches. Salon pricing categories were based on participants' own descriptions. Demographic information can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: *Participant Demographic Information*

Pseudonym	**Age (years)**	**Job Title**	**Length of Time as a Hairstylist (years)**	**Salon Type**	**Salon Price**
Hope	46	Salon Owner and Hairstylist	15	Independent	Moderate
Jas	43	Style Director and Hairstylist	28	Global Chain	Luxury
Georgie	38	Manager and Hairstylist	22	Local Chain	Luxury
Christine	25	Manager and Senior Hairstylist	7	Local Chain	Moderate
Benjamina	41	Senior Hairstylist	12	Independent	Value
Tammy	38	Director and Hairstylist	21	Local Chain and Independent	Luxury

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted online, scheduled for one hour, and consisted of eight questions, consistent with IPA guidance (Alase, 2017; Creswell, 2003). The semi-structured interview schedule was developed following the protocol outlined by Smith et al. (2009) and informed by gaps identified in the literature. Questions were designed to elicit participants' lived experiences and their interpretations of these experiences. The interview schedule comprised open-ended questions that progressed from general to more specific, allowing participants to shape the direction of the discussion (Willig, 2021). This approach aimed to minimise researcher assumptions and encourage rich, participant-led accounts (Smith et al., 2009). Example questions include 'how do you feel about providing social support to your clients?', and 'if you have noticed an impact of providing social support to your clients, how do you manage this?'.

Data Analysis

Smith et al.'s (2009) six-step process guided the data analysis, with language updated to reflect the more recent IPA terminology proposed by Smith et al. (2022). Each transcript was read and re-read while listening to the corresponding audio recording to support immersion in the data (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Exploratory notes were then made, focusing on descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual aspects of participants' accounts, including similarities, differences, repetitions, and contradictions. From these notes, experiential statements were developed, reflecting both participants' meaning-making and the researcher's interpretative engagement.

Experiential statements were subsequently clustered according to conceptual similarity and organised into personal experiential themes (PETs). This analytic process was repeated for each transcript, maintaining an idiographic focus and openness to the emergence of new themes. Finally, patterns were examined across cases by grouping PETs thematically rather than by participant, with themes refined, renamed, and reorganised until a coherent structure was achieved (Willig, 2021). Illustrative quotations were selected to provide depth and clarity while avoiding over-reliance on brief descriptive excerpts.

Reflexive Considerations

The researcher's interest in this topic emerged from observations of emotionally supportive interactions within hairdressing contexts. This, alongside a meaningful relationship with a hairstylist and a commitment to highlighting hairdressing as a legitimate site of support, had the potential to shape assumptions about the nature of such interactions. To address this, reflexivity was engaged throughout the research process to consider how these interests and presuppositions might influence the framing of the research question, engagement with the literature, and interpretation of data. Reflexive practices included bracketing, maintaining a reflexive journal, and ongoing reflection through supervision and discussions with peers, supported a critical and open approach to recruitment, data collection, and analysis.

Ethics

Ethical considerations were addressed at all stages of the research process in accordance with the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (2021) and London Metropolitan University's Research Ethics Policies and Regulations (2021). These guidelines informed the protection of participants, including considerations of potential harm, sensitivity, anonymity, and confidentiality. The study also complied with the Data Protection Act (2018), ensuring participants' personal data were securely managed and protected. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study. They were fully informed of the study's aims and were provided with a debrief form, which included details of external support services should support be required post-interview.

Results

Following an analysis of the interviews, four GETs were created: GET 1: Fulfilment in the Hairstylist-Client Relationship, GET 2: The Emotional Weight of Social Support in Hairstyling, GET 3: Managing Social Support in Hairstyling, and GET 4: Professional Recognition and Institutional Support in Hairstyling. Table 2 illustrates each GET and subtheme.

Table 2: *Group Experiential Themes and Subthemes*

GET 1: Fulfilment in the Hairstylist-Client Relationship **Subtheme 1a:** Joy and Gratification in Caregiving **Subtheme 1b:** Growing Through Relational Exchange **Subtheme 1c:** Mutual Support in the Hairstylist-Client Relationship
GET 2: The Emotional Weight of Social Support in Hairstyling **Subtheme 2a:** Overwhelm and Emotional Fatigue **Subtheme 2b:** Multitasking in Emotional Labour **Subtheme 2c:** Unintended Consequences
GET 3: Managing Social Support in Hairstyling **Subtheme 3a:** Boundary Negotiation and Conversation Management **Subtheme 3b:** Coping Strategies and Self-care
GET 4: Professional Recognition and Institutional Support in Hairstyling **Subtheme 4a:** Professional Recognition **Subtheme 4b:** Institutional Support

GET 1: Fulfilment in the Hairstylist-Client Relationship

The first GET describes the sense of meaning, fulfilment and joy participants derive from providing social support to their clients.

