

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

by

**Samii Kennedy Benson**

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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Program of Study Committee:  
Eulanda A. Sanders, Major Professor  
Wen Chang  
Tera R. Jordan  
Ellen C. McKinney  
Linda S. Niehm

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**DEDICATION**

*In honour of my most fashionable ancestor,*

*my grandmother,*

*Willie Mae Sims Benson*

*(January 25, 1927 – December 22, 2016)*

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**ABSTRACT**

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. Fifteen female fashion designers, ages 25 to 50 years old, who identified as Black or African American, participated in this study. The participants also met three out of the following criteria: (a) have completed a fashion design certificate or degree program, (b) design and produce a line at least twice a year, (c) participate in at least two fashion shows a year, (d) rely on their fashion design business as their primary source of income and/or (e) have been in business for at least five years.

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. In addition, other theoretical concepts including, intersectionality, the integration perspective, the social stratification and entrepreneurship framework, disadvantage theory and protected market theory were found to be applicable to this study.

Utilizing interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as the initial method of inquiry, 16 major themes emerged from the data: (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. 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.

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.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Background

The fashion industry has been criticized in recent years for its lack of racial diversity. According to a recent report investigating racial diversity at New York Fashion Week (NYFW), of the total 4,621 looks presented during the Fall 2014 NYFW preview, 79.69% were worn by White models, 9.75% were worn by Black models, 7.67% were worn by Asian models and 2.12% were worn by Latina models and these numbers have remained stagnant for the past decade or so (Stewart, 2014). The absence of racial diversity; however, does not end with models. Along with the underrepresentation of models of color, there is a racial (and gender) imbalance among every segment of the industry including, stylists, journalists, buyers, merchandise managers, executives and designers (Friedman, 2015).

While there has been a major push to put more Black models on the runway, the inclusion of Black designers has been overlooked. The dearth of Black designers in the arena of high fashion; however, is hard to ignore. Brown (2000) states,

Racism... keeps Black designers from making the cut. 'When you pick up Vogue, Elle, or Bazaar, they're always citing the designers to watch but they're never Black'.... 'The high-end market does not embrace talent from African Americans because people associate a certain lifestyle with the garments they purchase, and Black designers aren't considered status symbols by the population at large'.  
(p. 83)

The Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA), which accepts members by invitation only, also reflects the lack of diversity in the fashion industry as only 12 of its 470 members are Black (Friedman, 2015).

At NYFW Spring 2015, Black fashion designers presented only 2.7% of the total 260 shows (Friedman, 2015). The number of fashion lines presented at NYFW Spring



2015 by Black female designers is even smaller. Tracy Reese and Cushnie et Ochs, co-designed by Afro-Caribbean designer Carly Cushnie and business partner Michelle Ochs who is Canadian and half Filipino, are the only designer brands owned or co-owned by Black female fashion designers to show at an official venue during NYFW Spring 2015 (Friedman, 2015). Outside of the context of NYFW, there are successful Black female fashion designers including Azéde Jean-Pierre and Madison Mazey both of which were acknowledged on *Forbes's* renowned 30 under 30 list and Project Runway alums Kara Saun, Korto Momolu, Samantha Black, Kimberly Goldson and Kahindo Mateene (Wilson, 2016). Still, Black female designers trying to come up the traditional way by studying draping and patternmaking and apprenticing in ateliers rarely make it to premier status (Givhan, 2011).

Due to a number of factors, Black designers find it difficult to make a name for themselves in the fashion industry (Friedman, 2015). The low numbers of successful Black designers can be attributed to the scarceness of arts and design education in public schools, an absence of support from family as fashion design is often not regarded as a practical career within the Black community, and a lack of social and financial capital (Adams, 2015; Friedman, 2015). It can cost upward of \$50,000 to develop the samples for a small collection, and that does not factor in the costs associated with mounting a runway show or having a cushion to fund production and operating expenses (Brown, 2000; Givhan, 2011).

For newcomers, the costs to mount a show at NYFW range from \$70,000 to \$100,000 with much of it going to space rental, set design and the hiring of models and stylists (Holson, 2010). Most young Black designers do not have the option of going to a

bank for a business loan. They often seek investments from affluent friends and relatives; however, for those designers that do not come from institutional wealth, start-up funding is hard to procure. After noticing the lack of representation of Black designers in the fashion industry, former buyer, Brandice Henderson-Daniel created Harlem's Fashion Row (HFR) in an effort to provide an outlet for emerging designers of color to showcase their collections and promote their brand (Tate, 2017). HFR is now considered to be "the most prestigious platform for multicultural fashion designers" and is now a mainstay during New York Fashion Week (Johnson, 2015).

A majority of Black designers specialize in custom goods and run small, independent shops that are rarely viewed as making a significant impact in the fashion industry (Brown, 2000). To make a substantial profit, designers need to be mass marketed. In the past, independent fashion designers were able to mass-produce their lines by forging partnerships with major retailers or by securing investment deals with large firms (Brown, 2000). Today; however, the relationship between independent designers and retailers is strained. Less than 1% of designers stocked in department stores in 2015 were people of color (Rickards, 2017). The terms presented by major retailers make it difficult for small fashion companies with little to no financial backing to fulfill orders. When a retailer purchases a product wholesale from a designer, the designer is usually not paid until weeks or even months after the items are delivered (Siegel, 2016). In order to have a viable career in today's challenging fashion market, experts advise Black designers to settle by working for a more established label (Brown 2000; Givhan, 2011). Still, many Black designers continue to choose entrepreneurship over employment and even with all the odds stacked against them, they are willing to endure the trials and

tribulations of business ownership, and thus define success on their own terms (Brown, 2000; Givhan, 2011).

Many Black women are also choosing entrepreneurship over employment as a means to balance their family and work lives, to escape what is known as the “glass ceiling” often faced by women in corporate positions or to avoid unemployment in a weak economy (Mattis, 2004). Some take the entrepreneurial plunge because it is one of the only arenas where women can not only match, but also outperform their male counterparts in terms of earning potential (Forbes, 2013). Entrepreneurship has become a form of empowerment for Black women especially those who are flexible, risk-takers and determined to achieve success. Black women are starting businesses at a faster rate than the population at large; however, they tend to have smaller than average firms, lower employment growth and are often underrepresented in many industries, including the fashion industry (Haimerl, 2015).

This research will not only bring awareness to the marginalization and rejection that Black female fashion designers face within the industry, but also increase their visibility and provide access and exposure of their work. The personal stories of established Black female fashion designers and their experiences as entrepreneurs will enlighten others about their contributions to the fashion industry. The application of Black feminist thought as the main theoretical framework for this study will place Black women at the center of analysis thus, providing a clearer understanding of Black women’s experiences as independent fashion design entrepreneurs. The lived experiences as told first hand by the designer’s, will also be especially valuable to emerging Black female fashion designers aspiring to start their own businesses. By taking into account the

successes and failures of the women that will participate in this study, independent Black female fashion designers will be better equipped to navigate the barriers and challenges that they are likely to face as entrepreneurs.

### **Purpose**

Although there has been much research regarding women's motivations for pursuing entrepreneurship 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. In addition, studies specifically focused on Black female fashion design entrepreneurs are scarce. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs by examining how they launched, financed and successfully maintained their businesses. As well as identify their professional characteristics, motivations and any racial or gender barriers they face as Black female entrepreneurs in the fashion industry.

### **Significance**

The body of knowledge regarding female entrepreneurs has seen an increase in recent years largely in response to the rising number of women-owned businesses. Past research concerning sex, gender and entrepreneurship excluded Black women and primarily concentrated on comparing the experiences of White female and White male business owners. Other studies included Black women as research subjects, but only as a segment of female entrepreneurs from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups that

were lumped into one category (Smith-Hunter & Boyd, 2004). Comparing the experiences of Black female business owners to that of Black male business owners (Robb, 2002), to White female business owners (Dolinsky, Caputo & Pasumarty, 1994; Inman, 2000) or to female business owners of other ethnic groups (Smith-Hunter, 2004) are the most widely used approaches to research concerning Black women in entrepreneurship. Studies including Black female entrepreneurs have focused on their individual characteristics (i.e., education level, age, marital status etc.) (DeCarlo & Lyons, 2003; Mattis, 2004), motivational factors (i.e., work life balance, glass-ceiling, racism/sexism in the work place, social mobility) (Davidson, Fielden and Omar, 2010; Smith, 2000) views and roles linked to entrepreneurship (survival, opportunities for future generations, cultivating relationships) (Muhamad, 2015) and the challenges and barriers they face (stereotypes, access to financial capital, lack of support networks) (Heilman & Chen, 2003). To a lesser extent, research has addressed Black women in entrepreneurship at the macro-level by exploring entrepreneurial activity and trends among Black women as well as their success and sustainable factors (Fairlie & Robb, 2007; Robb, 2002).

Although this previous research is valuable, as it adds to the breath of knowledge regarding Black women in entrepreneurship, it does not contribute the more nuanced data that is needed to better understand what makes Black female entrepreneurs unique in their own right. While it can be useful to make comparisons based on gender, race and cultural differences, “simple comparisons without theory may do more harm than good because they can lead unsophisticated readers to believing that each racial/ethnic groups history, values, motivations, and goals are the same” (Robinson, Blockson & Robinson,

2007, p. 139). With Black women being the fastest growing segment of entrepreneurs in America, it has become especially important to understand the nature of entrepreneurship among Black women without comparing them to other groups (American Express OPEN, 2015).

This study is significant because it will fill a void in research pertaining to Black female fashion design entrepreneurs. It will illuminate the unique characteristics, motivations and challenges of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs as well as clarify the success strategies employed by this particular group. The findings of this research can be useful to fashion and apparel design educators and small business consultants who may provide programmatic assistance specifically focused on the needs of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs. This information will also inform key fashion leaders in regards to ways to improve 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.

### **Research Questions**

This study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the characteristics, personality traits, background, education and life experiences of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs?
2. 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?
3. What are the motivational factors for starting and maintaining a business among Black female fashion design entrepreneurs as they relate to Black feminist thought, cultural theory of entrepreneurship, disadvantage theory and/or protected market theory?

4. What are the success and sustainability factors for Black female fashion design entrepreneurs as they relate to Black feminist thought, cultural theory of entrepreneurship, disadvantage theory and/or protected market theory?
5. What are the resources and educational opportunities that have been useful to Black female fashion design entrepreneurs?

### **Objectives**

Specific objectives of this study are to:

1. Identify the characteristics, personality traits, background, education and life experiences of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs.
2. Understand the barriers and challenges faced by Black female fashion design entrepreneurs in regards to the intersections of race, class, gender, geographic location and other factors.
3. Determine if the motivational factors for starting and maintaining a business among Black female fashion design entrepreneurs relate to Black feminist thought, cultural theory of entrepreneurship, disadvantage theory and/or protected market theory.
4. Determine if Black female fashion design entrepreneurs define and measure success in accordance to Black feminist thought, cultural theory of entrepreneurship, disadvantage theory and/or protected market theory.
5. Identify resources and educational opportunities that will benefit current and future Black female fashion design entrepreneurs.

### **Assumptions**

A major reason for undertaking this research arises from the assumption that Black women's entrepreneurial experience within the fashion industry is different from that of other groups of entrepreneurs. An assumption within this research is that all participants will share their experiences as entrepreneurs and provide information pertinent to the objectives of the study. Another assumption within this research is that all participants will answer the research questions honestly and to the best of their knowledge. It is also assumed that the participants of this study will have a minimum of 5 years of business ownership experience and will be able to share valuable insights into

what has contributed to their success. It is assumed that 15 female fashion design entrepreneurs, who identify as Black and meet all other sample criteria, are willing to participate in this study. A final assumption of this research is that it will be of interest to other Black female entrepreneurs.

### **Scope and Limitations**

A goal of this research is to conduct in-depth in person, video conference or telephone interviews with 15 Black female fashion design entrepreneurs who meet at least 3 of the following requirements: (a) have received professional training in fashion design (b) design and produce a line at least twice a year, (c) participate in at least two fashion shows a year, (d) rely on their fashion design business as their primary source of income, and (e) have been in business for at least five years. Conducting face-to-face in-depth interviews may be too time-consuming for business owners and may deter them from participating in this study. Some participants may consider telephone or video conference calls as an alternative to in person interviews. The participants of this study may come from varying backgrounds with their own unique experiences, which could limit the generalizability of the findings. Further, the designers' willingness to become research subjects and share their life experiences indicates that the participant sample may become more homogenous than anticipated which could also make this study less generalizable.

### **Definitions of Terms**

Terms used in this study are defined as follows:

Black	The term Black generally refers to a person with African ancestral origins. In some circumstances, usually in politics and power struggles, the term Black signifies all non-White minority populations.
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The term covers a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. (Agyemang, Bhopal & Bruijnzeels, 2005). For this study the term Black includes individuals from differing ethnic groups, including but not limited to African-Americans, Caribbean-Americans and Africans, as well as those who identify as Hispanic and Black.

#### Entrepreneur

An entrepreneur is a person who habitually creates and innovates to build something of value around perceived opportunities (Bolton & Thompson, 2015).

#### Entrepreneurship

The three most prominent perspectives regarding entrepreneurship include (a) the view of entrepreneurship based on organizational status (e.g., firm size, age or ownership) or the status of the individual, (b) the view of entrepreneurship based on behavior (i.e., discovery and exploitation of profitable opportunities) and (c) the view of entrepreneurship on the bases of performance (e.g., growth, innovation or social entrepreneurship). While there is no universally adopted definition of entrepreneurship, an eclectic, multi-lens approach, combining the three perspectives is useful in understanding entrepreneurship. Each presents a clear indication that the field of entrepreneurship is based on a phenomenon that incorporates many diverse and heterogeneous dimensions (Audretsch, Kuratko & Link, 2015).

#### Fashion Entrepreneur

A creative person whose primary entrepreneurial activities are within the fashion, design or luxury based industries. They typically are in possession of a fashion enterprise, venture or idea and focus on results based creativity. A fashion entrepreneur drives forward the design and fashion industries, developing their independent sector and representing the best of their local scene. Within the fashion and design industry, a fashion entrepreneur is involved in the creation of new collaborations and business, co-designed lines/collections, and increased participation at international design festivals in an attempt to raise awareness of their profile and designs (Ecubator, 2011).

## Fashion Design Entrepreneur

According to U.S. Government statistics, fashion designers are five times more likely than any other profession to start their own business. This is partly due to; a low barrier to entry (starting with a sewing machine at home); the fashion industry's acceptance of fresh, creative ideas; and that fashion designers are able to offer a product or service (fashion collection, fashion illustration, fashion design, pattern and garment making) (Burke, 2010).

## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### The History of Black Seamstresses, Dressmakers and

#### Female Fashion Design Entrepreneurs

The early contributions made by Black women in the fashion industry have been “scantily researched and woefully unreported” (Alexander, 1982, p. 17). Throughout history, thousands of Black creatives and artisans who have exhibited exemplary craftsmanship, professionalism and business acumen as seamstresses, dressmakers, modistes and tailors, never received a line of credit on any fashion history timeline or book of any period although it was those individuals, the unnamed and unheralded, who subtly shaped the fashion statements of their times (Alexander, 1982, Butler, 1976).

African American design influences were rejected, ignored, marginalized, and segregated into colored, Negro, Black, Afro-American categories - if acknowledged at all. That did not stop African Americans, however, from fighting to make their contributions recognized as not just customs of a stigmatized subset, but consequential contributions of Americans to America. Only when wider audiences began to accept a more diverse, or enlightened, justification of African American culture, did American ‘authorities’ begin to recognize these contributions. (Lewis-Mhoon, 2014, P. 101)

The history of Black women in the fashion industry is rich and varied, as their involvement has always intersected with social and political change. Elizabeth Keckly, a former slave woman and the first great Black dressmaker on record, sewed exclusively for Mary Todd Lincoln and is credited with creating the First Lady’s inaugural ball gown (Alexander, 1982). Keckly also authored the book, “*Behind the Scenes, by Elizabeth Keckley, Formerly a Slave, But More Recently Modiste and Friend to Mrs. Abraham Lincoln, Or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*” that provides both her slave narratives and her personal accounts of life in the White House. Anne Lowe, one of the most sought out designers in the 1950’s, is responsible for creating the bridal

gown for the highly publicized wedding of Jacqueline Bouvier and John F. Kennedy (Reed-Miller, 2006). And Designer Zelda Wynn Valdes, was commissioned by Hugh Hefner to create the original Playboy “bunny suit” costume in 1960 (Reed-Miller, 2006). As demonstrated in the examples above, although they are often not celebrated or acknowledge, Black women are responsible for some of the most iconic style moments in fashion history.

For generations, Black women have used their clothing and hair not simply to create a fashion statement, but as a form of cultural and political expression, as well. Black female activists of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements wore their hair in Afros and cornrows to promote the “Black is Beautiful” mantra. The Black Panther Party crafted a uniform, which included a black beret to symbolize their position as soldiers, and Black leather jackets, which could be likened to armor for its members (Lubitz, 2016). The look worn by the Black Panthers is so iconic and powerful that when pop star Beyoncé and her all-Black cadre of background dancers performed during the 2016 Super Bowl halftime show wearing Black Panther inspired outfits, many people were outraged by the superstar’s bold sartorial political message (Allen, 2016).

Today, there is a renewed focus on self-empowerment among Black women and girls facilitated through the popular hashtag #BlackGirlMagic among others. “Phrases like #BeingABlackGirlIsLit, #BlackGirlsRock, and #MelaninPopping are being used by Black women among each other to affirm their beauty and intellectual prowess, unapologetically celebrating every inch of themselves and each other” (Thomas, 2016, para. 17). The Black Girl Magic movement has encouraged Black women and girls to just be themselves. In doing so, they have unintentionally provided an endless well of creative

inspiration for the fashion industry. What Black women wear and how they style their hair is continuously imitated not only by women of other races but by fashion's most influential designers.

The evidence of appropriation of Black culture is overwhelmingly blatant within fashion and mass media. From editorials to dress and makeup techniques, the desire to take on the stereotype appearance of people of color – disregarding the cultural implications of being a person of color – is ever – present. What turns the knife is how the originators of such styles are conveniently forgotten, given no accolades, while having been condemned and degraded for the same styles which women of non-color receive praise and credit. (Beckom, 2015, para. 6)

Although “[Black women] are some of the most stylish women on the planet...when it comes to creating the clothes that make the look, only a handful of [Black] designers ever rise to international stardom” (Givhan, 2011, p. 196).

### **Plantation Seamstresses and Freedwomen**

During the antebellum period, enslaved Blacks played a significant role in the economic development of our country through their contributions to the textile, apparel and fashion industries. As early as the seventeenth century, only a few years after the introduction of slavery in the United States, many slaves were already working in handicrafts as cobblers, hatters, tailors, seamstresses, carpenters, smiths and in other similar trades (Lewis-Mhoon, 2014; Stavisky, 1949). Prior to European invasion, Africans were engaged in various handicrafts and subsequently adapted many of the techniques learned in their homeland to colonial life in America. Weaving was one skill that slave artisans brought from Africa that became an essential part of life in the New World (Butler, 1976).

Most plantations had a weaving room, equipped with a spinning wheel and a weaving loom, where slave women made cloth from cotton and wool thread spun by

other skilled slaves; even silk was produced on some plantations and turned into expensive fabric for special occasions (Butler, 1976). As ex-slave Bob Mobley recalls of the Georgia plantation on which he was held, there was a house “built especially for spinning and weaving” where, his aunt who was a weaver and two or three of “the other nigger women made the clothes and they had to make them fit.” The mistress kept a close watch on the fit and “made them be careful so the clothes would look nice” (Fox-Genovese, 2000, p. 172). On George Washington’s estate in Mount Vernon, Virginia the spinning house was ran by a White supervisor and five slave girls, who together supplied the clothing for many persons living in the vicinity (Stavisky, 1949). It was not uncommon for plantation slave weavers to produce a weekly total of one hundred and twenty yards of cotton and woolen cloth in a relatively short period of three months (Stavisky, 1949). Some weavers managed to weave beyond their quota without the overseers noticing and sold the extra cloth to poor Whites in town (Joyner, 1984).

Black women were also responsible for most, if not all, of the sewing needs on the plantation, as well as, for the plantation owner’s relatives living in the city (Reed-Miller, 2006). One task of the plantation seamstresses was to make all of the household linens for the “big house” including curtains, tablecloths, cushion covers, bedspreads and intricate hand pieced quilts that were proudly displayed throughout the mansion to be admired by visitors and guest (Joyner, 1984). “Slave women cultivated their own skills in quilting and thereby testified to their distinct Afro-American aesthetic sense and their own acute sense of fashion and elegance” (Fox-Genovese, 1988, p. 120). Enslaved seamstresses also made clothing for fellow slaves from the durable although coarse and uncomfortable fabrics they were allotted such as osnaburg linen, homespun cloth made of

cotton and wool, broadcloth and Negro cloth (Hunt 1996; Sanders, 2012; Weaver, 2012). Most of the plantation sewing; however, involved mending and constructing clothing for the mistress of the house, the family, and the household servants (Reed-Miller, 2006).

Fashioning the wardrobe for the mistress of the house was of the utmost importance. Women's magazines such as *Godey's Lady's Book* and *Demorest's Mirror of Fashions* were passed around so that women of means could see what was fashionable at that time (Leuzzi, 1996). The desired garments were then constructed with only the picture or illustration used as a guide. In the northern states and in the Western territories, women did their own sewing or paid a dressmaker to sew the garments but in the south, Slave women were expected to do the work (Reed-Miller, 2006). A slave woman with keen dressmaking skills was extremely valuable to her owners.

Often the children of the household servants were encouraged to learn how sew and embroider (Stavisky, 1949). If a young Black woman exhibited a special talent for needlework, it was fostered and more formal training was provided for her to become a master seamstress and dressmaker (Butler, 1976). For example, in the eighteenth-century, Black women enslaved in the French colonies of Saint Dominque, Guadeloupe, and Martinique were sometimes sent to Europe to learn the latest fashion trends (Weaver, 2012). Once a slavewoman became especially competent in her sewing skills, her time was mostly spent producing garments and household trimmings for her owners. When there was a spare moment she would hire herself out making stylish dresses for society women and in many cases she was able to keep a good percentage of the money for herself and her family (Butler, 1976).

Enslaved seamstresses that resided in colonial towns and cities were given greater freedom than other slaves as they were allowed to travel freely to the markets to purchase fabric and to their client's homes (Weaver, 2012). Many Black women purchased their own freedom and that of their loved ones with money they earned as dressmakers (Reed-Miller, 2006). Once they were free, Black females usually held the same vocations they had under bondage (Johnson, 1992). In Savannah's Register of Free Colored Persons the two most common free Black female occupations held in 1823 were washerwoman (30) and seamstress (26); however, later in 1860 the occupation of seamstress (121) far outnumbered washerwoman (44) as the most common (Johnson, 1992). Dressmaking was a rewarding career choice for free Black women as most did quite well financially. After emancipation, Blacks developed a preoccupation with dress, similar to that of elite and middle-class Whites at that time (Johnson, 1992). One way that newly freed Blacks compensated for the deprivation they experienced during slavery was to purchase expensive clothes (Alexis, 1970). Blacks quickly earned a reputation for spending lavishly on clothes especially on their "Sunday-best" (Johnson, 1992; White & White, 1998). Thus, most Black dressmakers were fortunate to have a steady clientele of both Black and White patrons (Johnson, 1992).

During reconstruction racial segregation, fierce job competition from Whites and immigrant workers and the Black Codes enacted in the south, severely restricted newly freed Blacks from working in any occupation other than agricultural and domestic labor (Hunter, 1997). These circumstances left Black women largely excluded from the national American fashion and textile industry. While many Black women continued to



work as manual laborers, some possessed the talent and skill of sewing that allowed them to create to a more certain future for themselves, their families and their communities.

These designing women became stabilizing forces in the African American community using the same entrepreneurial spirit of independence, self-sufficiency, modesty, and dignity to uplift the community. The entrepreneurial spirit that they brought out of enslavement remained with them as they entered freedom after the Civil War. (Lewis-Mhooon, 2014, pp. 106-107)

At the turn of the century, many Black women launched fashion design businesses although most were reduced to the designation of “seamstress” as their exclusively White clientele refused to publicly acknowledge them as dressmakers or fashion designers (Johnston, 2005). Attempts to marginalize Black designs, fashion and style; however, only reaffirmed the power of Black designers. As their businesses grew in the twentieth century, Black designers began to utilize various forms of social capital and cultural capital available through their family, community, and neighborhood networks to create successful businesses within their own communities (Lewis-Mhooon, 2014).

### **Notable Black Dressmakers and Female Fashion Designers**

#### **Elizabeth Keckley (1818-1907)**

The first Black dressmaker to achieve national prominence was Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley. Keckley was born a slave of the Burwell family and the only child of her enslaved parents, Agnes Hobbs and George Pleasant, circa 1818 in Dinwiddie Court-House, Virginia (Edelsteine, 2012; Keckley, 1868a). Her early life was scarred by separation, physical abuse and sexual assault (Edelsteine, 2012; Keckley, 1868a). When she was about eight years old her father was sold and separated from the family; of this tragic occurrence Keckley writes: “the parting was eternal” (Keckley, 1868a, p. 24).

Around the age of fourteen she was sent to live in Hillsboro, North Carolina with her

owner's eldest son who was a minister, and his new wife (Keckley, 1868a). In North Carolina, Keckley suffered severe beatings at the hands of one of the minister's church members (Keckley, 1868a). She was also raped repeatedly over the span of four years by a White man who became the father of her only child, a boy she named George after her father (Keckley, 1868a).

Keckley was later sent back to Virginia to live with one of her old master's daughters who had recently married (Keckley, 1868a). With the family falling upon hard times, Keckley joined her new owners as they moved to St. Louis hoping their luck would improve in the West (Edelsteine, 2012). It was in St. Louis where Keckley began to make a name for herself, using the family's social connections to build her clientele (Way, 2015). She worked tirelessly to establish a solid reputation as a seamstress and a dressmaker among "the best ladies in St. Louis" (Keckley, 1868a, p. 45) for whom she sewed mostly evening dresses sold at a "market rate" (Reed-Miller, 2006, p. 6). Keckley's designs were so sought after that she was able to earn enough money to support the entire family; as she recounted, "With my needle I kept bread in the mouths of seventeen persons for two years and five months" (Keckley, 1868a, Ch. 3, p. 45). While in St. Louis, she was married to James Keckley; however, the marriage was not a happy one (Edelsteine, 2012). Keckley learned that her husband had misrepresented himself as a freedman and he had also become a burden as he "persisted in dissipation" and "was rapidly debasing himself" (Keckley, 1868a, p. 64).

After years of working to support others, Keckley became intent on attaining her freedom. Although she had numerous opportunities to run away to the North, she wished to be free lawfully, so she made a proposition to her owners to purchase herself and her

son (Wildemuth, 2009). Keckley was a valuable asset to the Burwell family due to the years of training they provided, as well as her ability to read and write, therefore the price for her and her son's liberty was set high at \$1,200 (Keckley, 1868a; Reed-Miller, 2006). She worked in earnest to save enough money, but because she was supporting the family with her earnings, she was not able to accumulate the necessary amount. Keckley was; however, able to raise the funds she needed through donations from special customers and received her manumission papers in 1855 (Keckley, 1868a). Refusing to accept the donations as a gift, only as a loan, she repaid all of her lady patrons of St. Louis before relocating to Baltimore with her son in the spring of 1860 (Keckley, 1868a).

In Baltimore, Keckley attempted to earn a living by teaching her system of cutting and fitting dresses to groups of young Black women, but this venture was unsuccessful (Keckley, 1868a). After six weeks in Baltimore, Keckley moved to Washington, D.C. where she quickly attracted a large clientele of the city's most affluent ladies including Varina Howell Davis, the wife of Mississippi senator Jefferson Davis who would soon become President of the Confederacy (Keckley, 1868a). Mrs. Davis was so enamored with the dressmaker's handiwork that she invited Keckley to come live with her in New Orleans, the city expected to become the capital of the newly formed confederacy (Edelsteine, 2012). Keckley was almost tempted by the prospect of guaranteed business and Mrs. Davis's promise to "take good care of her;" however, she respectfully declined the offer (Keckley, 1868a, p. 71). Word of Keckley's fine needlework eventually reached the White House. Based on her good standing and recommendations from influential society women, Keckley was able to secure a position as Mrs. Mary Todd Lincoln's

personal modiste during the four years of Abraham Lincoln's presidency (Wildemuth, 2009).

Although Mrs. Lincoln expressed "I cannot afford to be extravagant. We are just from the West, and are poor" (Keckley, 1868a, p. 85), she was known to be a compulsive shopper and often criticized for her conspicuous consumption during wartime (Sorisio, 2000). Mrs. Lincoln was also known for her sense of style and lavish fashions and jewelry earning her the title "the Republican queen" for her displays of elegance (Smithsonian Institution Archives, n.d.). "Her dresses were designed and made to her specifications, regardless of cost. On one gown alone she spent two thousand dollars" (Bradley, n.d., para 3). One of Mrs. Lincoln's most extravagant dresses is the purple velvet ball gown she wore during the Washington winter social season in 1861-1862 (Smithsonian Institution Archives, n.d). The gown features a daytime as well as an evening bodice piped with white satin and trimmed with mother-of-pearl buttons (Smithsonian Institution Archives, n.d). Keckley is credited with making the gown, which is now housed in the Smithsonian Institution's First Ladies Collection (Smithsonian Institution Archives, n.d).

During wartime, Keckley assisted the Lincolns in maintaining an elegant yet dignified appearance that would not offend those that were sacrificing so much.

In the years immediately before and during the Civil War, Keckley occupied an exceptional role as a White House insider. She virtually lived with the Lincolns on the eve of the war; consoled Mary Lincoln after the death of her son, Willie, and the assassination of her husband; and helped to craft – literally – the iconic image of the Lincolns. (Edelstein, 2012, p.149)

It was these intimate moments that were recounted in Keckley's memoir, *Behind the Scenes*, by Elizabeth Keckley, *Formerly a Slave, But More Recently Modiste and Friend*

to *Mrs. Abraham Lincoln, Or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*, published in 1868.

The book was written following President Lincoln's assassination in an effort to aid Mrs. Lincoln who became so destitute at the time, that she resorted to selling her husband's personal items as well as her own celebrated wardrobe (Adams, 2001). The debacle came to be known as the "Old Clothes Scandal" (Soriso, 2000). In writing her memoirs, Keckley's intentions were to not only clear her own name but also to protect Mrs. Lincoln's character as she asserted "to defend myself, I must defend the lady that I have served" (Keckley, 1868a, p. xiv).

While Keckley may have expected some criticism from readers, she did not anticipate the harsh backlash she received from the public at large as well as those closest to her (Keckley, 1868b; Santamarina, 2002). Newspapers condemned the book as "trash," "scandal" and "indecent literature" (Keckley, 1868b, p. xiv). Many Black people branded Keckley as a traitor to the beloved Lincolns and the newly formed Republican Party, which held a strong anti-slavery stance at that time (Jones, 2009). It is rumored that Mrs. Lincoln's friends were so angered that they purchased and burned up all the copies they could get their hands on and her son, Robert Lincoln demanded publishers to remove the book from circulation (Alexander, 1982; Soriso, 2000). Mrs. Lincoln, who was deeply offended by the publication as well, "refused to speak to Keckley, disparaged her as 'the colored historian' (emphasis hers), and even denied ever having met her (Keckley, 1868b, p. xiv).

Not much is known about Keckley's life following the release of her autobiography. As a result of all the negative criticism received, the publisher had

difficulty distributing the book and Keckley failed to make a profit from its sale (Hamelman & Young, 2000). She suffered such a decline in her patronage as a dressmaker that her attempts to revive her business in Washington D.C. were unsuccessful (Santamarina, 2002). From 1892 to 1893, Keckley accepted a position at Wilberforce University in Ohio as head of its Domestic Arts department (Keckley & Foster, 2001). During her tenure at Wilberforce, Keckley shared her collection of remnants and swatches of material and trimmings saved from the various dresses she made for Mrs. Lincoln with her beloved students (Fleischner, 2007). She lived much of her remaining years in obscurity (Alexander, 1982). At some point she returned back to Washington D.C. and became a resident at the Home for Destitute Women and Children, an institution she had assisted in establishing with earnings from her dressmaking business (Alexander, 1982). Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley died in her sleep on May 26, 1907 and she was buried at the Harmony Cemetery in Washington D.C. (Keckley, 1868b).

### **Fannie Criss (1866 -1942)**

Fannie Criss was born in 1866 in Cumberland County, Virginia to Samuel and Adeline Criss, who were formerly enslaved (Reed-Miller, 2006). She was one of the couple's seven children and their first child born after they had attained their freedom (Reed-Miller, 2006). The family later moved to Richmond where Criss listed herself as a dressmaker in the classified business section of the city directory; of the 132 women listed as dressmakers in 1902, 112 were White and 20 was Black (Williams, 1982). In her early life, Criss learned the art of dressmaking from her mother and later passed her skills on by offering a program in the Richmond area for young women to develop their sewing skills (Reed-Miller, 2006). Criss became the city's most celebrated designer in the early 1900s

likely charging up to \$200 for her elegant, handmade dresses (Farrington, 2005; Reed-Miller, 2006). With the help of her housekeeper and two or three young women Criss designed dresses for the White elite in Richmond (Perkins, 1995; Reed-Miller, 2006). Criss was well respected by her patrons and was well known for her beautifully design wedding gowns. The second day dress, designed by Criss in 1896, and worn in the Richmond high society wedding of Miss Ellen Clark to Mr. Gordon Wallace was donated to the Valentine Museum in Richmond, which has the second largest collection of period costumes in the country (Perkins, 1995).

Criss married William Thornton Payne in 1895 and purchased a home on West Leigh Street, located in an affluent area in Richmond. Criss operated her dressmaking business from this location as well (Reed-Miller, 2006). A neighbor, Maggie L. Walker, the first Black woman bank founder and president of St. Luke's Penny Thrift Saving Bank, became one of Criss's many wealthy clients (Reed-Miller, 2006). Criss's marriage to Payne did not last long and she later married William White and the couple relocated to New York City around 1918, acquiring a brownstone townhouse located between old Seventh and Eight Avenues at 219 West 137<sup>th</sup> Street (Smith, Jackson & Wynn, 2006). Criss continued to operate her dressmaking business at this location, which thrived as she began to design for wealthy black women, Broadway stars, and movie actresses (Smith, Jackson & Wynn, 2006). Gloria Swanson, who was once the highest paid actress in Hollywood, was one of her more prominent clients (Reed-Miller, 2006).

Criss's flamboyant and free spirited personality made her home in New York "which was filled with nice furniture and lots of silver and pretty things" a haven for the city's most influential Blacks (Reed-Miller, 2006, p. 46). Criss was neighbors with Sara

Breedlove Walker better known as Madam C. J. Walker, with whom she also enjoyed a close friendship (Reed-Miller, 2006). Criss also designed dresses for Madam Walker's daughter A'Lelia Bundles (Reed-Miller, 2006). Fannie Criss died on February 2, 1942, at the age of 76 in New York (Williams, 1982).

### **Ann Cole Lowe (1898-1981)**

Ann Cole Lowe was born circa 1898 in Clayton County, Alabama (Reed-Miller, 2006). She was the great granddaughter of an Alabama plantation owner and a slave woman who was a seamstress in charge of the needlework on the plantation (Way 2015). Lowe's grandparents, a slave woman named "Georgia" and a free black man called General Cole relocated to Montgomery Alabama where Lowe's grandmother and later her mother, Jane, sewed for the City's affluent first families (Reed-Miller, 2006). As a young girl Lowe learned dressmaking from her mother and grandmother and would later help them with the sewing (Way, 2015). When Lowe was sixteen her mother died, leaving behind four unfinished ball gowns for Alabama's first lady, Elizabeth Kirkman O'Neal (Way, 2015). Although coping with grief, Lowe finished the orders to her client's liking and subsequently took over her mother's dressmaking business (Reed-Miller, 2006). "Lowe found release from a disadvantaged position through her dressmaking skills, though instead of slavery, Lowe escaped the Jim Crow South" (Way, 2015, p. 118).

Lowe's first husband, a Black man named Lee Cohen, convinced her to give up her dressmaking business after the birth of their son, Arthur Cohen, however she continued to sew garments for herself (Way, 2015). While shopping in an Alabama department store in 1915, one of her stylish outfits caught the eye of Mrs. Josephine Lee



a socialite and wife of a successful citrus businessman in Tampa, Florida (Way, 2015). Mrs. Lee was so impressed when she learned that Lowe created the ensemble, she offered to hire her as a live-in dressmaker (Way, 2015). Lowe accepted the position, which required her to sew for Lee and her four daughters, who were active socialites in the city (Way, 2015). Lowe also made the gowns for one of the daughter's wedding party (Reed-Miller, 2006). Lowe lived and worked in Tampa from 1915 to 1928, except for when she attended the S.L. Taylor School of Design in New York City between 1916 to 1917 (Kirkham & Stallworth, 2000). Lowe recalls her year spent in New York as a lonely and difficult time being that she was the only Black student and was segregated from others by school officials (McAndrew, 2010). Upon her returned, Lowe's reputation spread throughout the city and she soon became the most in-demand dressmaker for Tampa's wealthiest women (Kirkham & Stallworth, 2000).

Around 1928 Lowe moved to New York City and used \$20,000 in savings to open a dress shop in a third floor loft on Lexington Ave (McAndrew, 2010). Alexander (1982) claims that Lowe enjoyed instant success; however, Way (2015) reports that Lowe was forced to close her shop after only one year due a lack of business. Lowe did not yet have the high society connections to sustain her business so in order to build her clientele, she designed under more established designer labels and for major stores and salons including Sonia Rosenberg (Kirkham & Stallworth, 2000). After many years of designing and constructing gowns for others, Lowe was able to once again build her reputation, this time among the prominent socialites of New York (Reed-Miller, 2006).

