

Fashion Entrepreneurs' Experiences of Hope in a Precarious Ghanaian Creative Industry

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ABSTRACT

This paper explored creative entrepreneurs' experiences of hope in navigating precarious working conditions in the Ghanaian fashion industry. The fashion and entrepreneurship scholarship acknowledges that several fashion entrepreneurs are 'hustling' to build and sustain their labels and brands in the face of difficulties. However, we discovered that rather than giving up, entrepreneurs must craft ways and develop strategies to make it in dire situations. Ghanaian fashion owners focus on and theorize the most prevalent practices of navigating, and managing compounded precarity: that of hope. Through a comparative and intersectional approach, we investigate the practices and narratives crafted by fashion entrepreneurs within challenging working conditions. This fact has implications for how we think about hope and entrepreneurship in the fashion industry in Ghana. By so doing, this study contributes to the ongoing conceptual debates regarding the nature of creative work in the fashion industry.

Keywords: Precarity, Hope, Fashion industry, Creative entrepreneurship, Ghana

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, there has been a surge in research studies that delve into the lived experiences of workers in response to the enduring restructuring impacts from the late 1970s and the fiscal austerity stemming from the global recession of 2008. These studies shed light on the profound political, social, and cultural implications of neoliberal structural dynamics (Alacovska, Langevang and Steedman, 2021; Gill and Donaghue, 2016; Langevang, Steedman, Alacovska, Resario, Kilu and Sanda, 2022; Mattoni, 2012; Johnson and Woodcock, 2017) on creative entrepreneurship especially in the global South. This line of research strongly emphasizes the need for a thorough examination of cultural and creative labor. This comprehensive critique aims to shed light on the working conditions within the realm of creative labor, challenging the prevalent tendency to downplay, disregard, and systematically suppress the experiences of many entrepreneurs in this domain (Alacovska and Gill in 2019 and De Beukelar in 2014). A deeper examination of the entrepreneurship literature uncovers a misguided notion that fosters

the misconception that creative entrepreneurs enjoy a comfortable lifestyle, often portrayed as a “rags to riches” narrative (Bengsch and Manias, 2019; McRobbie, 1998). Far from this, the reality in the creative arts sector is that of individual entrepreneurs contending with wave after wave of tumultuous work environments caused by precarity (Alacovska, 2018; Lee, 2018). The term precarity denotes labour rising from the loss of ‘good work’ as contingent on the systemic erosion of job security, labour protection and welfare provision (Scully, 2016; Standing, 2014; Waite, 2009). Even though, all sectors of the cultural and creative industries experience some level of precarity, it is the fashion industry that presents an illustrative example of precarity (McRobbie, 2022). Emerging research reveals that issues of precarity within the fashion industry have been intensified due to influx of substitute goods, second-hand clothing, lax governmental policies on import and export, as well as short-term relief support like bailouts (Banks and O’Connor, 2021; Comunian and England, 2020), and structural adjustment programmes of the global South (Aryeetey and Kanbur, 2017; Lamptey, 2017). However, rather than giving up, Ghanaian fashion entrepreneurs devise ways and means to succeed. Taking a comparative and intersectional approach, we explore both the practices and narratives that fashion entrepreneurs construct in such dire work conditions. This fact has implications for how we think about hope and entrepreneurship in the fashion industry. By so doing, this empirical paper contributes to the ongoing conceptual debates regarding the nature of work in the fashion industry. Specifically, the following questions guided this study: (i) What are entrepreneurs’ experiences of precarity in the Ghanaian fashion industry? (ii) How do entrepreneurs navigate compounded precarity of the Ghanaian fashion industry?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Precarious Work Situations in the Fashion Industry

The fashion industry, by which we mean designing, manufacturing and selling of fashion product, is one whose defining characteristics include uncertainty of demand, diversity of skills, infinite variety, a limited time in which any new product can be exploited, and massive market uncertainty (Brydges, 2017; McRobbie, 2022). Changes in the way fashion is created, manufactured and marketed generates uncertainty for entrepreneurs (Brydges, 2020). The fashion industry has become an illustrative case of post-Fordism economy (Bridges, 2018) defined by temporality, insecurity, uncertainty, ambiguity and ineffective labour regulation (Gill, 2002; Ross, 2008; McRobbie, 2016). In spite of the high levels of precarity, creatives continue to enter this space. Research has identified a range of mental rewards that entice people into creative work, such as the opportunity to aspire, live one’s passion, and the promise of ‘pay for play’ and ‘payment for doing what you love’ (Alacovska, 2018; Theime, 2018; McRobbie 2016). The question we ask ourselves is why do many creatives aspire to work in this industry when failure, insecurity, instability, uncertainty, and strife are defining features of creative work?