1a: Joy and Gratification in Caregiving

A notable feature across accounts was the joy participants experienced in connecting with their clients. Georgie captured this sentiment when she expressed:

> *"I like going to work…I like listening to people…having a conversation with someone and being able to interact in that way, you feel like you've got some kind of connection with them…" (Georgie).*

Georgie frames listening as a valued part of her role, with client conversations fostering connection and enjoyment at work. This demonstrates that social support in hairstyling may contribute to job satisfaction.

Benjamina similarly noted that client relationships can be unexpectedly rewarding:

> *"I don't think I really would…realise how much…connection and bond you would get with some of the people that you do their hair for. I think I've got…a deep and close relationship with with people that I do hair for…they almost become sort of friends..." (Benjamina).*

Benjamina suggests that transactional client relationships can evolve into friendship-like bonds, blurring boundaries but framing this as a positive aspect of her work.

More broadly, participants described not only enjoyment but personal fulfilment from providing social support to clients:

> *"I feel [providing social support] probably gives me value as a person…I'm probably actually going 'no, but they need me, I can fix them'." (Hope).*

Here, Hope links her identity to providing social support, with being 'needed' signalling value and personal fulfilment. More broadly, participants' emphasis on feeling valued suggests that caregiving may reinforce their self-image as capable, empathetic, and worthwhile.

1b: Growing Through Relational Exchange

Along with joy and gratification, participants recounted that learning and personal growth takes place through client interactions. Indeed, Benjamina outlined how such interactions broaden her worldview:

> *"It gives you a really sort of wider view on the world and…it makes you feel…maybe my life isn't as bad or…everyone's got other things going on…I feel like I've gained, you know, knowledge and personal skills…" (Benjamina).*

Benjamina's musings highlight that client interactions can offer different perspectives and even aid in reframing her own struggles, evoking humility and appreciation. This suggests that the provision of social support is not one directional but, rather, an educative experience that enables personal growth.

Indeed, Jas identifies clients as educators:

"…it does all kind of come around and help you in a way. So, it's almost like your clients are coming and educating you..." (Jas).

Jas's repositioning of the hairstylist-client dynamic outlines the reciprocity of relational exchange. As opposed to orienting clients exclusively as recipients of social support, she portrays them as contributors to her own personal development.

1c: Mutual Support in the Hairstylist-Client Relationship

The theme of reciprocity becomes further prominent in accounts of mutual support in the hairstylist-client relationship. Hope described this as:

"…sometimes it's a two-way thing. Sometimes they're therapising me." (Hope).

Hope's account illustrates the inversion of roles, where clients become the ones providing social support. This acknowledges that support does not flow in one direction.

Christine expands on this by presenting her relationship with certain clients as a trusted support system:

"…I use my clients for support also… I have shared stuff about my breakups…things that have happened in my life…not into huge detail because I think there is a level of it being unprofessional…" (Christine).

Christine's perspective showcases both the extent of her disclosures to clients but also an awareness of her professional boundaries. By not going 'into huge detail' she

speaks to a bargaining between vulnerability and professionalism when utilising clients as a source of social support.

Benjamina depicted a notable role reversal:

> *"…it is a two way…sometimes it's me and…I'm the one saying, 'oh my God, I'm freaking out…'. I'm planning a wedding and then one of the girls I had in had not long been married so I was picking her brain…it was a…role reversal and that was the first time in a long time I thought 'well, actually I'm the one having been counselled for a change…'." (Benjamina).*

Benjamina highlights that it is not the norm for her to be the socially supported. Indeed, the novelty of this indicates that participants may predominantly be the providers of social support and, when this is flipped, it proves to be significant.

Conclusion

This GET highlights that providing social support is a meaningful part of participants' work. Caring for clients brings joy and gratification while also shaping participants' sense of self. Participants described reciprocal relationships in which they are inspired, educated, and emotionally sustained by their clients.

GET 2: The Emotional Weight of Social Support in Hairstyling

While the first GET outlined the fulfilment participants derive from providing social support to their clients, the second GET captures the costs of such engagement.

2a: Overwhelm and Emotional Fatigue

Across accounts, participants described experiencing emotional overwhelm in their roles, highlighting that they are routinely cast as untrained supporters in sensitive topics. Hope chronicled the cumulative effect of this:

> *"I've burnt out twice…when it just felt like every single client had needed to draw my energy out of me to support their own mental health." (Hope).*

Tammy offers further insight into emotional overwhelm, notably when exchanges with clients feel forced:

> *"…you get a small part of clients…that I would never speak to in any other capacity or probably have anything in common with… And I think that's what drains me because it feels less authentic, and so I feel more wiped from those type of clients." (Tammy).*

This suggests that perceived inauthenticity in client interactions may contribute to emotional exhaustion by necessitating greater emotional labour.