By the late 1940s, Lowe was once again able to open her own dress salon with a client list that included women with surnames such as Rockefeller, DuPont, Biddle, and

Roosevelt (Alexander, 1982; McAndrew, 2010). In 1947, Janet Auchincloss, enlisted Lowe to create debutante dresses for her daughters, Lee and Jacqueline Bouvier (Way, 2015). In 1953, Lowe was again to commissioned by the Auchincloss' to design the wedding gown and 15 bridal party dresses for the marriage of their daughter, Jacqueline Bouvier, to Senator John F. Kennedy (Way, 2015). Although, the wedding gown, made of ivory silk fabric, featuring Lowe's signature applique flowers became one of the most photographed dresses in history, the designer was virtually ignored by the press (Kirkham & Stallworth, 2000). Still, due to the publicity surrounding the dress, Lowe earned respect and admiration from international audiences.

Indeed, Lowe could claim to have arrived in the fashion world when on one trip to Europe, the American socialite and heiress Marjorie Merriweather Post introduced Lowe to Christian Dior as "the head of the American House of Anne Lowe" (McAndrew, 2010, p. 789).

Despite her accomplishments, Lowe still never received the same level of recognition as her White counterparts among the general American public. Writer Thomas B Congdon (1966) of the *Saturday Evening Post* named Lowe "society's best kept secret" as she was barely known outside of the elite social circles for which she designed (McAndrew, 2010; Miller, 2002). Throughout Lowe's career, spanning five decades, she experienced prejudice and financial issues, sometimes at the hands of her prominent clients (Alexander, 1982; Miller, 2002). Lowe's friend and high-end fabric importer, Arthur Dages, in an interview for the *Saturday Evening Post* article chronicling Lowe's career, insisted that the designer's career suffered due to her race and geographical location (McAndrew, 2010). He states, "If she had lived in France, she'd have been as well known as Chanel or Dior. But people here told themselves that she was just another colored woman and they cheated her, they copied her designs" (Congdon,

1966, p.75). Despite her hardships, Lowe persevered. In 1965, when she was nearly seventy years old and technically blind due to glaucoma, Lowe once again opened her own dress salon, this time on Madison Avenue (Kirkham & Stallworth, 2000). Ann Lowe affectionately called the “Dean of American Designers” died in 1981 in Queens, New York (Alexander, 1982).

### **Zelda Wynn Valdes (1905-2001)**

Zelda Wynn Valdes was born in 1905, in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania the oldest of seven children (Leuzzi, 1996). Valdes’s mother taught her to sew at an early age (Leuzzi, 1996). She first designed outfits for her dolls and then later she would use newsprint to cut out life-sized patterns (Gonzalez, 1994). Valdes began her career in fashion when she moved with her brothers to White Plains, New York to assist her uncle in his tailoring shop (Deihl, 2015; Miller, 2002). In 1948, she opened a boutique on 158<sup>th</sup> and Broadway, named “Zelda Modiste,” becoming the first Black person to own a business in this prime location (Leuzzi, 1996; Wilson, 2013). At Zelda Modiste, Valdes had a staff of one saleswoman and nine dressmakers who sewed everything to order (Leuzzi, 1996). In the 1950’s, she moved her business to West 57<sup>th</sup> Street; the boutique came to be known as “Chez Zelda” (Deihl, 2015).

Valdes was known for her sexy skin-tight, low-cut yet, feminine gowns and her attention to detail, which garnered the designer a loyal following (Reed-Miller, 2006). Among Valdes’s clientele were many of the notable Black women of that era including Joyce Bryant, Dorothy Dandridge, Josephine Baker, Marian Anderson, Ella Fitzgerald, Eartha Kitt, and Gladys Knight (Wilson, 2013). In 1948, Valdes designed the wedding gown and bridal party dresses for the wedding of Marie Ellington and Nat “King” Cole,

an event that was attended by the most prominent members of the Black community (Deihl, 2015). She also designed dresses for legendary starlets such as Mae West and Marlene Dietrich (Gainer, n.d.).

Valdes was unique in that she was talented in both fashion and costume design (Deihl, 2015). Valdes's work caught the eye of Hugh Hefner, who commissioned her to design the original Playboy costume (Wilson, 2013). The snug satin Bunny outfit featuring Valdes' signature low-cut décolletage has since become an iconic pop cultural symbol and a reflection of the designer's timeless, glamorous aesthetic (Deihl, 2015; Wilson, 2013). In 1970, Arthur Mitchell, founder of The Dance Theatre of Harlem, asked Valdes to head its costume design studio, she was 65 years old at the time she accepted the position. She stayed with the company for thirty years until the time of her death in 2001 at the 96 (Wilson, 2013).

In addition to her legacy with The Dance Theatre of Harlem, Valdes was a founding member of the National Association of Fashion and Accessory Designers (NAFAD), organized under the National Council of Negro Women headed by educator Mary McLeod Bethune (Reed-Miller, 2006). The mission of NAFAD was in essence to help Black fashion designers establish themselves professionally and to integrate the mainstream fashion world (McAndrew, 2010). Valdes was president of the New York chapter of the organization in the 1950s (Reed-Miller, 2006). Valdes also shared her talents and knowledge with younger generations. As head of the fashion design at a Harlem summer arts program, she taught students her method of fine sewing and the ins and outs of the fashion business (Smithsonian Institution, 2013).

## Entrepreneurship

### Women as Entrepreneurs

A major reason women enter entrepreneurship is to escape what is known as the “glass ceiling” in corporate America (Mattis, 2004). This glass-ceiling barrier often persuades women to leave their corporate careers to start their own ventures because of an inability to obtain proper recognition by their employers and reach senior level positions (Orhan & Scott, 2001). The negative experiences women are likely to encounter in corporate life including systematic exclusion, lack of opportunity for advancement and the less than proportionate compensation they receive for performing the same functions and duties as their male counterparts, (Heilman & Chen, 2003; Smith-Hunter, 2004) push them toward entrepreneurship.

Another workplace issue that is particularly challenging for women is that of balancing their work and family life. Stroh and Reilly (1999) found that women take advantage of benefits such as parental leave and flextime more often than men. They also found that women who have used these benefits, as well as the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) are perceived as unfocused or sidetracked by their employers and find that they are not taken as seriously as their male coworkers (Stroh & Reilly, 1999). Faced with being looked upon in a negative light in regards to their commitment to work, women often feel they have to choose between their careers and their families and as a result, many are drawn to entrepreneurship which can offer a more flexible work schedule for career-driven yet family oriented women.

The terms “push” and “pull” are now commonly used to classify women’s motivations for starting a business (Brush, 1990; Kirkwood, 2009). Factors that push women toward entrepreneurship include insufficient family income, job dissatisfaction,

lack of job opportunities, and a need for a more flexible work schedule due to family responsibilities. Factors that pull women toward entrepreneurship include aspirations to be one's own boss, self-fulfillment, entrepreneurial drive, and the desire for financial independence, social status, and power (Orhan and Scott, 2001).

### **Black Women as Entrepreneurs**

Between 1997 and 2015, the number of businesses owned by Black women increased by 322% making this group the fastest growing segment of entrepreneurs in the U.S. (American Express OPEN, 2015). In 2015, Black women owned 1.3 million or 14% of businesses in the United States and half of all Black owned firms (American Express OPEN, 2015). A more recent study conducted by American Express OPEN (2016) reports 112% growth in the number of businesses owned by Black women between 2007 and 2016. Today, this group owns an estimated 1.9 million businesses in the United States and 61% of all Black owned firms (American Express OPEN, 2016). While the highest concentrations of Black women-owned businesses are in Georgia, at 35%; Maryland, at 33%; and Illinois, at 22%; Black women are launching companies in growing numbers across the country (American Express OPEN, 2015). Firms owned by Black women employ 376,500 workers nationally and generate \$51.4 billion in revenue annually (American Express OPEN, 2016).

The growth in Black women-owned firms can be attributed to a number of factors. Entrepreneurship is often utilized as an alternative to the gender and racial-based biases that Black women encounter in the traditional workforce including the absence of family-friendly policies, unfair promotion practices, and a lack of fair pay (Smith, 1999). As a result, Black women may seek out entrepreneurial opportunities as a means to

achieve personal and professional success as well as a sense of independence after withstanding oppression and subordination in the workplace.

### **Personal Characteristics, Background, and Experiences**

A questionnaire conducted by DeCarlo and Lyons (1979) to compare the personal characteristics of women of color (Black, Spanish American, American Indian and other) and White female entrepreneurs revealed several differences between the two groups. Nearly twice as many of the female entrepreneurs of color reported that their current business was not their first attempt at entrepreneurship; they were also much more likely to have started their business alone than with a partner when compared to White female entrepreneurs (DeCarlo & Lyons, 2003). Regarding age, the female entrepreneurs of color were somewhat older with a median age of 43 compared to their White counterparts with a median age of 37; the women of color also started their business at a later age (DeCarlo & Lyons, 2003). In a study comparing women business owners to corporate businesswomen, Mattis (2004) found that most of the women business owners were married, as were the corporate businesswomen. The study also revealed that women business owners were considerably more likely than corporate businesswomen to have children (Mattis, 2004).

In terms of education, more White females than the women of color participating in the DeCarlo and Lyons study (1979) reported having graduated from both high school and college; the White female entrepreneurs also reported a higher level of achievement in school. Bates (1986); however, found that when compared to Whites, self-employed, women of color were younger and better educated with their mean years of education rising by 2.4 years from 1960 to 1980. In a study conducted by Hisrich and Brush (1986)

to determine the characteristics of entrepreneurs of color, education was found to play an important role among the participants in the study. Most of the entrepreneurs of color had attended college and 28% had graduate degrees (Hisrich & Brush, 1986). Furthering their education to obtain and improve business skills by returning to college, attending seminars and conferences, taking continuing education courses, reading trade publications and self-help books, as well as seeking help from experts was also highly valued among the entrepreneurs of color (Hisrich & Brush, 1986).

The predominance of women in career fields that are thought to be traditionally female is directly related to the types of businesses they chose to launch as entrepreneurs (Bruni, Gherardi & Poggio, 2004). The majority of female owned firms, especially those owned by women of color are concentrated in traditional areas, such as, retail and personal services (Smith-Hunter & Boyd, 2004). These industries are often seen as extension's of women's traditional roles in the home (Smith-Hunter & Boyd, 2004).

### **Motivational Factors**

Although there is a significant overall general appeal of entrepreneurship, it is especially appealing to women and people of color who are more likely to encounter negative experiences in corporate life that “push” them toward self-employment (Heilman & Chen, 2003). Among these two groups, the primary reasons for entering entrepreneurship include systematic exclusion, lack of opportunity for advancement and the less than proportionate compensation they receive for performing the same functions and duties when compared to their White male counterparts (Smith-Hunter, 2004).

Heilman and Chen (2003) believed that women and people of color viewed



entrepreneurship as a solution to problems that they encountered in the traditional workplace that appeared to them to be fixed and unlikely to change.

“Black women and White women entrepreneurs often have different lived experiences that lead to completely different approaches and motivations when starting a business” (Robinson, Blockson & Robinson, 2007, p. 138). Smith (1999) argues that one of the reasons that Black women comprise one of the fastest growing groups of new small business owners is that, in corporate settings, they bear the “double-yoke” of racism and sexism. In their study of Black, Asian and other ethnic female business owners, Davidson, Fielden and Omar (2010) found that women of African and Afro Caribbean decent were more likely than other ethnic groups to experience gender and racial discrimination. Faced with social barriers and socioeconomic stratification due to their racial or ethnic background, women of color often turned to self-employment as a means to achieve career success and upward social mobility (Heilman & Chen, 2003).

A study examining the start-up motivations and growth intentions of entrepreneurs of color found that while motivations to start a new business were basically the same between Black and White entrepreneurs, their motivations for growing a new business were significantly different (Edelman, Brush, Manolova, Greene, 2010). The Black and White business owners participating in this study were similarly motivated by the desire to innovate; however, the desire for financial success was found to be greater among White business owners (Edelman et al., 2010). Structural barriers often faced by Black entrepreneurs such as access to financing may explain why they did not necessarily equate growth with financial success.

## Challenges and Barriers

Despite the positive aspects associated with entrepreneurship, women and people of color found that they still had to face many of the same challenges and issues they faced as employees in the traditional workplace. The stereotyping of female entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs of color made it difficult for these groups to build a solid client base or to attract competent personnel (Heilman & Chen, 2003). Customers may have chosen not to do business with a female or person of color due to a lack of confidence in the business owner to perform certain duties on par with a male or White entrepreneur with a similar type of business. Evidence also showed that more people would prefer to work for a male boss than a female boss (Heilman & Chen, 2003). This preference is likely associated with stereotypes associated with women and their perceived inability to lead in the workplace.

Women entrepreneurs also encounter challenges that are different than those encountered by their male counterparts. These challenges include, but are not limited to, access to financial capital, as well as fewer mentors and support networks (Buttner & Moore, 1997). Because women are often thought to lack the necessary business acumen to run a successful venture, bank loan officers are more hesitant to provide female entrepreneurs with capital as they are viewed as a bad risk (Heilman & Chen, 2003). According to a report conducted by the United States Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration (2010) women start their businesses with half as much money as men do, and they are more likely to use personal savings to do so; they are also less likely to access bank loans than men are. Data also shows that “women entrepreneurs have less bank credit than men entrepreneurs, and female entrepreneurs of

color are less likely than White women business owners to have bank credit” (Heilman & Chen, 2003, p. 359).

### **Success and Sustainability Factors**

Black women still only account for 3.8% of the total population of small business owners (National Women’s Business Council, 2012). In regards to the Black community however, Black women represent roughly half of Black-owned business owners and generate more than 28% of the Black business workforce (Robb, 2002). Although Black women owned firms only account for a little more than 24% of the sales generated by Black-owned businesses, when compared to other ethnic women-owned firms, businesses owned by Black women top the charts in revenue growth (Robb, 2002; American Express OPEN, 2015). It was also found that of all women-owned firms, those owned by Black women have shown a higher growth rate between 1997 and 2015 (American Express OPEN, 2015).

Historically, Black owned businesses have lagged behind White-owned businesses in terms of sales, profits, employment and survival (Fairlie & Robb, 2007). “Black firms are also found to have a substantially worse outcomes than White firms, on average, for both men and women” (Fairlie & Robb, 2007, p. 309). In a study comparing entrepreneurial performance between men- and women-owned business start-ups and among those owned by Whites and people of color, it was found that although businesses owned by women fared worse than those owned by men, among Black-owned businesses, those owned by women had a higher survival rate than those owned by men (Robb, 2002).

## **Resources and Programs**

Finding a mentor or support network is also challenging for women entrepreneurs. Research shows that there is an under-representation of women in business incubation or entrepreneurial development programs, even though they participate actively in the economy and the workforce (Hernández-Gantes, 1995). Nevertheless, women entrepreneurs are becoming more proactive in pursuing formal training and learning in both practical business settings and educational institutions to prepare themselves for business ownership (Choi, Jeong, & Kehoe, 2012).

## **Fashion Design Entrepreneurs**

Fashion is a highly sophisticated industry worth \$1.2 trillion globally and an estimated \$250 billion in the United States alone (United States Congress, 2015). The fashion industry is made up of multiple sectors involving market research, brand licensing and intellectual property development, design, materials engineering, product manufacturing, marketing, systems technology and distribution of products (Blank, 2016). It is also a structurally diverse industry encompassing international retailers, wholesalers, large design houses, as well as one-person design shops. As one of the country's largest employers, the fashion industry employs 1.9 million people in professions requiring a range of education and skills (United States Congress, 2015). It employs people in various occupations including computer programmers, lawyers, accountants, copywriters, social media directors, project managers, researchers and of course fashion designers.

Fashion design is the profession at the heart of the industry's creative process.

Two thirds of all fashion designers are employed in the two largest fashion hubs in the United States, New York City and Los Angeles (United States Congress, 2015). In 2012, a total of 6,825 fashion designers were employed in New York City earning an average of \$34.40 per hour and a total of 3,641 fashion designers were employed in Los Angeles earning an average of \$33.75 per hour (Florida & Johnson, 2012). New York is the fashion capital of the United States and is often regarded as the fashion capital of the world. Several cities in the Midwestern, Southern and Western regions of the United States are building their own reputation as fashion hubs, as well as, experiencing positive economic returns from growth of the fashion industry within their communities.

The headquarters of several major apparel retailers including Express, Abercrombie & Fitch, DSW and L Brands are based in Columbus, Ohio making it the third largest city for fashion in the U.S. (Florida & Johnson, 2012). Ohio's capital city has the most fashion designers per capita in the U.S. behind New York and Los Angeles (Florida & Johnson, 2012). A total of 518 fashion designers who earn an average of \$26.69 an hour are employed in Columbus (Florida & Johnson, 2012). One of the nation's leading music centers, Nashville, Tennessee, is also a leader in the fashion industry. A total of 282 fashion designers are employed in Nashville earning a median income of \$30.59 an hour (Florida & Johnson, 2012). As the home of the headquarters for Levi Strauss & Co. & Gap Inc., San Francisco is also among the top cities for fashion in the United States employing over 500 fashion designers (Florida & Jonson, 2012). In terms of earnings, fashion designers in San Francisco earn slightly more than anywhere else in the country averaging \$35.13 an hour (Florida & Johnson, 2012).

Large apparel companies typically employ a team of in-house designers headed by a creative director (Fashion Designers, n.d.). Although the labels they design for are familiar to many consumers, the individual designers remain largely unknown (Fashion Designers, n.d.). These companies however are increasingly recognizing the need for more entrepreneurial-minded employees that will bring a sense of ingenuity and innovation to their organization. Hence, many fashion designers act as intrapreneurs within a fashion company wherein they are given the freedom and financial support to create new products, services and systems and turn them into profitable new realities for their employers (Burke, 2010; Intrapreneur, n.d.; Pinchot, 1985). Fashion intrapreneurs are given the opportunity to perfect their entrepreneurial skills before leaving to start their own fashion ventures.

Self-employed fashion designers or fashion design entrepreneurs must be especially creative as well as possess a strong business acumen. Besides being responsible for the original ideas for garments, fashion design entrepreneurs are involved in every step of garment production, from product development to marketing and sales. Many fashion design entrepreneurs focus on creating high-fashion garments and one-of-a-kind apparel for individual clients while others mass produce an entire collection every season for a clothing line that often times bears his or her name. In 2014 about one in four fashion designers were self-employed (Fashion Designers, n.d.).

### **Potential Theoretical Perspectives**

#### **Black Feminist Thought**

This study will utilize feminist theory, more specifically, Black feminist thought, as its main theoretical position. Feminism, a social and political movement concerned

with women's oppression and the ways and means to empower women, gained prominence at the turn of 20<sup>th</sup> century (Scott & Marshall, 2005). First wave feminists were concerned with women's suffrage and access to educational and professional opportunities (Scott & Marshall, 2005). Second wave feminism came about in the late 1960s with the onset of the Civil Rights Movement along with other cultural theories (i.e., queer theory, Black studies), which sought to decentralize White, straight, male, cultural authority (Scott & Marshall, 2005). Black feminists argued that first wave feminism was simplistic, narrow in focus and concerned only with the needs of White women.

Black feminist thought is a critical social theory that has developed through the contributions of first wave contemporary Black feminists. Clarifying Black women's experiences and ideas by placing Black women at the center of analysis is the main tenant of Black feminist thought (Collins, 2013). Although Black feminist thought places Black women at the center of analysis, it does not seek to dismiss the contributions of others. As Collins (2013) asserts, "Black women must be in charge of Black feminist thought, but being in charge does not mean that others are excluded" (p.18).

### **Intersectionality**

Intersectionality is a Black feminist perspective introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) and widely used by authors bell hooks (1994) and Patricia Hill Collins (2013). It is a major analytical tool for studying, understanding and responding to the ways in which gender intersects with other identities, including race, class, age, and geographic location. This concept is also helpful for interpreting how these intersections contribute to the differences that exist between groups. The application of

Intersectionality will be useful in clarifying the ways in which the intersections of race, gender, and class shape Black women's experiences with entrepreneurship.

### **The Integrative Perspective**

The integrative perspective is an approach previously introduced by Candida Brush (1992) that seeks to understand a woman's societal relationships and how they contrast with the dominant masculine perspective. The integrative perspective posits that:

women's roles as reproducers are produces are neither compartmentalized nor are they static...[rather,] women's identities are defined in a complex network of relationships that change as situations change but are linked together in a web-like fashion that interconnects family issues, work, responsibilities and community relationships. (Aspaas, 2004, p. 282)

Brush found that the integrative perspective provides researchers with a clearer view of the many facets of a woman's reproductive and productive roles thus allowing for a greater understanding of how these roles integrate and inform her entrepreneurial experiences.

The integration perspective may be an effective approach for grounding research concerning Black female entrepreneurs. Due to the varied roles that women occupy, it is highly plausible that this approach would benefit any study concerning women of color in entrepreneurship regardless of location. For many Black female entrepreneurs, their business relationships are highly integrated into their family life, personal aspirations and commitments to their communities.

### **Social Stratification and Entrepreneurship Framework**

Robinson, Blockson, and Robinson (2007) assert that their social stratification and entrepreneurship framework is useful for researchers seeking to understand the process of entrepreneurship among Black women. Social stratification is defined as "the end result



of institutional processes that partition society into advantaged and disadvantaged socially constructed groups” (Robinson, Blockson & Robinson, 2007, p. 133). These socially constructed categories can include groups by gender, race/ethnicity, wealth and class (Robinson, Blockson & Robinson, 2007).

There are three types of interactions involving social stratification and entrepreneurship. The first type of interaction links entrepreneurship to social mobility. Entrepreneurship has the ability to create wealth allowing an entrepreneur and their families the opportunity to move from a lower class level to a higher status position. The second type of interaction links social stratification to social entrepreneurship in an effort to solve social problems. The third type of interaction between social stratification and entrepreneurship involves the actors who hold lower-status positions in society. It is through this interaction that researchers are able to explore how social constructs, specifically, gender, race/ethnicity, wealth, and class; influence the experiences of black women in entrepreneurship.

### **Cultural Theory of Entrepreneurship**

Cultural theory of entrepreneurship suggests that “group differences in business performance results from group differences in the cultural norms and values that are required for successful entrepreneurship” (Smith-Hunter & Boyd, 2004, p. 20). Such requirements for successful entrepreneurship include a predisposition toward risk taking, hard work, delayed gratification, a desire to be economically independent and a drive for high achievement. The application of cultural theory to the study of Black women entrepreneurs may explain why this group is often less successful in business than their White counterparts. Cultural theory implies that women of color suffer from a “cultural

deficiency” wherein they are hindered by a culture of poverty and low expectations for achievement and as a result, they are not encouraged to pursue small-business ownership or economic independence in general (Smith-Hunter & Boyd, 2004).

### **Disadvantage Theory**

Disadvantage theory proposes that those who are discriminated against in society and thus are excluded from participation in mainstream economic opportunities will often pursue self-employment as an alternative to under-employment or unemployment (Boyd, 2000; Light & Rosenstein, 1995). This theory has been used to explain the high rate of entrepreneurship among immigrants and people of color who pursue business ownership as a means of survival when no other options are obtainable (Light & Rosenstein, 1995). Disadvantage theory, applied to a study concerning minority women in entrepreneurship, challenges cultural theory suggesting that despite any cultural deficiencies that may exist, women of color have a strong desire to become self-employed often prompted out of necessity (Smith-Hunter & Boyd, 2004).

### **Protected Market Theory**

Protected market theory, first introduced by Light (1972), proposes that the distinct taste, culturally specific needs of ethnic groups can only be provided by co-ethnic entrepreneurs. Protected market theory is especially applicable to Black business owners who provide personal services that meet the needs of their community such as barbering and hair styling. The theory posits that co-ethnic entrepreneurs are protected from the mainstream market due to reduced competition from other ethnic groups, intense group solidarity evidenced through strong patronage from co-ethnic clients, and the

geographical clustering of minority groups which has the potential to create an ethnic enclave economy.

### **Summary of Review of Literature**

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. The use of Black feminist thought as the prominent theoretical underpinning for this study as well the application of other critical theories will provide a broader understanding of how race, class and gender inform this study. This study will explore the experiences unique to Black female fashion design entrepreneurs, identify their specific characteristics, motivations, and challenges, as well as clarify the success strategies employed by this particular group. The research findings of this study will add to the limited body of knowledge concerning Black female fashion designers and Black female entrepreneurs.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

### Research Approach

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the experiences of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs by examining how they launched, financed and successfully maintained their businesses. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, this research explored the participants personal and professional characteristics, motivations and any racial or gender barriers they have faced as Black female entrepreneurs in the fashion industry. Along with the interviews, each participant completed a survey that included their demographic and business profile information.

### Participants

The sample consisted of female fashion designers who were at least 18 years old and identified as Black or African American. For this study the term Black includes individuals from differing ethnic groups, including but not limited to African-Americans, Caribbean-Americans and Africans, as well as those who identify as Hispanic and Black. The participants were also required to meet three out of the following criteria: (a) have completed a fashion design certificate or degree program, (b) design and produce a line at least twice a year, (c) participate in at least two fashion shows a year, (d) rely on their fashion design business as their primary source of income and/or (e) have been in business for at least five years.

A total of 15 Black female fashion designers were interviewed for this study. This sample size was determined based on the point of diminishing return often reflected in qualitative studies wherein the collection of more data does not necessarily lead to more information (Mason, 2010). Frequencies are rarely important in qualitative research, as

one occurrence of the data is potentially as useful as many in understanding the process behind a topic. This is because qualitative research is concerned with meaning and not making generalized hypothesis statements. Finally, because qualitative research is very labor intensive, analyzing a large sample can be time consuming and often simply impractical (Mason, 2010). For these reason, qualitative samples are generally smaller than quantitative samples.

### **Data Collection**

Interviewing is often considered to be the quintessential qualitative research method as it allows the respondents to tell their own stories in their own words, making it an appropriate tool of inquiry to investigate the experiences, problems and barriers faced by Black female fashion design entrepreneurs. This study utilized qualitative research interviews as the primary data collection method. As it is described by Kvale and Brinkman (2009) “the qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects’ points of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations” (p. 1). In this type of interview, the participants are encouraged to describe what they experience and feel in as much detail as possible.

Prior to conducting the study, approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Iowa State University was obtained (Appendix A). Potential participants for this study were contacted by email and via social media outlets including Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. A recruitment letter (Appendix B) providing information describing the study, the purpose and focus of the study, time commitment, and contact information of the researcher, was sent to 80 potential participants. A recruitment flyer

(Appendix C) was also emailed to potential participants and posted on social media sites. In addition, a snowballing approach involving friends, colleagues, co-workers, acquaintances and confirmed interviewees was used to recruit participants. Any potential interviewees found through the snowballing approach received a follow up email from the researcher, which included the participant recruitment letter and flyer.

Potential participants contacted the researcher via email, phone, or social media to express their interest in participating in the study. Those who expressed interest were contacted via phone using a phone script (Appendix D) to answer any questions concerning the research and to request a signed consent form (Appendix E). Once the informed consent form was received, the researcher called each interested, potential participant via phone using a phone script (Appendix F) to confirm if they met the study requirements and to schedule an interview.

Interviewing took place in 2017 over a span of 6 months. Of the 15 interviews conducted, 10 were conducted over the phone, two were conducted via the videoconferencing service, Skype and three were held in person. The three in-person interviews all took place in Baltimore, Maryland; one was held at the participant's work place, one was conducted in a private study room at a public library and one was held at a local book store. All of the interviews were audio-recorded and lasted an average of one hour. The phone interviews were audio-recorded using the Tape-A-Call application on the researcher's private iPhone. In person, face-to-face interviews and videoconference interviews conducted via Skype were audio-recorded using the Voice Memos application on the researcher's personal iPhone. Videoconference interviews were video recorded through the Skype service as well. Files of the recorded phone and video interviews were

uploaded to the researcher's personal computer and secured with password protection and encryption. The data collected from the audio-recorded interview sessions were transcribed verbatim and checked for spelling, grammar, accuracy and clarity using word processing software, Microsoft Word. All transcribed documents were saved on the researchers personal computer in an encrypted folder for easy retrieval and storage of data.

Before each individual interview, the participant was asked to complete a survey (Appendix G) to record their demographic characteristics and a brief profile of their fashion business. An interview protocol (Appendix H) was prepared, listing the specific objectives of the study and the most essential questions to ensure that the researcher addressed all objectives thoroughly with each participant. Participants were also asked to share pictures or examples of their design work and/or design space during the interview. The researcher obtained consent from each participant to take photos and use pictures of their design work and/or design space to use in the study. To provide a platform to highlight their work and contributions to the field of fashion, the researcher also asked for and was granted permission to link the designer's names to the data.

Each interview began with a greeting by the researcher, a summary of the purpose of the study and an explanation of the interview procedures. The first questions asked in each interview were grand tour questions, used to encourage the participant to speak freely (McCracken, 1988b). This study's grand tour questions included "Can you describe when you first realize you wanted to become an fashion designer?" and "Who influenced you to become a fashion designer?"

To address the study's first objective; the designer's characteristics, personality traits, background, education and life experiences were identified through questions including "What personal characteristics do you have that make you a successful fashion design entrepreneur?" and "What makes your garments unique?" To address the second objective of the study; the barriers and challenges faced by the designer in regards to their race, class, gender, geographic location and other factors were examined, utilizing questions such as "What barriers did you face in the start-up phase of your business?" and "What challenges do you currently face as a fashion design entrepreneur" To address the study's third objective; the designer's motivational factors for starting and maintaining a business were determine through questions like "Can you describe when you first wanted to become an entrepreneur?" and "What were your goals for your business when you first started?" To address the forth objective of the study; how the designer defines and measures success was discussed, employing questions such as "What is your definition of success?" and "When did you consider yourself a success?" To fifth objective of the study; resources and educational opportunities that will benefit current and future black female fashion design entrepreneurs were identified by asking the designer questions like "Are you a member of any professional, social, or business groups or associations?" and "Which groups or organizations are most helpful to you and your business?" Lastly, summative questions were asked, including "What advice would you give to up and coming fashion design entrepreneurs?" and "What future goals do you have planned for your business?"

A pilot study was conducted to test the effectiveness of the interview questions and procedures, to determine the average length of an in-depth interview and to



determine if any changes to the interview protocol are necessary. Two Black female fashion designers that met the sample criteria and who expressed an interest to participate in the pilot phase of this study were selected. Each interview followed the prepared interview protocol and was audio recorded. One interview was conducted over the phone and one was conducted in-person. The phone interview lasted approximately 1 hour and 35 minutes and the in-person interview lasted approximately 1 hour. After the pilot test, the researcher met with her faculty advisor to discuss the interviews and to make any adjustments if necessary. Minor revisions were made to the interview protocol and the researcher's interview techniques were refined. Data collected from the first pilot interview was not included in this study; however, data from the second interview was maintained, analyzed and included with the study's results.

### **Data Analysis**

This study employed a relatively new phenomenological research design, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), an approach concerned with conducting a comprehensive examination of human lived experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith; Eatough & Smith, 2017; Smith, 2011). IPA is rooted in psychology and “recognizes ‘the central role for the analyst’ in making sense of the personal experiences of research participants” (Smith, 2004, p. 20). It also borrows from three key theoretical underpinnings: phenomenology, idiography, and hermeneutics (Smith et al, 2009). IPA is a form of phenomenology – both a philosophical tradition and a method of analysis – that is oriented toward finding the common meaning among individuals who have a shared lived experience of a phenomenon (an event, process or relationship) (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Finlay, 2014). IPA is idiographic in nature in that it attempts to interpret the meaning of

an experience to a given participant, and recognize the significance of the experience for that participant through a detailed examination of that particular experience (Shinebourne, 2011; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). It also holds a decidedly hermeneutic position in that it is focused on interpreting the “text” of life such as historical documents, literary works and interview transcripts (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Smith et al., 2009).

The hermeneutic circle, a fundamental tenet of hermeneutic theory, describes a dynamic, non-linear process of interpreting a text hermeneutically whereby the interrelationship between the part and the whole takes place at a series of levels (Denzin, 2002; Smith, et al., 2009). Therefore, to understand any given part of a text, you look to the text as a whole; to understand the text as a whole, you look to the individual parts (Smith et al., 2009). Neither the whole text nor any individual part can be understood without reference to one another, and hence, it is a circle. Thus, the analytic process is one that is multi-directional, allowing the researcher to not only move through the data in a step by step fashion, but to also move back and forth through a range of different ways of thinking that will offer different perspectives on the part-whole coherence of the text (Denzin, 2002; Smith et al., 2009). IPA requires the researcher to instantiate the hermeneutical circle concept throughout the analytic process. In this way, another equally important hermeneutic circle is created involving the dynamic between the researcher, the participant and the participant’s account of their lived experience of a phenomenon (Smith, 2007).

It can be said that the IPA researcher is engaged in a double hermeneutic because the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them. This captures the dual role of the researcher. He/she is employing the same mental and personal skills and capacities as the participant,

with whom he/she shares a fundamental property – that of being a human being. At the same time, the researcher employs those skills more self-consciously and systematically. As such, the researcher's sense-making is second order; he /she only has access to the participant's experience through the participant's own account of it. (Smith et al., 2009, p. 3)

The existing literature on interpretative phenomenological data analysis has not proposed a definitive method for working through the analytic process (Gorgi, 2000; Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty & Hendry, 2011; Smith et al., 2009). It is even suggested that researchers impart innovation and flexibility in the data analysis process (Smith et al., 2009; Larkin & Thompson, 2011). The researcher incorporated the use of MAXQDA, a computer software program, used to facilitate analysis for qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research. MAXQDA provides tools that allow researchers manage, index, search, node, code and process qualitative data, thus making it an appropriate program for IPA.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis is described as an interactive and inductive cycle, characterized by a set of common processes (e.g. moving from the particular to the shared, and from the descriptive to the interpretative) and principles (e.g. a commitment to an understanding of the participant's point of view, and a psychological focus on personal meaning-making in particular contexts) (Smith et al., 2009). For this study, the researcher followed the guidelines prescribed by Smith et al. (2009) coupled with a modified version of the van Kaam method for coding phenomenological data (Moustakas, 1994). The analysis process employed the following phases: reading and re-reading, initial noting, detailed coding, developing emergent themes, connecting emergent themes, moving to the next case, and looking for patterns across cases.

### Trustworthiness

As it relates to research, trustworthiness refers to “how much trust can be given that the researcher did everything possible to ensure that data was appropriately and ethically collected, analyzed, and reported” (Carlson, 2010, p. 1103). The four major concerns relating to trustworthiness identified by Guba (1985) are: (a) truth value, (b) applicability, (c) consistency, and (d) neutrality. When conducting qualitative interviews there is always the possibility that the trustworthiness of the research could be compromised due to the uncertainty involved with narrative inquiry. With that in mind, increasing trustworthiness and avoiding any “traps” before they are set is often a concern among qualitative researchers (Carlson, 2010). The most commonly used techniques used to increase trustworthiness include audit trails, reflexivity, thick and rich description, triangulation, member checking and bracketing.

To establish confirmability of the research findings the researcher utilized audit trails. Halpern (1983) identified six categories of information that can and should be collected over the course of a research study to inform the audit process. They include: (a) raw data, (b) data reduction and analysis products, (c) data re-construction and synthesis products, (d) process notes, (e) materials relating to intersections and dispositions, and (f) instrument development information (Halpern, 1983). The researcher kept a chain of evidence in the form of interview notes, journaling, various drafts of interpretation as well as, audio and video recordings and photographs (Carlson, 2010). This documentation, which occurred throughout the research process, was presented to an

external auditor (the major professor) to check for the incidence and degree of researcher bias.<sup>1</sup>

Reflexivity is another technique used during the research process that involved documentation. “Reflexivity in research is not a single or universal entity, but [rather]...it is a process of critical reflection both on the kind of knowledge produced from research and how that knowledge is generated” (Guilemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 274). Thus, a reflexive researcher is one that is aware of potential ethical challenges that may arise and is able to critically look at the potential challenges and address them in the planning, conducting, and analyzing stages of the research process. The reflexive researcher; however, does not only reflect on the research process but on themselves and their role in the process. For this study, the researcher kept a reflexive journal to disclose of any biases or assumptions that arose during the research process.

It is important for researchers to reflect on themselves and their role as researcher. The researcher reflected on her background, values and beliefs and how they might impact their research. While the issue of researcher bias is a valid concern, the researcher’s personal and professional experiences were useful in conducting interviews with other Black women who have had similar life experiences. The researcher used this similarity to her benefit. The concept of reciprocity, defined as “the practice of exchanging things with others for mutual benefit,” is useful in research studies such as this one where the researcher and the participant have similar life experiences (Carolan,

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<sup>1</sup> The researcher and the external auditor independently coded the first two interview transcripts. The intercoder reliability for the first transcript was calculated at 59% and 72% for the second transcript. Subsequent meetings were held to discuss and compare findings and refine coding techniques. After coming to an agreement, the coding guide was created through a collaborative effort.

2003, p. 3). The researcher used this position of commonality to build a rapport with the participants thus, making for more successful and productive interview sessions.

Thick and rich description involves corroboration, that is, providing evidence that confirms or supports a statement, theory, or finding (“Corroboration,” n.d.). Successful corroboration requires the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the contextual setting of their research and to be able to provide meticulous descriptions of the setting and how it is relevant to other settings (Carlson, 2010). For this study, the researcher provided detailed descriptions, including information regarding the research participants, data collection and analysis procedures in an effort to make this research more credible as well as to provide more background for the reader.

Triangulation is the process of using several research methods and/or analysis methods within the same study (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe & Neville, 2014). This technique could involve data collected from different people or groups, at different times, and from different places. It could involve different methods of data collection such as interviews, questionnaires, observations and archival data; this includes conducting a mixed methods study by utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods. Finally, triangulation could also involve using more than one researcher to analyze and interpret data (Carlson, 2010). The premise of triangulation is that data is validated through the cross verification from two or more sources. For this study, triangulation involved the use of a demographic study to gather additional data from the participants. This study also involved a second researcher (the researcher’s advisor) to analyze and interpret the data.

