

**Everything I do is for them: Motivations of African American Women Entrepreneurs in apparel/retail**

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**ABSTRACT**

*In this paper, we report on the motivations of African American women entrepreneurs concerning their lived experiences, as they consider and conduct aspects of their Apparel/Retail businesses. Data collection took place through in-depth interviews with thirteen African American women entrepreneurs. One major theme with two sub-themes was developed from the data. The theme revealed that African American women entrepreneurs viewed their Apparel/Retail businesses as a means of contributing to their communities. Our analysis suggested that gaining a better understanding of the entrepreneurial motivations African American women entrepreneurs provides insight into creating more equitable and inclusive entrepreneurship initiatives. Essentially, their entrepreneurial motivations indicate how they can be further supported given their experiences in Apparel/Retail businesses.*

*Keywords: African American women entrepreneurs, motivation, qualitative, apparel, retail*

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**Introduction and purpose**

Decision making is complex and so are motivations. Entrepreneurial motivations involve thinking about how to increase opportunities, independence, and income, while enduring many challenges within entrepreneurship (Wulandari, Djastuti, & Nuryakin, 2017). For some U.S. women entrepreneurs, motivations have become one way for them to positively impact the greater good of their communities. This study reveals how women entrepreneurs choose to give back to others while operating their businesses. In particular, this paper focuses on entrepreneurial motivations among African American women entrepreneurs.

African American women entrepreneurs are steadily contributing to the Retail industry. Retail (15%) ranks second considering the top three industries with the highest total revenue for women-owned businesses (Ventureneur, 2018). Additionally, African American women-owned businesses have increased by 66.9% from 2007, creating 609,766 businesses in the U.S. economy (National Women's Business Council, 2012). For these reasons, there has been a particular interest in understanding different contexts considering women entrepreneurs' experiences and motivations (Hodges et al., 2015; Matthews, Blanchflower, & Childs, 2019; Robinson, Blockson, & Robinson, 2007). Thus,

exploring entrepreneurial motivations from the viewpoint of African American women entrepreneurs in Apparel/Retail is important. Exploring this topic is helpful because few studies provide insight into the motivations of African American women entrepreneurs' while operating an Apparel/Retail business in the United States.

This study explores the perspective of African American women entrepreneurs' by focusing on the decisions they make in their everyday lives as entrepreneurs. The purpose is to gain an understanding of their rationale when considering and conducting their Apparel/Retail businesses. This study was guided by literature on entrepreneurship, specifically within the context of women and minority entrepreneurs. Then, findings from this qualitative study were used to discuss implications and further research regarding African American women entrepreneurs in Apparel/Retail.

### Literature review

There is a large body of research on entrepreneurial motivations (Segal, Borgia, & Schoenfeld, 2005; Dawson and Henly, 2012) and classification schemes. For example, Amit and Muller (1995) referred to push versus pull, meaning some entrepreneurs are motivated by dissatisfaction with their current state and 'pushed' into entrepreneurship, while others see opportunities and are 'pulled' into entrepreneurship. Although financial gain is a very strong motivation, whether push or pull, the definition of entrepreneurship has changed over time to incorporate more than financial gain (Paredo and McLean, 2006). It also includes being a means to change society. The motivation of "make a mark on the world" has been studied (Solesvik, Iakovleva, & Trifilova, 2019, p.688) and has been hypothesized to be a greater motivation for women than men. However, this hypothesis needs more study (Marlow and McAdam, 2013). Past studies of women entrepreneurs have shown they are motivated by many factors including self-identity, independence, financial (Bennett

and Dann, 2000; Walker and Webster, 2007), and lifestyle issues (Clain, 2000; Georgellis and Wall, 2005; Eddleston and Powell, 2012; National Women's Business Council, 2013 ). This all suggests that motivations can be highly complex. However, specific studies of women of color either generally lack rich descriptions or are difficult to locate.

Aspaas (2004) studied Hispanic, African American, and Native American women entrepreneurs. They investigated several factors related to their businesses: *economic, networking, household and familial, spatial, and personal linkages* (Aspaas, 2004). Aspaas (2004) found similarities among women's services and how they desired to meet the specific needs of their own ethnic/cultural groups. For everyone, the factors reflected the traditional caregiving role of women and their need to improve one's communities by investing in human capital. Although the Native American women in the study were operating their businesses because no other employment existed, their businesses also allowed them to remain close to their families and culture. Aspaas (2004) concluded that the women's small businesses considering Candida Brush's (1992) assertions of women's roles moving between productive and reproductive; as images of the women's culture, communities, and personal self-actualization were shown (Aspaas, 2004; Brush, 1992). While Aspaas' (2004) study of entrepreneurship in the United States was relevant at the time, there may be additional circumstances and situations since 2004 that need to be explored.