Christine provides another example of how client exchanges can lead to overwhelm and emotional fatigue:

> *"…we've had…things that have happened to us as staff and I guess it can be quite triggering for people if you bring that up …it's really hard to be able to police that." (Christine).*

Christine's account positions herself as both a witness and silent sufferer, underscoring the potential that providing social support to clients can evoke personal distress.

Similarly, Benjamina offers an account of the emotional residue of her clients' suffering, describing a lingering weight that stays with her beyond the salon:

> *"If someone has got quite a serious issue…you can really take that on… You don't just leave it, they don't just walk out the door and then you think 'ohh that's, that's done'." (Benjamina).*

2b: Multitasking in Emotional Labour

Participants highlighted the simultaneous cognitive, physical, and emotional demands of their roles, a form of multitasking that distinguishes their work from many other helping professions. Benjamina noted that such dual demands can be burdensome:

> *"You give advice, but you're also trying to concentrate…you know that this is such an underrated profession…there's so much that actually goes into it that you do have to really concentrate… it's quite tiring because there's a lot of mental work going on." (Benjamina).*

Benjamina's account highlights how the interplay of cognitive and emotional engagement challenges skilled precision, underscoring the unique and often unacknowledged demands of hairstyling compared to more regulated caregiving roles.

Tammy provides a unique perspective on this having recently qualified as a psychotherapist whilst working as a hairstylist:

> *"I actually find…the therapy work easier than being a hairstylist because…the time is very boundaried but, if you're getting locked into a conversation with a client and you're doing a full head of highlights…you can't just be like...'we're running to an end'…you still have to get that colour done." (Tammy).*

Tammy describes the challenge of multitasking in hairstyling, where relational engagement must be sustained alongside time-sensitive technical work. Unlike formal therapy, she notes, hairstyling lacks clear time boundaries, intensifying emotional strain and highlighting how structural features of the role shape social support provision.

2c: Unintended Consequences

Some participants described how the emotional demands of hairstyling spill into their personal lives, producing unintended relational and behavioural effects. For example, Hope reflected on the impact on her romantic life:

> *"I don't date…partly because to finish work and then go on a date would feel like I'm just seeing a new client…the hairdressing head goes on." (Hope).*

Hope's account shows how the performative emotional labour of hairstyling carries into her personal life, depleting her emotional resources and limiting her capacity for authentic connection. She described turning to alcohol in response to this depletion:

> *"…I drink quite a lot, and I think part of that's definitely a response to overwhelm. Come home, shut the brain off, stop thinking about everything that everyone's just piled on top of you…" (Hope).*

Tammy adds that sustained emotional labour may lead to maladaptive coping strategies, particularly during busy periods:

> *"You often have to have the same conversation, especially around Christmas, about 20 times in one day. And so…if we were finishing work…then going straight out, of course, I was going to need a line of coke before I went anywhere…because you've kind of got nothing left..." (Tammy).*

Here, Tammy emphasises the intensity of the relational and performative demands of the role and how such emotional labour can extend beyond the salon into behavioural consequences.

Conclusion

This GET revealed that offering social support in hairstyling can be emotionally taxing. Repeated client disclosures can create cumulative strain, blurring professional empathy and personal wellbeing. The fusion of technical and emotional labour leaves little space for recovery, often pushing participants toward personal coping strategies to manage exhaustion.

GET 3: Managing Social Support in Hairstyling

While GET 2 highlighted the emotional exhaustion that can result from providing social support, the third GET speaks to the procedures participants utilise to manage this aspect of their work.

3a: Boundary Negotiation and Conversation Management

A recurrent theme across accounts was the need to establish boundaries in hairstylist-client relationships. Georgie described these skills as largely self-taught and experiential:

> *"…learning where your kind of boundaries lie is a good thing, but I think that comes with time and...having a few probably quite awkward conversations." (Georgie).*

Georgie suggests a lack of formal training, with boundaries developed through trial, error, and difficult experiences rather than external guidance. This self-directed boundary setting points to an absence of organisational support. As a result, boundary setting may function as both a personal coping strategy and a professional expectation.

Similarly, conversation management was reported as a strategy that is learnt along the way to help regulate the demands of the hairstylist-client exchange. Georgie, for example, explained how she regularly redirects conversations:

> *"…unless I can really feel like someone needs to just like really unload…I will just…start to steer it. I wouldn't completely change the conversation matter, but I would try and sort of spin it..." (Georgie).*

Here, Georgie demonstrates how she utilises conversation management to strike a balance between protecting her wellbeing and ensuring clients still feel supported. Thus, boundaries may be shaped by the tacit demand to remain emotionally available.