In this work, we offer a critique of the literature. We argue that some creative labour studies tend to chide creatives as being unwitting participants of their own exploitation (Duffy, 2017; McRobbie, 2016). These scholarships fail to account for the agency of creative workers and how most decide to rewrite the often-scripted captions of them as 'calculated dupes,' and 'wannabes' (Gill, 2002; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008). But rather we are inspired by research that examines how creatives maneuver precarity to build and sustain their businesses (Ashton, 2021; Warren, 2018). In this study, we illustrate how hope as a mode of work within the creative industries manifest itself as an entrepreneurial approach in dealing with a precarious present.

The Concept of Hope

Hope has been lauded by scholars of all times from nativism to empiricism says Desmond Tutu (Safri, 2016). Hope has garnered substantial attention in relation to topics such as health, poverty, academia, performance and sports (Cook et al., 2019; Onwuegbuezie and Snyder, 2000). Although the sciences, psychology and sociology disciplines have caught on the wave on the topic of hope in recent times, uptake of this concept has been comparatively uneven in business and management studies. The generality of the construct across fields and in different contexts of analysis - makes it important, as Alacovska et al., (2021) charges future researchers to examine hope in relation to precarious work as well as in different spatial contexts. We do so in the context of the fashion industry by conceptualizing hope by drawing on positive psychology, sociology of work and creative labour scholarship to explicate the practices of navigating the complexities and hardships of Ghana's fashion industry. It is here that hope leaves the perpetual 'limbo' and enters the domain of practice and action to re-enact the future achievement of the good, however, hazy and unobtainable, in the present (Alacovska et al., 2021). In this case, not only is entrepreneurial actions uncertain, yet hope is deployed to craft pathways even when the present does not entail a clear referent (Cook et al., 2019; Lamont, 2019). In this work, we expound entrepreneurs experiences of working under precarious working conditions and how they navigate precarious circumstances in the Ghanaian fashion industry by building and sustaining their labels.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach focused on capturing the subjective experiences of precarity and hope among entrepreneurs. This approach involved collecting data from 30 individuals engaged in fashion entrepreneurship in Ghana through in-depth interviews. We realized that even though we were studying fashion entrepreneurship from different regions, the entrepreneurial experiences and working practices of the fashion entrepreneurs were remarkably similar. Comparing these cases, we felt, this could lead to new understandings of how business owners maneuver the vicissitudes of the fashion landscape.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Experiences of Fashion Entrepreneurs Under Precarious Work Situations

All the entrepreneurs we interviewed expressed that the fashion industry is characterized by the absence of institutional support and financial challenges.

Lack of Institutional Support

Perhaps the most commonly identifiable conceptualization and exploration of precarity relates to the ways in which an industry lacks support from governmental agencies, educational institutions, industry associations, and regulatory bodies in shaping the environment in which its social actors operate. It is evident from the interviews how the absence of institutional support compounded the already existing precarious Ghanaian fashion industry. For instance, a male fashion entrepreneur based in Tamale who happens to be a vice president of one of the associations in Tamale had this to say:

Our primary challenge has consistently revolves around a lack of knowledge, particularly in the sewing and fashion industries. For instance, consider the apprentices here. Some of them are reluctant to embrace the conventional, longer learning process; they opt for shortcuts. One of the distressing aspects of this situation is the absence of institutional bodies overseeing and regulating our practices. We operate without checks and balance, essentially we do as we please. There are no standards of practice.

