

Intersectionality of Race and Gender for Token Black Women Entrepreneurs



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INTRO

The phenomenological analysis of interviews with the participating Black women entrepreneurs, conducted to explore their experiences facing tokenism, gender discrimination, and racial barriers, has revealed several overarching themes. These themes illustrate the complexities of navigating entrepreneurship as Black women within their respective industries. The participants, each coming from unique professional backgrounds and industries, provided rich insights into their lived experiences, challenges, and strategies for success. Atkin's (2023) explains how the experiences of Black women entrepreneurs are impacted by pervasive gender and racial biases within traditional workplace structures. These biases can manifest in several forms, including limited opportunities for advancement, pay disparities, and hostile workplace cultures. Consequently, many Black women are compelled to pursue entrepreneurship as a pathway to economic independence and autonomy. However, the role of an entrepreneur amplifies token biases and can exacerbate visibility, assimilation, and polarization as Black women often find themselves as the sole representative of their race and gender in predominantly white and male-dominated industries. In this token role, they navigate the difficult balance of asserting their unique identities and talents while assimilating to societal norms.

METHODS

Researchers interviewed four black women who identified as token entrepreneurs. The definition use for the purpose of this study was, "any individual who identifies with a particular group that makes up 15% or less of the organization or the entire industry as a whole". Participants included business owners who serve industries and markets that traditionally are predominantly composed of men as customers or business owners. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling using a snowball method. A cross-sectional design was used to conduct a one-hour semi-structured interview with study participants virtually via zoom. Interview questions were designed to investigate the experiences of women who serve as tokens. The range of topics during questioning included social interactions, barriers to success, heightened visibility, and discrimination. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzing using thematic analysis to identify common patterns and themes within the data. The analysis began with a process of coding, where excerpts from the transcript were categorized into preliminary themes based on their content. This initial coding was followed by an iterative process of reviewing and refining the themes, ensuring they accurately reflect date interview data.

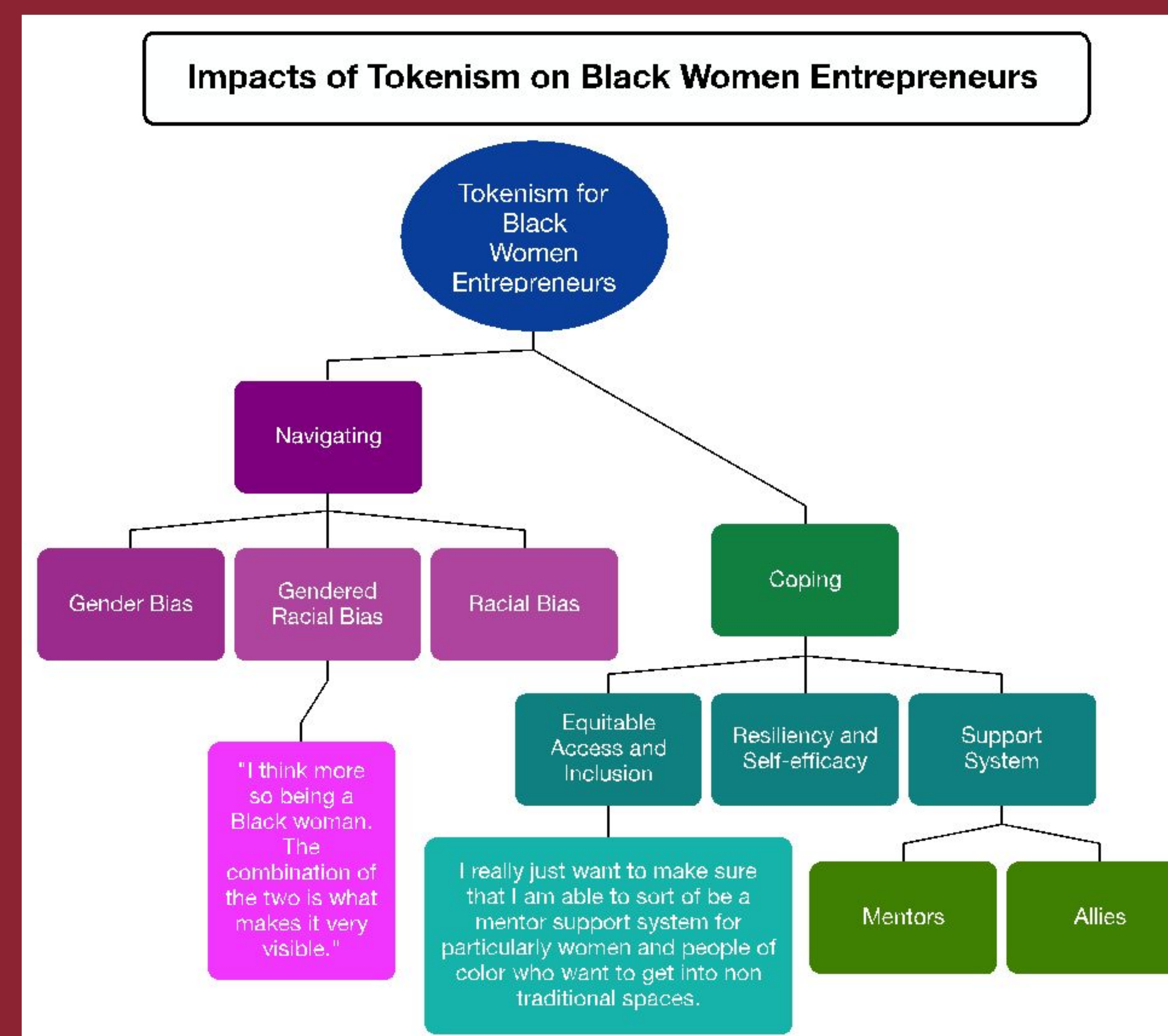
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Black women entrepreneurs experience pervasive gender and racial biases as token figures within their industry. However, far from shying away from the heightened visibility – they often embrace it and leverage their token status to increase opportunities for themselves and other historically marginalized groups.