3b: Coping Strategies and Self-care

While boundary negotiation and conversation management help participants manage emotional demands during client encounters, coping efforts also extend beyond the interaction itself. They described a range of practices, both within and outside the salon, that support rest and recovery. Hope, for instance, emphasised the value of silence and solitude after work:

> *"…when I am in the salon, I can keep up a steady stream of energy but the second the last client leaves the radio goes off... Silence at home…I live alone…I need the peace." (Hope).*

Hope's account accentuates the intensity of her work, where social and sensory demands accrue throughout the day. The intentional process of switching off from noise and company reveals a technique of restoring herself following the continuous strains of attending to clients.

Other participants spoke about relational strategies being a fundamental aspect of self-care post work. Indeed, Benjamina noted:

> *“I normally would speak to my partner and often share with him…voicing it with other people I think helps because…you second guess like ‘have I said the right thing?’.” (Benjamina).*

This reliance on personal networks highlights the absence of formal emotional support mechanisms in the salon. Beyond friends and family, some participants sought validation from broader communities, with Benjamina describing how online groups helped ease feelings of isolation:

> *“I do hear from…groups and forums…where people post they ‘have just had enough’…I'll read those things and think ‘OK, yeah…this is impacting other people as well’.” (Benjamina).*

Benjamina described finding comfort in reading online posts that confirm her experiences are shared, with even passive engagement reinforcing that the emotional demands of hairstyling are collective rather than individual.

To conclude, Hope provided a notable description of seeking formal therapy as a much-needed measure following burnout:

> *“I burnt out because when my mental health is bad…then clients were coming in…going ‘ohh but my life’, and I was like ‘right, OK… Talk me through it. Let's do this’,…and eventually I just went ‘I have to talk to a therapist. I can't keep holding all of this’.” (Hope).*

Hope conveys the heavy burden of accumulated social support provision and the acute necessity for formal support. Unlike the more routine coping mechanisms described elsewhere, Hope highlights how, in the absence of institutional support, professional therapy became vital for survival in her role.

Conclusion

This GET revealed how participants navigate the emotional demands of their work through an interwoven process of self-taught boundary setting, conversation management, and self-care.

GET 4: Professional Recognition and Institutional Support in Hairstyling

Building on participants' emotional management strategies, the fourth GET examines how this links to professional recognition and institutional support.

4a: Professional Recognition

For some participants, professional recognition transcends technical expertise to include the emotional and intellectual dimensions of hairstyling. Indeed, Hope challenges the perception of hairstyling as purely aesthetic:

> *"…I think if there's going to be the the recognition that being a hairdresser is more than just cutting hair is a good step." (Hope).*

Hope's account reflects a desire for collective acknowledgement of hairstylists' contributions and frustration with reductive framings that overlook their emotional labour alongside technical skill. This suggests that professional identity is closely tied to public and institutional validation, and that the lack of recognition for emotional labour can create tension between practitioners' expertise and societal perceptions of their role.

Hope adds that the technical aspects of hairstyling are often overlooked:

> *"You're holding all of that information and…at the same time as your head is going 'right so should I use a 731 or a 713…where shall I place this foil'? It's a lot more complex than I think most people realise when they look at hairdressers and they go 'yeah, you're just a hairdresser'." (Hope).*

Here, Hope highlights the multi-faceted expertise of hairstylists and resists the trivialised understanding of being 'just a hairdresser' by explaining her work as a delicate balancing act between technical decision-making and emotional attunement.

4b: Institutional Support

Across accounts, participants described an absence of training to prepare them for social support provision. Certainly, Jas described that training structures are entirely technical:

> *"They talk about more the hair…but there could be more or or at least an option for people to sort of say 'I need help with when someone says this…" (Jas).*

Jas's desire for 'at least an option' indicates modest expectations, not mandatory reform, but rather a recognition that some hairstylists may benefit from structured guidance regarding client exchanges.

Benjamina concurred, suggesting a shift in focus from outward skills to training that equips hairstylists to protect their own wellbeing:

> *"There was no mention…of…mental health impact on the actual hairdresser in terms of what you're dealing with with your clients…but I think having something in the training…would be really useful. And there's definitely room for it." (Benjamina, 303).*

Benjamina's insistence that there is 'definitely room for it' positions this gap as a curricular oversight. Her account highlights a disconnection whereby she routinely absorbs emotional disclosures, yet training leaves her underprepared for such work. This proposes an implicit devaluation and cultural minimisation of the legitimacy of the emotional aspect of hairstylists' roles. This gap suggests that social positioning may render this emotional labour invisible, positioning psychosocial contributions as secondary to technical skill and less deserving of formal recognition.