There have been international studies of women entrepreneurs. For example, Sharma and Gambhir (2017) conducted a case study of Meena Bindra, the founder of the Indian Apparel/Retail brand BIBA. They chose Bindra because she was an example of women's potential economic contributions. Bindra grew her business and brand while still managing her family. Also, Bindra had a passion for empowering women and young girls. Bindra's case study

shared many similarities with past studies, such as the complex nature of entrepreneurship (with an emphasis on exploring an apparel related occupation), the importance of motherhood, and how business decisions are intertwined with society's expectations of being a wife and a mother. However, other research found there are differences between women entrepreneurs in developing versus developed countries (Solesvik et al., 2019). The current study centers on African American women in the United States.

Gines (2018) used focus groups to interview 34 black women entrepreneurs in Kansas City, Oklahoma City, Wichita, Omaha and Denver and identified five major motivations: "workplace treatment", "perception of workplace value", "general workplace dissatisfaction", "passion" and "opportunity" (p. 16-17). The women had negative experiences in their workplaces that pushed them into pursuing entrepreneurship. They were pulled into starting their businesses by a love for their industry and the identification of a demand in the market. Robinson et al. (2007) conducted in-depth interviews with 62 African American women entrepreneurs in seven U.S. metropolitan areas and identified several motivations including *the significance of family history and family support* (group/family level), and *personal calling, and community orientations* (societal level). The women continued family or economic self-determination traditions while simultaneously attempting to fulfill family and professional commitments without compromise (*the significance of family history and family support*). They desired to assist their local and racial communities by providing employment and economic support, being able to serve as a positive role model, or perceiving one's business as a spiritual calling or to serve God for their chosen communities through their ventures (*personal calling and community orientations*). The lived experiences of African American women entrepreneurs were successfully captured by both Gines (2018) and Robinson et al. (2017). However,

we studied a different and more specific context: operating within Apparel/Retail businesses.

## Methodology

A phenomenological, qualitative study was conducted to examine the entrepreneurial motivations of African American women entrepreneurs concerning their experiences in Apparel/Retail. Within social and human science research, applying phenomenology enables understanding of the essence of a lived phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Moustakas, 1994). The guiding research question was as follows: *What motivates African American women entrepreneurs to consider and conduct their own businesses?*

## Sample

Following Institutional Review Board Approval, participants were recruited using purposeful and snowball sampling. To best answer this research question, recruitment methods ensured that participants met the specified criteria for this research study. All participants self-identified as an African American, woman, entrepreneur (or business owner) operating in any sector of the Textile and Apparel industry. Interviews were conducted with a total of thirteen African American women entrepreneurs who operated in the North and Southeastern parts of the United States. Participants interviewed for this study were in line with the exploratory nature of the proposed phenomenon that is experienced by all individuals selected in the sampling process.

## Data collection

The researcher was the data collection instrument. The participant's data was collected using three in-person, eight over the phone, and two Skype interviews that took place at a quiet and convenient location for the participant. Memos and field notes were also collected.

To protect the participants' identity, pseudonyms were used and all information

was stored on a password-protected computer. The researcher intended to interview participants within a one to one-and-half hour time period. Four interviews met this goal, six interviews surpassed this time, and three interviews took less than one hour to conduct. All interviews were audiotaped with the participants' consents. Using a semi-structured interview script and audio recording protocol assisted the researcher with achieving reliability in the data collection process. The use of this type of script allowed for a flexible format considering the wording and order of the questions as it allowed the interviewer to further inquire about pertinent information given certain situations. The primary investigator followed the same data collection procedures for all interview types to establish consistency and reliability.