Member checking is another technique used that allowed participants the opportunity to check the researchers interpretation of data they provided and to subsequently approve or disapprove of its validity (Seale, 1999). One of the main tenets of Black Feminist Thought is to allow the participants to tell their own story in their own voice. Member checking allowed the participants of my study the opportunity to speak for themselves.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The previous chapter presented the methodological procedures for a qualitative research study employing an interpretative phenomenological analytic approach to explore the experiences of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs. This chapter presents the results of the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics, personality traits, background, education and life experiences of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs?
2. 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?
3. What are the motivational factors for starting and maintaining a business among Black female fashion design entrepreneurs as they relate to Black feminist thought, cultural theory of entrepreneurship, disadvantage theory and/or protected market theory?
4. What are the success and sustainability factors for Black female fashion design entrepreneurs as they relate to Black feminist thought, cultural theory of entrepreneurship, disadvantage theory and/or protected market theory?
5. What are the resources and educational opportunities that have been useful to Black female fashion design entrepreneurs?

### Demographic Characteristics of Participants

This study's participants, all of whom granted permission for their names to be linked with their responses, are listed in Table 1. The demographic characteristics of the participants were compiled from the demographic survey completed by each participant. Demographic characteristics identified include the participants' age, racial and/or ethnic identity, city and state of residence, marital status and number of children (see Table 1). Educational information reported included the highest level of education reached (see Table 2) and the type of institution of higher education attended (see Table 3).



Fifteen Black female fashion design entrepreneurs were interviewed for this project. The designers' ages ranged from 25 to 50 with a mean age of 36. All of the participants identified themselves as members of the African Diaspora in one form or another. The African Diaspora is the "vast dispersal of Black people across the African continent, the Americas, the European and Asian continents and the islands of the great seas" (Manning, 2009, p. xix). Five of the participants identified as African American, four participants identified as Black American, three participants identified as Black, two participants identified as Haitian-American, and one participant identified as Afro-Caribbean.

The participants were based in all areas of the United States with the exception of the Western region. A majority of the participants resided in the Southeast region of the country. Out of 15 designers, seven designers (46.6%) lived in Southeastern states including Florida (1), Georgia (1) and Maryland (5). Out of the seven designers that resided in the Southeast region, five were located in the Baltimore, Maryland area. This coincidence can be attributed not only to the researcher's proximity to the area at the time this study was conducted, but also because Maryland, especially the Baltimore and Prince George's county areas, has the second highest concentration of Black women owned businesses in the United States at 33%, only two percentage points behind Georgia (American Express Open, 2015). Three participants lived in Midwestern states including Indiana (1), Minnesota (1) and Ohio (1). Two participants resided in the Southwest region of the US, specifically in the Little Rock area of Arkansas. Two participants were located in the Northeast region with one designer living in the Queens Borough of New

York city and the other was a resident of the city of Kingston in upstate New York. One participant, although born in the US, had a foreign address, residing in Marbella, Spain.

Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race/ Ethnicity</b>	<b>Geographic Location</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>No. of Children</b>
Shonda Ali-Shamaa	45	Black	Conway, Arkansas	Married	2
Nikki Blaine	41	African American	Zionsville, Indiana	Single/ Divorced	2
Janeen Brown	31	Black American	Pikesville, Maryland	Domestic Partnership	3
Naika Colas	30	Afro- Caribbean	Queens, New York	Single/ Never Married	None
Vanessa Donnelly	29	African American	Minneapolis, Minnesota	Married	2
Yamaia Faye	44	African American	Marbella, Spain	Single/ Divorced	1
LaToya Flood	29	Black American	Kingston, New York	Single/ Never Married	None
Victoria Jackson	50	African American	Baltimore, Maryland	Single/ Never Married	3
Merline Labissiere	34	Haitian- American	Miami, Florida	Single/ Never Married	None
Diane Linston	48	Black American	Maple Heights, Ohio	Married	2
Jordan Matthews	26	Black	Baltimore, Maryland	Single/ Never Married	None
Shenone Moussignac	29	Haitian- American	Conyers, Georgia	Single/ Never Married	None
Linda Rowe Thomas	47	Black American	Jacksonville, Arkansas	Married	2
Raquel M. R. Thomas	35	African American	Baltimore, Maryland	Single/ Divorced	2
Jessica Williams	25	Black	Baltimore, Maryland	Single/ Never Married	None

In regards to the marital status of the participants, seven were single, four were married, three were divorced, and one was in a domestic partnership. Nine out of the 15 (60 percent) participants had children. Two participants had three children, six

participants had two children and one participant had one child. With 60 percent of the participants being mothers, for many of them, the factor of motherhood played an important role in their decision to pursue entrepreneurship and in their experiences as Black female fashion designers. Women with children are often motivated to pursue business ownership as a means to balance their role as mother with their work life as entrepreneurship offers these women the flexibility to manage their dual responsibilities.

All of the participants have pursued some form of education beyond the high school diploma. Two designers had taken some college courses, one received a certificate of completion, two earned an Associate's degree, seven completed a Bachelor's degree and three achieved a Master's degree as their highest level of education obtained. Out of the 15 designers, 10 designers (66.7%) have received at least one certificate or degree in fashion design or merchandising.

Table 2. *Participant's education level*

<b>Education Level</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Some College	13.3% (n=2)
Certificate of Completion	6.7% (n=1)
Associate's Degree	13.3% (n=2)
Bachelor's Degree	46.7% (n=7)
Master's Degree	20% (n=3)

Among the designers who completed a fashion program, eight attended art and design colleges including four private, for profit institutions; three private, not for profit institutions; and one public institution. Three designers attended a vocational school, one attended a private historically Black university (HBCU) and one attended a four-year public university. Seven designers have also earned degrees of various levels in fields

outside of fashion including accounting, marketing, entrepreneurship, business administration, design and visual communications, biology, architecture and studio art.

Table 3. *Types of Institutions where participants obtained fashion degrees*

<b>Type of Institution</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Art and Design College	61.5% (n=8)
Four-Year Public University	7.7% (n=1)
Private HBCU	7.7% (n=1)
Vocational School	23.1% (n=3)

*Note.* Four designers have complete two certificate or degree programs in fashion. One designer received two degrees from the same institution.

<sup>a</sup>Of the eight fashion degrees obtained from an Art and Design College; four were from a private for-profit institution, three were from a private not-for-profit institution, and one was from a public institution.

### **Business Profile of Participants**

In addition to their demographic characteristics, the participants also provided information relating to their individual businesses on the demographic survey. This information included the participants' business name, business location and their website and/or social media pages (see Table 4). The participants also disclosed information pertaining to their number of years in operation (see Table 5), number of employees and/or interns (see Table 6) and methods of selling (see Table 7).

In regards to the location of their businesses, seven of the designers worked from a home-studio and seven participants operated a studio, boutique or showroom in a location away from their residence. One designer, who owned multiple enterprises, operated her fashion design business from home although its physical brick and mortar site was located in another state. All of the designers used a website and/or social media account to promote and/or market their fashion line.

Table 4. *Participants' Business Information*

<b>Business Name</b>	<b>Website/ Business Location</b>	<b>Social Media</b>
Love R.O.C.S.	Conway, AR	LoveROCS.com
Nikki Blaine Couture	Indianapolis, IN	NikkiBlaine.com
Sobiu	Pikesville, MD	Sobiu.com
Jacques Louis	Queens, NY	TheArteofStyle.com
Zenobian Moxis, LLC	Saint Paul, NY	Zenobianmoxisllc.com
Yamaia Faye Lifestyle Brands	Europe	YamaiaOnline.com
LaToya B. Flood Design	Uster Park, NY	LaToyaBFlood.com
Victoria Jackson Designs	Baltimore, MD	Facebook.com/victoria.v.jackson
Labissiere, Inc.	Miami, FL	Merlinelabissiere.com
Styles of Imagination, LLC	Cleveland, OH	Stylesofimagination.com
Jordan Matthews	Baltimore, MD	Jordan-Matthews.com
SM88, LLC	Atlanta, GA	SM88online.com
Romás by Linda Rowe Thomas	Little Rock, AR	Romasbylrt.com
DMR Fashion	Columbia, SC	DMRfashion.com
Irregular Exposure	Baltimore, MD	IrregularExposure.com

In terms of fashion entrepreneurship, the experience of the participants ranged from two to 17 years, placing each at varying phases of the *business life-cycle* (Ingram, 2011). Three designers were in the *startup phase* with 0 – 2 years of entrepreneurial experience in the fashion industry. The startup phase is considered to be the riskiest time for business owners as they are often challenged by negative cash flow (Henricks, 2005).

Three participants were in the *growth phase* with 3 – 5 years of experience as fashion design entrepreneurs. In this phase, entrepreneurs may notice an improvement in cash flow although challenged with the tasks of managing employees and maintaining customers (Henricks, 2005; Ingram 2011). Five designers with 6 – 10 years of experience reached the *establishment phase*. Businesses in the establishment phase are likely thriving with a steady cash flow, although it is not uncommon for some to stall in growth (Ingram, 2011). One participant was in the *expansion phase*, having 11 – 15 years of experience as a business owner; growth into new markets is a characteristic of this phase. Two designers had over 16 years of experience, successfully reaching the *maturity phase*. Entrepreneurs in this phase are often faced with the dilemma of choosing to expand their business or begin the process of consolidation (Henricks, 2005).

Table 5. *Number of Years in Business*

<b>No. of Years</b>	<b>Business Life-Cycle Phase</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
0 – 2	Startup Phase	20% (n=3)
3 – 5	Growth Phase	20% (n=3)
6 – 10	Establishment Phase	33% (n=5)
11 – 15	Expansion Phase	7% (n=1)
16 <	Maturity Phase	13% (n=2)

Five of the designers were the sole owner and operator of their business with no interns or employees. Four participants had 1 – 2 interns and/or employees, 3 participants had 3 – 5 interns and/or employees, 2 participants had 6 – 8 interns and/or employees and 1 participant had over 9 interns and/or employees. Most of the designers opted not to report the average annual revenue of their business; however, the highest income range reported was \$30,000 to \$80,000 annually.

Table 6. *Number of Interns and/or Employees*

No. Interns/Employees	No. Percentage
0	34% (n=5)
1 – 2	27% (n=4)
3 – 5	20% (n=3)
6 – 8	13% (n=2)
9 <	7% (n=1)

According to the North American Industry Classification System, the participants' businesses could be categorized as *fashion design services, apparel or clothing stores, clothing and accessories merchant wholesalers, cut and sew apparel contractors, and/or cut and sew apparel manufacturing* (Executive Office of the President, 2017). Based on the size regulations set by the Small Business Association (SBA), businesses of this nature, are considered small if they meet the size standard of 750 employees (for contractors and manufacturing firms); 500 employees (for clothing stores and apparel wholesalers); or if the average annual revenue is \$7.5 million or less (for fashion design services) (Small Business Association, 2017). All of the participant's fashion design firms are considered small businesses as they meet the established SBA size standards.

The participants used several different methods to sell their designs. A majority of the designers (67%) sold their garments via an independent online store. The second most commonly used method of selling was through custom orders with nine designers (60%) employing method. Six out of 15 designers (40%) sold garments from their independently owned brick and mortar location including boutiques and/or showroom spaces. Five participants (34%) sold their designs to small retailers and boutiques.

Table 7. *Methods of Selling Used by Participants*

<b>Method</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Custom Orders	60% (n=9)
Independent Brick and Mortar Location	40% (n=6)
Independent Online Store	67% (n=10)
Small Retailers and Boutiques	34% (n=5)
Major Retailors and Department Stores	0% (n=0)
Small Online Retailers	20% (n=3)
Major Online Retailers	7% (n=1)
Trunk Shows	13% (n=2)
Vendor Opportunities	20% (n=3)
Wholesale	20% (n=3)
Other <sup>a</sup>	13% (n=2)

<sup>a</sup>Includes showroom sales and third-party partnership agreements.

Three designers (20%) sold through small online retailers, three designers (20%) took advantage of various vendor opportunities, and three designers (20%) sold their garments wholesale to various retailers. Two participants (13%) have sold their garments at trunk shows and two participants (13%) used alternate selling methods including showroom sales and third-party partnership agreements. One designer (7%) sold her garments through a major online retailer. At the time of this study, none of the designers sold their garments through a major retailer or department store although several mentioned that it was a goal they hoped to accomplish at some point in their career.

### **Social and Environmental Factors**

The social environment or milieu refers to the immediate physical surroundings, dynamic social relationships and cultural context in which a defined group of people function and interact (Barnett & Casper, 2011). Humans' experiences within society can take place at multiple levels, often concurrently, including the micro level (e.g., families, church groups and schools); the meso level (e.g., communities and neighborhoods); and the macro level (e.g., the economy, government structure, and religion) (Society For



Applied Sociology, 2017). Embedded within each societal level are historical, social and power relations that have become institutionalized over time (Barnette & Casper, 2011).

The social and environmental factors associated with the participants of this study include *family influence, circle of support, school environment, community influence, travel experience and culture of fashion.*

<b>SOCIAL and ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Family Influence</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Lineage of fashionistas               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Well dressed women</li> <li>▪ Legacy of modistes</li> <li>▪ Passing down of skills</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Entrepreneurial tradition</li> <li>○ Parental Influence               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Influence on dress</li> <li>▪ Influence on character</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Motherhood</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Circle of Support</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Emotional support</li> <li>○ Instrumental support</li> <li>○ Informational support</li> <li>○ Appraisal support</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>School Environment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Influential instructors</li> <li>○ Fashion/home economics class</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Community Influence</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Disadvantaged neighborhood</li> <li>○ Emerging cities</li> <li>○ Fashion capitals</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Travel Experiences</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Traveling at a young age</li> <li>○ International travel</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Culture of Fashion</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Famous fashion designers</li> <li>○ Fashion on film</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

*Figure 1.* Social and environmental factors: Superordinate theme, major themes, sub-themes and minor themes

### **Family Influence**

The major theme, *Family influence* refers to the impact that the designer's immediate and extended family members have had in guiding their interest toward fashion and entrepreneurship. Decisions regarding career choice are not made by the individual in isolation, rather, career-making decisions often involve the impact of family members and other close personal attachments as well as other contextual variables such as family class, background, ethnicity, gender roles, beliefs, values, and traditions (Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996; Bratcher, 1982). The data revealed four sub-themes

associated with the major theme, *family influence*; they included, *lineage of fashionistas*, *entrepreneurial tradition*, *parental influence*, and *motherhood*.

**Lineage of fashionistas.** When asked to describe when they first realized they wanted to become fashion designers, most of the participants expressed that their interest in fashion began in childhood or adolescence. Shonda declared, “I’ve always wanted to. I might not have known what it was at the time but I’ve wanted to be a fashion designer even when I was a little girl.” Shernone added: “I always had an interest for fashion and designing my own clothes and cutting them up and putting them back together.” Vanessa answered:

It started a long time ago, so it wasn't just something that happened overnight or just this year. I wanted to do fashion design since I was 12. And the first thing I did obviously was I was always drawing out my clothes but at the time I didn't know how to sew.

The data revealed that for many of the participants, their shared childhood passion was fostered through their relationships with female family members. The *lineage of fashionistas* sub-theme included the minor themes, *well-dressed women*, *legacy of designers* and *passing down of skills*.

**Well-Dressed Women.** For some of the participants, their passion for fashion developed from an admiration they held for the most *well-dressed women* in their family. Shonda cited that it was her mother who initially influenced her affinity for fashion. She remembers, “She made my sister’s prom dress and my mother was always a sharp dresser, so that’s how I really got interested in fashion.” Naika commented:

I’m Haitian, so the Caribbean style – like my mom she always wears tailored clothing and she always makes sure she irons her things even her jeans so I’ve always wondered about structure and I’m more creative so I feel like my heritage, my background and my sister and my mom influenced me.

For Shernone, her older sister, who also works in the fashion industry, left a lasting impression. She recalls:

She did go to school for merchandising. Her friends, our friends, were always like, I wouldn't say the mean girls but they always dressed nice when they went to school. They always had the latest clothes and they really inspired me. Yeah, when it came to fashion they had a big influence on me paying attention to how I dressed and really trying to match clothes and really making it a big deal to kind of stand out when it comes to fashion.

***Legacy of modistes.*** Several participants also have designing “in their blood” as they come from a *legacy of modistes* including talented seamstresses, dressmakers and designers. Shonda stated, “My mother sewed, so I was always around it. You know, of course over the years I guess people stopped sewing, but it was always something I wanted to do.” Linda also grew up watching her mother sew, she remarked:

She wasn't a seamstress by trade, but she sewed for everyone in the neighborhood and I watched her make dresses, from wedding dresses to – I'm also a preacher's daughter so there was six of us and she made our clothes. No one ever knew the difference. She was just really good at what she did and so she was my greatest influence.

Jessica expressed that she was inspired to become a fashion designer by her grandmother who was a master seamstress:

She's from North Carolina and she used to design a lot of gowns for people down there. She also was making a lot of prom gowns for my sisters and my cousins, just family members, and I really got inspired by that. I loved the way they felt in the garments after she designed them. I loved how effortless it felt for her. So that was where my inspiration came from for it.

***Passing Down of Skills.*** Another important aspect of family influence revealed from the data was the *passing down of skills*, a practice involving older family members passing down their sewing and needlework skills on to the next generation. Some of the designers reminisced about being taught to sew by their mother, grandmother or other close family member. Shernone, who learned to sew at an early age, vaguely recalled,

“I’m not sure if my mother taught me or I think my cousin, I’m not sure, but I started really sewing, hand sewing when I was maybe 11 years old. Often the designer’s first sewing lessons focused on mastering the skill of hand sewing before being allowed to use a sewing machine. Shonda who was taught by her mother stated:

She did show me how to sew a little bit. When I was young it was mostly by hand because she didn't really want me touching the machine because it was my grandmother's machine. So it was one of those things that was passed down so she never really let me touch it until later on, so initially it was just by hand.

Victoria, who was taught by her grandmother, was also required to learn the skill of hand sewing first: “She started me on darning socks. I was not allowed to be on a machine until I was twelve. By the time I reached the age of twelve she had passed away.” From her comments, it is evident that Victoria’s grandmother used sewing to encourage her to conform to the traditional homemaker gender role. She explained:

My grandmother taught me how to sew because my idea when I was six was to join the military and my grandmother didn’t like that too much. So what she wanted me to do is to learn how to be a good housewife so she started me off making quilts. Quilt making was my first actual hands on construction.

However, as Victoria continued it became apparent that through the process of her grandmother passing down her sewing skills, she was also simultaneously passing down the family history. She goes on:

We used old shirts and rags and while we was tearing the strips of the garments there were stories behind each piece of garment that we stripped. Then we cut each strip of fabric into blocks, and we hand sewed each piece. The simplicity of a quilt has a deep history and that’s how I learned how to sew. I still have that quilt, today.

The basic sewing skills that many of the designers inherited from their forbearers gave them the foundation and confidence needed to develop their talent independently. After apprenticing under her grandmother for some time, Jessica declared, “After that, I

realized that I wanted to do a lot of seamstress work myself. She taught me a little bit of sewing here and there and then I continued just by trial and error really.”

**Entrepreneurial Tradition.** Having a family with an *entrepreneurial tradition* often provides female business owners with an innate entrepreneurial spirit, financial support and a propensity to take risks (Levent, Masurel, & Nijkamp, 2003). Some of the designers come from a family in which the owning and running of a business is a longstanding tradition. LaToya inherited her entrepreneurial spirit from her mother who is also a businesswoman. She stated:

She's been my mentor since a kid and I have watched her do many a great things in business. She started at the age of 29 opened a practitioner private school and had that open for 15 years and I watched her touch so many lives in business and so many people's lives and I was inspired by that.

Vanessa also noted that she initially learned about running a business from her mother:

I picked up a lot of traits from my mom. She does weddings and stuff like that and she makes everything that she does. So I kind learned from her when it came to being an entrepreneur. She's the first person I learned that from.

Janeen talked about helping her dad with his business when she was younger:

A lot of people in my family are kind of like entrepreneurial, or had that spirit. So my dad he was an electrician by trade. He started his own business so he would have his own side clients in the mix of his work. I remember, like I was good at writing and proofreading so he would have me look over his contracts and I was in middle school. So that was exciting to be a part of that

As a member of an entrepreneurial family, Shernone has witnessed the ups and downs that come with owning a business: “I know my parents and my sister have opened up businesses before and I've seen them open and closed all the time.” Continuing with the family tradition, she followed in her older sister’s footsteps, to become a fashion design entrepreneur. Shernone cites her sister as her business role model:

I'll say my sister is one of my mentors because she tells me a lot about opportunities when it comes to fashion and where I can sell my clothes and how to put together a fashion show and production wise how it should look and how I should display my clothes when I'm a vendor, when I go out and do vending opportunities.

And while she looks to her sister for advice in the area of fashion entrepreneurship, Shernone points out that their aesthetics are not the same: “she does design but its kind of...her style is different, its more vintage.”

**Parental Influence.** The sub-theme, *parental influence*, refers to the lessons, instructions and teachings that were imparted upon the designers by their parents during the formative years of their lives. For several participants, the manner in which they were raised significantly shaped their business mindset and design aesthetic. Two minor themes emerged from the sub-theme, *parental influence*, they included, *influence on dress* and *influence on character*.

**Influence on dress.** Because mothers often serve as agents of socialization regarding their daughter’s appearance they have a profound *influence on dress* practices performed by their offspring as well as well (Ogle & Damhorst, 2003). Diane, who grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, remarked, “my mom used to dress my sister and I. We were the Ferrell sisters and we were very much known for our appearance, especially me [laughs].” Merline, a second-generation immigrant, recalls her mother utilizing dress to reinforce her Haitian identity despite their impoverished reality. She stated:

I remember I grew up super poor. So poor that my mom [didn't] believe in going to school with tennis shoes. I don't know if its because the Haitians are really influenced by the French, but tennis shoes is kind of like this American idea. So I would go to school with church dresses, my mom would put ribbons in my hair and then I would go with my knee socks and church shoes and that was so sophisticated to her.

She goes on to explain how her mother's attempt to preserve their Haitian heritage through dress, coupled with her underprivileged upbringing, ignited her desire to become a fashion designer:

For me it was hard because I would see all my friends with Nike, you know what I mean, and I [didn't] even know what Nike was. We didn't know what trendy was. I just knew that I was different by going to school and being picked on. And so, late at night I would dream like if I had money how would I dress what would it look like. I would envision you know what the fabric is, what the color is, how would I walk into a room, what would the clothes be. I would dream of like when I have more money or when I do have this opportunity, this is what I'm going to wear. So I think growing up super poor and not having the fashionable clothes really impacted me and made me even curious of like ah man, I really want this.

***Influence on character.*** The manner in which children are socialized can have a lasting *influence on character* development well into adulthood. Parents take on the responsibility of socializing their children by imparting their cultural beliefs, values, norms, practices and attitudes. In accordance with distinctly Afrocentric values, Black girls are socialized to adopt both traditional gender characteristics such as being caring and nurturing as well as nontraditional gender characteristic such as independence and tenacity (Spencer, 1983). As Raquel noted:

I think when you're raised by a Black woman and my grandmother raised me, you're automatically taught to be strong and to overcome and to conquer and to empower other people to do great things. While a lot of us don't make it out of poverty, for those of us that do, I think it's solely based on the strength of our grandmothers and our mothers and fathers that gave us the things that they did give us to get out of there.

In regards to her strength of character, Vanessa stated:

I think my mom has a big influence on me as far as how I am because she's a single mom and she's independent and she knows how to get what she wants and knows how to accomplish her goals. That's where I get that from, her. So that's what keeps me moving because if my mom could do it with three kids by herself, I can do it too. I'm married so, I mean there's no excuse at this point.

For, Meline her mother's immigration story played an important role in shaping her character:

My strength comes from knowing that my mom came here on a boat with nothing coming from Haiti. She tells me this story and I'm like what! They literally built a rafter and they have like 100 people on there and some make it, some don't. You know when the boat gets full they have to throw some people overboard. So that's her story so that I can come here in America and I can be a fashion designer. So I believe in that American dream. I'm grateful that my parents lived that life so that I can live this life.

**Motherhood.** The last sub-theme to emerge under the major theme, *family influence*, was *motherhood*. As mothers in their own right, some of the designers discussed how taking on the role of mother has impacted them as fashion designers and entrepreneurs. Diane, mother to a son and a daughter and grandmother to a four-year-old grandson and a newborn granddaughter, joked, "The worst part about it is, neither one of my kids have a passion for fashion (laughs)" although she did mention that her son was thinking about modeling. She contended that motherhood never had much of an affect on her career as a fashion designer because her husband was a very hands-on dad: "I just never [had to worry about that] because my husband is very much a home person. He's just like I'll stay home at home and watch the kids." For Shonda, the thought of becoming an empty nester prompted her to finally pursue her life-long dream of becoming a fashion design entrepreneur:

When I turned close to 40, I said what do I want to do with myself? You know, a lot of times parents or people with children, get caught up in the children and then when they leave you don't know what you're gonna do with your life. So they were getting older and I decided, let's see what's going on. So I found a fashion school locally and I went for it.

Vanessa stated that she is motivated to pursue entrepreneurship full time because she wants to provide a better life her children:



[Being a mother] encourages me more because just the fact that I am working for somebody alone makes me realize I don't want to do this for the rest of my life. I want to be able to be my own boss and make my own money and not have to make a measly [one] thousand dollars every two weeks. I want to be able to live comfortably and I want my kids to live comfortably as well.

Linda echoed that she is driven to continue her fashion design business for the benefit of her children:

My kids drive me. Because I want them to see through me that anything is possible. And I also want – I never want them to have to struggle. So I know that, one day whatever I'm doing, that they are going to reap the rewards of it. So they push me everyday without even knowing that I'm doing this for them too.

Raquel was also adamant about creating a legacy for her children because she was not afforded the same luxury as a child:

For me legacy is very important. I dream of creating a legacy for my kids and giving them choices. I didn't have choices. I had to go to school. I had to take that 9 to 5. I had to, I had to, I had to, you know. I started working at 16 and I worked every weekend until I started my corporate position at the age of 22. So from 16 to 22 I worked every weekend. So I wanted to give my kids a choice, a legacy. My kids push me to be my best self, whatever that is and I may fail of course at something's but they make me get up. When it's bad and the financial statement looks crazy. I look at my kids and it's like ok we have to figure out where to go, we can't stop.

Nikki discussed how her roles of mother and businesswoman sometimes collide:

Working the long hours and everything I have to be mindful. So I will pack up and take things home. Their school is about – without rush hour traffic – 25 to 30 minutes from where my boutique is. So when it is rush hour traffic it would take me a hour unnecessarily. So that has been a bit of a strain for me. Because they're very athletic making sure I get to their games and things like that has been a little bit of a stretch. Sometimes I need to leave a lot earlier than I want to and then if there's a client I can't just be like, “get out of here [laughs].” “I need to go run and take care of my kids.” But you know sometimes I do, I will. Most people are very understanding especially knowing you're a woman running her own business and everything, people really respect that. I've never really had a problem with people saying, “you need to figure out if you will be a businesswoman or a mother.” I've never had to make that choice.

## Circle of support

The major theme, *circle of support*, refers to the network of people who surround the fashion design entrepreneur acting as a “community” to encourage and support her accomplishing their business related goals. A *circle of support* can include family, friends, professionals, community members and other supportive individuals. The data revealed four types of social support provided by the participants’, *circle of support*; they included, *emotional support*, *instrumental support*, *informational support*, and *appraisal support*.

**Emotional support.** The sub-theme, *emotional support*, involves expressions of empathy, concern, love, trust, acceptance, encouragement and/or caring. By providing *emotional support*, members of the *circle of support*, let the participant know that they are valued. Diane beamed as she spoke about the words of encouragement she has received from individuals who have followed her progress throughout the years:

I get so many people who say I am so proud of you and you're going to really be successful and you're really gonna to make it. I don't think, I can't let them down. So when I hear people say I'm so proud of you, I remember you working in your basement, to working in the little 2 x 2 boutique down the way, and that makes me feel good. That encourages me to just push forward.

Merline expressed how elated her family and friends were to share in her success:

My family is legit, even my parents are like “hey when are you going to get your storefront?” My sister is like “I'll do check out!” I have a thing in Orlando; I have a trunk show through Bloomingdale's, which I haven't announced yet by the way, but they're like “can we show up?” My friends are like “can we show UP?!”

**Instrumental support.** The sub-theme, *instrumental support*, encompasses the direct ways in which members of the *circle of support* have assisted the participants.

Tangible aid and services such as financial assistance, material goods, or services are

examples of *instrumental support*. Raquel talked about how having the support of the local community has been instrumental to the success of her business:

Community is huge for us. Community is key for DMR; community supports us. The community is why we have had the successes we've had. I'll tell you our high school crowd – our high school has supported DMR. Family and friends have supported DMR. People in the community, in Columbia – the Black community has been huge, the Black community came out in mass numbers on December 3<sup>rd</sup>, our grand opening day and they were there and they were happy to be there. So the community has supported the movement. Local artists have supported the movement. Family, friends, its been awesome.

Jessica's family, especially her mother was extremely instrumental in fostering her fashion design and entrepreneurial endeavors early on. She stated:

My grandmother had taught me a lot when I first started out. After that my mom – and I have a really supportive family – like me, my sister and brother, we lost our father a few years back but our mom is like the most supportive person in the world. So, whenever she sees that her kids are interested in something she automatically gets them some type of formal education on it. So that had a lot to do with how I got to where I am as well. It's not easy for a lot of people especially from our community to have that type support. So that's first and foremost, you know, just having that support from my mom was so helpful. So yes as soon as she saw I was taking it seriously – I was asking her to take me to my grandmother's every weekend on Saturday morning – she eventually was like okay we need to get you even further into this because you're two years from going to college. We need to get even more professional and serious. So she put me in classes at a local sewing store in Baltimore, right outside of the city and that was really helpful.

Diane commented that she has been fortunate to have the support of her family and friends throughout her career:

My husband he's very much of a, "I'll hold it down here at home and you do your thing" and my mom and my sister – I'm just really blessed to have family and friends that say "whatever you need, what can we do to help?" You know, if I do a photo shoot, "what can we do to help" so, no complaints there.

Shonda spoke about the *instrumental support* she has received during fashion shows from members of her *circle of support* including her cousin who also aspires to become a fashion designer:

When I do the shows, my cousin comes along to assist me. She actually went to The Fashion School too, after I did, so I was really proud of her. She's amazing! I didn't even understand what an assistant would even be like until she was like, "I'm gonna assist you," I'm like "okay whatever." So after the show you know, you have press, you have a lot of people to talk to you, but what I didn't consider the first time was that while I'm having all these conversations, models are taking clothes off. You know, I don't know where the clothes are; I don't know what they're doing. One lady, she stepped out of a formal gown and walked off and left it in the floor. So you know, you have to collect jewelry, you have to collect shoes, you have to collect all that stuff and make sure its put up. So she helped me on my second show and I was talking and I turned around and she was sitting there with her legs crossed. Everything was put up in bags. All the jewelry was back in the bags and in the boxes ready to go. So she has been amazing. And then in New York, she came and another designer friend of mine came. So again people are supportive, I have another girl who wants to just be involved in whatever I do. So people, they want to really get into it and understand the business and they want to help, so I always have a lot of assistants.

**Informational support.** The sub-theme, *informational support*, was offered in the form of advice, suggestions, and information that participants could use to address problems. Merline remarked about the invaluable *informational support* that she has received from her business-minded friends:

I have amazing friends. They're like, "hey let me give you pointers," "this is the latest thing." I'm coming to the table saying I don't know, like what do you think I should do? They're so open to say this is what I've done here and this is what I've done there.

**Appraisal support.** The sub-theme, *appraisal support*, involved the provision of information to the participants for self-evaluation purposes such as constructive feedback and affirmation. Merline described a retreat that she participates in with members of her *circle of support* where she not only receives, but also gives *appraisal support*:

There are amazing women that speak life into me. We get together every six months and we talk about our dreams. We do six month plans for the next part of group and then we have accountability to make sure you're on your dream plan. It happens every six months in the summer. Our retreat is somewhere by the water and everybody's talking about their dream out loud and at the end everyone has to have accountability and I'm accountable for other people. Like I have one friend that's writing a book, and the book is gonna truly help. Whatever your dream –

my other friend is working on her voice over career. So, I think support is [important].

### **School Environments**

For many of the designer's, the *school environments* they have progressed through, including elementary and secondary school as well as institutions of higher learning, have provided them with the opportunity to learn sewing and other fashion design skills that they continue to utilize in their careers. Some of the participants shared stories of learning these skills though a *fashion or home economics class* while others recalled being taught by one *influential instructor*.

**Fashion or home economics class.** The first sub-theme to emerge from the major theme, *school environments*, was *fashion or home economics class*. Victoria, who was first taught to hand sew by her grandmother, noted that she advanced to using a sewing machine in her secondary home economics classes, "I took the courses in junior high and high school, which was, known as home economics and that's how I started off on the sewing machine." Diane also took a series of home economics classes in high school. She describe the courses and some of the sewing construction projects that she made:

So at 14, it started in home economics. When you start learning home economics, I don't even know if they still teach it, but I remember making aprons and then potholders. I think we would work off of a commercial pattern. I was very fascinated, you know, just seeing the fabric and a sewing machine and what thread can do and I would get thread and some fabric and just sew. That's when I knew I wanted to do something with sewing. At 16 years old, at my high school, I took a textile fabrication [class]. So I learned about fabrics and then I learned how to make patterns, the miniature size patterns.

Latoya spoke about how the fashion class she took in high school ultimately changed her career trajectory:

My first goal was to be an attorney. That's what I wanted to be, an attorney for youth and kids and different things like that. So when I was in the 11th grade, in

high school we had the choice to stay in school all day or learn a trade. I decided that I didn't want to stay in school all day; I wanted to learn a trade. So they [had] options of different classes you can take. The program was called BOCES. One class I signed up for was speech but the class ended up getting canceled because it wasn't enough students. Well I love fashion and I love clothes so I'm gonna go over to the fashion class. I'm just thinking that it's a fashion class, that [we're] just gonna, you know, cut pictures out of magazines. I wasn't thinking it was like an intense class where we're actually learning how to sew. I made a tie, that was my first assignment in that class and at that moment I was like, whoa, I like this! This is something that I could see myself doing. So after that, it's just been a real desire and a passion of mine.

**Influential Instructors.** The second sub-theme that emerged under the major theme, *school environments*, was *influential instructors*. Merline remarked about a teacher that taught her how to crochet in elementary school:

The first thing I've ever done creatively is crochet. There was an amazing teacher – I was in elementary school and I asked my mom can I stay over after school and learn how to crochet. I believe that, that one professor that took their time to say I'll stay after school and teach you how to crochet – it sparked my imagination of like what else can I do.

Diane distinctly remembered her high school home economics teacher who sparked her fascination with sewing and fashion design:

I had a teacher by the name of Miss Rodriquez and I think I was the only person paying attention to her in home economics. I just remember her showing me how to make a three-layer halter dress and I was fascinated.

Victoria commented about her college professors that provided her with a broad range of fashion and textiles knowledge through their teachings:

Ms. Bailey, my clothing construction professor, use to say, “always construct your garments as if they are going to be in the store.” Ms. Bailey also sparked my knowledge for textile science, for me to go even further and deeper in the breaking down of fibers before they become yarn, before they become material and the hands on experiences with mixing dyes – I love fabric dyeing... In my entrepreneurship class with Professor Booth we had to go out to different businesses to see how [they were] ran. She also taught visual merchandising, where we had to learn everything that you do as far as the display of a store. Mr. Tolbert was another professor that taught us about color blocking.

For Janeen it was her 3<sup>rd</sup> grade art teacher who sparked her interest in sewing:

I would say as young as maybe seven or eight. In third grade I remember I had this art teacher, Miss Hutchens and in art she was teaching us – it was this one segment on how to hand sew and I mean it just rocked my world. After that day I went home, I had Barbie clothes, I was hand sewing everything. Ken's jacket turned into Barbie's backwards dress, I would sew buttons and... You know, my mom already sewed at that time so she was doing weddings, proms and things like that, but she didn't have time I guess at eight to show me how to do that or thought to. But I think it was after Ms. Hutchens' art class she saw my passion really sparked after that.

### **Community Influence**

The major theme, *community influence*, emerged as the participants described the communities in which they were raised or have resided in and how their experiences within those communities have influenced them in their careers as fashion design entrepreneurs. The data revealed three sub-themes associated with the major theme, *community influence*; they included, *disadvantaged neighborhoods*, *emerging cities* and *fashion capitals*.

**Disadvantaged neighborhoods.** The first sub-theme to emerge from the major theme, *community environments*, was *disadvantaged neighborhoods*. Some of the designers grew up in *disadvantaged neighborhoods*, which left a profound impression on them as adults. Victoria's disadvantaged upbringing resulted in childhood adversities that lead her to explore fashion design out of necessity:

I started to make my own clothes at the age of thirteen; that's when unfortunately, I had my first child. We lived in an area in Washington, DC and we didn't have much money. Although my mother worked in the federal government, she still did not – she didn't have the economical means – the money, to buy clothes. So, I might as well had made my own clothes or refurbish what we had.

Raquel, who runs an urban clothing label that she describes as “clothing with a conscience” stated that growing up in a *disadvantaged neighborhood* “had a huge effect

on the message” behind her apparel. She goes on to say: “I grew up in a drug-infested area, in poverty. So the same message that I want to get out to people and kids now, basically I needed that same message when I was growing up.”

Jessica’s description of her childhood neighborhood suggested a middle class upbringing:

I grew up in Baltimore. I'm from northeast Baltimore. Back when I was growing up there [it] wasn't a really rough area. We were really close with our neighbors and things like that. So it wasn't [rough], you know. I was brought up in an area that was pretty middle class.

She went on to say; however, that the once middle class neighborhood is now poverty-stricken, “I went back to that area a year ago, it's not the same. Baltimore has just completely changed up; the poverty has expanded so much.” In regards to growing up in Baltimore, Jessica asserted, “I didn't want to be the average person from Baltimore that has a small mindset and [is] only used to a certain way of life because of how we've grown up, I always wanted something more for myself.” Janeen, who also grew up in Baltimore, talked about the trials of inner-city life:

I grew up in Baltimore City. I don't want to say it was the ghetto, I mean it was the hood, I guess. You know inner city life. Corner stores on every corner, you know, everything that was poisonous to your body was accessible. Drug dealers – my brothers feel short to that. In and out of jail that type of thing. I will say their lives are different today. It's different for all of us now.