Beyond training, participants envisioned other structural forms of support to aid in addressing the emotional demands of their role. Christine noted:

> *"…there definitely is room for some kind of after support or just like tools on how to deal with having to listen to that while you're at work because…there's this really kind of grey area…I do think that there's room for, I don't know…what it would look like, but there's definitely room for aftercare." (Christine).*

Christine humanises hairstylists as people who have vulnerabilities. The 'grey area' she describes is that clients' sharing cannot be restricted, yet hairstylists remain unprotected.

While Chrstine appears unsure as to what institutional support might look like, Hope suggests that industry-specific mental health support could provide relief:

> *"…maybe we need…better mental health support provision… If there was a more focused like specific to our our challenges…but yeah some kind of acknowledgement…not in a joking way, that what we do is actually quite crucial but…it comes at a price and therefore there might be the provision of support for us." (Hope).*

Hope's phrasing that the work hairstylists do 'comes at a price' highlights the experiential cost of social support provision without systemic relief. Her insistence that recognition is 'not in a joking way' suggests that she believes that hairstylists' emotional labour is often trivialised, minimising its impact and, perhaps, offering insight as to why such support structures do not already exist.

Conclusion

This GET highlights participants' calls for training, post-interaction, and psychological support reflecting a yearning for structural recognition that legitimises the full scope of their work and promotes a more sustainable practice.

Conclusion

Participants described the hairstylist-client relationship as deeply meaningful, with listening, advising, and caring framed as sources of fulfilment and mutual support. However, alongside this, they reported the emotional toll of providing such care, often experienced as exhausting and extending into their personal lives. To cope, participants developed informal, self-taught strategies, largely without institutional

support. This lack of formal recognition for the emotional dimensions of hairstyling underpinned participants' calls for professional validation and structured support.

Discussion

GET 1: Fulfilment in the Hairstylist-Client Relationship

1a: Joy and Gratification in Caregiving

This subtheme captured the enjoyment and fulfilment participants derive from emotionally connecting with their clients through the provision of social support. Across narratives, providing social support was described as a valued aspect of both professional and personal identity, suggesting that these moments of human connection may be significant to their experience of job satisfaction. These findings echo existing research that demonstrates that hairstylists derive fulfilment and satisfaction from the relational aspects of their work (Hill & Bradley, 2010; Sheane, 2012), yet the current findings extend this by revealing that such gratification is experienced as both emotional and existential. For example, participants expressed that supporting their clients provided them not only with satisfaction, but with a sense of being needed and feeling valued.

Similarly, participants described that, through frequent and close contact with their clients, they develop bonds that resemble personal relationships. Such descriptions of friendship-like relationships align with research that highlights the social intimacy of hairstyling interactions (Barnes, 2001; Garzaniti et al., 2011). Therefore, it could be reasoned that the gratification that emerges from such connections might aid in explaining why hairstylists, despite engaging in emotionally demanding work, consistently report high job satisfaction (Page et al., 2022). Undoubtedly, such

positive framing of emotional labour in hairstyling sits in tension with traditional literature on emotional labour which typically associates emotional labour with decreased job satisfaction (Hochschild, 1983).

1b: Growing Through Relational Exchange

Participants reported that providing social support to their clients contributed to their own learning and growth. This process of gaining understanding through clients' narratives proposes that hairstylists are not just passive listeners, but active participants in reciprocal exchanges that foster personal development for them. Participant accounts revealed a dynamic of give and take in which providing social support to their clients resulted in self-reflection and self-awareness for themselves. This illustrates the concept of relational reflexivity, where engagement with others' experiences prompts personal growth and re-evaluation of one's own circumstances (Donati & Archer, 2015).

Such findings represent a novel contribution to the literature as, while previous studies have acknowledged that hairstyling involves emotional engagement and relational care (Hill & Bradley, 2010; Sheane, 2012), few have documented how this work can promote hairstylists' own development. This identification of potential growth through relational exchange broadens the conceptualisation of emotional labour in hairstyling, suggesting that the relational environment of the salon may serve as a unique context for hairstylists' own learning and emotional expansion.

1c: Mutual Support in the Hairstylist-Client Relationship

The final subtheme highlights that emotional support in the hairstylist–client relationship is reciprocal, with hairstylists serving not only as providers but also as recipients of social support. This offers a novel perspective on emotional labour in hairstyling by indicating that participants' well-being may be enhanced through social support provision. Rather than confirming traditional theories that emphasise strain and depletion (Hochschild, 1983), this suggests that mutual care and relational equality may sustain job satisfaction, even amid emotional demands. This is consistent with literature that maintains that reciprocal emotional exchange can reduce dissonance and burnout (Delroisse et al., 2023) and may aid in understanding the paradox of high job satisfaction among hairstylists despite the emotional demands of their work (Page et al., 2022).