It can be deduced from the narrative that some workers in the industry are stuck in their ways and are not ready to pick up new challenges. This participant shared that; Ghana's fashion brands lacks what it takes to access global markets because of the limited skill sets. For this reason, it will be difficult for some local brands to expand their businesses into international markets when they do not meet the basic standards of sewing. The cause of this situation arises from the absence of institutions, both formal and informal (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), within the organizational sector of Ghana's fashion industry. This absence leads to various uncertainties experienced by social actors within the industry, specifically fashion entrepreneurs, ultimately resulting in a state of precarity. The concept of "precarity" in this context refers to the instability or precariousness that these entrepreneurs face due to the absence of supportive structures (Lewis, Dwyer and Waite, 2016; UNCTAD, 2017). This situation has a direct impact on fashion entrepreneurs, making their professional and financial situations unstable. They struggle with issues like financial insecurity, competition, market instability and difficulty in planning for the long term. Furthermore, it was discovered that a lack of financial support from institutions, such as government grants and loans for fashion startups, can stymie entrepreneurs' innovation and creativity. For example, a male fashion designer who also works as an emergency nurse at the Tamale Regional Teaching Hospital shared his concerns.

Additionally, when it comes to our workspace, there's a significant shortfall in funding, based on my personal experiences. This financial limitation has made it challenging for us to establish our workspace in accordance with the expected standards of a fashion house. We aspire to meet these standards, but it's difficult when most of our resources are directed towards our primary goals.

This narrative highlights that a lack of adequate financial support can lead to challenges in establishing a brand that is sustainable, which boils down to the absence of institutional support (McRobbie, 2016). In the context of the fashion industry, precarity often arises due to a lack of financial security and access to resources needed to meet industry standards and sustain a business (Deuze, 2012). In this context, the absence of institutional support contributes to the precarity experienced by fashion entrepreneurs who struggle to meet industry standards and invest in their workspace due to financial constraints. This can hinder their ability to compete, innovate, and grow in the fashion industry.

Sourcing for Funds

To thrive as independent labels rather than operate solely as artistic or leisure pursuits, business owners must establish stability across various facets, particularly in financial matters (Aakko et al., 2018). Without the availability of loans, grants, and additional forms of support, owner-managers might encounter challenges in meeting their operational needs. The absence of governmental financial support for fashion entrepreneurs in Ghana can pose a considerable obstacle for independent fashion labels seeking to enter or expand their presence in the fashion industry. When asked about her 15-year professional journey in Accra, she shared this insight.

In the beginning, the journey was incredibly challenging. However, I never allowed myself to succumb to the idea that I had no support and thus couldn't proceed. Instead, I started work in my room to the hall, when I needed to cut I will spread materials on the ground for cutting. I started small, and as I began to accumulate some funds, I crafted a basic table. Over time, my resources grew, allowing me to upgrade to a larger table and acquire a proper cutting table. During this period, I relied on a manual sewing machine, completely unaware of the existence of motorized options that could significantly expedite the work. It was only when I managed to save enough money that I purchased a motor and integrated it into my sewing machine. This change proved to be a game-changer, greatly enhancing productivity. The key to my success lay in a gradual process of reinvesting profits back into the business. As time passed, I continued to improve and save diligently. Through the grace of God and persistent efforts, I stand where I am today.

Her story resonates with the concept of bootstrapping, as this fashion entrepreneur opted for this challenging but resourceful path to nurture her fashion business. Bootstrapping, in her case, meant relying on her personal savings and the income generated by her business to fuel its expansion

(Ekenem, 2005). Faced with the obstacles of limited access to loans and a lack of external support, she remained undeterred. In her entrepreneurial spirit, she ingeniously navigated the prevailing challenges, finding innovative ways and means to make progress (Quaye and Acheampong, 2013; Chiles et al., 2007). Without financial support, fashion entrepreneurs struggle to bring their creative ideas to life. Entrepreneurs often need to be resourceful and make the most of what is available, relying on their creativity and innovation. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that fashion entrepreneurs in precarious geographies, may lack the infrastructure and resources needed to access loans and other facilities for their businesses. A male fashion entrepreneur who also holds a position at a bank and serves as a co-founder of a fashion brand in Kumasi offered insights into the challenges faced by small business owners when it comes to accessing loans.

