Black fashion designers matter: A qualitative study exploring the experiences of
Black female fashion design entrepreneurs

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Background

Black female fashion designers come from a rich heritage that uniquely prepares them for entrepreneurship. The societal challenges and limitations they have faced throughout history and continue to face today have served as motivational factors, often pushing Black female fashion designers to seek solace through self-employment. The historical past of Black women's involvement in the textile, apparel and fashion industries is important in developing the complex understanding of the motivation that drives them to succeed today despite the limitations that are still placed before them.

Purpose

While there has been much research regarding women's motivations for pursuing entrepreneurship (Davidson, Fielden and Omar, 2010; Smith, 2000), there is still a gap in the literature concerning Black female business owners. After conducting an exhaustive search using Google Scholar regarding research on entrepreneurship in the field of fashion, a total of 48 articles were found; however, a majority of the studies pertained to fashion entrepreneurship in African, Asian and European countries. There is an apparent void in academic research concerning fashion entrepreneurship in the United States as well. Further, studies specifically focused on Black female fashion design entrepreneurs are scarce. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs by examining how they launched, financed and successfully maintained their businesses.

Research Questions

This research was approached by developing the following research questions: (a) What are the characteristics, personality traits, background, education and life experiences of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs?, (b) What barriers and challenges do Black female fashion design entrepreneurs face in regards to their race, class, gender, geographic location or other factors and how do these constructs intersect to inform their individual experiences?, (c) What are the motivational factors for starting and maintaining a business among Black female fashion design entrepreneurs as they relate to Black feminist thought?, (d) What are the success and sustainability factors for Black female fashion design entrepreneurs as they relate to Black feminist thought? and (e)What are the resources and educational opportunities that have been useful to Black female fashion design entrepreneurs?

Method and Theoretical Foundation

Through in-depth interviews the researcher inquired into the characteristics, personality traits, background, education and life experiences of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs; the barriers and challenges they face in regards to their race, class, gender, geographic location and other factors; their motivational factors for starting and maintaining a business; how they define and measure success; as well as an identification of resources and educational opportunities that they benefit from. To better understand the lived experiences of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs, the researcher utilized Black feminist thought as the main theoretical position for this research.

Findings

Utilizing interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as the initial method of inquiry, three superordinate themes, (a) social and environmental factors, (b) characteristics and personality traits and (c) business challenges and strategies and 16 major themes, (a) family influence, (b) circle of support, (c) community influence, (d) school environment, (e) culture of fashion, (f) travel experience, (g) knowledge seeker, (h) sharing knowledge, (i) knowledge of self, (j) entrepreneurial mindset, (k) business challenges, (l) facing adversity, (m) growth factors, (n) business strategies, (o) success factors and (p) giving back, emerged from the data. The interrelationship of the themes presented resulted in the development of a conceptual model of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs' experiences. The model displays six phases of events experienced by the Black female fashion design entrepreneurs: (a) nurturing environment; (b) acquiring knowledge; (c) building a foundation; (d) experiencing growth; (e) achieving success; and (f) giving back. The experiences of the Black fashion design entrepreneur are reinforced by her circle of support – the network of people who surround her, acting as a "community" to encourage and support her in accomplishing her business related goals. Throughout the Black fashion design entrepreneurs' experiences she also takes on the role of knowledge seeker, as she continuously seeks and gains knowledge relevant to the pursuit of her entrepreneurial goals.

Significance

This study is the first of its kind concerning Black female fashion designers and their experiences of entrepreneurship thus, it significantly contributes to academic scholarship in the interdisciplinary fields of apparel, merchandising, and design, Black studies, women and gender studies and entrepreneurship. The findings of this research can be useful to fashion design and apparel educators and small business consultants who may provide assistance to nascent Black female fashion design entrepreneurs. This information will also inform key fashion leaders in regards to ways of improving the lack of diversity in the fashion industry. Most of all, this research will serve as a source of positive reinforcement for Black women who are in search of examples of successful role models as they pursue their entrepreneurial endeavors.

References

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