Merline vividly describes the immigrant community where she spent her childhood and how it has shaped her identity:

I was born in Miami, Florida but I grew up super Haitian because in Miami, Florida [there] is a huge population of Haitian and Cuban immigrants. No one spoke English so we lived very, I would say as if we were in Haiti. I didn't speak English until I believe I went to the second grade. Actually, I had to go to ESOL for a second language. So for me it was hard. I always say I'm Haitian instead of more Haitian-American because I grew up where we had chickens running around. It was like mini Haiti and all my friends were either Haitians or Cubans.



Merline also noted that the area she grew up in has undergone gentrification and is no longer the disadvantaged area she remembers, “Now it's Wynwood, it's very popular, Wynwood, Santa Clara. It's very hip and trendy now but that's kind of where I grew up.”

**Emerging cities.** The second sub-theme, *emerging cities*, refers to cities that have experienced significant growth in recent years and are considered up-and-coming in terms of arts, culture and fashion. Nikki remarked about pursuing fashion in the Midwest:

In Indianapolis, I mean the next major city is Chicago. So you know the challenge is real of being realistic about can you really make a living doing this because this is Indiana. It's kind of like the tech world of the Midwest. Fashion is slowly up-and-coming. The Art Institute is now in Annapolis and they have an apparel program at Ball State.

Diane, who relocated from Dallas, Texas to Little Rock, Arkansas, spoke about the challenges of being a Black female fashion design entrepreneur in a smaller city:

With my husband's job we ended up moving to Little Rock, Arkansas and in Little Rock, there is absolutely nothing [laughs] when it comes to resources. The only fabric stores around are Joann's and Hancock's is not even here anymore. So it was – that was a challenge. And then moving to a new city and just breaking that barrier of being a female, an African-American woman and then like I said me being a burn survivor, the minute I walk in the door, I get – where people are – you know, I have to prove myself. So again dealing with all three of those barriers. But I think, honestly though, the most difficult part was trying to find a way to make my business work in a city that was not designed for what I was trying to do.

Shonda declared that although she grew up in, North Little Rock, Arkansas, a city that was not always as accommodating for fashion designers, especially Black fashion designers, as it is now, she was determined to make her way:

You know back then people didn't really – even now – well I guess now its a little different, now people are trying to embrace everybody things. But back then it just wasn't something that you would think that this little Black girl from North Little Rock would be doing...I'm pretty strong willed, so I kind of knew what I wanted to do and I'm kind of one of those people that will do it regardless.

Vanessa grew up in Jacksonville, Florida and moved to Minnesota at the age of 10. She noted that Jacksonville, “is really not so much fashion driven” but in regards to her current city she went on to say that:

Minnesota can be. It's one of those things where you have to make a name for yourself and create your own lane. And then it's just a good place for you to start off but it's not like a perfect place for you to continue fashion as far as designing and all that because you really can't go further than just learning.

**Fashion capitals.** The third sub-theme, *fashion capitals*, refers to cities that have had a significant influence on the fashion industry. Shernone commented that growing up in the cosmopolitan city of Miami, Florida, might have had an influence on her pursuing a career in fashion design, “Maybe the beach scene and going out to the beach a lot, maybe that and South Beach – hanging out on South Beach, maybe had a big influence in my wanting to do fashion, because in Miami people are really flashy.” She now lives in Atlanta, a city also known for fashion. Atlanta is also one of the top cities in the country for Black entrepreneurs. Shernone remarked:

Atlanta is probably a good place for Black entrepreneurship. One of the things that drew me to Atlanta is it was so welcoming when it comes to Black entrepreneurs. There's a lot of people here that can kind of support you in that. I probably wouldn't have started doing fashion if I wasn't [here]. I probably would feel like I can't accomplish this if I didn't come to Atlanta, because Atlanta is just a place for Black entrepreneurs. I don't know, I don't think I would have become a fashion designer if I didn't move to Atlanta.

Shernone contended however, that in order to expand her business she may have to move to a larger fashion capital:

Now I would say, although Atlanta is a great place to start, I don't know if it's a place that can [take me] where I'm trying to go as a fashion designer. I don't think me staying in Atlanta would help me because I feel like I got my start, I know what I want to do, but I don't think if I stay I will get to where I'm trying to go. I've thought a lot over the last couple of years; I thought about maybe either going to New York or California because it's a better place for designers who have already established themselves.

## Travel Experiences

Many of the designers discussed how their *travel experiences*, whether within the United States or abroad, has had a positive impact on their fashion design careers. Linda noted that she travels extensively for work:

I've had the opportunity to travel all around. I've done Atlanta fashion week... Boston. I've done...a lot of different fundraisers. I've had an opportunity to do a lot of different things with my fashion. I actually got invited to London Fashion Week this year.

Linda also explained how traveling and immersing herself into different environments stimulates her creative side:

Last year we went to Miami for the very first time and just seeing the different color schemes of the beach and the beautiful beiges and the blues together that put this whole different color palette in my mind. So that's where my spring 2017 [line] was from, just sitting there on the beach that day and seeing how pretty these different colors were and the sea shells and...so my inspiration can come from all different places.

The data revealed two sub-themes associated with the major theme, *travel experience*; they included, *traveling at a young age*, and *international travel*.

**Traveling at a young age.** Some of the designers discussed how having the opportunity to travel during their childhood and adolescent years profoundly impacted their outlook on life. Jessica voiced how *traveling at a young age* gave her a broader perspective and allowed her to reach for something greater:

I really started getting [my inspiration] by traveling and meeting other people when I was young. Every summer my mom would put me in some type of camp or something of that nature that would expose me to other people, so that's [where] a lot of my inspiration [comes] from, just meeting other people that weren't from where I was from.

**International travel.** Some of designers expressed the significance of traveling abroad. Yamania, who has traveled the world extensively as a fashion model remarked

that: “being immersed in other cultures and being open to receive other people in other situations sharpened this pursuit to be able to create.” Victoria served 13 years in the United States Army. She spoke about her experiences while stationed in Europe, which lead her to the House of Chanel:

I was [stationed in] Shape, Belgium. Paris, France was two hours from my back door...so I used to travel along with some international students that [were] from Gabon and Sierra Leone, who worked in the couture houses. So as I traveled with them to the Coco Chanel house [where] I started off sweeping up treads and needles.

From Victoria’s Parisian experience, she learned the skill of couture first hand and discovered a new passion for the art form:

I saw how they [executed] their artistry of hand sewing. Even though I grew up sewing when I was six, seeing it at a new level in a couture house and how they took the work passionately...I said that is really interesting. I would love to know more about it. So one of the head seamstresses showed me how to do [couture] hand sewing. I found it to be relaxing and it was nice to see your art on a garment like a canvas to a painter. That’s when I knew that I wanted to be a fashion designer in this area of this industry.

Merline travels to Europe every year as part of her non-profit organization. She discussed how her most recent visit drastically changed her overall design aesthetic:

I was a hipster in Savannah. I [mean] a super, super hipster, I'm talking about the kind of hipster, you're on your bike, you have holes in your shoes, Toms and you think it's cute. But I went to Europe and they weren't wearing name brand clothes. I loved...[how] sophisticated, they were, the way they carried themselves – people barely wear jeans [there]. So when I came back that year, three years ago my brand really shifted, it really became very minimal. If you look at my all white collection where its like, very clean and kind of just sophisticated, just a little posh...that's like literally after Europe. And they weren't doing too much, they didn't have all this extra stuff on. They made it simple, they made it sophisticated and I wanted that girl. I was like that girl is my client, that’s my girl.

Diane proudly remarked about the chain of events that led up to her impromptu solo trip to China:

In 2007 I flew to China by myself. Because you know I told you I have the investors that gave me the money and just to tell you how fate had it, I was emailing a company in China and I should say it was an accident, but I hit a letter off and ended up getting someone in China who actually had a manufacturing company.

Diane ends her account indicating how she not only gained a life-long friendship from her international experience, but invaluable business know-how as well:

So what ended up happening was, I was getting orders and I had to think of how to get this manufacturing company. So I don't know, like I was emailing somebody, and this man appeared like, "oh I have a manufacturing company" and we just made a connection and we are actually friends to this day. You know going to China, I had this group of people's money so I had to make sure that I did good. So it was a good move all around you know.

### **Culture of Fashion**

The major theme, *culture of fashion* refers to fashion in and of itself and the impact that it has had on the lives of the participants. Fashion is most often considered a business but it is also very much a culture. When the participants were first asked what influenced them to become a fashion designer several stated that it was just a fascination with fashion that motivated them. As Vanessa stated:

I think fashion in itself influenced me just because I like being able to see people in my clothes. I feel like you can just do anything when it comes to fashion and fashion can be anything. So yeah, I really didn't have any influence or influencers that helped me get to that point. It was just all my motivation from just seeing work from different people, different designers, and different types of people in the fashion industry itself.

Latoya commented, "I just loved fashion and loved going shopping and different things like that. But it wasn't really [a particular] designer that I was following or anybody in particular that really sparked that interest." Linda recalled:

I just had big dreams. I've always been a big dreamer and you know I can remember [watching] TV and how I was so infatuated with Jackie O and anything that was fashion as a little girl. I was infatuated with it. So I've always dreamed outside of the box.

The data revealed two sub-themes associated with the major theme, *culture of fashion*; they included, *famous fashion designers* and *fashion on film*.

**Famous Fashion Designers.** Many of the designers named specific fashion designers who have inspired them in their own careers. Victoria stated, “Coco Chanel. That’s number one, Coco Chanel. Oscar de la Renta and I also pay homage to the first Black designer that people don’t know about, Elizabeth Keckly because its important to study history, especially our history.” Diane listed her favorite designers and explained how each inspires her:

I will tell you my favorite designers and [my design style] will make sense. Pierre Cardin – so back in the 60s he had like super futuristic designs, they were waaaay ahead of his time. You had Gianni Versace who gave you that 16th century era, because you remember, you know his logo. And then you had Patrick Kelly – his designs were just vibrant and fun and alive. And my last is Kimora –Baby Phat by Kimora Lee Simmons.

**Fashion on Film.** Some of the designers spoke about the impact of seeing *fashion on film*. Victoria remarked:

I love looking at old movies. I love movies from the 1940’s especially our own movies like *Cabin in the Sky*, Oscar Micheaux’s movies.... movies with Lena Horne, with us in it, I just love. For my hair, for my make-up, from the way we wore the clothes.

Linda credits the movie *Mahogany* for inspiring her to become a fashion designer:

I guess when I actually knew what [a fashion designer] was...putting that title to it, I was like 10 or 11 and I saw *Mahogany* for the first time, with Diana Ross. And I was like, “oh my goodness, that’s a real job?” So that was when I actually knew what it was called what I wanted to be. You know what I mean? But before that, it was just, you know, I want to make clothes when I grow up but seeing that movie actually gave me the ability to identify a title to what I wanted to be.

### Characteristics and Personality Traits

Entrepreneurship requires a specific set of dispositional traits to withstand the unstructured situations in which entrepreneurs are faced with daily. In these unstructured

situations, it is the entrepreneurs' personality that provides the structure needed to handle the demands of business ownership. An entrepreneur has to anticipate challenges in advance, plan ahead, implement decisions, be alert and proactive, and make things happened. Because of the characteristics and personality traits required, not everyone is attracted to or fit for entrepreneurship. The *characteristics and personality traits* associated with the fashion design entrepreneurs interviewed for this study included *knowledge seeker, sharing knowledge, knowledge of self, and entrepreneurial mindset.*

<b>CHARACTERISTICS AND PERSONALITY TRAITS</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Knowledge Seeker</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Self-taught learner               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Innate creative sense</li> <li>▪ Researcher</li> <li>▪ Jane of all trades</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Life-long learner               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Formal training</li> <li>▪ Opposition to formal training</li> <li>▪ Merging disciplines</li> <li>▪ Continuing education                   <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional development</li> <li>• Graduate school</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Humble student               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Learning from others                   <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking notes</li> <li>• Asking for help</li> <li>• Mentorship</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Accepting criticism                   <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practicing</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Sharing Knowledge</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Mentoring</li> <li>▪ Coaching</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Knowledge of Self</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Staying true to yourself</li> <li>○ Knowing your niche</li> <li>○ Embracing your culture</li> <li>○ Spiritually grounded               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Fashion as a ministry</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Entrepreneurial Mindset</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Entrepreneurial traits               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Time management</li> <li>▪ Organization</li> <li>▪ Preparation</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Young entrepreneur</li> <li>○ Accidental entrepreneur</li> <li>○ Serial entrepreneur</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Figure 2. Characteristics and Personality Traits: Superordinate theme, major themes, sub-themes, minor themes and micro-themes

### **Knowledge seeker**

The major theme, *knowledge seeker*, describes the fashion design entrepreneur who is constantly searching for information that is relevant to their business. The

*knowledge seeker* may be interested in learning at least something about many different

topics or they may focus on becoming an expert in one particular subject. Victoria asserted: “Education. Education. You’ve got to have education. Education is key and that’s more than a cliché that people like to say, but knowledge is power, knowledge is definitely power.” The data revealed three sub-themes associated with the major theme, *knowledge seeker*; they included, *self-taught learner*, *life-long learner*, and *humble student*.

**Self-taught learner.** The sub-theme, *self-taught learner*, refers to the participants who have taken it upon themselves to become educated on a subject or trained in a skill without the guidance of an experienced instructor. Vanessa noted that she is mainly a self-taught designer, as she had not received any formal education in the field: “Right now YouTube is my best friend. You know, with technology nowadays you can find anything online, so that's how I ended up learning everything. Everything is self-taught.” Echoing Vanessa’s comment, Merline stated, “I’m a self-taught learner. I’m on YouTube. I listen to other people. I have books that I’m opening. I look at how other designers do it.” Merline described how she taught herself the skill of garment construction before she received her formal training:

I'm a self-starter so before [I attended] school I just taught myself everything. I believe that we are in a generation where if you don't know something you go find it. If your plan A didn't work, you go to plan B. If plan B didn't work, plan C. So that’s kind of how I approach my life and so before SCAD I self-taught myself the garments. I would go to the thrift store, I would put the clothes inside out and I would cut them and I would use that as a pattern.

On finishing fifth on the 14<sup>th</sup> season of the fashion design competition show, *Project Runway*, Merline further noted:

I tried out for Project Runway three times. The first time I tried out I was self-taught. I didn't know what a pattern was. I just did it. I did prom dresses. I made



suits for people. I made ties. I saw it and I just deconstruct it and then I was like, “Oh I can do that!”

Jessica stated that she was also a self-taught designer before she attended design school:

“I taught myself a lot about the design process and then I sat in some sewing courses and of course I went to college at the Art Institute, but it started really with just trial and error.” The *self-taught learner* sub-theme included the minor themes, *innate creative sense*, *researcher*, and *Jane of all trades*.

***Innate creative sense.*** Several participants revealed that they possessed an *innate creative sense* that has served them well as fashion design entrepreneurs. Merline declared, “I think I've always been a creative girl. I've always loved working with my hands.” Jessica noted that she is very creative but not in the typical sense:

Like of course every designer is creative, right, but the way that I – my design aesthetic, I look at something that's on trend, and make it into something that's very different, that can only be designed by me. So I definitely have an eye for changing things slightly, but not confusing people.

Yamania stated that her upbringing fostered her creative sense:

We were always doing crafts. I was afforded the surroundings where my mother was doing pottery, interior decorating, sewing and things of this sort so it was just a natural element for me and then I'm already creative so I would take it further.

***Researcher.*** The minor theme, *researcher*, evolved as several designers used the term to describe themselves as they went about discovering or verifying fashion design or business related information. Victoria addressed the importance of conducting research:

I'm a big researcher. I will research till – down to the inkling. I mean, as far as history of costume, I will go outside of the book and dig deeper for knowledge of where the garment – actually, not only the garment, but the textile – how it started. Going all the way back during slavery, even before slavery, the Egyptian period. I've always loved history. Studying what was going on in that period, you know, what they wore. That's where a lot of my inspiration comes from.

Victoria, who is also a fashion design instructor, goes on to say:

Then I will bring it to my students and let them know fashion is beyond just making clothes. You have to research. You have to have that knowledge. In textile science I incorporate math. You know, “how are these people making money?” If you want to start a [fashion label], research and knowledge is the biggest and the most important [thing] in this industry before you move further into entrepreneurship.

***Jane of all trades.*** The minor theme, *Jane of all trades*, is a play on the old phrase “Jack of all trades” used to describe someone who has acquired knowledge in many areas. Merline listed the various fields she has dabbled in: “I’ve done set design and since I’m in theater, I’ve done costume design. I was a graphic designer, I taught myself Photoshop. Fliers, movie covers, I just do it and I was even an event planner.” Shernone, although trained in many disciplines, indicated that she considers herself an artist first:

I majored in art but in the back of my mind I wanted to do fashion. The classes I took under studio art encompass really everything from...3D art to graphic design and screen-printing and all that. I was trained in skills related to fashion design, textiles and fabric manipulation and learning how to dye fabric.

***Life-long learner.*** The sub theme, *life-long learner*, acknowledges that leaning does not end at childhood or in the classroom; rather, it continues throughout one’s life. As Jessica put it: “Every time I learn something, I always knew I needed to learn more. I’ve never felt fully educated, still to this day there’s always something to learn.” The *life-long learner* sub-theme included the minor themes, *formal training*, *opposition to formal training* and *merging disciplines*.

***Formal training.*** The minor theme, *formal training*, refers to the fashion design education that many of the designers have received which includes learning the traditional design skills of sketching, draping, pattern-making and garment construction. Jessica remarked that her design school education gave her a realistic view of the fashion industry:

After high school, I attended the Art Institute of Philadelphia and that's where I got a lot of my formal training. Like everything that I thought I had down pat, oh my God, that school really opened it up to me and showed me what the real industry is [like].

Merline described how her formal education refined her skills and expanded her knowledge in fashion and design:

I think before school I was already very driven. I think what school has done for me, because I love school, is it has made it so elegant. It purified my craft. It added sophistication to my craft. It was no longer just like a craft it was – it became a skill and a talent, you know what I mean. Then I had words to describe for it, like before I had color theory I didn't know the opposite of red was green. Like I had a great sense of color but I didn't know why, you know how you're like, “ah, I love these two” but you didn't know the complementary color of orange is blue so when those two colors come together magic happens. So just, a lot of things I've done, [was through] intuition, but now those had words to it, they make sense. It's like with music – with someone that is self-taught, when they start reading the notes it becomes life, you're like, “YES!” [laughs].

***Opposition to formal training.*** Some of the participants voiced their unfavorable opinions regarding the traditional mode of fashion design education. Others have found themselves on the receiving end of negative remarks from those in *opposition to formal training*. Disapproving comments made by a fellow designer prompted Victoria to question her pursuit of higher education:

She made me feel bad because she kept saying that, she didn't have to go to college like, “I don't know why people spend a lot of money to learn how to sew.” I left her house feeling like, “did I just waste my money going college?” She had the clients and the money and I didn't, yet I'm going to school spending all this money for sewing. My children are the ones who told me “Ma, you're receiving something she will never have, a degree.”

Although Jessica received a formal college education, the hostile learning environment at her alma mater left a negative impression:

I have to be honest, the one thing I didn't appreciate, at least at that school, is they made it seem so impossible for you to be a designer. Yet, they took your money for you to become one and I just hated that. I remember my first day, my professor told me, look to your left, look to your right, this person won't be here in

two years. I mean, I did it, and you're right, they probably aren't gonna be here, they're going to drop out, but, you know, having people that support you, and having a teacher that's telling you can do it makes a big difference and we did not have that. I had to put myself in their shoes and say, "well if I wanted to be a designer and I couldn't make it, I would be upset too." So I felt like they was taking out their anger, for not being able to reach their goals, on the younger demographic that was now their student.

Due to her experience, Jessica has created her own fashion design entrepreneurship program and she encourages up and coming designers to seek alternate modes of instruction to learn design skills:

So honestly, I don't recommend [college] for education going forward. I'm not against college, I love college, I'm a graduate myself, but I can tell you that I would never go back to a classroom setting to learn anything I wanted to learn. I always tell clients that are in my programs, "you can go to school or you can learn from somebody that actually reached that success." You can learn from somebody that wish they did it and didn't or you can learn from somebody that absolutely did and is happy with where they are. It makes a big difference.

Vanessa said that the high cost of tuition for a fashion degree nearly steered her away from pursuing her passion:

I was supposed to go to school at the Art Institute when I was 18. Back then Minnesota didn't really have a lot of schools that offered fashion design because like I said this is not a state for you to do that type of stuff. So I was gonna go to the Art Institute for fashion merchandising, not even for fashion design because they didn't even offer it then. They were charging \$26,000 a year and then expected me to pay \$6000 a year out of my own pocket, which I didn't have. So that almost crushed my dreams of being a designer.

Diane, who earned a degree in fashion design and merchandising from Virginia Marti College stated that her formal education, did not teach her what she now knows about the fashion industry. She goes on to say:

I'm the kind of person, I completely think out of the box. So when I look at people like P. Diddy that had his collection and his different designers, how did they get to that stage? Then I started learning and you know studying them and so I did the collection. I remember the first collection I did and I realized that I need a manufacturing company. So how do you get a manufacturing company? How does that work? Then you got a manufacturing company. How are they getting in

these stores? So then I had to learn ok, they're doing trade shows. All that wasn't taught in school so I've made massive mistakes. Like if I just had a nickel, [for every mistake], I would be a millionaire by now [laughs]. Yes so, school doesn't teach you about how to find a manufacturing company, they don't teach you about the trade shows.

Jordan talked about the pros and cons of her formal education:

I feel like at MICA the program kind of helped me and hurt me. It helped me in a whole a bunch of ways because I wouldn't know any of the things that I know now if I hadn't taken these courses and you know, they give you a lot of artistic freedom to experiment and figure things out. But also it was just like, it wasn't a big, big focus in fashion design or even garment design because the garment design class that they had was one of those shorter classes and it was pass or fail and like we just made a bunch of like tiny samples of things not necessarily really getting into the specifics of making a shirt or pants. So we never had enough time to it because I think the class was 9 to 12 [weeks] or something like that. It was a bigger focus on being conceptual at MICA as opposed to I made this because I'm really into these colors right now. It was always like, "what does this mean?" or "what does the color represent?" and I'm just like its not always about that. I feel like the things that I make, they mean something but its not like a really weird conceptual meaning behind it.

***Merging disciplines.*** The minor theme, *merging disciplines*, refers to the interdisciplinary approach that some of the designers applied to their design process.

Merline outlined her method of combining her two passions, fashion and architecture:

I'm merging architecture and fashion together. I think that gives me an edge that a lot of designers don't have. It gives me a different lens to look through and I'm grateful for that lens. I'm grateful that I can pick up a paper and kind of chop it and be like, "oh that's a design." Or I can go back and forth, like when I'm doing architecture I use fashion as inspiration, and when I'm designing, architecture is my inspiration. I think that has given me a different perspective and kind of like sets me apart from this race.

Naika who majored in biology in college spoke about how she is combining science with fashion design:

I'm in grad school at Pratt, but at first it was kind of like, "how do I go from a bio major to doing design on my own and now being a designer?" I didn't know how to tie in fashion with bio like, "how do you do them together?" And then I started working for the Bureau of Recycling and Sustainability and I realized, easy, I can

do both as sustainable fashion. It's still fashion, but it's environmentally friendly fashion and most designers especially Black designers aren't really doing that.

***Continuing education.*** The minor theme, *continuing education*, refers to the participants' educational experiences beyond or in addition to their undergraduate degree. Two micro-themes emerged from the minor theme, *continuing education*, they included: *professional development* and *graduate school*.

*Professional development.* Several designers' discussed their participation in *professional development* opportunities ranging from informal learning activities such as conferences and workshops to academic course work leading to specific certifications. Victoria noted that although she has completed a college degree, she continues to seek out opportunities to enhance her knowledge:

I attend a lot of the sewing expos and workshops on how to design, how to start your business, how to start your garment line, how to sew knits... Even now as a professor, I try to expand my learning because I want to bring it to my students and to let them know you have to go out and enhance your skills and education.

Victoria also takes advantage of the educational opportunities offered through her professional memberships:

When you're in certain organizations they have their own little groups and meet-ups where you can learn and take tours and stuff like that. It's good to get in different organizations. With the Costume Society they send you emails, invites to the workshops and the forums or you can go to museums. I love museums – The Smithsonian in Washington, DC is my favorite. I love to visit the Smithsonian and just look at the garments. I was actually a docent for the Smithsonian for a couple of years. The Black Quilter's Guild is another one that I'm apart of where you can work with other Black quilters and learn about our rich history.

*Graduate school.* Some of the designers have already earned advanced degrees in diverse subjects and others have expressed the desire to attend *graduate school*. Merline discussed her future plans to continue her education in the field of architecture:

In a couple more years I am going back to school to be an architect. I had the opportunity to get an Associate of Arts in Architecture at Miami-Dade College. I haven't told anyone yet, but hopefully like next year, or two years from now I'm going back to get my master's in architecture because I feel like their both my loves you know and I miss one every time I stop one. I'm like, "oh my gosh I've missed this!" So [my business] would be split between being a fashion designer and being an architect.

Several designers talked about the importance of obtaining business knowledge and expressed that they either have earned, are pursuing or plan to pursue an advanced degree in the area of business. Raquel noted that both her undergraduate and graduate degrees are business related:

I graduated with a degree in business and business marketing. I also have my master's. So I have my MBA. So all of my college education is based solely around business, running businesses.

LaToya also mentioned her plans to pursue graduate study in the business field:

I'm in school again and I graduate in 2018 with my bachelor's degree in Business Management. I start my master's program next year and I want to get it in Business Management. Then I will continue on until my doctorate.

**Humble student.** Some of the participants' spoke about occurrences in which they assumed the role of the *humble student*. Victoria spoke about her humbling experience as a novice at the House of Chanel:

The majority of head seamstresses have been there for sometime so you have to start small. So you take the humblest position – sweeping the floor of someone's couture house. Sweep up, thread every needle, run errands. You may have one that will be like, "ok she learned the language, oh she's taking an interest so let me show her a little something." At first it was frustrating, but I looked and I watched and I learned.

The virtue of humility is one that emerged repeatedly throughout the interviews with the fashion design entrepreneurs. In describing her personal characteristics, LaToya noted her humbleness:

I am down to earth and I'm touchable. I know a lot of designers that are like –they haven't even gone nowhere and they're just so untouchable. You have to go through this assistant and go through that person. I'm not grand; I'm just very humble and very grateful for the opportunity that God has allowed me to have, for the things that God has allowed me to experience.

Merline commented by saying:

A lot of designers that I meet...they come with the attitude like, “oh, I got this, I know it.” When you have that attitude there's nothing that can come in, there's nothing that can go out because you think you know it all in this industry. So I definitely come with the idea that I don't know it all, so I have a lot of people that advise me because I approach everything like I don't know it all and I'm very humble about that.

In the same vein, Victoria offered the following advice for up and coming designers, “ Be teachable. Learn how to be humble and how to keep your mouth shut in certain situations. In certain situations you do have to speak up, but there're some situations where you just need to listen.” The data revealed two minor themes associated with the sub-theme, *humble student*; they included, *learning from others*, and *accepting criticism*.

***Learning from others.*** Many of the fashion design entrepreneurs discussed their openness to *learning from others*. Merline commented, I've had CEO's, rich people, go to coffee with me. These people were big time, like way ahead of my league. I call them up like, “hey I want to learn five things from you. I'll take you to coffee.” *Learning from others* can occur directly (e.g., hands on instruction) as well as indirectly (e.g., observing or listening). The minor theme, *learning from others*, included two micro themes, *asking for help* and *taking notes*.

***Asking for help.*** Admitting to oneself that there are some tasks that cannot be accomplished alone requires a certain level of humility. Some of the designers related being a *humble student* to *asking for help*. Victoria simply stated, “If I'm not sure, I ask.”

Merline proposed that people are willing to help if you just ask:



Once you first say that you need something, just throw it in the air and people are going to jump on it. They're going to be like, "oh you need help with this?" "Oh, yeah, sure da – da – da." They won't give you money but they will give you their time. You know sometimes they might even invest. You never know. But I think sometimes as designers we stay in a corner and we don't talk to other people to give us advice.

*Taking notes.* Being a *humble student* also requires one to take notes. The micro-theme, *taking notes*, literally refers to recording information for subsequent recall.

However, *Taking notes* also means to "take note" of something by paying close attention or observing carefully. Merline discussed *taking notes*, especially when one of her business-minded friends is offering advice:

I have amazing people around me that give me advice, friends that have a lot of money or they've been in whatever industry for years and they're just like, "go get this book, go do this," and I'm like, "yes!" and I take it down and I'm like with my notes, someone's talking about business, I'm taking my notes out like, "who am I?" "I don't know nothing." I'm taking my notes out. So I'm all about people giving me advice and pouring into my life.

Merline also explained how she uses her notes as a reference tool:

Having humility, that's how I show up to every conversation and I put it out there. So I'll talk to someone and be like "hey I'm really looking for blah, blah, blah" and they'll be like, "yeah you should do this" and I'm like writing it down, and then later they'll probably be like, yeah I know someone [who can help you] or I'll go back to my notes and find it myself.

Victoria suggested that even those who are regarded as experts in their respective fields should consider taking notes from their contemporaries:

Sometimes as professors we have to take ourselves out of being the professor all the time and learn from each other as colleagues. You know, I'm the history and textile go-to, but I'll slip into Professor Douglas's class and watch him, how he maneuvers the material in draping and I'm like, "okay, let me take some notes."

Victoria indicated that she also "takes note" of how others conduct business to learn what to do and what not to do, "I noticed that a lot of designers worry about how to make

money but they don't know the business side. I learned by watching others. Whether it was good, bad or doing it the right or the wrong way.”

**Accepting criticism.** Several participants noted the importance of *accepting criticism* with grace and appreciation. Shonda stated that although she has a strong personality she is able to accept criticism: “I know who I am, but at the same time I’m able to take critiques, I’m able to absorb the stuff around me and modify whatever accordingly because I know who I am and I know who my woman is.” Shonda continued her thoughts on *accepting criticism* by saying, “be open to other people not just criticism, but you have to be open to understanding that you don't know everything. So you have to be open to advice, be open to taking things in.” Merline admitted that she tried out for *Project Runway* three times before making the cut. She discussed how she used the constructive feedback received from each audition to improve her designs for the next try-out:

So the first time I did it they gave me feedback like, “you don't even know how to sew.” That was the reason why I went to SCAD. Then after SCAD I was like, “oh, I wanna try again” and they were like, “uh, you have amazing designs but you need to work on your craft” and I was like “ah, man okay.” The first time, I just went to go get feedback because when you're in this industry there's no one looking at your work saying, “good, no, awful.” Like there's no real people in your life. Most of the people will be like, “ah this is amazing!” But you need real people to say, “this won't sell, this is not great” and I think that's what Project Runway did for me.

Prior to her third and final audition for *Project Runway*, Merline turned a failed collection into a success by using it as an opportunity to gather feedback directly from consumers:

A week before my audition I had a trunk show and my clothes bombed. I had a good friend that said, “Merline, let's look at it, let's changed the perspective around.” “Just tell everyone this is a sample sale, and that you want their feedback.” So some people bought, some people didn't, but I got to get feedback from all these people who were like, “change this, I love this, I'm going buy this anyway.” When I got the call from *Project Runway* I had a week to edit all those

garments. At the audition I was a maybe, and I told them “oh, thank you!” I was excited, I was like, “I’m just here for feedback.” “See you next year!” Then the producers were like, “wait we love you, can you come back tomorrow?” I think they loved the fact that I can take feedback. People want to see that, you’re not a brick wall so when they give you feedback, their voices are not in the air or whatever.

*Practicing.* The micro theme, *practicing*, evolved from the minor *accepting criticism* as the designers discussed using feedback received to make improvements through practice. The participants noted that *practicing* ones craft is essential to becoming a better designer. Victoria stated that when she initially began to learn the skill of hand beading at the House of Chanel she did not work on major garments: “I just worked on [smaller projects]. I took them home and started practicing. The more you practice the more you perfect your skills.” Vanessa spoke about how her designs have improved from when she first started:

The first time I actually made a clothing line....[I was invited] to be in a fashion show. I’d never done a fashion show at the time and I’d never had anything displayed. I did the fashion show and people loved how creative it was even though they weren’t the best pieces. So after I did that, that’s what pushed me to keep working on my designs because I realized that if I keep getting better at what I’m doing then who knows where this might go.

### **Sharing Knowledge**

The major theme, *sharing knowledge*, refers the designers desire to share what they have learned with others. Victoria stated, “I was always a person who liked to share knowledge, especially amongst my African American sisters and brothers.” Merline thought of *sharing knowledge* as a way of “paying it forward.” She commented, “When I meet other designers, I’m always quick to be like, this is all I’ve learned here. Here it is on a platter, you know on a platter because someone did that for me. Two sub-themes that emerged from the major theme, sharing knowledge, are *mentoring* and *coaching*.”

**Mentoring.** One way that the designers shared knowledge with others was through *mentoring* up and coming designers. Shernone stated that she hopes to mentor future entrepreneurs:

One of my goals is to inspire other people to pursue entrepreneurship. I see a lot of people since I've started doing this come and go. One day they'll start an online store and then a couple years later you don't see them again. I want to inspire people to just keep going, like you can actually do this if you have a good idea for something. Yes, I think it is important that I be a mentor to somebody because I've had people ask me before, "how did you get started?" "what did you do?" and I have absolutely no problem telling them how to get started.

LaToya expressed that she wants to be a mentor for young people wanting to enter the fashion industry because she was not afforded the same opportunity:

I think it's important because I was not fortunate to have that way paved for me, I do want to paved that way for others. I believe if that way wasn't paved for me, I'm paving the way for somebody else. So it's important for me to reach back and help somebody else along their journey. I do honestly believe that and starting in June my company will have a mentoring program where we're going to bring in high school girls and boys that want to come in and do an internship and we're gonna teach them about the industry.

Vanessa echoed LaToya's comment, stating that because no one was there to help her when she was starting out, she wants to help others that may be in the same situation she was in:

Nobody ever tried to reach out and help me so when people reach out to me and say, "hey Vanessa can you help me because I don't know where to start," of course I'm gonna help because I've been there. I wish at the time somebody would have been there and said I want to help you get to where you need to be.

Linda spoke about why she thinks it's important to be a mentor for young Black girls:

I use myself for example, if I am a successful Black woman, I think it is really important to mentor younger African-American girls so that they see there's so much more that we can be in this world other than singers and dancers and athletes. So when they see that, hey I can run a business, hey I can be CEO or whatever – that's possible. You don't have that one-track mind of all I can ever accomplish is being a singer or an actress or...there's so much more to us than that.

Linda went on to describe her internship program:

I have an internship program with UAPB for example and they have a fashion program. So when the interns come from there, you know, I can kind of gear it towards –they want to know more fashion things. With the University of Central Arkansas, they don't have a design program, but I think they still have the fashion merchandising because that's where I went. But I mentored one of their business students and she didn't really want to be a fashion designer but she wanted to know how the business was ran. Let's say she opened her own store one day. So I was able to cater to the entrepreneur side and you know she learned a few things about fashion. She helped with social media and things like that when it came to fashion. I think she did some pictures and photo shoots, but she learned how to do the business side of it.

**Coaching.** Providing business *coaching* was another way that the designers shared knowledge with others. Jessica offers coaching services for individuals wishing to learn more about the business side of fashion. She noted that it is mainly Black women that have been drawn to her program:

I have a program, it's called the IE Fashion Academy, based on my brand Irregular Exposure and basically we're a coaching service for emerging and aspiring fashion entrepreneurs. All of our clients so far–it's not something that, you know, I meant for it to be this way, it's kind of just how it happened – but all of our clients are African-America women, thus far, and that's just who signed up. That's who's ready to invest in themselves and that's who is, you know, who's sick of the way things are going and they what to change it.

### **Knowledge of Self**

The major theme, *knowledge of self*, or self-knowledge, refers to how individuals describe their roles and characteristic behaviors, their preferences and values, their goals and motives, and their rules and strategies for regulating behavior (Markus, 1993). Those possessing a *knowledge of self*, have a keen sense of self-awareness; they know who they are. Shonda offered the following words of advice for up and coming fashion designers: “Know who you are. Be strong in your designs, be strong in your vision,” Latoya declared: “I was never really a follower. I was always different, I marched to the beat of

my own drum.” Victoria found avenues to express her unique sense of self even as a U.S. Soldier. She commented:

I notice that on all the military post, in the PX, whoever was the buyer, ordered the same garments. So whenever a lady thought she had a couture garment, when she goes out to a party or church, you [would] see the same dress on three other people. But not me, I always – when I lived overseas I went down into the towns and purchased different designs. I always knew that I was different from everyone else and they knew it too [laughs].

The data revealed four sub-themes associated with the major theme, *knowledge of self*; they included, *staying true to self*, *knowing your niche*, *embracing cultural heritage*, and *spiritually grounded*.

**Staying true to yourself.** The sub-theme, *staying true to yourself*, refers to standing by and never defaulting from one’s personal beliefs and values. In staying true to herself Yamania voiced: “I’ve had to endure, persevere. I’ve been challenged and I had to flip that challenge into something that was productive for me first” Shonda asserted:

I’m true to myself and I know who I am, I know who my woman is, I know what my point of view is. I mean it’s a learning process throughout, you fail and you learn from the failure. But I think the biggest thing for me is I know who I am. Even in school, when [the instructor] was like, “you need to change this” [I would] say, “no ma’am, this is what it’s going to be because this is who I am.” So she learned to leave me alone [laughs].

Jordan stated that being different is what prompted her to pursue fashion design:

I feel at one point in my life I realized that I was different from everybody. And then from that point on I didn’t want to be the same You know how when you were younger, like in high school and things would be trendy and all the girls in the class had this one thing? Well I didn’t have it and it was just like I didn’t necessarily want it either. I was fine with the way that I looked. I feel like that influenced me because the older I got, I wanted to know how to make these things so I wouldn’t have to be the same as everybody else.