The following questions are a sample, but not an exhaustive list, of all the questions asked to participants during the interviews: *What is it like to be an African American woman entrepreneur and/or What does being an African American woman entrepreneur personally mean to you as an individual?*

### **Data analysis**

After completing the data collection process, all interviews were transcribed verbatim. Participant confirmation was used to confirm that participants' experiences were documented accurately before analyzing data. The researcher referred to memos and field notes accordingly. Memos were examined along with the interview transcripts as a digital audit trail to validate thinking processes that clarify understandings through the data analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Field notes assisted in informal summaries based on what the researcher heard and observed in each interview. Collectively, the data allowed meaning to be examined by patterns and inferences. Spiggle's (1994) methods for analysis and interpretation were used to structure the interpretation of data. As a result of the analysis, the researchers

continued to use this iterative process to further develop the presented themes.

### **Being motivated for more than just myself**

After analysis, the main theme that emerged was *Being Motivated for More Than Just Myself*. This theme spoke to their willingness to make decisions considering aspects of their lived experiences and business practices. This pivotal theme entailed two sub-themes: (1) *Creating Opportunities for the Betterment of the Family*, and (2) *Help Me, So I Can Help Others*.

### **Creating opportunities for the betterment of the family**

Qualitative analysis of the data revealed participants saw their Apparel/Retail business as a means to change the lives of their immediate family. Referring to African American men and women, friends, and colleagues, Alexandra felt that they were "building back up the Black Wall Street." Before the destruction of Black Wall Street, African Americans living in the Greenwood community in Tulsa, Oklahoma was considered the wealthiest despite segregation (Messer, Shriver, & Adams, 2018). African American community members and leaders promoted and embraced entrepreneurial initiatives that were a social and economic attraction to African Americans seeking financial autonomy and creating improved living conditions such as accumulating wealth for future generations (Messer et al., 2018). Similar to that period of Black progression, many participants desire to enhance the living conditions of other African Americans. For Alexandra, she desires to help many generations of her family:

*Alexandra: Having a child and just knowing that I need something more is...what really drives me. Knowing that I need to provide. Knowing that I want to provide for my daughter and my family like I said my Mom has done so much for me and it is like I*

want to be able to retire her. She could still do hair, but I'm like you and grandma can come live with me. We are getting a house, and if y'all want to move in, I got room for y'all.

Alexandra believes it is her time to be the main provider and ensure that her family is taken care of. She continued by giving specific examples of how she desires to help her family:

*Alexandra: The houses [has] been getting kind of old and they need some work on them. I said that if I were to ever make it big enough [as a designer with enough financial capital] where I could move them, just move my family into another house in the country and we all just live out there. I would go back, and I would renovate the houses and turn them into Airbnb's because the houses are in very nice areas. My grandma's house is big, but it is just one level, and it needs to be updated. Like the contractors now and the people that are out there now with the ideas about the buildings stuff, I can turn those houses into something great. Have the money go back into their bank account, so that they're always making money...investing back into our people. I will always have money for my Mama and Grandma if I do this with the houses. I have a plan and I am striving for it like my twenty-year goal to just always circulating that money, and always taking care of my people.*

Having an entrepreneurial mindset, Alexandra aspires to venture into real estate as another means of providing opportunities for her family and others. Additionally, participants' entrepreneurial activities in Apparel/Retail often assisted them in encouraging their families to start their own

businesses. Saray characterizes how she presents this concept to her daughters:

*Saray: I want to teach my girls and one of the best parts about being a business owner is the fact that I have two daughters. They see how Mommy works, they see what Mommy does, and they see my husband and I have to work as a team, I don't do this by myself. I have a husband that works with me side by side, but I'm trying to teach my daughters how to own your own business. To get far in this world you really have to take chances and the dream that you want to see happen and do your best to fulfill it. So, I had to put something about my daughters because everything that I do is for them. Specifically, being a business owner, I do this for myself, but I also do this to show them that this can be done.*

Believing in the importance of turning dreams into reality, Saray demonstrates what she thinks is necessary to succeed in life. While African American women entrepreneurs are driven to promote opportunities of wealth for their families, helping others is also a challenging motivating factor when considering their operations in their Apparel/Retail businesses. This is further illustrated in the next theme, *Help me, so I can help others*.