When it comes to bank loans, as a business student, I've observed that obtaining one can be quite challenging. This is a prevalent issue in our country. Banks tend to be hesitant to lend to individuals with just ideas; they prefer businesses that are already established. It's not entirely unreasonable, considering the risks involved in lending to startups. Banks often prefer to provide loans for more substantial endeavors, and when you approach them for a small business loan, you may encounter difficulties. They typically encourage what's known as counter-funding loans. In this approach, you are required to save a certain amount of money with the bank, and they will then multiply it, often by a factor such as twice its value. However, they will charge you interest on your own funds, essentially providing you with a loan against your own savings. As a business student and someone involved in entrepreneurship, I believe that bank loans may not always be the most suitable option for businesses like ours.

From the narrative, it is evident that while loans can be a valuable source of capital for their business, they are not always ideal for small businesses, especially those that are not well established. Nonetheless, access to bank loans in general for small businesses, especially startups, indeed has been a significant challenge for Ghanaian fashion entrepreneurs. Another female fashion entrepreneur based in Tamale had this to share about the financial challenges for start-ups in the Northern region of Ghana.

If you leave, once you are done with tertiary education, what they are expecting is for you to work and bring something home. But for you to say you are starting a business and they pushing money again, they will ask you where do you want them to get the money from? You are on your own. In my case, I initially began this venture as a hobby during my school days and managed to build a small client base. As I transitioned it into a formal business, those same individuals became my customers. So, I started small and gradually expanded, without the need for a large sum of money upfront. It was more of a one-customer-at-a-time journey.

In this context, the interviewee described how she embarked on her entrepreneurial journey with a deliberate and step-by-step approach. Her

methodical approach involved reinvesting her business profits, primarily because there was no familial support available. Given her educational background and cultural norms, the prevailing expectation was that she would achieve independence and shoulder the responsibility of providing for her family independently. Several of these findings are also deliberated in earlier research studies (e.g., Kira, 2013; Aakko et al., 2018; Ekenme, 2005; Steedman et al., 2022). For instance, the problems highlighted concerning the challenge of sourcing for funds frequently intersect with the difficulties faced by businesses operating in precarious geographies and informal settings. There is no form of support at micro level (family/friends) or at the macro (banks, government units). Consequently, the study's findings encompass entrepreneurial strategies, particularly the profound role of hope that fashion entrepreneurs employ to navigate these challenging situations.

Navigating Compounded Precarity

Several factors underlie the instability of the Ghanaian fashion industry, encompassing factors such as relational ties, market volatility, limited skill diversity, and an excess of fashion products. Throughout our interviews, a prevailing sentiment emerged, indicating that the fashion industry was evolving and progressing until the onset of the pandemic. Despite the hurdles faced, these entrepreneurs remain steadfast in their belief that a more promising future awaits the industry. As an example, a Kumasi based female fashion entrepreneur shared how she managed to transform the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic into opportunities. While some of her peers decided to abandon their businesses, she persevered and discovered innovative ways to thrive amidst the pandemic.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, I temporarily left and returned. When I came back, I initially didn't focus on ready-to-wear garments. The demand for our regular work had slowed down, but then there was a surge in orders for bonnets and morning coats. Many people in the industry abandoned their work, assuming it was the end of the road. However, my commitment to the craft and my understanding of my clients' needs compelled me to adapt. I quickly shifted to sewing and selling morning coats, which not only brought in numerous orders but also revitalized our business. This experience taught me that diversifying with ready to wear items can help sustain my work. Above all, it reinforced the notion that if you're passionate about what you do, you'll find creative ways to keep it alive, regardless of the challenges that come your way.

This narrative highlights the significant role of hope in guiding fashion entrepreneurs as they navigate through challenging and unpredictable situations. In this instance, hope served as a guiding force, enabling the entrepreneur to discover strategies for surviving in uncertain times. She exhibited not only proactivity but also resourcefulness and innovation. In response, she explored various avenues to not only make ends meet but also enhance her income. The majority of our interviewees actively embraced and

engaged with hope, rather than passively waiting for unforeseen opportunities (Alacovska et al., 2020). In this context, hope took on the form of both an active endeavor and a mindset that empowered individuals to envision and create pathways toward their desired goals, aligning with the concept of hope as an action and a means of self-perception, as described by Snyder (2000). The determination of entrepreneurs to persist in the midst of precarious circumstances enabled them to envision a hopeful future within Ghana's fashion industry, even in challenging times. They adopted diverse approaches that reflected a resolute determination to take action despite the industry's inherent uncertainty and instability. For instance, one interviewee, who was both a fashion entrepreneur and a banker and a mother of two, passionately emphasized the importance of proactivity and maintaining hope despite formidable odds.