Victoria voiced that Black people should find ways to stay true to themselves within the fashion industry:

As African Americans in this industry, we run all over the place, we run behind folks instead of marching to our own tune. We run behind too many people trying to do what they do. Create your own, you know. *Project Runway* is good but it's not everything to just lose yourself in.

**Knowing your niche.** In fashion design entrepreneurship, *knowing your niche*, refers to having a clear understanding of your brand identity and your customer base.

Most of the designers have successfully carved out a well-defined niche market for their business. Shonda declared that she is in essence, her own base customer:

She's strong. I mean you have to be to carry – you've seen some of my necklines – you have to be strong to carry some of the stuff that I create. She's not loud, but she is powerful. When she walks in a room, you notice her. She's powerful and she sexy without being overtly out there. She's a strong woman. She's me [laughs]!

Merline described her target customer as “the creative woman in the business world.”

She goes on to describe her ready to wear line:

It's really me simplifying my design so that the everyday woman can wear it. So if you look at my garments closely there's architectural shapes because I love negative spaces, I love positive space, I love curves. My signature is the half circle that goes above her hips, you know. I like to kind of show her silhouette. I'm also inspired by the 1900's or the late 1800's, mens garments so a lot of my girls have tailcoats like the guys. So I have a little bit of that into it. Then the last thing is sportswear. I do love the idea of being comfortable cause I feel like the businesswoman should be very comfortable. So a lot of my materials are sportswear. I add the design element of architecture, a little bit of the men's attire and then lastly is adding the sportswear fabric to make it more casual and not too serious. I design for the creative woman and that's my passion because I am a creative woman in this industry and we're not wearing suits anymore.

Shernone said that she prides herself on being an eco-conscious fashion designer:

Meaning that more often than not I'm trying to use organic and eco friendly materials when I design my clothes. A lot of people... appreciate that, the fact that it is organic...because they can't really find it anywhere else. Like you can't really find organic clothes just going into the mall. A lot of people design, just to design and they don't really ask, “how can I make myself standout?” or “how can I make my materials [eco-friendly]?” or “what can I do to make people want to buy [my garments]?” A lot of people don't think about that when it comes to design and a lot of my customers appreciate that.

Diane said that her designs are futuristic: “They’re kind of like rock star clothing but you can wear them to work, you can wear them to church. It’s not casual wear it’s high fashion for the casual wearer [laughs].” Jessica called her designs, “the not so basic basics.” She stated:

I honestly feel like a lot of my stuff is really basic pieces just with an amped up little detail. Like I have a silk button up and the back of it is completely open, so that's just like a little surprise there. I have a sweat suit, it was worn by Evelyn Lozada on *The Real* and everybody went crazy, but to me it was just a regular sweat suit. The big twist on it was the fabric; it was a pair of jogger style pants and then a knit blazer, but it looks like a pantsuit. So people looked at it as a professional piece but it's made out of a sweat suit material...I like to do a twist on the fabrics I use and the textiles, but for the most part I think my stuff is pretty simple. It's always like a pair of classic pants or a classic blazer, but it's a huge surprise when you see the fabric.

On coaching up and coming designers about finding their niche, Jessica remarked:

They come with like the craziest stuff and I always have to be honest with them and let them know it's a market for everything, but you want to be smart with everything you design as well and you want to make sure your pieces are wearable. If your top client can't wear it to dinner – you gotta think about where people can wear these pieces.

**Embracing your culture.** *Embracing your culture*, was the last sub-theme that emerged from the major theme, *knowledge of self*, as the participants discussed how they celebrate their cultural heritage as fashion design entrepreneurs. Some of the designers acknowledged their culture through their business practices while others incorporated elements from their respective cultures into their design process. Jessica spoke about how Black culture has inspired some of her recent designs:

This past November I put out some sweatshirts and people took to them really well. I had a line of sweatshirts that really celebrated the African-American culture. Two years ago, I came out with a sweatshirt that celebrates Trayvon Martin and then this past fall I came up with a collection that celebrated Freddie Gray. It celebrated like how Black people aren't just statistics. I had a shirt that says “Welfare's Most Wanted” and it just celebrated how we're not the number one statistic in welfare and they want us to be, you know. So [my] culture, I feel



like it's inspired me so much. Every time something happens in the world that really shakes it and just leaves me uneasy, I always do something creative with it. So I am absolutely inspired by just our culture, the hardships we deal with right now and the Black men that we're losing every day all of that inspires me and I just turn it into a work of art at that point.

Jessica also indicated that she considers her culture in every aspect of her business. She mentioned an upcoming event she has planned that will celebrate the contributions that Black people have made to the fashion industry:

My culture has everything to do with [what I do]. I'm actually doing an event really, really soon. I'm really excited to start working on it. It's going to be called the Blacks in Fashion project, just celebrating African-Americans in the fashion industry. We have inspired each other so much since the beginning of time, I feel we're the most creative people on this earth and we come up with so many creative ideas and I get inspired sometimes just from some of the ideas we come up with.

LaToya expressed that she embraces her attributes as a Black female:

I'm not trying to—you know a lot of people in this industry, they try to dilute who they are and dilute their culture. You gotta be mixed with this and you gotta be mixed with that. I'm happy being Black and I love being Black. I embrace that and I give honor to the Black designers that have paved the way for me. I don't deny who I am. I don't try to dilute who I am to make me be able to fit into this industry. I embrace who I am and it's like, either people gotta except it or they don't.

Shonda remarked that she also celebrates Black womanhood through her designs:

You know, we embrace our curves and up until recently that's not what society did. You had to be a pencil and that's what they considered to be sexy. So as Black women we've always had the curves, we've always embraced those curves and that's what I like to bring out in women. I don't use the colors, I don't do a bunch of color, I don't do the fabrics, but I think the spirit of the Black woman, I think is what I represent in anything that I do.

Shernone stated that due to her decidedly Black cultural design aesthetic, members of the Black culture naturally favor her garments more:

I think that my culture does show up in my clothes. A lot of the images I put on my clothes, might be geared towards Black people more so and [people] of other

racers, when they see my stuff, they may feel like maybe it's not for them but I feel like my base customers are African-Americans.

Vanessa mentioned that she would be honoring her African heritage for her next collection, “This time around I plan on doing an African - Bohemian collection because my mother's is Liberian. So I'm trying something a little bit different than the normal stuff that you see in the industry today.” Merline describe a recent collection that paid homage to her Haitian heritage: “My last collection I took the map of Haiti and I took shapes out of that and I created space around the garment and those spaces became the garment for that collection.” Diane contended that while she tries to attract a more diverse clientele, her design style seems to appeal to Black women over any other racial or ethnic group:

I'm trying not to cater more so towards the African [American] community so when I do a photo shoot I try to incorporate White models as well as the African-American models. I really don't want to be labeled as that. I want my White consumers to know [they] can purchase from me. But I do find that my designs really are more so geared towards the African-American woman.

When asked why she thought Black women were more drawn to her designs than women from other racial or ethnic groups Diane concluded:

I had to realize that [my] White consumers didn't like the bling. They didn't like the lavish. You know they were just very plain and simple whereas we as African-Americans we like to bling-bling. You know when you're a designer you come into your own. So I try not to be, but it just is what it is I guess [laughs].

**Spiritually grounded.** Being *spiritually grounded*, refers to having a strong spiritual foundation which provides the participants with the motivation needed to persevere in their careers as fashion design entrepreneurs. Some of the participants expressed that it is their religious beliefs that gives them the conviction to pursue and

maintain a career as a fashion design entrepreneur. Merline indicated that her Christian faith has allowed her to view her role as a fashion designer through a different lens:

My faith has really changed my perspective. I'm a Christian and I think for me, my identity is in Christ. So in the industry, if you make an awful dress, especially when you're in school, you lose your mind when your professor says, "this is horrible." You lose it like, "that's that, oh life is over." But by me having my identity in Christ, it frees me up to be an artist. I remember having my first studio, I would create something and I would never show anyone because I was thinking it was never good enough. I was so afraid of failure and I was so afraid of what people were going to think, because my identity was wrapped up into fashion, it was wrapped up into what people thought, what my professors thought, it just had me stuck, you know. Now, if someone gives me a critique, my heart is not hurting because my identity is not in being a designer.

When asked what keeps her motivated as a fashion design entrepreneur when business gets tough, LaToya asserted:

I am a woman of God and I go to church. I go to New Harvest Community Church out in Poughkeepsie, New York where my pastor is Tony Green. I'm a spiritual woman so that's what keeps me – that's what gives me the strength I need for when those down days come and problems arise and when I feel discouraged, when I feel hopeless, I just remember, God didn't bring [me] this far to leave [me]. So my spirituality plays a very important role in how I speak and in the way that I am.

***Fashion as a ministry.*** The minor theme, *fashion as a ministry*, emerged from the sub-theme, *spiritually grounded*, as designers discussed how they have turned their passion for fashion into a ministry to help others. In Christianity, a ministry is defined as an act of service performed by Christians to assist the church in carrying out its mission of spreading its faith and teachings out in to the world. For this study, the participants honor their talents, knowledge and experience in fashion design entrepreneurship to give back to their respective communities. Victoria, who is actively involved with the sewing ministry at her church, mentioned that she is "working on a children's line not for sale

purposes, but for a mission trip to Haiti.” Also a devout Christian, Merline related the mission of the church to her own personal mission to share her talents with others:

Because I’m Christian, I have a heart for mission. I love how people go on missionary and they go teach the Bible. The biggest thing that changed me is when I did my first mission trip with this organization, they didn't go on the street telling people about Jesus – it blew my mind – all they did was love on people and then later on if they asked they would be like this is why I'm doing it. But they never force anything down people's throats. They just literally went in the inner city, they remodel people’s homes and they prayed at the end. These people were so loving, I was like, that is what I want to do. So my mission is to go and teach people how to sew and about fashion. Literally, that's all it is and just love on them. So no matter what background they’re from, I go in and I teach fashion design, I love on them and I tell them they're amazing, they create their stuff and then I leave. Because I have a heart, you know, I have a heart to just love people.

### **Entrepreneurial Mindset**

An *entrepreneurial mindset* is often thought to be an innate characteristic of successful entrepreneurs that distinguishes them from non-entrepreneurs (Ronstadt, 1990). Sub-themes emerging from the major theme, *entrepreneurial mindset*, included: *entrepreneurial traits, young entrepreneur, accidental entrepreneur* and *serial entrepreneur*.

**Entrepreneurial traits.** Some of the participants mentioned specific traits they have that make them successful as fashion design entrepreneurs. The most common *entrepreneurial traits* that emerged from the data are *time management, organization* and *preparedness*.

**Time management.** As a retired soldier, Victoria said that she learned the importance of *time management* in the military. She noted, “Be on time. Be before time, because if you’re before time, you’re on time, if you’re late, if you’re late well you can forget it.” Victoria went on to explain how she manages her time as a designer:

I take time out and say, “ok, I’m working on this today,” because if not you will be overwhelmed. I make my own deadline a week before the actual deadline.” I always finish a week ahead – give me the deadline, what date does it need to be done so I’ll start rolling. I do not lag or say “oh this is gonna be next year” no, no, I start right then and there, it’s ready for pick up, got to move on, and I do that right to this day. I have a deadline and I always work to finish a week before the deadline because I don’t like working under pressure. I don’t, I can’t do that.

**Organization.** Victoria stated that as a designer you have to have organization:

You can’t be cluttered, that’s what I learned about working with other designers in Atlanta, they were unorganized and they were cluttered. No, you have to have a clear mind and you have to be organized especially when you’re doing mass production and dealing with large wedding parties.

**Preparedness.** Merline talked about how she is preparing to take her business to the next level:

I already priced everything. I have dream books, so everything that I’m telling you, there’s a binder and there’s visuals, I’m not just talking about it. I know [how] my boutique will look. I got all the hangers already. I know exactly what my racks look like, I know what my tags look like. My vision – it’s so real to me because I researched then I put it in the binder, just like pages of Pinterest folders. This is my shipping container. This is the boutique, I designed a floor plan, this is the square footage. So I make my dream real and then down the road I’ll tweak it but it’s so real that there’s visuals....I created all of that for this corporation because you’re supposed to be ready. When the door’s open you should be ready, like hundreds of thousands of minutes before you walk into that door. Right now, I don’t have all that stuff but God is preparing me, because its coming but I need to be prepared for that.

Diane echoed Merline’s comments regarding preparing for the next stage of growth in one’s business:

Know the business. You know you are a fashion designer, now make it profitable. Know your direction to get you to where you want to be. So now you’ve got to find your next step. You know, maybe there is someone that you might admire, how did they get there? Did they have to take certain steps to get to where they are? So definitely create your own business. Don’t just stop at being a fashion designer become your brand, become your business, sell yourself for whatever that is worth. You are not just a designer, become a business and treat it like a business, know that business. If that’s what you want to do, if you want to be financially successful, know that business and think how can you take it to the next level.

**Young Entrepreneur.** Some of the participants developed an entrepreneurial mindset early in life. Jessica, who started her LLC at the age of 16, recalled her experiences as a *young entrepreneur*:

I remember one Christmas, [my mom] told me she had a big surprised and my big gift was in the basement. She had re-did the entire basement into my sewing studio. She told me I could use the back door to have customers come in. It was like the most amazing thing, I just broke down crying, it was ridiculous! I had a fitting room, so I would have my customers come over, I would measure them, and sketch out what they wanted and then they would come back in like two or three days and pick up the item. I would go to the fabric store, I would order fabrics online, I would design it, pattern make it, sew it, make a sample. Everything. I was doing everything. Mind you, I was only 16 so I was in high school trying to finish, getting all my work done every day, on top of all of this, taking care of my mom and just making sure she's good. It was not easy but you know I made a way and God made a way for it to work out. So it turned out to be fine but it was a lot. I really was running a business in high school, like a whole business.

Merline remembered her first entrepreneurial experience, “In high school I would sell crochet purses. Someone was like, “I love that, you should sell it” and so I sold it to a teacher. It’s crazy, she messaged me and said, “I still have that purse” [laughs].”

Shernone revealed that her first entrepreneurial experience occurred at the age of 14:

I was a hairstylist. I actually taught myself how to do hair too. When I was like 12, I was doing my own hair and then I was doing my sisters hair, and then I was doing their friends hair and then I started really making money when I was 14, just doing hair in my mom's kitchen. So yeah, I've been doing hair ever since. Here and there I'll do hair but I don't want to do hair nowadays, but I will if somebody wants their hair done.

LaToya remarked that acquiring leadership skills early in life prompted her to pursue a career in entrepreneurship:

I had great leadership skills and I always was a leader. So when it came to being an entrepreneur it just fit, it was just like, this is me, this is who I want to be. When I was 17, around the time I was about to graduate high school, Nordstrom's department store came into our school and they started the BP Fashion Board. The fashion board taught us everything about the industry, about buying, about manufacturing and all kinds jobs that the fashion industry holds, which I never

knew and I was like, “Wow!” They gave us this questionnaire and it was to determine where we would fit in fashion. My questionnaire said that I'm supposed to be a leader and that I should be a designer and I was like, “wow, that's me, that's what I want to do.”

Raquel stated that she has known she wanted to be her own boss since she was a little girl:

I kind of knew who I was in third grade. So, I knew that I wanted to work for myself, I didn't know how. I didn't know how it was going to happen, but I knew that I wanted to work for myself; I knew that I wanted to make a difference. I wanted to be great. And I just kind of went through the course. I went to school. Got good grades. I started playing basketball and that got me into college. So I had my tuition paid and I just started to grow from there. But I always knew, I knew I wanted to be a business major because, I knew I wanted to work for myself and I needed to learn the craft. So I've always known, I've always known.

**Accidental Entrepreneur.** Some of the designers stated that their foray into entrepreneurship happened by accident. Victoria explained how she fell into the fashion design business and became an *accidental entrepreneur*:

Actually, I really did not want to start my own business. But when I was in college I did my first beaded gown and we had a fashion show and my dress was put in the show. It was a turquoise, long, loose fitted dress and I hand beaded white pearls on it. After the fashion show, a young lady bought it, she bought my dress and that's when I said, “oh, I think I can start a business.”

Diane recalled that moment when became an entrepreneur by accident:

So I was designing and creating that's one thing, but then I had to make money. So I realized that NGU is a brand and I have to make it work I have to make people know NGU designs by Diane Linston. So it had to become a business. I remember it's a really upscale boutique in Cleveland Ohio, Black owned and she would not give me a chance by allowing me to sell my collection in her boutique So one day I was on a local TV station in Cleveland and [reporter] asked where can people buy your clothes. So the first thing I said was this boutique and people were calling and you know, they had no idea what they were talking about. So somebody that worked [at the boutique] called me and said, “was it you?” and I was like, “oh yeah I'm sorry, I didn't mean to do that.” So she said well at this point you gotta make good on this [laughs]. I remember selling like, a thousand dollars in three hours. So I was like ok we got something here. If I can do it in this boutique, let me start going around to other boutiques and it worked. So now I'm a businesswoman [laughs].

**Serial Entrepreneur.** Some participants noted that their current fashion design business is not their only entrepreneurial endeavor. The *serial entrepreneur* may have launched ventures prior to starting her fashion design business, she may have several business running concurrently, or she may have plans to launch new firms in the future.

LaToya indicated that her fashion design firm is not her first business venture:

I have a restaurant as well. I'm a businesswoman outside of this and I have other business projects as well. Business is my passion, I love business and I don't believe in just staying in one lane. I believe in having different sources of income, so that you're not just totally dependent on one thing. I truly believe in that. So I'm a business woman, and fashion is just one entity of me.

Shernone expressed that she is always looking for other business opportunities. She mentioned a recent business endeavor that she is involved in:

Me and my friends we started doing mobile bartending because we danced together in college and we've always stayed in touch with each other. So we came together and we created a mobile bartending group and we go out to events and bartend for events and parties and weddings and stuff.

### **Business Challenges and Strategies**

While all business owners face challenges, Black women encounter additional barriers due to their race and gender. There are also industry specific issues unique to fashion design entrepreneurs. As a result, Black female fashion design entrepreneurs have their own distinct set of challenges. The participants discussed the challenges they have encountered or currently deal with as business owners and fashion designers and offered strategies to overcome and succeed. The superordinate theme, *business challenges and strategies*, emerged into six major themes: *business challenges*, *facing adversity*, *growth factors*, *business strategies*, *success factors* and *giving back*.



<b>BUSINESS CHALLENGES and STRATEGIES</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Business Challenges</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Managing finances               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Purchasing and procurement</li> <li>▪ Pricing and profitability</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Industry Relationships               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Relationships with other designers</li> <li>▪ Relationships with industry professionals</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Facing Adversity</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Dealing with discrimination               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Racial discrimination</li> <li>▪ Gender discrimination</li> <li>▪ Overcoming discrimination</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Personal hardships</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Growth Factors</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Hiring a team</li> <li>○ Brick and Mortar</li> <li>○ Manufacturing               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ In house vs. outsourcing</li> </ul> </li> <li>○ Wholesaling</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Business Strategies</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Restructuring</li> <li>○ Creating systems</li> <li>○ Branding</li> <li>○ Marketing</li> <li>○ Networking</li> <li>○ Utilizing resources</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Success Factors</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Forming an advisory Board</li> <li>○ Finding a business coach</li> <li>○ Defining Success</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Giving Back</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Non-profit organizations</li> <li>○ Uplifting the race</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Figure 3. Business Challenges and Strategies: Superordinate theme, major themes, sub-themes and minor themes

### **Business Challenges**

The major theme, *business challenges*, emerged as the participants described the most prominent challenges they have faced as fashion design entrepreneurs. The data revealed two sub-themes associated with the major theme, *business challenges*; they included, *managing finances* and *industry relationships*. LaToya spoke about the many challenges she has faced as a businesswoman:

Setting up a business is hard. It was hard in the sense of thinking, “am I making the right choice, am I making the right decisions” Then you know certain people you may call to help you and rely on, they let you down, you're like, “oh my God, I depended on this person.” So sometimes you have to learn how to walk alone in your destiny and in your dreams. I have faced, financial obstacles, you know being able to lose everything and then get it all back again. So it's different

barriers like that I have faced. I have even faced obstacles in just finding good manufacturers that was like the most challenging thing.

**Managing finances.** Several participants stated that one of the toughest challenges they face as fashion design entrepreneurs is *managing finances*. Shernone indicated that she started her business online first to avoid potential financial pitfalls:

I didn't have a lot of money to start and that's one of the reasons why I'm just an online store right now. I just felt like it made more sense for me to just start online because it would probably be the most affordable way to do it, make my clothes at home and put them online. Not having enough money to buy my fabrics when I started out was probably one of my biggest barriers and challenges as well.

LaToya noted: "You have to have the skills of a designer but the mindset of a businesswoman. If you don't know your business and you don't know your numbers as far as accounting goes then you are setting yourself up for failure." Merline expressed that handling finances is an uphill battle:

I totally get that I won't be successful financially for a while because I'm still building a foundation. I got an accountant to make sure that my money's going where it should be. There's accountability when it comes to money because, again if you don't know how to manage your first check, by the time you get that 30th check, you don't know, where the money went, you don't know your profit margin, you don't know how many rolls of fabric you bought, what was the cost of the zippers. So for me I'm really kind of putting all that into place right now for when it does happen, because I think it will happen. I think if you're a hard worker it will happen, but I just think you need to be wise with the gift that you've been given. You have to steward over it because that's your money, that's your time, and I'm really serious about that too.

Diane pointed out that starting a fashion design business requires a lot of money and this is where many designers fall short. She continued:

A lot of designers become hindered because they really don't have the finances to put together a collection. So with me, I remember the first collection that I did, I had orders and I remember going to Style Max, which is like maybe the third largest trade show for retail in the world. So I'm there with my 12 pieces and I'm getting all these orders – I didn't even realize that how I was gonna make these orders. That hadn't dawned on me. So one of the things that I did – and a lot of times banks are not going to touch you – I ended up getting investors to help me

out. They gave me \$10,000 and I took that 10 grand and turned it into \$30,000. So you've got to have an excellent business plan and you've got to have some kind of way to prove yourself. So my background, you know, I went to school for it, I've done all these shows, I mean I did a show for the queens of Liberia. So all of that is included. But what really helped me was that purchase order for \$10,000.

The data revealed two minor themes associated with the sub-theme, *managing finances*; they included, *purchasing and procurement and pricing and profitability*.

***Purchasing and procurement.*** Purchasing and procurement though closely related, *purchasing and procurement* are two distinctly different activities that function together. Purchasing is part of the procurement process. Purchasing it is concerned with the budget and the cost of goods and services needed for a company whereas procurement is concerned with the negotiation of terms and the quality of the goods and services to be purchased. Merline described how she strives to be resourceful and cost efficient when purchasing for her clothing line:

If you look at my New York Fashion Week collection, it's crazy like all that was linen from Joann's. People want to run off to like New York to purchase fabric, I went to Joann's and I did the whole collection! I always say it's not about buying expensive fabric; it's all about the design. I'm not a rich person, so instead of being mad about my circumstances, I [ask myself], "what can I do today with my resources?" So sometimes I can go to New York and spend a thousand dollars, \$100 a yard or I can go across the street and get something for \$350 and make something beautiful.

Jessica stated that her biggest financial challenge was learning how to spend and invest her money responsibly. She commented:

It wasn't even finances. I was always blessed. I never had issues with finances. It was just kind of knowing what to do with the money. Sometimes the challenge is when you have the money to invest and you're just spending it wrong. That was my challenge. Okay, I had \$3000 to spend on an event, but why are you spending \$3,000 on an event? So if I found out about a vendor event, I would go "oh, it's \$2,500, I'm signing up. I got it" instead of doing all the research to assure this will get you a return on your investment. Do you even have \$2500 worth of inventory to get your return or at least break even? You know like all those things, I wasn't

even considering the business mindset of it. I was definitely thinking I had my numbers down pat but I really didn't.

Victoria pointed out the importance of utilizing technical drawings to avoid overspending when purchasing fabric and notions:

No matter if I'm gonna do it myself or I'm gonna send it out. Even if I'm just doing it for an individual client or for myself, I always do what we call flats and specs. Flats is when you sketch out the details of the garment and you put specific measurements; how many buttons....A lot of people do not do that and they go out to the fabric store and they overspend and when they overspend, they still do not have enough material.

**Pricing and profitability.** Another financial challenge reported by the fashion design entrepreneurs centered around *pricing and profitability*. Shernone stated one of the best things about her business is that she manages to sell her eco-friendly garments at an affordable price: "when you go on my website and see my products, you really can't get that anywhere else for the price that I'm charging." Merline remarked that it is important for designers to know the price of each garment in their inventory and the profit margin once each item is sold:

It's crazy because I'm the designer and sometimes I have to balance that life because you'll be poor if you don't know how to balance and manage your money. You know, you don't know what's the cost for every garment, you should know your profit margin for every garment that comes out.

**Industry Relationships.** The second sub-theme to emerge from the major theme, *business challenges*, is *industry relationships*. Naika talked about the difficulty of making industry connections as a Black designer:

I've been around other designers and it's so hard to be a Black designer because it's so easy for people to have connections. They'll say oh my dad's best friend is Marc Jacobs you know, and that's not me. I didn't come from that, I came from like a low income area. So it's harder for me it's harder for us to make connections unless we're interning like crazy or brown nosing like crazy. A lot of times I go to events and I see Black designers and it's like they don't even want to be there because that's not their element but they're doing it because that's what

they feel they have to do to get to where White designers are. We are not allotted the same anything, the same network, the same references. We don't have that. So I feel like that's the hardest thing.

Two minor themes associated with industry relationships included, *relationships with other designers* and *relationships with industry professionals*.

***Relationships with other designers.*** The first minor theme associated with the sub-theme, *industry relationships*, is *relationships with other designers*, which refers to the various interactions that the participants have experienced with other fashion design entrepreneurs. Merline spoke about trying not to compare herself with other designers:

I'll meet another designer that has her stuff in stores and I find out she hasn't put systems in place. Sometimes I'll look at a designer and I'm like wow they're further than me, but it's because I'm doing all this ground work that you can't really quite see yet, you know. But that just reminds me I'm on the right path.

Merline also talked about the competitiveness that exists in the fashion industry among designers:

I don't like meeting designers that like, when you ask them something they're like, "oh I don't know." It breaks my heart because you know you're not sharing. They don't want to share it because they feel like they're competing with you and the sad thing is we're not competing. None of us are competing because our clients are not the same. Our vision is not the same. We're not even going in the same direction. You know what I mean? So that's why it was hard for me to be on *Project Runway* sometimes because designers feel like we're competing and I don't think we're competing.

Victoria commented on the differences between working with American designers versus European designers:

Working with other designers you watch and observe what to do, what not to do. I've had to work with a lot of designers and it was a big difference between designers and entrepreneurship in another country than in America. I had to work with designers in Europe, they were White, Black, whatever, but they took compassion to their skill. Then I worked with designers in Atlanta especially amongst African-Americans they want to abstain knowledge. When you ask them questions they would look at you like, "I'm not gonna nah ah," We call it *shade*.

***Relationships with industry professionals.*** The second minor theme, associated with the sub-theme, *industry relationships, relationships with industry professionals* refers to the participants' dealings with professionals in the fashion industry such as public relations specialists, buyers and stylists. Jessica recalled an adverse experience with a public relations firm that she was seeking for representation:

I remember one PR team in particular, they're based in L.A., and I wanted them to represent me. I love what she did, I love what she stood for and I loved her brand. I had been contacting her like crazy because I wanted to get in before her registration closed and I finally got her on the phone after like three weeks and she told me her rate was \$2,500 a month and I'm like, "oh!, to do what?" I understand people's value, but I just didn't understand what we were doing exactly. So, I was waiting for her e-mail with the syllabus with everything we would cover over the next six months and what you were responsible for, never got it, but I got the contract. Another thing that worried me is that the contract didn't even have her full name on it. It had her Instagram name and I'm not signing anything with someone's nickname on it. So I thought about it, I called my business coach before I made a horrible decision again. I had the money so why not do it, that's what I'm thinking. I called my business coach, she's like, "absolutely not!" Number one, where is her name on this contract. Number two, what did she promised me for this amount of money, what are you getting? She was like, "if you're doing all this and she's all the way in L.A., can you afford to travel to L.A. every few weeks?" I'm like, "you're right." So I immediately told her you know what, "I'm gonna hold off," and the response I got was like, "well why did you waste my time?" [laughs]

After that experience Jessica stated that now she prefers to work with industry professionals that are up and coming:

I'm somebody that never has had conflicts or any type of negativity over my business, but I learned this year that certain people are use to certain things and if you're not of a certain caliber to them, then you're kind of looked down upon. So I've learned to work with people that are more emerging. I prefer to work with them. I also like working with people that are more in my community. Like I found like a videographer in the D.C. area now to do my videos instead of going to L.A. and New York to work with people. I prefer that because I feel like they work a lot harder and they're more enticed to work with you. They're hungry. They want to learn.

## **Facing Adversity**

The major theme, *facing adversity*, emerged as the participants' described how they overcame personal or professional challenges that have affected them as fashion design entrepreneurs. The data revealed two sub-themes associated with the major theme, *facing adversity*; they included, *discrimination in the fashion industry and personal hardships*.

**Discrimination in the fashion industry.** The first sub-theme to emerge from the major theme, facing adversity, is dealing with *discrimination in the fashion industry*. Unfortunately Black women often bear the “double-yoke” of racism and sexism in the fashion industry. Three minor themes associated with *discrimination in the fashion industry*; included, *racial discrimination, gender discrimination and overcoming discrimination*.

**Racial discrimination.** LaToya voiced her thoughts on racial discrimination within the fashion industry:

I do feel that race plays a part when we are in a predominantly White and Asian dominated industry. So as an ethnic person, a person of color it's much harder to break into the industry, it's much harder to get the opportunities; it's much harder for us to even get jobs in this industry, really hard. So I think that does have a hindrance but I believe that if this is your dream and this is your passion, you don't let your culture, you don't let nothing send you away from what you want to do and if nobody will open that door then you create the door for yourself.

Jessica described a time when she had to deal with *racial discrimination* while on a tour of the garment district in New York with clients from her fashion entrepreneurship coaching program, whom all happened to be Black women:

I remember we just did a New York City fashion retreat. It was a two day retreat in New York City where all the clients met up and we went to fashion shows and things like that and it was just beautiful. The first part of the trip was a New York City Garment District tour and I remember trying to put it together myself and I

had so many contacts in the garment district but a lot of them, as soon as they picked up the phone or as soon as I came in for a meeting, “no-no-no, you guys can't come.” “Nope you can't do that. We're not going to be able to do that.” So I hired one of my mentors, she's a Caucasian woman, she was in New York and I had to hire her to guide our garment district tour so we could get into certain factories.

Jessica continued to explain the racial discrimination faced that day and how it impacted her mentor and her clients:

Also I remember we had a speaker coming that was a buyer, she was African-American, but she automatically assumed that we were all clients of the Caucasian woman, so that was crazy to me. So I had to like, kind of say, “hey I'm the founder,” and our tour guide, she immediately saw what was happening and she said, “I'm so sorry” I was like there's nothing for you to apologize for, but now you see our world, you get it, you're getting a taste of what it's like to try to do this. So I'm glad that she got to see it as well because she didn't get it at first and she's like, “now I see why you told me you needed me here” and I'm like, “yeah.” So, it's not all the time but it happened our first day. I mean you could see it in their faces they were so like, “I cannot believe this,” I'm like, “welcome to the world of fashion ladies” especially in New York. This is why it's hard out here and it was their first time being exposed to that. I'm glad they didn't let it deter them but that's how, that's how they are, you know.

Victoria recalled feeling discriminated against by other ethnic groups in the classroom setting and at industry events:

I remember stepping into a classroom and they're looking at you because you're an African-American woman and you look around your classroom and the majority of the people in your classroom are from India and China and they're looking at you like, “why are you even here?” Or when I travel to New York to certain expos, when I sit amongst those who are not from the United States, they will look at you as if, “why are you here, why do you want to know about this textile industry?” All you all need to do is just pretend to be a designer, but we know the real deal of number crunching, the mathematics plays a big part in this industry.

Merline, on the other hand, stated that as a second-generation immigrant she doesn't focus on racial discrimination. She explained her point of view:

I don't see myself as the color of my skin. The color of my skin doesn't dominate my perspective. I look at it more towards what the generation before has given me. I don't look at it more as like I'm African-American or I'm Haitian-American



and this is it. I just see it as this opportunity, I'm always blown away. For someone to take this trip from Haiti to America – don't speak English. It's like me going to China, I don't speak Mandarin and I'm going to make it, that's insane! It's like right now, if I don't want to be a fashion designer I could go work at a company because I speak English, my parents can only do what they can with the education – like they're not even educated, you know. So I'm super lucky I look at it from that lens. I look at it from my struggle lens more than the color of my skin.

**Gender discrimination.** Victoria spoke about the gender discrimination that takes place in the fashion industry:

In this industry it's never easy for African Americans, especially African American women because we have a lot of barriers. Not only from other races that would treat us like we're not their equal, but dealing with it amongst ourselves, our male counterparts, our Black men who try to diminish us in this industry.

LaToya talked about her frustrations with being stereotype in the fashion industry:

As a Black woman in this industry, as you know, it becomes even more difficult because they think of you as an urban designer, rather than a fashion designer. It's like no, I'm a designer. I'm a designer, it's not about my race, it's not about the race, it's about me just designing. I think that will always be a stereotype and that's the mold I'm trying to break because I'm not just here to be a Black designer, I just wanna be a good designer period, my color should not matter.

Linda discussed the challenges of being Black, a woman, and a burn survivor:

Being a Black woman you know of course there are other things that we have to deal with being an African-American period. But then too you have to put in, "oh you're a woman." And then I have to put in, "oh I'm a burn survivor," so I don't- I'm not looking the part in three different categories now. So, but yes being an African-American woman is very challenging in business. And not only just fashion design but also just you know, being a Black woman entrepreneur, period.

**Overcoming discrimination.** The designers noted the various methods they use for *overcoming discrimination* in the fashion industry. When asked how she deals with discrimination Victoria stated:

You work harder. You prove them wrong. You can't put your tail between your legs and run and stick your head in the dirt like an ostrich and say, "I can't do it, I

won't do it, I'm not going to do it, no." As a matter of fact that actually gives me more energy to do what they say I can't do.

Victoria went on to say that it is important to be able to "code switch" in this business in order to avoid being labeled with racial stereotypes:

Act according to how you're supposed to act because now they are looking at you and they have already placed you as that angry Black woman, ghetto, uneducated, which you're not neither one of that. That's why when I go into these workshops, when I travel, I'm always in business attire. I did not grow up in the suburbs but on the other side of the tracks as they say, but I learned how to turn off the hood talk – turn it off, it won't make you less than what you are but you have to do it.

**Personal hardships.** Some of the participants have faced *personal hardships* that have had an impact on them as fashion design entrepreneurs. Linda shared her story of survival and triumph:

I am a burn survivor. I was burned in a house fire when I was two. But just the things from my personal life you know where I won't quit I'm going to continue to pursue whatever it is that I'm trying to accomplish. I just have a strong drive based off of the morals and the characteristics and all those values that my mom put in me saying you are no different than anyone else and you could be anything that you want to be. So of course that has trickled over into my professional life and my business life. If it's something I want and I'm passionate about it I'm going to be very driven and I'm going to make sure that I succeed and I'm not going to stop because an adversity pops up that makes it difficult or says no this can't happen, I'm still going to figure a way around it and make it happen.

Jessica remembered the *personal hardships* she faced as a student in design school in Philadelphia with being away from her family in Baltimore:

I was so depressed in school just being away from my family. My mom has multiple sclerosis, so she basically can't walk very well, so not being able to check on her every day would drive me crazy. My sister was trying to move to Philly – well she was having struggles with that. So I was hoping she was coming but she wasn't coming. It was just so much stress in my personal life that went along with the school. So just to have like personal things that was stressful and and then also have like your teachers telling you you're wasting your time like on a daily basis, like it wasn't the easiest.

Nikki reflected back to a personal hardship she faced at the beginning of her career:

I actually resigned from my position at Quaker Oats in October 2006. So for me when I resigned I actually was sitting on two tax returns. So I had about maybe 14 or 15 thousand dollars that I was going to play with. But what happened is at the same time my mother got dreadfully sick where she ended up having to get a heart transplant. So what I thought I was going to be doing, I was not doing at all because I was running her back and forth to the doctor so it was it was rough.

Janeen stated that a personal hardship helped her realize what she really wanted to do in life:

I knew I wanted to do it full time after my dad had passed away – he passed on a Sunday so that was spiritual for me starting out a new week in a new realm. Until then we knew he was sick for a long time but he would still get up go to work at five six o'clock in the morning and he was still living it the way he wanted to. It wasn't you know – it was still mediocre from other people's view, but to me it was very symbolic for choosing how you want to live. He didn't have to be hooked up to an IV or anything like that to try to extend his life. He lived by going to work and talking to people every day like he wanted to. So I was working at a retail store, working 60 something hours. At that time I had one - well two children my newest daughter was a baby. She was a few months old and it was too many hours away from them and I no longer had pleasure in what I was doing and I felt unfulfilled. My health declined I was very weak, just a whole bunch of things, but that really was my revelation when my dad passed and I said, you know what, I want to live the way I want. Life is too short. Do it how you want to do it. So that was my big wake up in 2009. By 2011 is when I actually quit my job.

### **Growth Factors**

The major theme, *growth factors*, refers to key aspects that will likely increase the growth of a business and take it to the next level. As LaToya remarked, “I see my company being a big name just like a Ralph Lauren, Coco Chanel, Prada, I see my company being a really big household name and that's where I want my company to grow.” The most common *growth factors* that emerged from the data are *hiring a team*, *brick and mortar*, and *manufacturing and wholesaling*.