Conclusion

Collectively, the findings in this GET contribute novel insights by challenging the assumption that emotional labour in hairstyling is innately depleting. Instead, participants depicted a dynamic of growth, reciprocity, and personal meaning that enables emotional labour to be experienced as emotionally fulfilling.

GET 2: The Emotional Weight of Social Support in Hairstyling

2a: Overwhelm and Emotional Fatigue

Participants revealed that providing social support to their clients regularly left them feeling drained and fatigued, with sustained emotional engagement described as depleting. This sense of depletion aligns with existing research on emotional labour (Jeung et al., 2018) and burnout among hairstylists (Cohen, 2010; Page et al., 2022).

Participants described that social support provision could become further fatiguing when interactions felt forced or inauthentic. This mirrors existing research showing that emotional dissonance intensifies emotional strain and can lead to fatigue, withdrawal, and reduced empathy (Hochschild, 1983; Gérain & Zech, 2019). Participants also reported that these challenges were especially pronounced for younger or more junior hairstylists, aligning with research suggesting that limited life and work experience increases vulnerability to burnout and compassion fatigue (Cocker & Joss, 2016; Jeung et al., 2018), and with salon-specific findings that younger stylists often feel unprepared for the role of ‘incidental counsellor’ (McCann & Myers, 2023). Extending existing research, participants further described feeling overwhelmed when client disclosures triggered distressing personal memories, an aspect of emotional labour that is less well-documented in hairstyling literature, highlighting how social support provision can evoke individually specific and deeply personal forms of distress.

2b: Multitasking in Emotional Labour

Alongside such experiences, this subtheme highlighted the challenges participants face regarding the simultaneous management of technical, cognitive, and emotional tasks with them describing having to ‘juggle everything at once’. Indeed, participants illustrated a complex dynamic of role layering where they act as artists, technicians, and confidants within a single appointment. This multi-focus reflects Hochschild’s (1983) concept of dual role strain in emotional labour, where employees are required to balance instrumental work demands with affective performance. This requires, what participants described as, constant mental and emotional juggling, positioning hairstyling as a cognitively demanding profession, something that is often unacknowledged by those outside of it.

These findings reinforce existing research recognising salon work as multilayered emotional labour (Gimlin, 1996; Page et al., 2022). However, this study adds nuance by demonstrating how participants actively navigate these overlapping demands concurrently. Certainly, participants described engaging in real time emotional monitoring while assessing clients’ tone and expression to decide when to listen, comfort, or divert conversation. Participants reported that such attentiveness required substantial cognitive and emotional energy, supporting Jeung et al.’s (2018) characterisation of hairstyling as ‘high burnout work’.

2c: Unintended Consequences

This subtheme emphasised that the demands of social support provision often extend beyond the salon and into hairstylists' personal lives, leading to relational and behavioural consequences. For example, participants reported that their 'salon mode' of emotional availability became maladaptive outside of work, with some participants describing how the ability to rapidly connect with others can complicate personal relationships, with intimate interactions sometimes feeling overly performative. Such an impact highlights a novel finding, expanding the discourse on the costs of emotional labour in hairstyling.

For some participants, the costs of emotional labour included behavioural consequences, such as the use of alcohol and drugs. Indeed, some described using substances to manage the performative demands of salon work, highlighting the concept of emotional residue, where work spills over into personal life (Guy et al., 2014). This concept has rarely been discussed within the context of hair salons; however, it aligns with broader research linking occupational stress and emotional burden with an increased risk of substance use (Grandey et al., 2019; Varma et al., 2024).

Conclusion

These findings align with existing research indicating that emotional labour in hairstyling can lead to adverse outcomes such as burnout, overwhelm, and

emotional fatigue. They also offer novel insights into the relational and behavioural implications of social support provision in hairstyling.

GET 3: Managing Social Support in Hairstyling

3a: Boundary Negotiation and Conversation Management

Participants' accounts stressed the necessity of managing interpersonal boundaries in hairstyling. Collectively, participants demonstrated that they continually calibrate their emotional availability with clients and, in the absence of formal organisational structures, rely heavily on personal boundary management skills to maintain the delicate balance between client expectations and their own emotional wellbeing. This is consistent with boundary regulation theory which suggests that individuals continuously adjust the permeability of their personal boundaries in response to relational demands (Petronio, 2002).

Conversation steering emerged as an important strategy participants utilised to negotiate boundaries and manage client interactions. Such practices are consistent with emotional labour theory which demonstrates how employees manage the emotional content of their interactions to maintain relational harmony (Hochschild, 1983). Moreover, Hope's redirection of intrusive questions from clients reflects what Grandey (2000) described as a protective manoeuvre aimed at maintaining both professional functioning and personal wellbeing. Such findings represent a novel contribution to the field, highlighting that participants actively engage with strategic boundary management, and not just reactive coping.