### **Help me, so I can help others**

While all participants expressed the importance of obtaining help, it became clear that most of the women were interested in making a difference in their communities despite whether or not they received the help they needed in their Apparel/Retail businesses. For most participants, having a fashion-related business is a new experience. Kierra explains this notion of being new to Apparel/Retail, by suggesting that at times her business initiatives result in her cheering on herself, while also connecting to a

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network of friends who help to cheer her on towards her entrepreneurial goals:

*Kierra: My friends...they are getting excited for me and just texting me like how proud they are of me. Even so, I still have to cheer myself on and figure a lot of these things out by myself because this is a new field for me. So, any information that I see, I try to just gravitate towards it and learn by having studying sessions with whoever I feel like wants to spend time learning this with me.*

Participants often discussed how they like to make other people happy by providing a product or service that suits their clients' needs. Even so, Saray still considers closing up her shop:

*Saray: You know [sighs] it's like today...today was a hard day, all day long we made sixty dollars. Sixty bucks from twelve to eight. It cost one hundred and ten dollars for me to have the people work the store. That can be very hard when financially your revenue is not coming in the way you want it to come in. There are days, there's probably...every day I think about closing that damn store. Every day...I think about is it worth it. But I love it and it's part of my life. I would miss it terribly, but my gosh, new and creative ideas...what is going to bring a person into the store? What's going to make them buy from you so just having that thought all the time, my mind never sleeps.*

While she often questions what will bring people into her stores to purchase items, Saray understands that this is part of the dynamics of being in an apparel-related business and she is not completely ready to give up something she loves.

For Shanice, service to herself, communities, and organization is key:

*Shanice: It's about service and not just service to others, but doing what services me as well because if it serves me then I am all in. My business services a lot of women and communities as well. I'm able to donate to Veteran women's support initiatives. I am able to donate to girls' club-type initiatives and young girl or youth female programs, homeless women, things that are in the same spirit as dress for success. I am able to help women feel better about themselves by helping them gain confidence while letting them know that you can be comfortable, but you also can look above standard.*

While Shanice strives to improve her customers' well-being through clothing, she is also able to give to initiatives that share a similar mission of encouraging young girls and women to be confident. For Abigail, the need to address specific concerns and support Black communities further drives her business endeavors:

*Abigail: It started off as a need for my natural hair, I couldn't find any products that actually helped with sleep care. Finding some that actually fit, a bonnet, cap, or shower cap was a huge challenge and I just said I need to make my own. I've always done some type of crafting or sewing and so from there it became well, girlfriends needed it, daughters needed it, cousins needed it, so I am like you know what, I got something that people want, and it is not Asian made. We are buying our products from a country that doesn't even understand our needs. Let's make it here, let's appreciate each other, riding on that wave of supporting a sister and each other in our community.*

As she creates good quality products, she is also serving individuals that embrace a “Made in America” and “For Us, By Us” mentality. Thus, being able to maintain their business helps them to impact the greater good of women and their community.

### Implications and future research

The data from this study reveal a unique perspective of African American women entrepreneurs engaged in the Apparel/Retail industry that centers around their motivations being rooted in others more than themselves. That is, contributing to the greater good of their families and communities is what essentially drives them. Given this, several implications can be deemed from this research. First, since investing in their families and creating generational wealth from their businesses are a motivation for these entrepreneurs, banks may want to develop business accounts that support this goal for small business owners. For instance, business savings accounts for African American entrepreneurs could be developed within community banks that allow a portion of business earnings to go directly into savings accounts for their children’s college funds. Secondly, giving back to the community as a whole is important to this group of entrepreneurs. In that same token, it may be advantageous for Small Business organizations within the communities of these entrepreneurs to offer community grants that will benefit the businesses and communities these entrepreneurs operate in. For example, a grant that can be used to update the exterior buildings and landscaping of the retail locations of African American entrepreneurs would beautify the community as well as their businesses. One such grant was created in July 2020 by the Keep America Beautiful organization. Specifically, this grant supports the efforts of volunteers, residents, and business owners to prevent litter, promote recycling, and beautify areas in and around Martin Luther King Jr. corridors where their businesses are located. It also promotes neighborhood building by empowering individuals to

become engaged in the communities where they live and work (Keep America Beautiful, 2020).

Future research may reveal even more behind the innate nature of these African American women entrepreneurs. Specifically, studies that further assess whether generations of entrepreneurs may exist within an African American family would be interesting. It would also be meaningful to carry out in-depth interviews with family members, especially the children of African American entrepreneurs. This examination would determine the impact of their pursuits on their families because their entrepreneurial efforts are so girded in the betterment of their families.

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