FLR-PLN CEO Adia Dightman; Don't Get Mad, Get Paid CEO Simone Spence; Royelles founder Mukami Kinothi Kimotho; Fria founder Sheilisa McNeal Burgess; PowerHandz CEO Danyel Surrency Jones, Well-Kept Beauty founder Sheena and Adorned by Chi creator Jacque Aye—during the New Voices panel, An Entrepreneur's Journey: Building Momentum.

“ less than 1% of Black women receive a million dollars in investment, like VC funding or venture capital funding... to have somebody who looks like me being in this space... it's even lower. So I'm going to be a token in any place that I go in my professional life.”



THEMES

- **Gender and Racial Bias** - The interviews highlighted the systemic barriers and discrimination unique to Black women as they navigated gender bias, racial bias, and a specific gendered bias as Black women which often created barriers in access to benefits afforded to white women or men in their respective fields.
- **Token Bias** - As Black women entrepreneurs, they often experienced token bias which heightened visibility, necessitated assimilation, and had repeated experiences with polarization from clients and colleagues. However, participants also expressed their desire for the opportunity and autonomy entrepreneurship offered, and some noted how they welcomed the increased visibility.
- **Equitable Access & Inclusion** - They also demonstrated a deep dedication to equitable access and inclusion, and a desire not just for personal success but also for opening doors for future generations and group who have been historically and currently marginalized within society at large and specifically within their industries.

DISCUSSION

The findings from the qualitative interviews reveal distinct narratives, each illustrating the complex landscape of Black women entrepreneurs. Nicole's narrative showcases a Black woman therapist in Texas, emphasizing her innovative approach to therapy and the entrepreneurial spirit needed to carve out her own space in a challenging industry. Joyce's theme highlights her journey navigating the intersectionality of gender and race in entrepreneurship, showcasing her resilience and strategic maneuvering in a field that may not always recognize her contributions fully. Tina's interview details her commitment to equitable access and inclusion, as she leverages her success as a business leader into opportunities to embrace a diverse team of employees. Rhonda emphasized the importance of strong social support through mentor and ally relationships, while capitalizing on her heightened visibility to increase her presence and opportunity. These narratives, viewed through Kanter's lens of visibility, polarization, and assimilation, highlight the unique challenges and triumphs of Black women entrepreneurs. They collectively underscore the heightened scrutiny, gendered expectations, and pressures to conform while maintaining personal and professional identities. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the diverse strategies and paths Black women entrepreneurs take to navigate and succeed in various sectors.

CONCLUSION

The findings underscore the necessity of recognizing and supporting the unique paths Black women entrepreneurs carve out in diverse industries. This research not only enriches our understanding of the strategies employed by these formidable leaders but also stresses the critical need for systems that foster an environment of equitable access and recognition for Black women in entrepreneurship.

REFERENCES

References
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Figure 1. Booker, Shekeidra. *An Entrepreneur's Journey: Building Momentum*. November 4, 2020. <https://www.essence.com/news/money-career/entrepreneurship/black-women-entrepreneurs-with-businesses-you-need-to-know-about/>. Photograph. 04/13/2024.