However, while such strategies appeared to aid participants in managing the provision of social support to their clients, the limits of these approaches also became apparent through participants' narratives. For example, when emotionally exhausted, participants recalled finding it difficult to skilfully uphold the boundaries they usually managed. This provides a novel extension of the existing literature, emphasising the situational calibration of self-protection in hairstyling.

3b: Coping Strategies and Self-care

Participants described a multitude of coping strategies they utilised to manage the provision of social support to their clients. These may be understood as attempts to replenish emotional resources which have become depleted (Hochschild, 1983; Grandey, 2000). They may also reflect a form of self-protection required to sustain long-term engagement in a role that demands recurring emotional presence without institutional structures to buffer its psychological costs (Page et al., 2022).

Within the salon, micro-breaks served as informal coping mechanisms offering momentary relief for participants. Support from colleagues was also reported to be an effective coping strategy. This may reflect the concept of the buffering effect of social support in emotionally demanding work, a notion widely supported in organisational psychology (Halbesleben, 2006). Participants also reported relying on psychological compartmentalisation which has been identified as a protective cognitive strategy that prevents emotional spillover and mitigates burnout in other service-based roles (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1991).

Outside of the salon, participants described utilising coping strategies such as exercising, talking with friends, and spending time alone. These practices align with recovery theory which proposes that individuals restore depleted emotional and cognitive resources through detachment, relaxation, and meaningful leisure activities (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). Participants also reported using online communities as a form of emotional validation and reassurance. Such engagement is a novel finding, reflecting more contemporary strategies of mitigating the difficulties associated with hairstyling. Similarly, the recognition of formal therapy as a necessary intervention when informal coping strategies prove insufficient provides a novel insight into the limits of self-managed emotional regulation in hairstyling.

Conclusion

Together, these findings deepen existing understandings and offer new insights into how participants manage emotional demands through self-developed strategies. These practices highlight participants' agency while also revealing limited institutional support.

GET 4: Professional Recognition and Institutional Support in Hairstyling

4a: Professional Recognition

Participants' accounts revealed a desire for hairstyling to be recognised as a profession defined not only by technical expertise, but also by cognitive and emotional complexity. This finding largely mirrors the long-standing notion that salon

work is socially undervalued and stereotyped as low-skilled (Hanson, 2019; Page et al., 2024). Participants articulated that this undervaluation delegitimises and undermines the emotional labour they perform, making it both invisible and unsupported.

This tension appears to generate a degree of occupational identity dissonance in which participants are societally positioned as ‘just’ aesthetic workers, yet their lived experience is one of enacting complex emotional care. In participant accounts it appears as though a large part of their sense of professional identity is contingent on public and institutional validation and, when their emotional labour goes unrecognised, contributes toward feelings of exhaustion and frustration. These findings are consistent with Page et al. (2024) who argued that a lack of recognition for the work hairstylists do contributes towards an effort-compensation imbalance and burnout. Indeed, participants conveyed that, without recognition, emotional labour can become harder to sustain and justify.

4b: Institutional Support

Participants consistently reported an absence of institutional structures to support the emotional demands of hairstyling, with them purportedly feeling underprepared and unprotected as a result. This finding replicates decades of research documenting insufficient training for hairstylists, particularly regarding client interactions and boundary management (McLaren et al., 2010; Sattler & Deane, 2016).

Participants' descriptions of only being trained in the more practical elements of hairstyling implies the prioritising of technical, over emotional, skill. While previous literature has recognised this and emphasised the need for communication skills training (Milne & Mullin, 1987; Anderson et al., 2010), the present study proposed that, alongside this, participants also desire training aimed at boundary regulation and self-protection. Such narratives suggest a shift from client-oriented training to training that supports hairstylists' wellbeing. This aligns with research which emphasises the importance of stress management and emotion regulation skills for emotional labour providers (Gérain & Zech, 2019; Wolkowitz, 2002).

Moreover, participants expressed a desire for post-interaction support. Their accounts captured the potential asymmetry present in the hairstylist–client relationship whereby clients may discuss sensitive or triggering topics, often unaware of hairstylists' related vulnerabilities. This asymmetry may mirror dynamics seen in formal mental health and caring professions. However, in such professions, organisational practices such as supervision, reflective practice, and debriefing may be present and aid in preventing burnout and compassion fatigue. Yet, in hairstyling, such structures appear to be absent.