**Hiring a team.** The designers spoke about growing their businesses and the need to scale up and sustain their growth by hiring a team. Merline remarked that she has plans

to incorporate her business. She outlined her future organizational structure: “I’m working on my corporate structure – so if you saw my scale, it’s me, CEO and founder and then having my board of directors, and then having my assistant and then having all my interns and people working for me.” LaToya noted that her business has reached a level of growth that now she needs to consider hiring a staff: “Now that the company is really growing and I’m looking like wow, so it’s at the place and point that I do have to hire a team now.” Jessica said that it was challenge finding the right team for her business:

I just thank God, now I have a pretty secure team that’s been really working hard. My administrative manager, she has just like, oh my God! She’s actually a friend of mine that I’ve been knowing for about four years and she started her own line and she needed some mentorship and I told her, if you can help me, I can help you out. So I hired her to work, so now she’s a full time administrative manager for me and just having her for the past few months has been so helpful. Before her, I hired somebody – again I wanted to hire somebody that I knew because I had challenges with people that I didn’t know prior. So I wanted to hire somebody that I knew or that knew of me. So I hired somebody that use to model for me and she was so excited to work with me she did a really good job and on day 13 she just quit. She was like, “you know, I have another job, my other job that I have to work they picked up hours.” I’m like, “Oh my gosh” so just finding that team that’s gonna stick around. You also have to be okay with paying people. You can’t just have people work and stress themselves out for free and then be mad if they leave. So I definitely had to figure out a medium there. Definitely finding and securing a team was a big challenge.

**Brick and mortar.** Obtaining a brick and mortar location is often one of the first signs of growth for a fashion design entrepreneur, whether it is a studio, showroom or storefront location. Vanessa remarked that her goal is to open multiple store locations:

I want to be able to open many different stores around the country maybe even out of country one day. I want to be able to see celebrities wear my stuff. I just basically want the world to wear everything that I make. If money was never involved, I think just seeing people wear my stuff would just make me happy.

On not having a brick and mortar location for her business, Merline commented:

I've done the beautiful studio downtown. I'm more cost efficient in this season of my life. My studio is not as glamorous as it used to be, because I'm kind of shifting my perspective as a designer. What I mean about that is when I first started in the industry I did the beautiful studio downtown, the runway shows, New York Fashion Week all that beautiful stuff. I think this season I'm more focused about getting my stuff in stores. I want to survive as a designer so I have a home studio, which is something I would never do in the past. I think for me the next step is, I'm putting together a shipping container boutique, where I'll get a shipping container and I'll remodel it and then someone will pick it up and then drop it in very trendy places instead of having the overhead cost.

Nikki described her boutique and studio space in detail:

I have my own boutique. It's a boutique slash studio. So that's where the magic happens. When you first walk in I have a nice window display, then you step down I have my accessory room. Then in the next room I have a small little boutique where you can buy off the rack and then the third room is where I do my cutting and sewing. It's kind of like my house at that point [laughs]. You know, I'll indulge; I'll ask you if you want some water or some wine. I have a flat screen where as we're searching for fabrics and materials you can look on my flat screen versus looking on my computer. My cutting table is probably about 20 feet long. So I've created an ambiance that when people walk in they're like, "oh my God! I would never leave here." You know people just feel so welcomed and they enjoy my space when they come in.

Raquel spoke about the grand opening of her first brick and mortar location:

DMR is now a store. Yes! So it started as an online store and now we are an actual brick and mortar business. DMR is in Columbia place mall, in Columbia, South Carolina and we're actually moving merchandise from an actual store location. We did that in December so we are three months into that project. So I had a grand opening December 3rd of 2016 and it was amazing. The people came out, hometown support and it was great. I had a ribbon cutting with our councilwoman Joyce Dickerson and our mayor was also there. So it was a lot of fun and we had our second annual fashion show.

Linda also recently opened her new design house in Arkansas:

I actually just acquired a facility that is – it's actually 7,000 square feet and some of it is unchartered, but I do have the only show room and production house in the state of Arkansas. I had to get a space because I started out sewing in the spare bedroom and you can only imagine some days I would look up and that's all I've done the entire day, so I had to stop doing that.

**Manufacturing.** Several designers have grown into *manufacturing* their garments to meet the demand of their growing customer base. Some have even started their own in-house manufacturer. The participants discussed their challenges with *manufacturing* in the fashion industry. Victoria stated: I've had to do mass production. It takes big planning and I do it all by myself. I had to work from five garments to 30 garments at a time. I have turned my house into a factory. Shernone commented that finding a manufacturer in her city has been difficult:

I'm looking for manufacturers in Atlanta that can make my clothes for me because I don't have time anymore and a lot of times I'm looking outside of Atlanta for opportunities like that and its probably one of the biggest challenge I have.

Jessica spoke about some initial challenges she had with manufacturing:

I remember, right before I hired my business coach I found my very first manufacturer who I still work with. With manufacturing a lot of the manufacturers had what's called minimums and that's when you had to order a certain amount for them to take on your order. The minimum for my first manufacturer was 16, and I'm like, "oh I can sell 16 pairs of pants, I can sell 50 of these" but I had seven items and I had like 50 of each. So I like had over 300 pieces of inventory and I'm like "oh, I'll be able to sell it, I'm gonna do it" instead of actually looking over numbers to see how many customers you actually have. You have to ask yourself, "can you do this?" So I made them really quickly, it was a really expensive order and I ended up sitting on inventory forever and that's when I hired the coach. Like a month after that I was like, "uh, I think I made a bad business decision" [laughs], I was like, I need help and that's when I kind of figured things out. I learned to set up contracts with the manufacturers where they could get a percentage off of each piece sale if we did it on a pre-order basis which is a really smart business decision.

***In house or outsourcing.*** Once the fashion design entrepreneurs have reached a level of growth in their businesses where they have to consider manufacturing as an option, they are challenged with the choice of manufacturing there garments *in-house or outsourcing* the work to a manufacture in the U.S. or overseas. LaToya spoke her difficulty in outsourcing a manufacture to the language barriers that exist:

To manufacture the clothes, oh my gosh that was just like pulling teeth, totally pulling teeth, it was like the needle in a haystack just to find a good manufacturer at an affordable price. Then there were language barriers. There's a lot of manufacturers that are overseas that have more affordable prices but it's like language barriers.

LaToya contended; however, that she is choosing to work with a manufacture in the U.S. versus looking overseas: "I'm trying to go US based. I'm working with a good manufacturer that's in Colorado so it's not overseas. I don't really want to pay the overseas fees to do that so I just want to stay here in the USA." Shernone remarked: "Five years from now I would like to be my own manufacture where I can design clothes, have them made – not mass production, I like to keep it small" Jessica stated that although she started off doing the entire garment construct process herself, she now does the initial production of her samples in-house with the help of her team. She outlined the process:

When I started off, I was doing a lot of custom work, so I would get the inspiration and then I would sew the design myself, and do the pattern making. I don't do that anymore. I have a team of seamstress and they manufacturer it now. So now when I get inspired, I usually sketch on my iPad and I'll just sketch everything out that I'm inspired by. I'll go through the sketches and pick my top five or top seven and then I'll make those into my collection. I'll get those sketches over to my project manager and she will look over everything and she let's me if know if she feels like it's feasible. Even though I'm the designer, she will tell me no Jess, we can't go too crazy. So if it's too hard of a design, we can't bring it to life so we'll have to edit it, so it's a lot of back and forth. But once we finalize everything they'll create a sample. Once I get the sample and I approve it and love it we'll go into production and that's when you get like 10, 20, 30, made at once and I'll try to ship it out to my wholesalers and pretty much that's the design process for me. They do everything for me now, they pattern make, they sew it and they get the samples out, they get the wholesale orders out, so it's a full process.

Jessica also discussed her challenges with using a manufacture in China:

One challenge is with my manufacturer being overseas. It's not easy to get your stuff shipped through customs, my stuff can take an extra week just because

customs has to confirm that you're a legitimate business and they have to call you and confirm if it's clothing in the boxes. So shipping has been a challenge for me.

Raquel noted that she uses manufactures in the U.S. as well as abroad:

I use a manufacture here and they're based out of L.A. They have a manufacture in L.A. and in Miami. I also use Next Level, they are a huge clothing company. And American Apparel, I buy a lot of material from them and obviously I put my ideas on those pieces. Manufacturing is very expensive. So until you kind of get yourself into the Macy's or Nordstrom's, J.C. Penney, big stores like that, you're not really manufacturing on a large level. Most of the business that I do I'm able to utilize the local small businesses so everything that I do at DMR, 90 percent of it is through local small businesses. Only 10 percent comes from manufacturing. Like I said I use the manufacture that's based in L.A. and then I do order some things from China mainly because of the cost. But I try to support small businesses and Black small businesses. So I typically outsource first to small business owners and then as we grow and as I need more product I'll go to those larger manufacturers.

Diane noted that she is the only Black female in the city of Cleveland Ohio who has a women's manufacturing company. She goes on to describe her company in detail:

It is hard as *shiggity* [laughs]. It's hard as SHIGGITY! Let me tell you in a nice manner. But I have about six employees and I have every machine – if you know anything about the sewing equipment – I have some Juki sewing machines, some Kenmore's, to the old 1900's sewing machines and I'm just very blessed. I have good workers and we can put it out maybe 50 pieces within two days, which is not a lot. I worked with a company in China so my mostly high-end things are being made there because I don't have that kind of equipment to manufacture it. So we have a showroom and people come in the showroom and they purchase things and they are extremely amazed when I take them for a tour. It makes me feel good because I meet so many people that say this is my dream, you have lived my dream.

**Wholesaling.** Another sign of growth for a fashion design entrepreneur is having the ability to wholesale their garments to other retailers. Some of the designers have reach this level in their business while others noted that they are making plans to begin *wholesaling*. Merline stated her plans to begin wholesaling her garments:

So hopefully next year I want to be in stores. Between 10 to 20 stores is my goal, selling wholesale for sure. So right now I'm like sending samples, calling buyers, trying to get my stuff in stores.



Shernone has also made it a goal to wholesale her designs:

I would really like to maybe wholesale my items to different boutiques across the country and just have them sell my items in their stores instead of me trying to keep up with the online store and orders and shipping and all that. All I want to do is design and make my clothes and have my clothes sold in boutiques around the country. That's where I see myself in five years.

Diane noted that she has her garments in over 30 stores and her goal now is to get a deal with a major retailer:

Now I'm in the position to where I can cater to Bloomingdale's or Macy's. I think that's hard for any designer whether you are Black or White. I remember I submitted a line sheet to Macy's and the buyer called me. She asked me a whole lot of questions that I did not know the answers to and I felt so bad. I remember one of the questions asked, "are these lines sold in other stores?" I told her no, and that was not the right answer to say because I was selling them in other stores. She said, "I think you need to understand the business. So you know maybe you can come back and we can talk about it." So now how do I learn the business, you know.

### **Business Strategies**

The major theme, *Business strategies*, refers to the techniques and fundamentals employed by the fashion design entrepreneurs to differentiate or diversify their business, reach business goals and take their business to the next level. The most common *business strategies* that emerged from the data are *restructuring, creating systems, branding, marketing, networking, and utilizing resources*.

**Restructuring.** The sub-theme, restructuring, is defined as a reorganization of a company with a view to achieving greater efficiency and profit, or to adapt to a changing market. LaToya remarked that her business is in a state of transition as she prepares for the next level of growth: "I have a studio but I'm actually relocating. It's just a lot of transitioning that's going on in my life. We're in the process of moving and relocating

into a new place in Harlem.” Merline discussed her quick rise to success after appearing on *Project Runway* and how she is now taking a step back to restructure her business:

I did feel that *Project Runway* kind of escalated my career, which is a great thing because it opens more doors for me. On the other end, my business mentality – I felt I had to catch up to that on success, because if you have that and orders are coming in and there’s no systems in place, you look a mess because there’s no foundation for your company to grow even bigger. What happens when you get like a \$20,000 contract? So that’s what I’ve been doing. I took a step back the last couple months. I didn’t sell. I just stopped everything. I’m always sacrificing my personal life for my career so I’m really trying to get the balance and then because my career was so fast I feel like the last couple of years after *Project Runway* I just kept running. I did, New York fashion week, I was at LA fashion week, I was doing appearances. I think for me, I need to come back to why I started my company....One thing is going back to that roadmap, that’s why a business plan is so important, and to just re-edit it along the way and say, “okay, okay, okay, what do I want?” Not what the world’s kind of pushing me to do because, I’ve accomplished a lot in my career but, what does Merline Labissiere want, because at the end of the day I can have a successful business but not be totally satisfied in what I've achieved.

**Creating systems.** A system is a method of solving a repeated business issue in a strategic and effortless way. *Creating systems* allow the fashion design entrepreneur time to focus on more important things in their business. Merline emphasized the importance of creating systems in building a foundation for her business. She outlined how she using systemization in her business:

So I’m really good at systems. One thing I’ve learned is the importance of creating a system. It’s hard if you don’t have systems, you can’t manage your interns. Systemization can be creating a flow and a communication from your interns. All of my interns are virtual. I have systems where they drop off something. I send them the work, they send it back. Systems in my studio where this day is all cutting, this day is all sewing, this day is all tags and so I’m creating systems because if you’re not careful you could be a one man show for the rest of your life and I don’t want that. So I try to create systems where I can bring someone on and they know what’s in my brain because I trained them. I spend a lot of time in front of computers making sure my systems are in place, making sure I have the foundation because when it takes off, it takes off, but you have to have an amazing foundation.

LaToya said that what she loved most about her business is how well organized it is:

Like for instance, I was doing a garment for a lady and I knew the lady. She was going to a wedding and she called to ask me but I had to send her through my channels of how my business operates, its not the same way as just call Toya and she's gonna do the garment for you anymore. No, you fill out a certain form, I need to know certain information. She even came to me and was like wow your business is legit and I just started laughing. I had to do that because people take you serious when they see you're serious about what you're doing. So, I was tremendously honored by that. I love the organization that we are building, I love the communication level we have with our customers, with each other, I just love the atmosphere. I feel that this is a great atmosphere for the business. It's something that is just really peaceful and it's very organized.

**Branding.** Branding is more than a name, a symbol or a slogan, it refers to the overall perception that a customer has when they hear or think of a business. The fashion design entrepreneurs discussed utilizing *branding* strategies to differentiate their businesses. Merline admitted:

I love branding but I'm not really good at it, I have friends and that's just what they do professionally. One guy he works for Coke, he's done branding for Coca-Cola in Europe and he was helping me brand my company so I literally have a package of homework that I had to do before I meet with him every month to tell him this is my brand, this is my brand Bible, this is where it's at. I have another guy, he did my logo for my brand which is super dope.

**Marketing.** The sub-theme, *marketing*, includes activities associated with buying and selling a product or service including various methods of advertising. Jessica remarked: "I'm very smart and I can say that for sure. When I say that, I mean in business. I'm really good at marketing and that's something that allowed me to really be successful as well. Just marketing myself different from the average brand." LaToya noted that while she had only utilized social media for marketing purposes she is looking for outside help:

I'm hiring a team of marketing people to take it to the next level. It was just me and my mom doing everything but now I'm getting more people on board to really take it to another place and scheduling photo shoots and different things like that.

Vanessa's marketing strategy is centered around her company's website:

Right now my manager is working on the website. Everything I make will be available for purchase and that's how we're basically marketing. We're using a lot of Facebook marketing tools on there too that's going help boost the brand a little bit more and try to gain more traffic to our website.

Raquel also takes advantage of online marketing avenues:

I use social media as a vehicle. Social media is huge. Most of it is free and the pieces that you pay for isn't necessarily expensive. So I use social media to drive the business. I do very little print – print would be flyers and newspaper. I do very, very little of that. We do flyers here and there but for the most part I use social media to drive the business.

**Networking.** The fashion design entrepreneurs discussed the importance of building industry contacts and relationships through *networking*. Shernone stated, “I try to collaborate with other Black businesses. I try to work with independent up and coming artist like myself. We can kind of collaborate and their fan base can become my fan base and vice versa.” Merline commented on how *networking* has helped her gain unexpected opportunities:

I'm on apps like Eventbrite. I try to look up different events. Like I love Wynwood, a very artsy place, I go there. I have my card, I'm very talkative – people are like, “I love your shoes” and then I'm like, “da-da-da-da-da” like she and I are there for an hour, that's just my personality. But I love to just go out to the galleries. You never know who you're going to meet like, it's insane, you never know. My school came into town and they were having a SCAD day. They took the alumni out and they were like, “sign up for free” and I just signed up and I went on this tour with them. They had other people that was there that wasn't even alumni. So I met this guy and he was the director for district downtown Orlando. He was like, “yeah you should come talk” and I'm like “yeah, sure” I gave him my contact, they follow up and they send me the contract to sign and they're flying me in to go speak. I made this great partnership because I showed up to some event and gave them my card. So it's crazy!

**Utilizing resources.** The sub-theme, *utilizing resources*, refers to any resources that the fashion design entrepreneurs have taken advantage of that have helped them in

their business in some manner. Shernone suggested that online resources are the great for up and coming designers because they are usually free to the user:

I would say use all the online resources you can when it comes to starting out because it's probably the cheapest way. There's a lot of how to start a business videos online and on YouTube and articles that you can read that won't cost you anything and there's a lot of web sites that you can go on. You don't even have to know how to do graphic design to start a website there's a lot of web sites out there if you're trying to get something started. There's a lot of resources online so take advantage of the online resources you have. And all the resources that you have on campus because that's one of the things I did on campus when I transferred to Georgia State University. There were a lot of on campus resources that actually helped me when I was starting out.

### **Success Factors**

The major theme, *success factors*, is defined as the key elements necessary for a business to achieve and maintain success. The data revealed three sub-themes associated with the major theme, *success factors*; they included, *forming an advisory board*, *finding a business coach* and *defining success*.

**Forming an advisory Board.** The first sub-theme to emerge from the major theme, *success factors*, was *forming an advisory board*. Diane asserted that forming an advisory board for your company is essential for its success. She described her advisory board and how they have supported her business:

I have this advisory board and we meet like three or four times a year. They are anywhere from retired bank people, professors, business owners, and they are Black and White. So I tell anybody this, create your own advisory board. That's what I tell them. So one of the ladies, she owns a daycare. She was very instrumental in helping me. You know just giving me good advice about when you have employees. Things that you need to know, things that you need to be careful about.

**Finding a business coach.** The second theme to emerge from the major theme, *success factors*, was *finding a business coach*. Jessica remarked that finding a business coach helped her turn her business around and finally make it profitable:

I have a business coach, her name is Raven Jones and she has a program called, “Fire Your Boss Academy.” Basically you’re getting out of your nine to five and transitioning into a full-time entrepreneur. So I signed up for the program and it was pretty much like a business development course. So I would get two classes every month online and then I would have accountability sessions with her, it was a lot of work, but I did the work really quickly. It wasn’t cheap for her to be my coach. I remember telling her, “I have to make this work, you’re my last investment, I’m sick of losing money, I’m sick of not doing business properly and wasting money.” So within four months of working with her I was out of my job, I had grossed more than I ever made working on my own. I had so many advisors, I had an accountant, I had a lawyer, which I still work with on a monthly basis. That program, I still can’t believe, I signed up for her program December 2015 and to see where I am now, it just tells you...yeah, I could have went to school and got my MBA in business or something of that nature, but I would still be in school and here I learned from somebody in an accelerated course, and clearly it worked because I’m grossing numbers I never made a day in my life before, I have all these manufacturers now so it works.

Yamania commented about a friend that has taken on the role of business coach:

I’ve been along side people who have mentored me but it was more in the aspects of business. I do have a really good friend that is kind of like a mentor but its business, it’s not actually sketching that particular thing. It’s more about hello this is how you go ahead and do that manufacturing, it’s distribution and is fashion embodied in there but he’s like you already got the idea of fashion you need the other part.

**Defining Success.** The third theme to emerge from the major theme, *success factors*, was *defining success*. Shernone stated that her definition of success is:

Just doing what you set out to do even if it doesn't make you the most money. Working on what you want to work on every day is my idea of success. It's not about the money. You have to enjoy it and love what you do.

Shernone also went on to say that her ultimate goal is to be completely self-employed:

I think because I've always been an entrepreneur, I don't see myself really wanting to work for anybody but myself. My end goal is to eventually just work for myself so that kind of keeps me going. Even when I feel like giving up I'm like, no, you can't. There's no other option like I have to work for myself.

When asked if she considers herself a success, LaToya commented:

I consider myself, on this level of life, I consider myself successful for where I have been. I have known designers that have been in this industry way longer than

me and never have reached the heights that I have and I'm grateful for that. That's what makes me very grateful for where I'm at. I feel I am successful now but I haven't reach my all my goals yet. I came a long way from just sitting in the house, sewing on the sewing machine to now having my own studio. That's a successful move, you know, compared to a lot of designers who haven't had the opportunity to even go to New York fashion week and be seen on such a big platform and being featured in magazines, it's like wow. So I'm happy. But am I all the way happy with my level of success? No, because I really want to be a household name. I want to be a household name like Gucci, that's success to me. But I feel success is also your state of mind and your state of well-being. You can have everything in the world and still not feel successful, you know if you don't have that inner peace and happiness within yourself you will never find success.

A friend reminded Merline that sometimes you take a step back to appreciate your

success:

I was at this point where I didn't have the studio and my friend was like, "you know you're successful, right?" and I was like, "what!" They were like really look at all the things you've done and I'm like "no!" They said "successful people never feel like they're successful" [laughs]. It's because we're always climbing up the next ladder. We can't appreciate what we have and so I'm stepping back and appreciating where I am. If you're not careful the world tells you, you need to live like this. Don't forget that you did this, don't forget you use to be on every runway, you know what I mean.

Merline also remarked that for her, success is not monetary, but rather it is about being

able to do what she loves to do:

It's not really about money. I get to create! I just get to do what I love and I think that's the biggest gift of success and I could have chosen to work at a nine to five job – I live paycheck to paycheck, I live project to project. So if I don't have a project, I don't have money for that season. So I made this choice for this life that I live. I chose to do what I do and love it instead of kind of going after the white picket fence that the world suggest that we need, that will make us happy.

Victoria echoed Merline's comment: "It's about enjoying doing what you love. It's not about money. That's where we mess ourselves up because we always think it's all about money. But its enjoying what you love and not to be stressed about it. Vanessa remarked:

There's always going to be days where you feel defeated because some people are better than you or they're at a level higher than you. But everybody has a different

level of success, everybody is not going to be successful at same time or like I said at the same level.

When asked to give her definition of success Diane remarked:

You know a lot of people already say that I am successful but yet I still don't think so. But I think when I have that chance to see my clothing possibly in a major department store and to possibly see a very well-known celebrity wearing an NGU design, possibly to see it on a major television show. Then I think that's when I have arrived. I feel like I have a lot of people saying I'm already successful because I'm doing things a lot of designers haven't done yet. Having my own manufacturing company. I wanted the manufacturing company, I got that, so now I'm continuing to work on just creating a beautiful line for the whole world to see and you know with fashion, when you have a label it might last about 10 years. Like Baby fat and FUBU, I'mma do like the well-known designers do. Run with it for about 10 years and then sell it [laughs], because that's what they do.

Yamania voiced: "I need to leave this legacy for my daughter and for the generation behind me." Raquel noted that success is different to different people:

Success is many different things. Financially, I obviously need to be able to take care of myself and my family – my kids. Investing in myself is important too the people I love, my children. That's one piece of success. The other piece of success is bringing people with you. So when you do something great, when you do something that's successful you got to go back and pull people along with you, that's being successful to me. Success is also, pouring into other people and giving them something to look forward to, giving them a message that may help them get up in the morning. So success is different for me but that's in the big picture. That's what success is to me. It is beyond finances. You need finances don't get me wrong, but success is also pulling up the people that are in your circle. Helping other people and providing them with a message that can help somebody else overcome something.

### **Giving Back**

The major theme, *giving back*, refers to all of the ways that the fashion design entrepreneurs give back to their community. The data revealed two sub-themes associated with the major theme, *giving back*; they included, *non-profit organizations and uplifting the race*.



**Non-profit organizations.** Several participants have extended their fashion design business to include a non-profit organization. The missions of some of the designers' *non-profits* are a reflection of their own personal adversities. When Linda was two-years-old, she was severely burned in a house fire that also took the life of her six-year-old sister. As a burn survivor, she is passionate about raising money to support burn centers and organizations that give other burn survivors and their families hope. Linda spoke about the mission of her foundation, *Designing Hope*:

Philanthropy is very, very important to me because when I got burned, I went through Shriners's hospital and that's done strictly on fund raising. You know, my family never incurred a bill. I would go back and forth from the time I was two to 18 years old and none of those operations, my family never paid a nickel for. So I know how important it is to continue to give back. So I started my own foundation, *Designing Hope*, and I do exactly that. I partner with hospitals and I helped them raise funds. What I do is, I partnered with the hospital, we put on a big fashion show, a silent auction and the firemen come out and model, which the women love. They say they're coming to see me, but they come out to see the firemen [laughs]. The firemen come out and model and we just raise money and all that money ends up going back to the burn center to help them with their programs.

Linda's foundation also provides Christmas funds, scholarships and other programs for young burn survivors, for example: "There's a glam session that teaches the girls how to dress, put on makeup and make them feel good about themselves." Some of the participants have used their platform to make a difference in the lives of young people. Encouraging children to follow their dreams is the mission behind Merline's non-profit organization *Provoke Style Fashion Camp*. Merline declared that that work she does through her non-profit is ultimately what she wants to be remembered for:

That's one of the things that I'm really passionate about. At the end of all this I don't want people to remember me just by a dress that I made or oh, "Merline loved architecture and fashion." We don't remember collection number five from designers like Chanel, we just know that she was an affluent person. I want my legacy to be like, "man, she gave back to the next generation, she provoked so

much.” Like I said, my word is provoke. I provoke old thinking into new perspectives and that’s why my non-profit is called *Provoke Style*. So my kids – a lot of them come from nothing, a lot of them come from harsh backgrounds and so I provoke old thinking into new perspectives and I tell them, you can be a fashion designer, you can be whatever you want, follow your dream. That’s the legacy I want to leave behind, impacting people, changing lives. I don’t know what they’re going through, you know, but they get to dream now.

As a daughter of Haitian immigrant parents, Merline also spoke about having the opportunity to come full circle and give back to the community from which she came:

I feel really strong about artist not just consuming. We go to art school, we take-take-take, but we don’t give it back to the community. So this time 90% of the kids are Haitian, first generation just like me. Their parents are immigrants, so I’m like, “oh my gosh, you’re me!” Like with those braids, that’s like me, you know.

The purpose of Raquel’s non-profit organization, *Dream Catchers*, is to inspire underprivileged youth in her hometown to reach for their dreams:

My entire goal is to get out into our community and be on the ground with them to show them, hey, “I’m from here, but now I’m here. So you can do it.” My nonprofit organization is called *Dream Catchers* because you can catch your dream. Keep dreaming. You can catch it. I caught mine, so you can catch yours. With *Dream Catchers*, I will tie that directly into DMR and I will physically get out there and go touch our babies. Go into our communities, set up programs, work with the city and the county council with their programs and initiatives. Columbia is doing a lot of things right now – the mayor, his focus is on entrepreneurship. So my goal is to get home and to focus solely on the kids in our community.

**Uplifting the race.** The last sub-theme to evolve from the major theme, *giving back*, was *uplifting the race*. Some of the participants regarded their standing in their communities and in the fashion industry as an opportunity to help improve the lives of other people of color. As LaToya stated:

I design to create opportunities for ethnic women, Black and Hispanic, that want the opportunity to come into this industry when that opportunity is not given. I want to show them that you can break the mold in this industry.

As Victoria pointed out:

Not to exclude other races, but we need to know who we are. We need to know our history more than anybody else's history. It is shown that we are the only ones that don't know our history and every since we got on those ships we've been divided. It's good to work amongst ourselves and really teach each other, you know, help each other.

Merline voiced that instead of complaining about the problems in her community she is focused on finding solutions:

I love being African-American and I love being Haitian, but I never talk about the problems. I know the problems exists, by the way, I know racism exists. I know hardships exist, but I feel like its time for us to talk about solutions. I think if every one person can give back and go back in your community, we can change the world. I'm not going to wait for the world to change; I think I can do my own part here. I'm always tell my siblings, if every one person that's complaining came up with three solutions, I think we can impact the whole next generation we can impact a whole community. I feel like if you're mad about something, there's a reason you're mad about it, I think you're the one to change it, so what [are] you [going] to do to change that? So I get a lot of, "wow you're going back in the community?" I'm like, "yes!" I go back to my Haitian community; I go back to my African-American community. I even go to Poland. I want to be part of the solution and not just sit around.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND MODEL

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. As well as identify their professional characteristics, motivations and any racial or gender barriers they face as Black female entrepreneurs in the fashion industry. This research used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to collect qualitative data by conducting in-depth interviews with 15 Black female fashion design entrepreneurs. Additional data, including demographic characteristics and information regarding the participants' businesses was also collected. The interpretative phenomenological analysis revealed superordinate themes, major themes, sub-themes, minor themes and micro-themes that directly related to the experiences of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs. This study was based on the following five research objectives:

1. Identify the characteristics, personality traits, background, education, and life experiences of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs.
2. Understand the barriers and challenges faced by Black female fashion design entrepreneurs in regards to the intersections of race, class, gender, geographic location and other factors.
3. Determine if the motivational factors for starting and maintaining a business among Black female fashion design entrepreneurs relate to Black feminist thought, cultural theory of entrepreneurship, disadvantage theory and/or protected market theory.
4. Determine if Black female fashion design entrepreneurs define and measure success in accordance to Black feminist thought, cultural theory of entrepreneurship, disadvantage theory and/or protected market theory.
5. Identify resources and educational opportunities that will benefit current and future Black female fashion design entrepreneurs.

### Research Objective 1

To achieve the first objective of this study, to identify the characteristics, personality traits, background, education and life experiences of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs, various questions were asked of participants during the in-depth interview sessions in order to obtain a detailed description. Some of the interview questions that were posed to address the first research objective asked participants to discuss and/or describe the personal characteristics that make them successful as fashion design entrepreneurs, their formal and informal educational experiences related to fashion design and their design style and overall design process. The themes that best described the characteristics, personality traits, background, education and life experiences of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs included: *entrepreneurial mindset, family influence, school environment, community influence, knowledge seeker* and *travel experience*.

### Characteristics and Personality Traits of Black Female Fashion Design

#### Entrepreneurs

**Entrepreneurial Mindset.** The entrepreneurial mindset is defined as “a growth oriented perspective through which individuals promote flexibility, creativity, continuous innovation and renewal” (Ireland et al., 2003). Having an entrepreneurial mindset is essential to building and sustaining a successful career in artistic fields such as fashion design. In an effort to define an “arts entrepreneurial mindset” Pollard and Wilson (2013) outlined five integral elements; (a) the capacity to think creatively, strategically, analytically and reflectively, (b) confidence in one’s abilities, (c) the ability to collaborate, (d) well-developed communication skills, and (e) an understanding of the current artistic context. Like other arts entrepreneurs, fashion design entrepreneurs are

motivated by two triggers to engage in entrepreneurship (Aggestam, 2007). One trigger is related to the desire to engage in new venture creation and the other trigger is related to the need for artistic achievement (Aggestam, 2007). “Both triggers must be activated for a successful arts entrepreneur to experience both creative fulfillment and the commercial exploitation of that creativity (Pollard & Wilson, 2013, p. 9).

Participants mentioned specific traits they have that make them successful as fashion design entrepreneurs. The most common entrepreneurial traits that emerged from the data are time management, organization and preparedness. Several participants noted that they were young entrepreneurs, as their entrepreneurial mindset was developed early in life. The results of a survey piloted by Walstad and Kurilsky (1998) to investigate the entrepreneurial attitudes and knowledge among youth ages 14 to 19, substantiated this finding revealing that there is a strong interest in entrepreneurship among Black youth, significantly greater than that found among White youth. Some of the participants stated that their foray into entrepreneurship occurred unexpectedly, making them accidental entrepreneurs. In their study exploring the factors that motivate women to start their own business, Orhan and Scott (2001) coined this type of female business owner “entrepreneur by chance” in that they did not purposely seek entrepreneurship but rather excepted it due to external circumstances or individual necessity. Some of the participants are also considered to be serial entrepreneurs as they noted that their current fashion design business is not their first or their only entrepreneurial endeavor. This finding is consistent with a previous finding reported in a study conducted by DeCarlo and Lyons (1979), comparing the personal characteristics of women of color (Black, Spanish American, American Indian and other) and White female entrepreneurs, which

revealed that nearly twice as many of the female entrepreneurs of color reported that their current business was not their first attempt at entrepreneurship.

### **Background and Life Experiences of Black Female Fashion Design Entrepreneurs**

**Family influence.** Previous reports attributed the low numbers of successful Black designers to an absence of support from family, as fashion design is often not regarded as a practical career within the Black community (Adams, 2015; Friedman, 2015). The findings of this study; however, revealed a positive correlation among family relationships in guiding the participants' interest towards fashion design and entrepreneurship. Bradford, Buck and Myers (2001) noted that elaborate kinship ties and extended family bonds are central to Black children's socialization experiences. Therefore, within Black families personal decisions, such as ones future occupation, are not made alone but with extensive family guidance (Martin & Nakayama, 1997). The participants also discussed the impact of their relationships with female relatives in particular. "The centrality of women in [Black] extended families reflects both a continuation of African-derived cultural sensibilities and functional adaptations to intersecting oppressions of race, gender, class and nation" (Collins, 2000, p. 178). The importance of their interactions with family members in imparting cultural values and traditions that would be carried on into adulthood was revealed as the designers discussed their background and upbringing.

The sub-theme, lineage of fashionistas, highlights the role that influential female family members have played in the lives of the participants. These women-centered networks, consisting of *bloodmothers* and grandmothers, sisters, aunts, or cousins acting as *othermothers*, are significant because as Collins (2000) asserts Black women "affirm

one another's humanity, specialness, and right to exist" (p. 102). The minor theme, passing down of skills, which refers to the practice of older family members passing down their sewing and needlework skills to the participants, is a prominent example of the family's influence. Collins (2000) notes "countless Black mothers have empowered their daughters by passing on everyday knowledge essential to survival as [Black] women" (p. 102). The participants of this study were no exception to this as many learned the invaluable skill of sewing from either their mother or grandmother.

The data also revealed the occurrence of an entrepreneurial tradition among the participants. Several participants came from a family in which the owning and running of a business is a longstanding tradition. This finding is meaningful as it refutes previous research that suggests that there is not a significant business tradition in the Black community. Much of the "social capital" literature concerning the limited level of self-employment in the Black community contends that the primary reason for lack of business traditions among Black communities is African-American culture. Frazier (1957) linked the inability of African-Americans to achieve the same level of entrepreneurial success as other racial and cultural groups to slavery. Light (1984) argued that Black communities are too individualistic and do not have the networking and solidarity that supports business in other communities. Butler (1991) contended, however, that much like immigrant groups that dominate certain niche markets, there is a long-standing tradition of business ownership within the Black community. Feagin and Imani (1994) further noted that despite continuing racial discrimination, a strong interest in entrepreneurship can be found amongst the Black community.



Parental influence from the participants' mothers in particular was a significant factor of this study. As Collins (2000) noted, "the mother/daughter relationship is one fundamental relationship among Black women" (p. 102). For several participants, the manner in which they were raised significantly shaped their business mindset and design aesthetic. The mother's influences on dress and on character were found to be the most prominent among the participants. Mothers often serve as agents of socialization regarding their daughter's appearance (Ogle & Damhorst, 2003). Further, it is common for Black mothers in particular, to instill in their daughters the importance of appearance, as it significantly influences how society perceives them (Davis, 2015).

In regards to their parents' influence on their character development, having "strength" of character and being "strong" were the most common traits imparted upon the participants by their mothers. This is evidenced in Collins' (2000) assertion that Black daughters learn to expect work, to strive for education so they can support themselves and to anticipate carrying heavy responsibilities in their families and communities." Similarly, Ladner (1979) found that Black females are socialized in childhood to become strong, independent women, as their likelihood of becoming heads of their own households is increased due to the effects of poverty and racism. Further, Joseph (1984) proclaimed, "Black mothers teach their daughters highly adaptive mechanisms designed to promote physical and mental survival...[and] without such teachings the mental and physical survival of Black women would be impossible" (p. 19).

As mothers in their own right, some of the designers discussed how motherhood has impacted them as fashion designers and entrepreneurs. Collins (2000) noted that due to the incessant responsibilities of motherhood Black women often find it difficult to

follow their dreams and explore or express their creative side. Nevertheless, the author found mothering to be an empowering experience for many [Black] women. Collins (2000) wrote:

[The] special relationship that Black mothers have with their children can also foster a creativity, a mothering of the mind and soul, for all involved. It is this gift that Alice Walker alludes to when she notes, “And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of a flower they themselves never hope to see (p. 198).

Several participants of this study remarked that being a mother serves as a source of motivation to continue running their business and that they wish to create a legacy for their children through their work. “For many Black female entrepreneurs, their businesses are highly integrated into their family life, personal aspirations and commitments to their communities” (Benson, 2016, p. 4). Motherhood proved to be a push factor for some of the participants who voiced that they wanted to work for themselves, make more money and provide a better life for their children. Common push factors that motivate women to start their own business include, insufficient family income, dissatisfaction with a salaried job, difficulty finding work and a need for a flexible work schedule (Orhan and Scott, 2001).

**Community Influence.** The communities in which the participants’ were raised in have profoundly affected them in their careers as fashion design entrepreneurs. Some of the designers grew up in disadvantaged neighborhoods, which left a lasting impression on them as adults. Having an underprivileged childhood encouraged the participants to work hard and strive for success. Growing up in poverty can be viewed as a push factor that motivated the participants to pursue entrepreneurship. This finding is significant as it negates the assumption of cultural theory which implies that women of color suffer from

a “cultural deficiency” wherein they are hindered by a culture of poverty and low expectations for achievement and as a result, they are not encouraged to pursue small-business ownership or economic independence in general (Smith-Hunter & Boyd, 2004). However, this finding does correspond to Robinson, Blockson, and Robinson’s (2007) social stratification and entrepreneurship framework which links entrepreneurship to social mobility in that it allows an entrepreneur to create wealth thus providing the opportunity to move from a lower class level to a higher status position. It also agrees with disadvantage theory, which proposes that despite any cultural deficiencies that may exist, women of color have a strong desire to become self-employed often prompted out of necessity (Smith-Hunter & Boyd, 2004).