Striving and putting in diligent effort to reach a specific goal and connecting with certain clients is crucial. You must strive to achieve having a certain kind of clients. Mere hope without action leads to inaction and no progress. You can't be sitting there doing nothing. Nothing will happen without an action. Perseverance is key, as breakthroughs typically don't occur overnight. However, attending a single fashion show or presenting one outstanding collection could potentially pave the way for that long-awaited breakthrough.

Instead of being petrified in a space where uncertainty is pervasive and a long-standing feature (Waite, 2009), most entrepreneurs envisioned a life beyond the now. Thus, they devised tactics of action as aligned to the brute reality of long standing precarity, they found means and continually developed new subjectivities that enable them to maneuver the changing labour markets. Rather than remaining immobilized in an environment characterized by pervasive uncertainty, which has long been a defining characteristic (as described by Waite, 2009), the majority of entrepreneurs dared to imagine a future beyond the present. Consequently, they formulated strategies for proactive engagement that aligned with the enduring challenge of long-standing precarity. They sought out avenues and consistently cultivated new perspectives that allowed them to adapt to the shifting dynamics of the labor market. This aligns with prior scholarly investigations that have underscored the deliberate application of hope as a response to uncertainty within the creative sectors, (see Alacovska et al., 2020; Thieme et al., 2018; Lobato and Thomas, 2018).

DISCUSSION

Through thirty interviews conducted within three distinct entrepreneurial hubs in Ghana – Tamale, Kumasi, and Accra – we delved into the narratives of designers, seamstresses, dressmakers, and tailors as they navigate the entrepreneurial landscape within Ghana's fashion industry. Despite the geographical diversity, varying socio-economic backgrounds, and a wide array of experiences across these regions, our research uncovered striking similarities. These shared experiences provide a unique perspective on the challenges

and successes of fashion entrepreneurs in Ghana's unpredictable fashion sector, emphasizing the crucial role of hope in this context. In our analysis of entrepreneurship within the fashion industry, we posit that Ghanaian fashion entrepreneurs represent a notable example of precarious labour. When we consider the three entrepreneurial hubs investigated in our study, several characteristics of precarity become evident. These include the notable absence of robust institutional support and the considerable challenges associated with obtaining financial assistance. Our research revealed that fashion entrepreneurs faced various obstacles when they sought financial assistance, whether it was during the initial phases of their business or when they aimed to expand. This observation aligns with the findings of previous research in the field of creative industries and entrepreneurship, such as the work of Alacovska et al. (2020). Their study highlights how precarious labor conditions are prevalent in creative industries, where individuals often lack the institutional backing and resources needed to establish stable and secure businesses. Additionally, the limited access to financial assistance underscores the difficulties faced by Ghanaian fashion entrepreneurs in the three regions examined, which is a common challenge for entrepreneurs in emerging markets and creative sectors. This aligns with broader discussions on the challenges of financing entrepreneurial ventures in developing economies (e.g., Naudé and Amorós, 2013). The logic of this is that precarity is a hopeful place in Ghana's fashion industry (Alacovska et al., 2020), which seems like a 'lost course' for those actively building their life hopes in the fashion industry. Nonetheless, entrepreneurs in Ghana's fashion industry demonstrated unwavering determination to make it happen, defying all odds.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of our study, we conclude that fashion entrepreneurs in all three regions conceptualized hope as a mode of work, an agentic force that drives decisions and performance. In this stead, we also conclude that hope is a means by which entrepreneurs craft and devise tactics to build and sustain their fashion businesses and their decisions to defy all odds are neither a 'mere' means of coping with precarity nor a resource to deal with precarity.

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