Hope's suggestion of industry-specific mental health provision speaks to a recognition that emotional labour in hairstyling has psychological consequences. It also aligns with existing research that reports that hairstylists desire mental health support (Cowen et al.,1979; Page et al, 2022). This proposes that institutional support may not merely be desirable but essential for professional sustainability, with

an absence of training, post-interaction, and mental health support placing participants in ethically complex and emotionally precarious positions.

Conclusion

Collectively, these findings align with and extend existing research showing that hairstylists' experiences are shaped by limited institutional support. Participants' calls for training, post-interaction, and psychological support reflect a need for greater recognition of the full scope of their work and for more sustainable practice.

Strengths and Limitations

The present study contributes novel insights into a population whose emotional work is widely acknowledged anecdotally, yet empirically understudied. By focusing on hairstylists' personal experiencing of social support provision, this study addresses a significant gap in the field. Moreover, by highlighting factors that shape hairstylists' wellbeing and sense of support within their roles, these findings offer practical implications for the profession, including areas for improved training and support.

Despite its strengths, several limitations should be considered. Firstly, the sample displayed limited diversity, with all participants identifying as women. Although women make up a significant majority of hairstylists in the UK (PolicyBee, 2022), the absence of other gender identities limits the range of experiences represented. Moreover, the study's geographical specificity limits the transferability of these findings as all data was collected in one city within one country, which may differ

from others in terms of salon regulations, training expectations, and the societal role of hairstylists. While qualitative research does not aim for statistical generalisability, these contextual boundaries remain important when considering the applicability of this study's findings.

A further limitation relates to the use of purposive sampling combined with passive snowballing, which introduces the possibility of sampling bias. For instance, this study only reflects the experiences of hairstylists who feel they do provide social support to their clients and does not capture those who reject or do not identify with this aspect of the role. Similarly, the sample may have disproportionately attracted individuals who felt motivated to share their stories; perhaps those with more pronounced or emotionally charged experiences of providing social support, with hairstylists who felt neutral or indifferent, underrepresented. What is more, while the sample size of six participants is consistent with IPA's idiographic commitment and considered appropriate for doctoral research (Smith et al., 2009), it, inevitably, restricted the range of perspectives represented. Considering these limitations, the findings of the present study should be understood as contextually situated and reflective of the experiences of this particular group.

Implications for Practice and Research

This research yields several significant implications for practice, training, and future research. Indeed, these findings highlight several ways in which mental health professionals can meaningfully contribute to the therapeutic support of hairstylists. For example, participants described a range of emotional and relational

consequences arising from client disclosures. This suggests that therapeutic support may be required not only to address overt distress, but also to assist hairstylists in developing ways of processing clients' disclosures.

Furthermore, the findings suggest a need for more robust structural support within the hairstyling industry. Certainly, implementing protective factors, such as consistent access to training, formal recognition of emotional labour, and the provision of appropriate mental health resources, could improve the wellbeing of hairstylists and mitigate some of the risks associated with social support provision. Indeed, the results of this study imply that hairstylists would benefit from more systematic, sector-wide access to training that prioritises their emotional wellbeing, rather than solely enhancing their capacity to respond to clients' disclosures.

Similarly, a further implication concerns the importance of greater social and institutional recognition of the multifaceted work performed by hairstylists. Enhanced structural and societal acknowledgement of their emotional and interpersonal contributions may help to legitimise their role as informal supporters and, in turn, create opportunities for improved working conditions and wellbeing initiatives.

Beyond implications for practice and training, this study highlights several directions for future research. For example, investigating the possible longer-term psychological effects of providing support, such as vicarious trauma, burnout, or compassion fatigue, could inform targeted interventions, while quantitative studies using standardised measures of depression, anxiety, and burnout may complement qualitative findings and enhance generalisability. Further research could also

examine differences across salon types, price points and employment structures to better understand how organisational culture, clientele, and workplace hierarchies influence emotional labour. Finally, extending research beyond London and the UK would enable cross-cultural comparisons and clarify how regulatory, cultural, and economic contexts shape hairstylists' roles as informal supporters.

Conclusion

Whilst the role of hairstylists as social supporters appears to be receiving increased recognition in the literature, little is known about how hairstylists make sense of, navigate, and manage this. By examining their lived experiences, the present research sought to explore this by answering the question: 'how do hairstylists in the UK experience the provision of social support to their clients?'. The findings both align with existing literature and offer new insights. They reaffirm hairstyling as a form of multilayered emotional labour conducted within a context of limited professional recognition and support, while extending existing conceptualisations by showing that this labour involves vulnerability and personal development. Gaining such insight is vital for understanding hairstylists' wellbeing and how best to support them. These experiences can inform the development of more contextually sensitive professional guidance, ultimately strengthening workplace wellbeing and broader mental health outcomes for hairstylists.

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