**School Environment.** The participants noted the impact of their former and present school environments on their careers as fashion design entrepreneurs. The secondary school environment provided many of participants with the opportunity to learn sewing and other fashion design skills through a fashion or home economics class. Home economics has a long tradition in the uplift of the Black community. At the time of emancipation, home economics provided the practical education newly freed Blacks needed to upgrade their occupational skills (Neyland, 1990). Several participants expressed the significance that home economics had in influencing them to become fashion design entrepreneurs. Some participants also remembered the impression that one influential instructor had in encouraging them to pursue fashion design as a career. In a study conducted by Bradford et al. (2001) that investigated the communicative influences on Black and White women’s career socialization, teachers were most commonly identified as mentors among both groups, providing substantiating evidence that

educators have a profound influence on the career aspirations of Black girls and young Black women.

**Travel Experience.** Having the opportunity to travel for many of the participants has had a positive impact on their fashion design careers. Some of the designers discussed how having the opportunity to travel during their childhood and adolescent years profoundly influenced their outlook on life. The designers also expressed the significance of traveling abroad. Much like the participants in a study conducted by Willis (2012) in which she used an intersectional lens to explore the experiences and outcomes of Black women who studied abroad, the women in this present study reflected on the benefits of foreign travel and how it has advanced their personal growth and development. The designers developed a broader perspective of the world and the possibilities available to them as Black women. Travel also enhanced their sense of agency and empowerment, which ultimately lead to the development of a stronger sense of self.

### **Education of Black Female Fashion Design Entrepreneurs**

**Knowledge seeker.** Education and the pursuit of knowledge was an extremely significant factor among the participants. This finding is consistent with a study conducted by Hisrich and Brush (1986) to describe the characteristics of entrepreneurs of color, which reported that education played an important role among this group. In addition, it was reported that among the entrepreneurs of color most had attended college and 28% had graduate degrees (Hisrich & Brush, 1986). In regards to female entrepreneurs of color specifically, DeCarlo and Lyons (1979) found that they were less educated than the White female entrepreneurs participating in their study. Conversely,

Bates (1986) found that when compared to Whites, self-employed, women of color were better educated with their mean years of education rising by 2.4 years from 1960 to 1980.

Most participants of this present study expressed that they are constantly searching for information that is relevant to their business. Many of the participants also stated that they were self-taught learners. They have taught themselves the garment construction process often utilizing online resources such as YouTube. Having an innate creative sense has allowed the designers to easily pick up on and master new skills. Several designers even thought of themselves as researchers and some of them could be considered a “Jane of all trades” as they have acquired knowledge in many areas. Overall the participants expressed that they are life-long learners and are committed to continue learning all there is to know about their business. As Collins (2000) contends, “education has long served as a powerful symbol for the important connections among self, change, and empowerment in [Black] communities (p. 210).

Although a few of the designers were self-taught, a majority had received formal training in the area of fashion design where they learned the traditional dressmaking skills of sketching, patternmaking, draping, and garment construction. However, despite the noted benefits of receiving a traditional fashion design education, some participants were opposed to formal training. The negative views expressed among the participants regarding formal education were due to adverse experiences at a specific educational institution, the high cost of tuition and a lack of instruction in the skills needed to be successful as a fashion design entrepreneur. Still, other participants mentioned that they were currently in graduate school or were planning to pursue graduate study in other design fields such as architecture, visual communications and sustainable design.

Previous studies regarding women and entrepreneurship suggest that women lack the necessary business acumen to run a successful venture (Heilman & Chen, 2003). This insinuation may explain the designers' expressed need to continuously update their business skills. As such, several designers have obtained, were pursuing or had future plans to pursue a degree in an area of business such as accounting or marketing. The participants also noted the importance of participating in continuing education opportunities in the form of professional development such as conferences and workshops. Similarly, among the female entrepreneurs of color participating in a study conducted by Hisrich and Brush (1986), furthering their education to obtain and improve business skills by returning to college, attending seminars and conferences, taking continuing education courses, reading trade publications and self-help books, as well as, seeking help from experts, was highly valued.

A defining characteristic that emerged repeatedly throughout the interviews with the fashion design entrepreneurs was that of humility. The participants remarked that being humble was pivotal to their success as fashion design entrepreneurs. They discussed their openness to learning from others and their willingness to accept criticism with grace and appreciation. The designers also noted that accepting criticism involves the ability to use feedback received to make improvements through practice. Taking the initiative to practice ones craft can make the difference between being a good designer or being a great designer. Having the virtue of humility is essentially what seems to separate these Black female fashion design entrepreneurs from all the others who may have tried but failed to reach or maintain a notable level of success.

## Research Objective 2

The second objective of this study was to understand the barriers and challenges faced by Black female fashion design entrepreneurs in regards to the intersections of race, class, gender, geographic location and other factors. To elicit the dialogue needed to reach the second research objective, the designers were asked to discuss the barriers and challenges they experienced in the start-up phase of their business, the barriers and challenges they currently experience, and how they have managed to overcome these barriers and challenges. In addition, the participants shared their thoughts on what differentiates the challenges and barriers they encounter as Black female fashion designers from those encountered by female fashion designers from other racial and/or ethnic groups. The themes that were most closely related to the barriers and challenges faced by Black female fashion design entrepreneurs included: *business challenges* and *facing adversity*.

### Barriers and Challenges Faced By Black Female Fashion Design Entrepreneurs

**Business Challenges.** Several participants stated that one of the toughest challenges they face as fashion design entrepreneurs is managing finances. This outcome is reflective of findings generated from previous studies concerning female entrepreneurs. In a qualitative study conducted by Pellegrino and Reece (1982), financial management was found to be one of the greatest areas of concern among 20 women business owners in Norfolk, Virginia. In a study including over 1,000 female entrepreneurs conducted by Hisrich and Brush (1984), the women cited a lack of financial training and a lack of experience with financial planning as a major weakness. The designers also discussed difficulty in obtaining startup funds from outside sources. Previous research found that

women of color had fewer financial options and a greater difficulty in obtaining resources needed to pursue their entrepreneurial goals than their White counterparts (Smith-Hunter & Boyd, 2004). Challenges regarding industry relationships were also a significant factor among the fashion design entrepreneurs. The participants expressed disappointment in the lack of camaraderie that exists amongst Black women in the fashion industry. This lack of gender/racial solidarity and unwillingness to support one another is shown to be a similar occurrence among Black women in other workplace settings (Bell and Nokomo 2001).

**Facing Adversity.** The participants of this study described some of the personal and professional challenges that have affected them as fashion design entrepreneurs. The participants talked about their experiences with discrimination in the fashion industry, which included racial and gender discrimination. When studying how Black women experience entrepreneurship, it is important to consider the “double-yoke” of racism and sexism that they often face. Several studies have shown that Black women experience entrepreneurship differently than their male counterparts and women from other racial groups (Dolinsky et. al., 1994; Inman, 2000; Smith-Hunter, 2004). “The dual influence of race and gender means that African American women generally trail Black men, White women and White men in earnings, power and prestige in the work place” (Harvey, 2005, p. 790).

For the participants of this study, understanding their experiences requires more than an examination of racial and gender difference but also the intersections of ethnicity, class, geographic location, disabilities, motherhood and other variables come into play. Although all of the participants of this study identified as Black, some of them have



acknowledge their unique cultural or ethnic background. Three of the participants are of Haitian decent and one noted a Liberian heritage. The intersection of being a second-generation immigrant has significantly shaped their experiences as fashion design entrepreneurs. Obvious class distinctions exist among the participants as well due to their varied backgrounds and childhood experiences; geographic location is also a consideration. One participant is a burn survivor and she spoke about how that intersection places a third barrier for her to overcome in addition to being Black and being a woman. Some participants mentioned their personal hardships such as caring for a sick or disabled family member that has also impacted their entrepreneurial experiences. Thus, for this study the concept of Intersectionality was extremely useful in understanding barriers and challenges faced by Black female fashion design entrepreneurs.

### **Research Objective 3**

The third objective of this study sought to determine if the motivational factors for starting and maintaining a business among Black female fashion design entrepreneurs relate to Black feminist thought, cultural theory of entrepreneurship, disadvantage theory and/or protected market theory. The interview questions that were posed to address the third research objective asked that participants discuss and/or describe their initial and current goals for their business, how they sell and market their designs and what has motivated them to continue running their business throughout the years. The themes that most closely related to the motivational factors for starting and maintaining a business among Black female fashion design entrepreneurs included: *culture of fashion*, *circle of support*, and *knowledge of self*.

### **Motivational Factors of Black Female Fashion Design Entrepreneurs**

**Culture of fashion.** One of the motivational factors for pursuing fashion design entrepreneurship found to be common among the participants was the culture of fashion. The participants expressed a passion for the field and a personal calling to work in the fashion industry. Previous studies have shown that having the opportunity to fulfill a personal calling is a motivational factor for Black females to pursue entrepreneurship (Robinson, Blockson, & Robinson, 2007). The integrative perspective is also useful in understanding the culture of fashion as a motivating factor, as it considers many facets of a woman's reproductive, productive and personal roles and how these roles integrate and inform her entrepreneurial experiences. Aspaas (2002) found seven integrations that exist between women's businesses and other dimensions of their lives. The integration applicable to understanding the culture of fashion as a motivating factor for entrepreneurship entry considers the link between a woman's business and her abilities and aspirations (Aspass, 2002). Women's businesses provide them with an outlet for creativity, time flexibility and an opportunity to apply their skills and talents to personal growth (Aspass, 2002)

**Circle of support.** Having a network of supportive individuals to encourage and support them in accomplishing their business related goals was a significant motivational factor found among the fashion design entrepreneurs. Disadvantage theory posits that due to discrimination, immigrants, people of color and others who are at a disadvantage in society and have been excluded from the mainstream economy will often embrace entrepreneurship as a form of survival (Smith-Hunter & Boyd, 2004). The theory suggests that this exclusion from the mainstream economy, which restricts entrepreneurs

from accessing available resources such as startup funding, leads to the development of tight networks of interpersonal relationships that can provide informal assistance in a number of ways (Light & Boacich, 1988). As found among the participants of this present study, informal assistance may take on the form of financial assistance or unpaid labor from family and friends.

**Knowledge of self.** Having a strong sense of self was a significant motivating factor among the participants in becoming fashion design entrepreneurs. The participants expressed a need to stay true to themselves and to stand by and never default from their personal beliefs and values. The participants' insistence on staying true to themselves paralleled a main tenet of Black feminist thought, *the power of self-definition*, which posits that:

By insisting on self-definition, Black women question not only what has been said about [Black] women but the credibility and the intentions of those possessing the power to define. When Black women define ourselves, we clearly reject the assumption that those in positions granting them the authority to interpret our reality are entitled to do so. Regardless of the actual content of Black women's self-definitions, the act of insisting on Black female self-definition validates Black women's power as human subjects (Collins, 2000, p. 114).

The embracing of one's culture was also a significant theme among the participants as it was important to celebrate their cultural heritage through their work as fashion design entrepreneurs. The designers acknowledged their culture through their business practices while others incorporated elements from their respective cultures into their design process. The designers noted that they are often inspired to create garments that celebrate their culture with some carving out a well-defined niche market in catering to Black women. This finding is supported by protected market theory which posits that the distinct taste, culturally specific needs of ethnic groups can only be provided by co-

ethnic entrepreneurs (Light, 1972). The participants also noted that having a strong spiritual foundation provided them the motivation needed to persevere in their careers as fashion design entrepreneurs. Turning their passion for fashion into a ministry to help others was a motivating factor for the participants. Previous research reported that having the opportunity to fulfill a spiritual calling is a motivational factor for Black females to pursue entrepreneurship (Robinson, Blockson & Robinson, 2007).

#### **Research Objective 4**

The fourth objective of this study was to determine if Black female fashion design entrepreneurs define and measure success in accordance to Black feminist thought, cultural theory of entrepreneurship, disadvantage theory and/or protected market theory. The interview questions that were posed to address the fourth research objective asked that participants define what success means to them, to discuss the importance of mentoring and to offer advice for up and coming designers. The themes that most closely related to how Black female fashion design entrepreneurs define and measure success included: *growth factors*, *success factors* and *giving back*.

#### **How Black Female Fashion Design Entrepreneurs Measure and Define Success**

**Growth factors.** Although Black women owned firms only account for a little more than 24% of the sales generated by Black-owned businesses, when compared to firms owned by women from other ethnic groups, businesses owned by Black women top the charts in revenue growth (Robb, 2002, American Express OPEN, 2015). One way that the participants defined and measured their success is through the growth of their business. Growth factors included hiring a team, obtaining a brick and mortar location, manufacturing their designs and selling their designs wholesale. The participants were all

in different phases of the business life cycle thus each participant had experienced a different level of growth. Hiring and managing a team of employees and obtaining a brick and mortar location were major signs of growth for the fashion design entrepreneurs. Several designers had grown into manufacturing and wholesaling their garments to meet the demand of their expanding customer base. Some had even started their own in-house manufacturing company. This finding challenges previous research that reported that minority women do not tend to establish businesses in fields such as construction and manufacturing (Bates, 1993).

**Success Factors.** In a study comparing entrepreneurial performance between men- and women-owned business start-ups and between business start-ups owned by Whites and people of color, it was found that although businesses owned by women fared worse than those owned by men, among Black-owned businesses, those owned by women had a higher survival rate than those owned by men (Robb, 2002). The factors of success found in this study included, forming an advisory board, finding a business coach and defining success. The participants noted that forming an advisory board for their company was essential for its success. Advisory board members could include other business owners, fashion industry professionals, accountants, lawyers, academic professionals and other individuals in the community who can provide strategic advice to the fashion design entrepreneur. Participants also discussed the importance of hiring a business coach in ensuring the success of their business. A business coach will share their expert opinion with the fashion design entrepreneur and help them develop their business acumen so that they can take their business to the next level of growth.

The participants defined success in three ways. First, the designers said that their idea of success was having the opportunity to do what they love and enjoy doing every day. In this definition the participants also made clear that success for them was not based on money. The second way that the designers defined success was being able to work for themselves and be their own boss. Thirdly, the participants' defined success in terms of the goals they want to reach in their business. For some of the designers this meant having a storefront boutique, some aspired to wholesale their garments and have them sold by other retailers and some want to see their brand become a household name. Goal oriented designers also discussed leaving a legacy for their children. Structural barriers often faced by Black entrepreneurs such as access to financing may explain why they do not necessary equate growth with financial success.

**Giving Back.** A significant finding among the participants was their propensity to want to give back to their communities. Several participants had extended their fashion design business to include a non-profit organization. The non-profits focused on matters close to the fashion design entrepreneurs in some way, whether it was raising money for burn survivors, encouraging children of immigrant parents, or going back to the disadvantage communities in which they were raised to encourage the children to reach for their dreams. Being advocates for the Black community was also important to the fashion design entrepreneurs. The participants regarded their standing in their communities and in the fashion industry as an opportunity to help improve the lives of other people of color. This finding is consistent with the findings from a study conducted by Robinson et al. (2007) that reported that Black women entrepreneurs expressed a responsibility toward their local and racial community. Further, Black women

entrepreneurs defined success for themselves as being able to provide employment and economic opportunities for their chosen communities (Robinson et al, 2007).

### **Research Objective 5**

The fifth objective of this study sought to identify resources and educational opportunities that will benefit current and future Black female fashion design entrepreneurs. The interview questions that were posed to address the fifth research objective asked that participants discuss the importance of memberships in professional or social business groups and to describe any resources and/or educational opportunities that they take advantage of. The themes that most closely related to the resources and educational opportunities that will benefit current and future Black female fashion design entrepreneurs included: *business strategies* and *sharing knowledge*.

### **Resources and Educational Opportunities Beneficial to Black Female Fashion**

#### **Design Entrepreneurs**

**Business Strategies.** The participants employed a number of business strategies to differentiate or diversify their business, reach business goals and take their business to the next level. The most common business strategies that emerged from the data are restructuring, creating systems, branding, marketing, networking, and utilizing resources. Restructuring is defined as the reorganization of a company with a view of achieving greater efficiency and profit, or to adapt to a changing market. The participants noted that their businesses were in a constant state of transition. As they moved from one level of business growth to the next, restructuring was implemented to insure that their business would sustain. Creating systems or methods of solving a repeated business issue in a

strategic and effortless way was important to the fashion design entrepreneurs in creating a solid foundation for their businesses.

The participants discussed utilizing branding strategies to differentiate their businesses. Distinguishing themselves in the industry was found to be important among the participants. Online marketing was the most prominent marketing strategy used among the participants. The fashion design entrepreneurs discussed the significance of building industry contacts and relationships through networking. Membership in professional organizations was not found to be prominent among the participants. However, taking advantage of networking opportunities to make connections with others in the industry was utilized as an alternative to professional membership. The participants discussed utilizing any resources available to them especially those that are free of costs such as online resources and resources available through the Small Business Association (SBA).

**Sharing Knowledge.** The desire to share knowledge with up and coming designers was significant among the participants. One way that the designers shared knowledge with others was through mentoring and internship programs. The sharing of knowledge by Black female fashion design entrepreneurs' echoes the helping ideology presented in a similar study investigating Black female hair salon entrepreneurs where by salon owners wantingly helped stylists shift to entrepreneurship. This helping ideology stems from a sense of gender/racial solidarity as the willingness to help one another is based on shared experiences of racial and gender discrimination (Harvey, 2005).



### **Theoretical Implications**

To explore the life experiences of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs, several theoretical perspectives were considered, including Black feminist thought, the integrative perspective, the social stratification and entrepreneurship framework, disadvantage theory, protected market theory, and cultural theory of entrepreneurship. All but the cultural theory of entrepreneurship were useful in understanding the experiences of the participants. As such, the researcher did not locate a definitive theory, but rather each of the applicable theoretical perspectives listed above offered multiple ways in which this study could be framed. Further, as a result of the emergent quality of the research data a conceptual model was developed to explain the unique experiences of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs. This unanticipated finding called for the addition of grounded theory as an emergent method.

#### **Black Feminist Thought**

This study utilized Black feminist thought, as its main theoretical position. As a “self-defined, collective Black women’s standpoint about Black womanhood” (Collins, 1996, p. 9) advanced by Patricia Hill Collins, Black feminist thought builds on the prolific works of Black feminist intellectuals such as Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison as well as the collective resistance of countless “ordinary” Black women against “systems of race, gender and class oppression (Collins, 1989, p. 745). Therefore, Black feminist thought seeks to reclaim the unrecognized and unheralded works of great individual Black women thinkers from past eras, reinterpret existing works through new theoretical frameworks, unsilence the voices of subgroups

within the larger collectivity of U.S. Black women, and recognize the ideas of Black women thinkers that are not typically regarded as intellectuals (Collins, 2000).

Black feminist thought was useful in situating the experiences of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs within the context of the White male dominated fashion industry. The historic marginalization of Black female fashion designers is a direct outcome of the system of oppression as explained by Collins (2000), that is designed to “suppress the ideas of Black women intellectuals and to protect White elite male interest and world views” (p. 5). “The overarching purpose of U.S. Black feminist thought is to resist oppression, both its practices and the ideas that justify it” (Collins 2000, p. 22). In applying Black feminist thought, the researcher hoped to reclaim the forgotten works of our most notable Black dressmakers and female fashion designers and acknowledge those who contributed much to the textile, apparel and fashion industries in the U.S. but will forever go unnamed. Further, the researcher utilized Black feminist thought to empower and give a voice to contemporary Black female fashion design entrepreneurs so that their ideas are never suppressed like those of their predecessors. Because “Black women must be in charge of Black feminist thought” (Collins, 2000, p.18), the use of in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method for this study allowed the participants to tell their own stories in their words, thus, placing them at the center of analysis.

Although the applicability of Black feminist thought as a theoretical framework for fashion, dress and appearance research concerning Black women has yet to be fully explored, it is gaining more consideration among scholars in the field. In her study, *Female Slave Narratives and Appearance: Assimilation, Experience and Escape*, Sanders

(2011) investigated the significant role that dress and appearance played in the lives of American slaves, employing Black feminist thought as her theoretical lens. By analyzing the personal narratives of Black female slaves, Sanders (2011) was able to adhere to the core tenet of Black feminist thought in centralizing the lived experiences of this group of women as their stories so often remain in the margins. The application of Black feminist thought to guide future studies regarding Black women's involvement in the fashion industry will offer researchers multiple opportunities to interpret Black women's oppression within the larger society, the suppression of their contributions to the fashion industry and the strategies they use to cope and overcome.

### **Intersectionality**

Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) introduced the term intersectionality in the scholarly paper, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*. Intersectionality is a Black feminist perspective that contends "the experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1243) and that these experiences are often not considered within the distinctive realms of feminism or antiracism. As an analytical tool, intersectionality is useful in understanding and responding to the ways in which gender intersects with other identities. For this study, the concept of intersectionality was used to clarify the ways in which the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, class, disability, geographic location and other identities shaped the experiences of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs.

### **The Integrative Perspective**

The integrative perspective is an approach introduced by Brush (1992) that seeks to understand a woman's societal relationships and how they contrast with the dominant masculine perspective. Brush found that the integrative perspective provides researchers with a clearer view of the many facets of a woman's reproductive, productive and personal roles thus allowing for a greater understanding of how these roles integrate and inform her entrepreneurial experiences. For the participants of this study their business relationships were highly integrated into their family life, personal aspirations and commitments to their communities. The integration perspective was effective in exploring how the many facets of the participants' lives shaped their experiences as Black female entrepreneurs.

### **Social Stratification and Entrepreneurship Framework**

Robinson, Blockson and Robinson (2007) assert that their social stratification and entrepreneurship framework is useful for researchers seeking to understand the process of entrepreneurship among Black women. Social stratification is defined as "the end result of institutional processes that partition society into advantaged and disadvantaged socially constructed groups" (Robinson, Blockson & Robinson, 2007, p. 133). Examining entrepreneurship through the multi-dimensional lens of social stratification allows for more nuanced considerations regarding the intersection of entrepreneurship and society (Robinson, Blockson & Robinson, 2007). For this study, the social stratification and entrepreneurship framework was helpful in understanding how socially constructed categories including gender, race/ethnicity, wealth and class influenced the experiences of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs.

### **Disadvantage Theory**

Disadvantage theory proposes that those who are discriminated against in society and thus are excluded from participation in mainstream economic opportunities will often pursue self-employment as an alternative to under-employment or unemployment (Boyd, 2000; Light & Rosenstein, 1995). The theory suggests that due to this exclusion, which restricts entrepreneurs from accessing available resources such as startup funding, leads to the development of tight networks of interpersonal relationships that can provide informal assistance in a number of ways (Light & Boacich, 1988). Disadvantage theory, applied to this study concerning Black women in entrepreneurship, was useful in understanding the significance of the circle of support, a network of supportive individuals, to Black female fashion design entrepreneurs (Boyd, 2004).

### **Protected Market Theory**

Protected market theory, first introduced by Light (1972), proposes that the culturally specific needs of ethnic groups can only be provided by co-ethnic entrepreneurs. Protected market theory was applicable to this study as it concerns Black business owners who provided a unique product and/or service to their community. Many designers acknowledged their culture through their business practices while others incorporated elements from their respective cultures into their design process. The designers also noted that they are often inspired to create garments that celebrate their culture. As such, the designers' are in essence ethnic entrepreneurs as they offer distinctly "ethnic" products and services that meet the specific taste and buying preferences of their ethnic clientele. By catering to the specific needs and preferences of their community, the designers have a stark advantage within this particular ethnic marketplace.

### **Cultural Theory of Entrepreneurship**

Cultural theory of entrepreneurship, which suggests “group differences in business performance results from group differences in the cultural norms and values that are required for successful entrepreneurship” was not applicable to this study (Smith-Hunter & Boyd, 2004, p. 20). Cultural theory implies that women of color suffer from a “cultural deficiency” wherein they are hindered by a culture of poverty and low expectations for achievement and as a result, they are not encouraged to pursue small-business ownership or economic independence in general (Smith-Hunter & Boyd, 2004). This implication was not found to be true among the participants of this study.

### **The Inclusion of Grounded Theory**

The practice of combining different methodologies and their accompanying methods, principles, and processes in the course of a research study is becoming more common among qualitative researchers (Lal, Suto & Ungar, 2012). In a *combined methodological approach*, a researcher may introduce a new methodology at the data collection stage, during data analysis or in the representation of findings (Lal, Suto & Ungar, 2012). In addition, the occurrence of combining methodologies might take place at some or all stages of the research process. This study initially utilized interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a research design concerned with conducting a comprehensive examination of human lived experiences, as its sole methodology; however, the unforeseen development of a conceptual model in the latter stages of the research process called for the addition of grounded theory as an emergent method. Because IPA and grounded theory share similar data collection methods (i.e.,

interviewing) and analytic procedures (i.e., coding) the researcher was able to successfully combine the two methodological approaches.

While phenomenological studies focus on describing the common meaning of a phenomenon experienced by several individuals, the goal of a grounded theory study is to move beyond description and to generate a theory that reflects an understanding of a phenomenon (Bowen 2008; Creswell, 2013). Thus, grounded theory is a qualitative methodology in which the researcher seeks to develop a theory that provides a general explanation of a process, an action, or an interaction shaped by the experiences of a particular group of people (Creswell, 2013). It is important to note, however, that a researcher does not begin a project with a preconceived theory in mind, unless their purpose is to elaborate and extend an already existing theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Rather, the researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As the researcher continuously compares newly coded data with previously coded data in a process known as *constant comparative method*, a theory grounded in the data evolves (Bowen, 2008).

Charmaz (2008) argues that not only is the product of grounded theory (i.e., the theory) emergent, but the method itself possesses emergent qualities. Under this premise, Charmaz diverges from the traditional grounded theory approach and its systematic procedures (e.g., coding and theoretical sampling) first introduced by Strauss and Corbin, and advocates for a *constructivist grounded theory* approach that places more emphasis on the individuals involved in the research – both the participants and the researcher – than on the methods of research (Creswell, 2013). Ultimately, the researcher found concepts from both grounded theory approaches useful in generating a theory for this

study. The flexibility of constructivist grounded theory provided the researcher with the opportunity to employ “creative problem solving and imaginative interpretation” in choosing or creating various methodological strategies needed to handle “puzzles and problems” that arose throughout the research process (Charmaz, 2008, p. 156). And from traditional grounded theory, the researcher borrowed and applied the procedures of axial coding and selective coding upon completion of the initial interpretive phenomenological analysis of the data.

In axial coding, the researcher evaluated the emergent themes found in the data by comparing, testing and verifying their hypothetical relationships to each other (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Here, the researcher also identified the four types of categories related to what is referred to as the “core” category or “central” phenomenon, which in the case of the present study is entrepreneurship among Black female fashion designers (Creswell, 2013). The four categories include (a) *causal conditions* – factors that cause the core phenomenon, (b) *strategies* – actions taken in response to the core phenomenon, (c) *contextual and intervening conditions* – factors that influence the strategies, and (d) *consequences* – outcomes from using the strategies (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The researcher went on to create a *coding paradigm* or conceptual model to illustrate how the categories relate to and surround the core phenomenon (Strauss, 1987). In the final phase of this study, the researcher conducted the selective coding process whereby propositions are stated to further describe the interrelationship of categories in the model. In the next section, the conceptual model of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs’ is presented.



### **Conceptual Model of Black Female Fashion Design Entrepreneurs' Experiences**

The primary contribution of this research is the development of a conceptual model of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs' experiences. The conceptual model (Figure 4) illustrates the relationship among the superordinate themes, major themes, sub-themes, minor themes and micro-themes of how Black female fashion designers experience entrepreneurship. 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 female 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 female 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.



Figure 4. Conceptual Model of Black Female Fashion Design Entrepreneurs' Experiences

The first phase experienced by the Black female fashion design entrepreneur is the *nurturing environment*. In this phase the designer is encouraged and inspired by various aspects of her socio-cultural environment to pursue fashion design and entrepreneurship as a career choice. This environment could include influential family members, a positive school environment, a supportive community and impactful experiences such as travel. The *nurturing environment* phase may occur concurrently with the second phase, *acquiring knowledge*.

The second phase experienced by the Black female fashion design entrepreneur is, *acquiring knowledge*. In this phase the designer develops a greater sense of self-knowledge thereby gaining a deeper awareness of their preferences, values, goals and motives. The designer also develops or becomes aware of their entrepreneurial related characteristics. The designer becomes more knowledgeable about the fashion industry and is inspired by impactful experiences such as international travel. The *acquiring knowledge* phase may occur concurrently with the third phase, *building a foundation*.

The third phase experienced by the Black female fashion designer entrepreneur is, *building a foundation*. In this phase the designer encounters issues common to starting a business. Here the designer learns to manage business finances, develops industry relationships, and she may have to overcome various types of adversities including gender and racial discrimination. The *building a foundation* phase may occur concurrently with the forth phase, *experiencing growth*.

The forth phase experienced by the Black female fashion design entrepreneur is, *experiencing growth*. In this phase the designer will experience significant expansion within her business. She may hire a team of employees, obtain a brick and mortar location and begin manufacturing and wholesaling her designs. The designer will find it necessary to implement various business strategies including restructuring, systemization, branding, marketing, networking, and utilizing available resources. The *experiencing growth* phase may occur concurrently with the fifth phase, *achieving success*.

The fifth phase experienced by the Black female fashion design entrepreneur is, *achieving success*. In this phase the designer will experience a satisfactory level of success. This may mean they are, happy with their career doing what they love, they are

able to work for themselves, or they have reached many of the goals that they set for themselves in their business. In this phase the designer may form an advisory board and/or hire a business coach to insure that she is able to sustain success and maintain her business long term. The *achieving success* phase may occur concurrently with the sixth phase, *giving back*.

The sixth phase experienced by the Black female fashion design entrepreneur is, *giving back*. In this phase the designer may give back to community in some way. She may give back by sharing the knowledge she has learned along the way. The designer may choose to mentor others or offer internships to up and coming designers. She may choose to establish a non-profit organization to reach specific disadvantage groups or she may choose to devote her time to uplifting other people of color. By giving back the designer is in essence taking part in creating a nurturing environment for a potential future Black female fashion design entrepreneur.

The designer may go through each phase many times throughout the life of her business. Each phase is reinforced by the designer's *circle of support*. The *circle of support* provides emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support that the designer needs to move successfully throughout each phase. Each phase is also sustained by the designer acting as a *knowledge seeker*. By taking the initiative to constantly seek knowledge, the designer actively promotes her own success throughout each phase.

## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

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. Fifteen female fashion designers, ages 25 to 50 years old, who identified as Black or African American, participated in this study. The participants also met three out of the following criteria: (a) have completed a fashion design certificate or degree program, (b) design and produce a line at least twice a year, (c) participate in at least two fashion shows a year, (d) rely on their fashion design business as their primary source of income and/or (e) have been in business for at least five years.

### Summary

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. In addition, other theoretical concepts including, intersectionality, the integration perspective, the social stratification and entrepreneurship framework, disadvantage theory and protected market theory were found to be applicable to this study.

This study utilized interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as the initial method of inquiry. Sixteen major themes emerged from the data: (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.

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. It highlights the unique characteristics, motivations, and challenges of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs and clarifies the success strategies employed by this particular group. 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.

### **Future Research**

This study examined the life experiences of 15 Black female fashion design entrepreneurs through an interpretative phenomenological analytic approach utilizing in-depth interviews. Future research might employ a quantitative approach to investigate a larger sample. This study focused on the entrepreneurial aspects of the Black female fashion design entrepreneur; however, further research could be conducted to explore their design process. This study could also be replicated using a different demographic sample such as Black men or women of other ethnicities and backgrounds. It could also be replicated to examine the experiences of Black women in other sectors of the fashion industry. A subsequent longitudinal study would be useful in understanding the proposed conceptual model of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs' experiences.

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## APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL LETTER

**IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY**  
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board  
Office for Responsible Research  
Vice President for Research  
2420 Lincoln Way, Suite 202  
Ames, Iowa 50014  
515 294-4566

**Date:** 9/26/2016

**To:** Samii Kennedy Benson  
1082 Sardis Cove Rd.  
Charlotte, NC 28270

**CC:** Dr. Eulanda Sanders  
31 MacKay

**From:** Office for Responsible Research

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

**IRB ID:** 16-361

**Approval Date:** 9/26/2016      **Date for Continuing Review:** 9/5/2018

**Submission Type:** New      **Review Type:** Full Committee

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

- Use only the approved study materials in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.
- Retain signed informed consent documents for 3 years after the close of the study, when documented consent is required.
- Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes to the study by submitting a Modification Form for Non-Exempt Research or Amendment for Personnel Changes form, as necessary.
- Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.
- Stop all research activity if IRB approval lapses, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is reestablished.
- Complete a new continuing review form at least three to four weeks prior to the date for continuing review as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Please be aware that IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. Approval from other entities may also be needed. For example, access to data from private records (e.g. student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. IRB approval in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 202 Kingland, to officially close the project.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.

**APPENDIX B:  
PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT LETTER**

Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Samii Kennedy Benson and I am a doctoral candidate in the Apparel, Merchandising, and Design program at Iowa State University. My dissertation is entitled Black Fashion Designers Matter: A Qualitative Study Exploring the Experiences of Black Female Fashion Designers.

The 2015 state of women-owned businesses report commissioned by American Express Open listed Black women as the fastest growing group of business owners. Today this group owns an estimated 1.9 million businesses in the U.S. and 61% of all Black owned businesses. Despite these accomplishments, Black female entrepreneurs are still under-researched especially in regards to business ownership within the fashion industry.

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs by examining how they launched, financed and successfully maintained their businesses. As well as identify their professional characteristics, motivations and any racial or gender barriers they face as Black female entrepreneurs in the fashion industry. 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.

I am writing to request your participation in this research that will involve a brief demographic survey and a one-on-one interview lasting 1 to 2 hours. To better accommodate you and your schedule, I would be willing to come to your place of business or find a convenient location where we can talk. You also have the option to participate in an interview via phone or videoconference. If you agree, your face-to-face interview will be video recorded. Videos may be included in study results that will be shared. To qualify for this study you must be a female fashion design entrepreneur who is at least 18 years old and identifies as Black or African American.

I am also asking that you meet 3 out of the following criteria:

1. Has completed a fashion design education program (certificate or degree)
2. Designs and produces a line at least twice a year
3. Participates in at least two fashion shows a year
4. Relies on your fashion design business as your primary source of income
5. Has been in business for at least five years.

If you prefer, steps will be taken to protect your confidentiality. However, I hope you will allow me to use your name and include photos of your designs and/or workspace in the results of this study. I would like this research to be a platform to highlight you and your work as a Black female fashion designer. Not only will your knowledge and perspectives regarding fashion design and entrepreneurship greatly enhance this study but I hope that your participation will also allow others to understand and appreciate your contributions to the field of fashion.


If you are interested in participating, please respond to this email or contact me by phone at [REDACTED] no later than July 15, 2017. If you have additional questions to ask prior to making a decision, feel free to contact me. Also, if you know of someone one else who fits the criteria and would also be interested in participating in this study please do not hesitate to refer them to me. I would be happy to personally extend a request for their participation

Thanks so much! I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,  
Samii Kennedy Benson



**APPENDIX C:  
PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT FLYER**



**#Black Fashion Designers Matter**

**A Qualitative Study Exploring the Experiences of Black Female Fashion Design Entrepreneurs**

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs by examining how they launched, financed and successfully maintained their businesses. As well as identify their professional characteristics, motivations and any racial or gender barriers they face as Black female entrepreneurs in the fashion industry.

To qualify for this study you must be a female fashion design entrepreneur, at least 18 years old and identify as Black or African American.

**Participants should also meet at least 3 of the following requirements:**

- Have completed a fashion design certificate or degree program
- Design & produce a line at least twice a year
- Participate in at least two fashion shows a year
- Rely on their fashion design business as their primary source of income
- Have been in business for at least 5 years

**Participants will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview lasting 1 to 2 hours**

To participate or for more information, please contact Samii Kennedy Benson via Email at [samii@astate.edu](mailto:samii@astate.edu) or By Phone at [REDACTED]

## APPENDIX D PHONE SCRIPT TO OBTAIN INFORMED CONSENT

Hello [name of potential participant],

My name is Samii Benson. I'm a doctoral candidate in the Apparel, Merchandising, and Design program at Iowa State University. I am conducting research on Black female fashion designers for my dissertation entitled: *Black Fashion Designers Matter: A Qualitative Study Exploring the Experiences of Black Female Fashion Design Entrepreneurs*. I received your email (or phone call, or online message) and I am following up to see if you would be interested in participating in this study.

To qualify for this study I am asking that you are a female fashion design entrepreneur who is at least 18 years old and identifies as Black or African American. I am also asking that you meet 3 out of the following criteria:

1. Has completed a fashion design education program (certificate or degree)
2. Designs and produces a line at least twice a year
3. Participates in at least two fashion shows a year
4. Relies on your fashion design business as your primary source of income
5. Has been in business for at least five years.

If you decided to participate you will be asked to first complete an informed consent form. After your signed informed consent form is received, I will call you to ask some screening questions and schedule your interview. During the interview session you will first be asked to fill out a brief demographic survey. Then you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview that should last from 1 to 2 hours. I would like to interview you in your workspace; however, we can decide on another quiet location that is convenient for you. If you are unable to participate in a face-to-face interview, you have the option to participate in an interview via phone or a video conference service such as Skype, Zoom or FaceTime.

During the interview you will be able to share your thoughts, experiences and opinions on fashion design, the fashion industry and entrepreneurship. You may be asked to show pictures or examples of your designs. If the interview is conducted in your workspace and if you agree, photographs of your designs and workspace will be taken and included in the results of the study. If you agree, your face-to-face interview will also be video recorded. Photos and videos will be included in study results that will be shared. Because of your standing within the fashion industry, I hope that you will also allow me to use your name in the analysis of the data. However, if you prefer, measures will be taken to maintain your confidentiality.

Do you have any questions about the study at this time?

Would you be interested in participating in this study?

Yes

No

[If No] Thank you for your time. If you change your mind, please feel free to contact me.

[If Yes] Great! I would like to send you a copy of the informed consent form for your review. Would you prefer to have the form emailed to you or sent via U.S. mail?

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing address: \_\_\_\_\_

After reviewing the informed consent form please return the informed consent form with your signature indicating your decision to participate in this study to me via email or U.S. mail:

Email address: samii@iastate.edu

Mailing address: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me. If you have any questions after this phone call please contact me via email or by phone at \_\_\_\_\_.

Enjoy the rest of your day!

**APPENDIX E:  
INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT**

**Consent Form for Black Fashion Designers Matter: A Qualitative Study Exploring the Experiences of Black Female Fashion Design Entrepreneurs**

This form describes a research project. It has information to help you decide whether or not you wish to participate. Research studies include people who choose to take part – your participation is completely voluntary. Please discuss any questions you have about the study or about this form with the project staff before deciding to participate.

**Who is conducting this study?**

This study is being conducted by Samii Kennedy Benson, Ph.D. candidate; Department of Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management at Iowa State University.

**What is the purpose of this study?**

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs by examining how they launched, financed and successfully maintain their business. As well as to identify their professional characteristics, motivations and any racial or gender barriers they face as Black female entrepreneurs in the fashion industry.

**Why am I invited to participate in this study?**

You are being asked to take part in this study because you are a female fashion design entrepreneur who identifies as Black or African American. In addition, you are being asked to participate because: you have received professional training in fashion design, you design and produce a line at least twice a year, you participate in at least two fashion shows a year, you have been in business for at least five years and you rely on their fashion design business as their primary source of income. You should not participate if you are under age 18.

**What will I be asked to do?**

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to share your thoughts, experiences and opinions pertaining to fashion design, the fashion industry and entrepreneurship. You will be asked to complete a brief demographic survey to answer questions regarding your age, ethnic background, area of residence, education and marital status. You may also be asked to show pictures or examples of your designs. If the interview is conducted in your workspace and if you agree, photographs of your designs and space will be taken. If you agree, your face-to-face interview will also be video recorded. The photographs and videos will be included in study results that will be shared. If you wish to maintain confidentiality, any identifying artifacts or distinguishable items in the photos will either be blurred or blacked out. If you are unable to participate in a face-to-face interview, you will have the option to participate in an interview via phone or video conference call.

Your participation will last for approximately 1-2 hours and will be audio or video recorded. Types of questions that you may be asked include, but are not limited to:

- What did you first realize you wanted to pursue a career as a fashion designer?
- What motivated you to become an entrepreneur?
- What role has your family played in your decision to become a fashion design entrepreneur?
- What barriers or challenges have you faced as a Black female fashion design entrepreneur?

In addition, if you agree to be re-contacted, you may also be asked for feedback about the researchers analysis of findings and conclusions. This process called member checking will allow you to check for accuracy of information, correct misinterpretations or fill omissions.

### **What are the possible risk or discomforts of my participation?**

The risks or discomforts related to your participation in this research are very minimal. While participating in this study you may experience possible discomfort at disclosing personal information during the interview. No names of people or organizations discussed in interviews will be reported in results, except yours, should you agree. In addition, any identifying details obtained during the course of an interview will be generalized to protect confidentiality. However, despite steps taken to minimize the risk, there is the possibility that something sensitive you say about a product or colleague might be attributable to you based on context. There could be some potential social and economic risks if some of your responses were deemed negative by others.

Following the interview, if you agree to be re-contacted, you will be provided with results and allowed to make corrections or remove any information that may be harmful to you or others.

### **What are the possible benefits of my participation?**

You may not receive any direct benefit from taking part in this study. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will fill a void in research pertaining to Black female fashion design entrepreneurs. This study will illuminate the unique characteristics, motivations, challenges, motivations, and opportunities of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs as well as clarify the success strategies employed by this particular group.

### **What alternatives do I have to participating in the research?**

If you are unable to participate in a face-to-face in-depth interview, you may consider participating in a telephone or video conference call as an alternative to an in person interview.

**How will the information I provide be used?**

The information you provide will be transcribed, reviewed, and coded by the investigator and used to complete research for a doctoral dissertation, potential conference presentations, and potential publication. If you agree, photographs of your designs and space will be taken and included in study results that will be shared. Video recorded interviews will also be included in study results that will be shared. If you wish to maintain confidentiality, any identifying artifacts or distinguishable items in the photos will either be blurred or blacked out. If you agree, your name will be linked with your responses. If you prefer, your identity will be confidential.

**What measures will be taken to ensure the confidentiality of the data or to protect my privacy?**

Because of your standing within the fashion industry, I hope that you will allow me to use your name in the analysis of the data. If you prefer to remain anonymous, records identifying you will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by applicable laws and regulations. Records will not be made publically available. However, federal government regulatory agencies auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the ISU Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies with human subjects) may inspect and/or copy study records for quality assurance and analysis. These records may contain private information.

If you prefer confidentiality, the following measures will be taken for published reports of the study:

- Participant's names will be known only to the investigators of this study.
- Participants will be assigned or asked to choose a pseudonym.
- Any identifying details obtained during the course of an interview will be generalized to protect confidentiality.
- All electronic data gathered will be kept in a password-protected computer file.
- All physical data will be kept in a locked file cabinet.
- All information will be destroyed upon the completion of the study.

The member check procedure will allow you the opportunity to redact any information you consider too private or sensitive. However despite steps taken to minimize this, it is possible that someone familiar with the industry may be able to infer your identity based on a combination of information.

**Will I incur any cost from participating or will I be compensated?**

You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

### What are my rights as a human subject participant?

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part in the study or stop participating at any time, for any reason, without penalty or negative consequences. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer. If you permit your name to be linked with your answers, you may change your mind at any point, and your confidentiality will be protected.

If you have any questions *about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury*, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, [IRB@iastate.edu](mailto:IRB@iastate.edu), or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office of Responsible Research, 2420 Kingland Building, Suite 202, Iowa State University, Ames Iowa 50011.

### Whom can I call if I have questions about the study?

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study. For further information, please contact Samii Kennedy Benson by phone at [REDACTED] or via email at [samii@iastate.edu](mailto:samii@iastate.edu) or supervisor Eulanda A. Sanders by phone at [REDACTED] or via email at [sanderse@iastate.edu](mailto:sanderse@iastate.edu).

### Consent and Authorization Provisions

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, that your questions have been satisfactorily answered, that you have decided whether to allow the use of your name in published reports, and whether to allow photographs of your work and/or workspace in published reports. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

### Please check yes or no to the following authorizations:

I allow the use of my name. **Yes** \_\_\_\_\_ **No** \_\_\_\_\_

I allow photographs of my work and/or workspace. **Yes** \_\_\_\_\_ **No** \_\_\_\_\_

I allow video recording of my face-to-face interview. **Yes** \_\_\_\_\_ **No** \_\_\_\_\_

**Participant's Name** (printed) \_\_\_\_\_

**Participant's Signature** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX F:  
PHONE SCRIPT TO SCHEDULE AN INTERVIEW**

Hello [name of potential participant],

This is Samii Benson. As you know, I am a doctoral candidate in the Apparel, Merchandising, and Design program at Iowa State University conducting research on Black female fashion designers for my dissertation entitled: *Black Fashion Designers Matter: A Qualitative Study Exploring the Experiences of Black Female Fashion Design Entrepreneur's*. I have received your signed informed consent form and I am following up regarding your participation in this study.

First I would like to ask you a few screening questions to confirm that you meet the study criteria:

Are you a female fashion design entrepreneur?

Yes  
 No

Are you at least 18 years old?

Yes  
 No

Do you identify as Black or African American?

Yes  
 No

Have you completed or a fashion design education program? (certificate or degree)

Yes  
 No

Do you design and produce a line at least twice a year?

Yes  
 No

Do you participate in at least two fashion shows a year?

Yes  
 No

Is your fashion design business your primary source of income?

Yes  
 No

Have you been in business for at least five years?

Yes  
 No



Do you have any questions about the study at this time?

Would you like to go ahead and schedule your interview date, time and location?

Yes

No

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me. I look forward to our interview. I will also give you a reminder notice three days before our scheduled interview to confirm your participation. If you have any questions in the meantime or you need to reschedule your appointment please contact me via email at [samii@iastste.edu](mailto:samii@iastste.edu) or contact me by phone at [REDACTED].

Enjoy the rest of your day!

**APPENDIX G:  
DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY**

**What is your age?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Please check the race/ethnicity you most identify with:**

- \_\_\_\_\_ Black  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Black American  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Afro-American/ African American  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Afro-Caribbean/ African Caribbean  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Afro-Hispanic/ Black Hispanic  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Afro-Latino  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Marital Status:**

- \_\_\_\_\_ Single/Never Married  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Single/Divorced  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Married  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Domestic Partnership (not married)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Widowed

**Do you have children?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Please write the city and state where you reside:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Please check the last degree or education completed:**

- \_\_\_\_\_ High School  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Some College  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Certificate of Completion  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Associate's Degree  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Bachelor's Degree  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Doctorate  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

**How long has your business been in operation?** \_\_\_\_\_

**How do you sell your designs?** (please check all that apply)

- \_\_\_\_\_ I sell my designs through my own independent brick and mortar Location(s)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ I sell my designs through my own independent online store  
 \_\_\_\_\_ I sell my designs to small retailers and boutiques  
 \_\_\_\_\_ I sell my designs to major retailers and department stores  
 \_\_\_\_\_ I sell my designs to small online retailers  
 \_\_\_\_\_ I sell my designs to major online retailers  
 \_\_\_\_\_ I sell my designs wholesale  
 \_\_\_\_\_ I sell my designs at trunk shows  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

**How many lines do you produce a year?** \_\_\_\_\_

**How many fashion shows do you participate in a year?** \_\_\_\_\_

**How many employees do you have?** \_\_\_\_\_

**What is the average annual revenue of your business?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Is your fashion design business your primary source of income?** \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX H: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### (1) Greeting

- HI, \_\_\_\_\_! How are you? As you know, I'm a doctoral candidate and I am conducting research on Black female fashion designers for my dissertation entitled: *Black Fashion Designers Matter: A Qualitative Study Exploring the Experiences of Black Female Fashion Design Entrepreneurs*. Thank you so much for in participating in this study!
- During the interview I will ask you questions regarding your thoughts, experiences and opinions on fashion design, the fashion industry and entrepreneurship. You may be asked to show pictures or examples of your designs.
- First I would like to test the equipment. Please state your first and last name

### (2) Opening Questions

- Describe when you first realize you wanted to become a fashion designer?
  - When did you first start sewing and/or designing?
- Who influenced you to become a fashion designer?
- Where did you grow up? Did growing up here influence or affect your decision to become a fashion designer?

### (3) Questions related to Objective 1:

*Identify the characteristics, personality traits, background, education and life experiences of Black female fashion design entrepreneurs.*

- What personal characteristics do you have that make you a successful fashion design entrepreneur?
- Do you possess any characteristics specifically related to being a black female that make you a successful fashion design entrepreneur? If so, what are they?
- How do you think these characteristics have contributed to your success?
- Describe your formal educational experiences related to fashion design.

- Informal experiences?
- What design skills are you trained in?
  - Draping, sketching, ect.?
  - Technical skills such as computer aided design?
- What is your design process?
  - Where do you get inspiration for your designs?
- What makes your garments unique?
- Can you describe your design style?
  - Is there a particular time period or culture that you are drawn to?
  - What types of fabric do you like to work with?
  - What types of design and/or sewing techniques do you prefer to use?
  - Can you show examples of some of your designs?
- Does your race and/or ethnic background affect your design esthetic in anyway?
- When and where do you like to create?
  - Can you show me your design space?
- Describe your formal educational experiences related to entrepreneurship.
  - Informal experiences
  - How have these experiences helped you in your entrepreneurial endeavors?
- Do have a mentor or mentors that have helped you in your fashion or entrepreneurial endeavors?
- If yes, describe this relationship.
- Do you have female mentors?
- Do you have Black mentors?

- Is it important to you to have female and/or Black entrepreneurs as mentors and examples of successful entrepreneurs? Why or why not?

**(4) Questions related to Objective 2:**

*Understand the barriers and challenges faced by Black female fashion design entrepreneurs in regards to the intersections of race, class, gender, geographic location and other factors.*

- When did you start your business?
- What barriers did you face in the start-up phase of your business?
  - Are any of these barriers specially related to you being a black female entrepreneur?
- What is the most challenging task you have faced as a fashion design entrepreneur?
  - How did you overcome this challenge?
- Do you currently face challenges as a fashion design entrepreneur?
- Do Black female fashion design entrepreneurs face different challenges than other fashion design entrepreneurs?

**(5) Questions related to Objective 3:**

*Determine if the motivational factors for starting and maintaining a business among black female fashion design entrepreneurs relate to Black feminist thought, cultural theory of entrepreneurship, disadvantage theory and/or protected market theory.*

- Describe when you first realized you wanted to become an entrepreneur.
  - What was your first entrepreneurial experience?
- When did you first think about starting your own design business?

- Describe the event that “triggered” your initial start-up activity.
- What were your goals for your business when you first started?
- How did you feel when you actually opened your business?
- How do you sell and market your designs?
  - Do you use social media?
- What has motivated you to continue running your business throughout the years?

**(6) Questions related to Objective 4:**

*Determine if Black female fashion design entrepreneurs define and measure success in accordance to Black feminist thought, cultural theory of entrepreneurship, disadvantage theory and/or protected market theory.*

- What is your definition of success?
- As a black woman, do you think that you view success differently than your counterparts?
- When did you consider yourself a success?
- What is the one thing you feel most contributed to your success?
- In your opinion what are the best things about your business? (product, service, customer service, profits, community service, etc.)
- What are some of your current goals for your business?
- What advice would you give to up and coming fashion design entrepreneurs?
- Do you think it is important to mentor up and coming black female fashion design entrepreneurs?
  - If so, how do you currently mentor up and coming black female fashion design entrepreneurs?

**(7) Questions related to Objective 5:**

*Identify resources and educational opportunities that will benefit current and future*

*Black female fashion design entrepreneurs.*

- Are you a member of any professional or social business groups or organizations?
  - If yes, what are they and what are their purposes?
  - How often do you meet with them?
  - If no, what are your reasons for not being a part of a group or organization?
- Describe how you feel membership in these groups has been helpful in your business development.
- Which groups are most helpful to you and your business?
- Do you think it is important to hold membership in organizations specially focused on black female entrepreneurs or those focused on fashion design entrepreneurs?
- Do you take advantage of any resources or educational opportunities available?

Thank you for the interview, do you have any other comments about your path and career as a Black female fashion designer that you want to share?

May I contact you for follow-up questions as I analyze my data?

Thank you.



## APPENDIX I: CODING GUIDE

### SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

- **Family Influence**
  - Lineage of fashionistas
    - Well dressed women
    - Legacy of modistes
    - Passing down of skills
  - Entrepreneurial tradition
  - Parental Influence
    - Influence on dress
    - Influence on character
  - Motherhood
  
- **Circle of Support**
  - Emotional support
  - Instrumental support
  - Informational support
  - Appraisal support
  
- **School Environment**
  - Influential instructors
  - Fashion/home economics class
  
- **Community Influence**
  - Disadvantaged neighborhood
  - Emerging cities
  - Fashion capitals
  
- **Travel Experience**
  - Traveling at a young age
  - International travel
  
- **Culture of Fashion**
  - Famous fashion designers
  - Fashion on film

### CHARACTERISTICS AND PERSONALITY TRAITS

- **Knowledge Seeker**
  - Self-taught learner
    - Innate creative sense
    - Researcher
    - Jane of all trades

- Life-long learner
  - Formal training
  - Opposition to formal training
  - Merging disciplines
  - Continuing education
    - Professional development
    - Graduate school
- Humble student
  - Learning from others
    - Taking notes
    - Asking for help
    - Mentorship
  - Accepting criticism
  - Practicing
- **Sharing Knowledge**
  - Mentoring
  - Coaching
- **Knowledge of Self**
  - Staying true to yourself
  - Knowing your niche
  - Embracing your culture
  - Spiritually grounded
    - Fashion as a ministry
- **Entrepreneurial Mindset**
  - Entrepreneurial traits
    - Time management
    - Organization
    - Preparation
  - Young entrepreneur
  - Accidental entrepreneur
  - Serial entrepreneur

## **BUSINESS CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES**

- **Business Challenges**
  - Managing finances
    - Purchasing and procurement
    - Pricing and profitability
  - Industry Relationships
    - Relationships with other designers
    - Relationships with industry professionals

- **Facing Adversity**
  - Dealing with discrimination
    - Racial discrimination
    - Gender discrimination
    - Overcoming discrimination
  - Personal hardships
  
- **Growth Factors**
  - Hiring a team
  - Brick and Mortar
  - Manufacturing
    - In house vs. outsourcing
  - Wholesaling
  
- **Business Strategies**
  - Restructuring
  - Creating systems
  - Branding
  - Marketing
  - Networking
  - Utilizing resources
  
- **Success Factors**
  - Forming an advisory Board
  - Finding a business coach
  - Defining Success
  
- **Giving Back**
  - Non-profit organizations
  - Uplifting the race

**APPENDIX J:  
DESIGNER PROFILES**

**Shonda Ali-Shamaa**  
Love R.O.C.S.

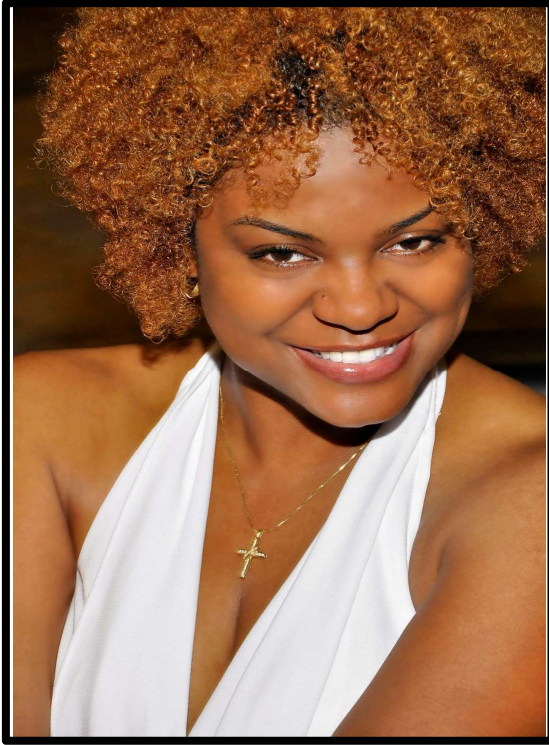


Shonda named her fashion label, **Love R.O.C.S.** with her family in mind, using the first initials of each member's name; RahShonda (her daughter), Omar (her husband), Chris (her son), and her own to create the acronym. The clothing line offers timeless wardrobe pieces for "strong, powerful women." It's for the woman who is "not loud but you notice her when she walks through the door."

Shonda's love for fashion was realized early in life. As a young girl she watched her mother sew and was inspired to create original designs for her Barbie dolls using the fabric scraps left over from her mother's projects. In 2012 Shonda revisited her childhood dream and enrolled in the Jamileh Kamran School of Fashion Design (later renamed the Arkansas School of Fashion). There she received the skills and support she needed to make her dream of becoming a fashion designer a reality.

In 2013, Shonda debuted her clothing line at the 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Designers Choice Fashion Preview, a charity event held in Little Rock, Arkansas to benefit the Timmons Arts Foundation. That same year, Love R.O.C.S was presented at Little Rock Fashion Week where it earned the distinction of Clothing Line of the Year. Since the launch of her clothing line, Shonda has participated in numerous runway shows including New York Fashion Week. As a native of North Little Rock, Arkansas, Shonda is dedicated to supporting charities in her community as well including Big Brothers Big Sisters , The Glass Slipper Closet and ALS in Wonderland.

**Nikki Blaine**  
Nikki Blaine Couture

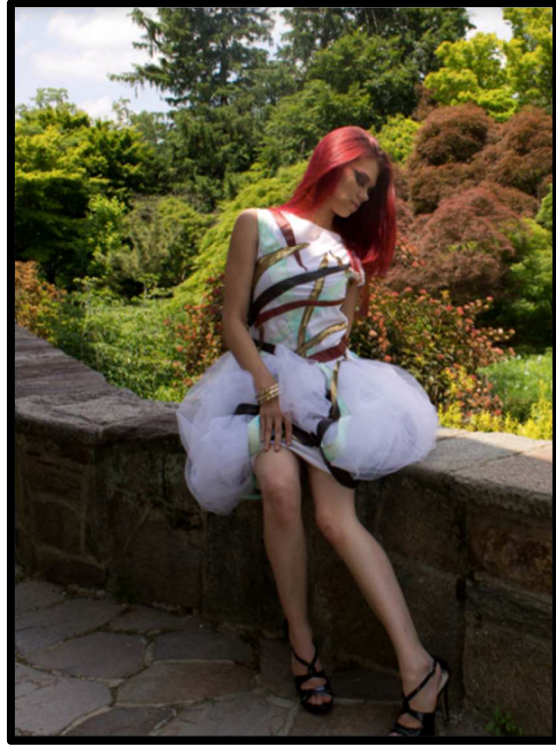


Nikki is the owner of **Nikki Blaine Couture**, a boutique located in Zionsville, Indiana. She also operates a studio in the Circle City Industrial Complex in downtown Indianapolis and teaches fashion merchandising courses at Harrison College. Nikki coined the term “Glam Chic” to describe her high-end, trendy yet effortless, couture fashion line. Her garments have graced Hollywood celebrities including Niecy Nash, Jenna Fredrique and Loretta Devine and have been shown on runways all over the country including New York Fashion Week.

After college Nikki worked as an accountant for several years, while also pursuing her passion for design on the side and making a name for herself in Indianapolis’ burgeoning fashion scene. Nikki resigned from her accounting position in 2006 with the intentions of running her couture fashion business fulltime. Unfortunately, the same week she turned in her resignation letter, her mother was diagnosed with heart disease; Nikki’s mother later underwent a heart transplant in 2009.

Nikki is adamant about supporting charities and fundraisers especially those that benefit research for heart disease. In 2014 she created an all red collection for the Fashion A “wear”ness fashion show which took place at the 26<sup>th</sup> annual Meet the Artist gala held at the Central library in Indianapolis. In addition, Nikki always ends her fashions shows with something red to show her support for the American Heart Associations social initiative, Go Red For Women.

**Janeen Brown**  
Sobiu



**Janeen Brown** is the designer of the custom clothing label, Sobiu, pronounced So-Be-You. At the age of four, Janeen began to show signs of her natural gift for fashion design. She credits her mother and her paternal grandmother for teaching her how to sew at a young age.

Janeen worked in fashion retail management for several years, where she gained invaluable experience that she would later employ as a fashion design entrepreneur. Two life events led her to finally turn her talent into a business: becoming a mother to two of her three daughters and feeling that she was never able to spend enough time with them and the death of her father, who had a big influence on her outlook on life. Janeen was inspired by the way her father, who was an electrician, lived life on his own terms by choosing to do the work he loved everyday, even after he had become ill. Subsequently, after his death in 2009, she resigned from her retail management position and began to design fulltime.

Janeen considers herself a “fashion architect” as she is heavily inspired by architecture and symmetry and is inclined to incorporate both elements into her designs. She also considers her craft to be her ministry and she hopes to inspire others to be their best and empower them to follow their own passions in life. Her ministry is reflected in her company’s mission, “Be a Beacon”, which means to be a light for others.

**Naika Colas**  
Jacques Louis JLC



Eco-fashion designer, **Naika Colas**, is the CEO of Jacques Louis JLC, a New York City based fashion brand, dedicated to sustainable clothing. Naika cites her Haitian heritage and her mother’s tailored, Caribbean style of dress for influencing her interest in fashion. Although she majored in Biology as an undergraduate at Fairleigh Dickinson University, fashion was always something that she enjoyed and wanted to know more about.

Naika began to design her own clothing after taking continuing education classes at the Fashion Institute of Technology. She soon realized that she could make a career out of fashion design when people began to offer to pay her to make garments for them. Her dilemma however, was how to tie in fashion with her biology background. Naika’s current position as an outreach specialist for the Bureau of Recycling and Sustainability lead her to envision an innovative solution: sustainable fashion.

Her new “Haitian Girls Pop” fashion collection, sponsored by Pratt Institute’s Graduate Student Engagement Fund, works to empower young Haitian women who are unable to receive proper schooling due to the financial burden it places on their families. The fabric used for the collection is produced from recycle plastic bottles collected from the streets of Port-au-Prince, Haiti which helps to combat the waste management crisis in the nation’s capital.



**Vanessa Donnelly**  
Zenobian Moxis, LLC



**Vanessa Donnelly** is a Liberian American fashion designer and the CEO of the quickly rising fashion label, Zenobian Moxis. She is also the mother of two and the wife of well-known musician and producer THA RIFT of the rap group Free Wifi. In addition to balancing her life as a wife and mother, Vanessa finds time to create designs for her fashion brand, which she describes as a mix between high-end, bohemian and African styles.

Vanessa was inspired by her cultural heritage in naming her fashion label. The name came into play when the designer took her first name, which means butterfly in Greek and the names of two different African butterflies. And thus, Zenobian Moxis was born.

Although based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Vanessa has plans to make her label available worldwide. Currently her garments are available online via [ZenobiaMoxis.com](http://ZenobiaMoxis.com), at her showroom located in Los Angeles, California and through the pop-up shops that she hosts regularly in Minneapolis and in other cities. Recently, Zenobian Moxis was featured at Minneapolis St. Paul Magazine's 2017 annual fashion show, "Fashionopolis." In addition, the label held its first solo fashion show, "A Night Amongst The Butterflies" on Saturday, August 12, 2017. Vanessa continues to travel the country to promote her growing fashion brand.

## Yamaia Faye

Yamaia Faye Lifestyle Brands



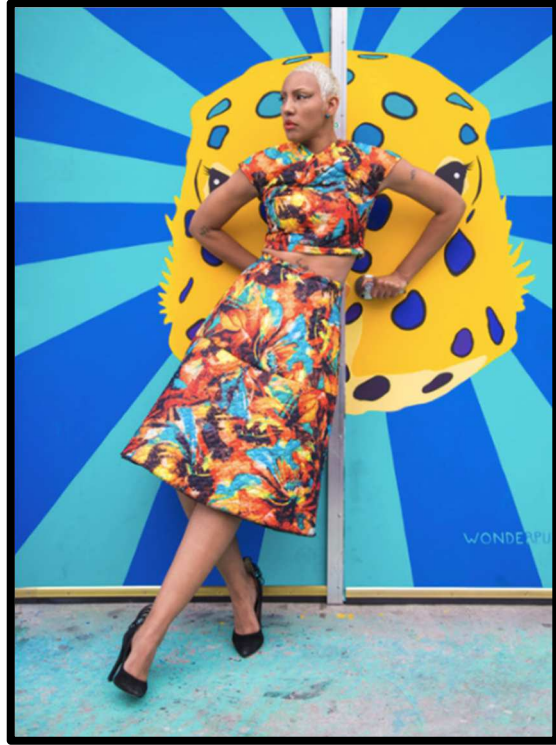
**Yamaia Faye** is a fashion industry entrepreneur who runs the multifaceted fashion and image empire, Yamaia Faye Lifestyle Brands. She is also a former international fashion model and image consultant. It is her aim to share her creativity, knowledge and experience with others.

Growing up, Yamaia lived in numerous cities across the U.S. including Hawaii, Washington D.C., New York and Chicago. She has also lived abroad in Milan, Italy and Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Yamaia's culturally diverse upbringing prepared her for international success as a fashion model working for the likes of Michael Costello and Versace.

Currently, Yamaia lives in Mirabella, Spain with her daughter, where she operates her fashion design and lifestyle studio. Yamaia personally oversees every part of her business including designing couture collections, organizing YLUXXX Brand tours, providing expert advice to individuals, businesses and through TRE radio. She is also a passionate public speaker focused on empowering women in creating their own identity for their life.

## LaToya Flood

LaToya B. Flood Design



**LaToya Flood** is the designer and CEO of LaToya B. Flood Design. She began her career at the Westchester BOCES or Board of Cooperative Education Services. BOCES is a program created by the New York state legislature to provide school districts with shared educational services. LaToya's final project for her BOCES program, creating her own clothing boutique, inspired her passion to start her own fashion business.

After graduating from New Rochelle High School and the BOCES program with a fashion design certificate in 2006, LaToya went on to continue her fashion design studies at the Art Institute of New York City. LaToya is currently pursuing a Bachelor's degree in business administration and she has plans to continue her education in the business field.

LaToya has many years of experience designing evening gowns, sweet sixteen dresses and custom garments for dance groups. On February 13, 2016 the designer LaToya B. Flood debuted her fashion line during New York Fashion Week. LaToya stated that the inspiration for her debut collection was to bring color to winter. LaToya B. Flood Designs are available at [latoyabflllo.com](http://latoyabflllo.com).

**Victoria Jackson**  
Victoria Jackson Designs



Fashion and costume designer, **Victoria Violet Jackson** is the mother of three sons and a 13 year veteran of the United States Army. Her love for art, fashion and sewing started at the age of six growing up watching her mother her grandmothers hand sewing strips and squares of fabric together to create traditional quilts. The knowledge and skills she received from her mother and grandparents were enhanced by the home economics courses in costume design and textile science that she took in high school.

While Station overseas in SHAPE, Belgium, Victoria traveled to Paris where she worked in the house of Coco Chanel. In addition to threading needles, sweeping the floor, and running errands, Victoria learned the art of couture from the master seamstresses. After her military career, Victoria studied fashion design and merchandising at Clark Atlanta University. As a college student, she started her own business making and beading bridal gowns and bridesmaids dresses.

Now residing in Baltimore, Maryland Victoria is an adjunct professor teaching textile science, fashion illustration, and apparel construction. She also works with the Church of God In Christ and their International Mission Department in making mission dresses for those in need. In addition, Victoria is a costume designer, wardrobe and stage manager for various community theaters in the DMV area. Her next journey will include earning a Master's and PhD. in Textile Engineering from the University of Georgia.

**Merline Labissiere**  
Labissiere, Inc.



Haitian-American, Miami based designer, **Merline Labissiere** is the CEO of Labissiere, Inc. Merline designs specifically with the working, creative woman in mind. Her pieces are inspired by her Haitian ancestry and affinity for architecture. As a designer, Merline says that her strengths are that she is very conceptual and that she tends to think outside of the box in terms of her design aesthetic and the colors that she chooses.

Merline fell in love with the idea of combining architecture and fashion at a young age. The designer has an associate's degree in architecture as well as a degree in fashion design from the Savanna College of Art and Design. Merline was also a contestant on Lifetime's Project Runway season 14 where she finished in fifth place. Her experience on Project Runway afforded her the opportunity to design a winning look that was manufactured and sold nationwide for Heidi Klum's intimate apparel line.

Along with her passion for fashion, Merline has started a non-profit organization, Provoke Style Fashion Camp, dedicated to teaching fashion to inner city youth. The mission of the non-profit is to provoke style in the hearts of the next generation in order to dream beyond today. Since its inception in 2014, Merline has partnered with several organizations and schools to reach students who would otherwise not have the opportunity to engage with the arts.

**Diane Linston**  
Styles of Imagination, LLC

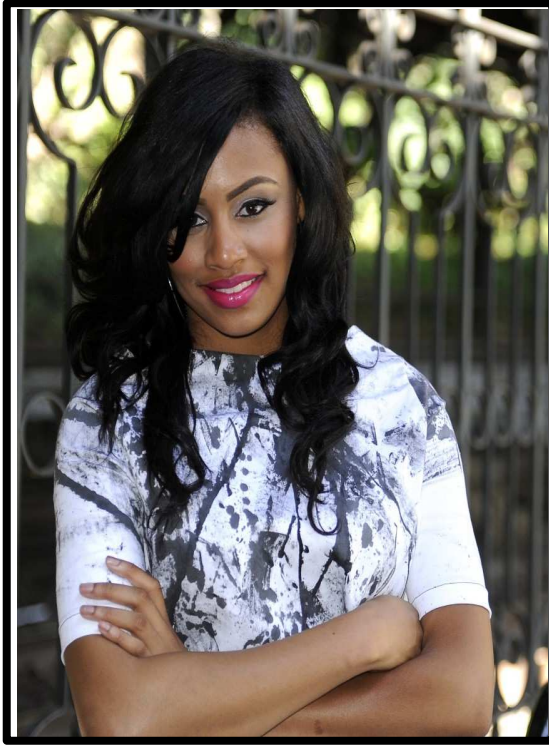


Maple Heights, Ohio based fashion designer, **Diane Linston**, is the CEO of Style of Imagination, LLC. Diane's signature label is N.G.U., which stands for Never Give Up. "Never Give Up" has been Diane's rallying cry throughout her pursuit of becoming a high-fashion designer. She states, "My dreams are more than just being a fashion designer," states Diane, "It's a dream come true for me. My career has not been easy; I have learned everything about fashion the hard way and I never gave up on my dreams, hence N.G.U. was born!"

Diane has been featured in more than 20 magazines, nationally and internationally including the September 2013 issue of Today's Black Women. Diane has participated in New York and Washington DC Fashion-week. Her collections have garnered national attention and have provided her with the opportunity to work with local and national celebrities.

On June 1, 2015 Diane opened her showroom own showroom in Cleveland Ohio. Diane is the only Black woman in the state of Ohio that owns an apparel manufacturing company. The N.G.U. collection is available online via [stylesofimagination.com](http://stylesofimagination.com) and can be seen in more than 50 stores across the United States.

**Jordan Matthews**  
Jordan Matthews Designs



Born and bred in Baltimore City, **Jordan Matthews** continues to blur the lines between art and fashion. Having been interested in visual and performing arts at a very young age, Jordan continues to use all of her skills in her work today. During her time at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), Jordan began as a Photography major, but quickly switched to Fibers because she needed a challenge.

At MICA Jordan became well versed in the art of surface design, screen-printing, costume and garment design and pattern making. She cites pop art as her inspiration, especially by artist such as Andy Warhol and Keith Haring. Jordan first debuted her hand painted garments, Swank, at her senior thesis show in 2013.

Upon graduating in 2014, Jordan continued to pursue making a name for herself and her eye catching designs. She was named Fashion Designer of the year in 2014 by RAW Baltimore. She has designed for celebrities such as, Elle Varner, King Los, Natalie "The Floacist" Stewart and Lola Monroe. Jordan continues to live and work in Baltimore where her designs can be found at Entropy Ink & Boutique and online via [Jordan-matthews.com](http://Jordan-matthews.com).

**Shernone Moussignac**  
SM88, LLC



**Shernone Moussignac** is the artist and graphic designer and fashion designer of the eco-conscious brand, SM88, LCC established in 2008. The Atlanta based brand features original clothing, one-of-a-kind accessories and hand-made jewelry. SM88 has many cultural inspirations and influences that reflect Shernone's Haitian heritage.

LXXXVII (88) APPAREL is a trademark of SM88, LLC. This line features eco-friendly graphic tees, clothing and accessories. Shernome creates these pieces with the modern day hipster, chic tomboy and the eco-conscious trendsetter in mind. The motto for SM88 reads, "You are aware of self and proud of what you put on. You make a statement without saying a word and above all you never strive to fit in."

In designing her pieces, Shernome makes a conscious effort to use eco-friendly materials and business practices that will not affect the brand or its products in anyway. She is also dedicated to making her designs affordable and accessible to everyone. SM88 and LXXXVII (88) Apparel are available online via [sm88online.com](http://sm88online.com).



**Linda Rowe Thomas**  
Romás by Linda Rowe Thomas



Linda Rowe Thomas is the designer behind the Romás fashion label. Since its debut in 2010, the custom couture brand has quickly become known for its haute couture eveningwear, tailored fit and elegant style. In keeping with its motto, “Timeless Classics with Contemporary Style,” the brand embodies elegance and sophistication.

Linda is also an author, inspirational keynote speaker and philanthropist. Her non-profit organization, Designing Hope, is dedicated to raising money to benefit burn centers at hospitals across the country. As a burn survivor, she uses her adversities to inspire others. At the age of two, Linda survived a house fire, which left her with facial scarring and without fingers on her left hand. Despite this impediment, she maintains impeccable quality with each stitch and to this day she still sews each garment by hand.

Linda has showcased her fashion line at over 10 fashion weeks around the world. In addition, She is the first and only burn survivor to showcase on the Mercedes Benz New York fashion week platform. She has designed for numerous celebrities including notable actresses, singers and professional athletes and has been featured in several prominent magazines. In addition, Linda owns the only production house and designer showroom in the state of Arkansas.

**Raquel M. R. Thomas**  
DMR Fashion



**Raquel Michelle Richardson Thomas** is the CEO and Owner of six thriving businesses, including DMR Fashion and women's and men's clothing brand that combines fashion with a positive message and a movement. DMR stands for Definitive Movement Rebellion. DMR **Fashion** is more than a brand it's a declaration of self-expression, which encourages and promotes the freedom of being your truest self.

The Columbia, SC native decided while just a child that despite her circumstances, she would achieve her goals and change lives in the process. After receiving her BA in Business Administration and Marketing from Virginia State University and Graduating from the University of Maryland with an MBA, she quickly began crafting her action plan to make her entrepreneurial goals realities.

Before her 28<sup>th</sup> birthday Raquel was the owner and CEO of two thriving companies, at 31 she notched two more successes on her business belt and today Raquel sits at the helm of several lucrative companies that include a Child Care and Learning Center, Museum Shop in the nation's capital, a Health Care Business and a Cleaning Company. This mother of two advises young entrepreneurs, to stay committed to their dreams and goals in spite of the often tedious and difficult work and to invest in themselves and never give up!

## Jessica Williams

### Irregular Exposure



**Jessica Williams** is the fashion designer and founder of the fashion brand Irregular Exposure. Irregular Exposure is a luxury women's ready-to-wear clothing line created for women full of style and grace. Jessica created the brand using New York street style as her primary inspiration. Since its debut in 2009 the brand has grown significantly.

Irregular exposure is sold in over 55 retailer, sells within it's own luxurious downtown Baltimore location and wholesales to over 1,000 venders worldwide. Jessica has created partnerships with BET, VH1 and has participated in numerous fashion shows including New York fashion week platforms. Irregular Exposure is quickly becoming a household name.

In addition to her fashion brand, Jessica started the Irregular Exposure Fashion Academy. The program was developed to assist future fashion business owners in making a smooth transition from employee to fashion entrepreneur. Available through a digital format, the program provides guidance to her clients that have a dream of owning a fashion business but need assistance with planning and in improving their business skill set.