Consuming the Black Gospel Culture: an Interpretive Study of Symbolic Exchanges

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the meanings of Black gospel music and symbolic exchanges of gospel culture within and across gospel and non-gospel communities. Based on an ethnographic account, we analyze our informants’ lived experiences with consuming gospel music and culture. Based on the consumption orientation and based on the nature of experience, we find that gospel music consumption is characterized as indulgent, contemplative, communicative, and transcendent. We discuss how gospel music mediates to define and redefine the meanings of the culture within and across gospel communities and Others. While being commodified as a cultural product, gospel music spawns new consumer identities.

INTRODUCTION

Music evolves, metamorphoses, and its meanings and consumer experiences are intricately interwoven, begatting a mandala of symbols while letting the consumer immerse in the vast sea of emotional undulation. Black gospel music is a genre par excellence. Originating in the Negro spirituals, one definition of gospel music may be “a religious music of African Americans that emerged in urban centers during the early decades of twentieth century” (Burnim and Maultsby 2006, 51). It is an expression of the aesthetics, values, and experiences of their community (Jackson 1995). Today, however, gospel music is consumed by both descendants of Africa and those who do not share all the African American heritage and tradition. It is appreciated through an MP3 player by a lonesome jogger as well as in church as part of liturgical ceremony. The music is sung by religious African Americans in a choir as well as by groups of Japanese Buddhists or Australian atheists. Gospel music is not only sung, but the choir is an object of spectacle by tourists. Then, what does it mean to different individuals to consume such supposedly religious and ethnocentric gospel music? How do people consume their experience with the music and culture? The multivocal character of gospel music seems to expand unbounded and continues to augment its multiplicity.

On a Wednesday morning, for instance, a deluge of foreign tourists fills up the sightseeing bus at Times Square and cruises New York City. They head toward Harlem to explore and experience what they believe to be authentic African American urban culture including gospel music. In one of the churches, a few locals walk down the aisle with Chinese takeout in a plastic bag and start rocking their bodies as they approach an open pew, while a group of young Japanese female tourists indifferently listens to the tour guide’s explanation about where the donation would go. All of a sudden, a pencil-thin woman staggers up to the stage and speaks to the audience about her personal problems. Then, a man in a red and yellow robe recites the bible while the gospel choir, made up of members of the local addiction rehabilitation center, sings frantically, and some locals, in trance, sing together and shout intermittently “thank you,” “hallelujah,” and “amen.” Chaos and madness permeate this newly renovated church; the site is an apt simulacrum of an “authentic” Black church in Harlem appropriated for a commercial purpose in the global age.

Another way to apprehend gospel music and culture is to critically examine its meanings in relation to consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Gospel music is a subject of study in various disciplines. Its history and the history of performance are topics in music history as well as cultural studies (Darden 2004; Smith Pollard 2008). As the music of a subculture, in ethnomusicology, its musical tradition in its cultural context is examined (Burnim 1985; Jackson 1995). In sociology, the function of gospel music in symbolic interaction and its power in social influence are explored (Semmes 1974). In anthropology, the hybridization of indigenous and gospel music by locals in the age of globalization has been explored (Magowan 2007).

On the other hand, in consumer research, experiential consumption of music is profoundly related to the subculture represented by age group (Holbrook and Schindler 1989; Blair and Hatala 1992), ethnicity (Schroeder and Borgerson 1999), and religion (Davis and Yip 2004), or any combination of these variables (Gooch 1996). Previous studies on religion or spirituality in conjunction with consumption (O’Guinn and Belk 1989; Kozinets 2001) did not integrate the role of music in cultivating and enhancing religiosity or consumption. On the other hand, there seems to be little research efforts made to investigate consumer behavior of African Americans with few exceptions (Edson Escalas 1994; Stamps and Arnould 1998; Hirschman and Hill 1999). While the postmodern social phenomenon unveils “cocooning” lifestyle and fragmented social identities in urban landscape (Thompson and Holt 1996), previous inquiries about minority communities (Üstüner and Holt 2007) neglected the significance and role of aesthetic consumption in the sustenance of consumer identity. In this regard, gospel music is an integral part of consumer identity, and it is driven by outer-directed forces.

Therefore, the present study investigates the experiential consumption of gospel music by incorporating multidisciplinary perspectives. In particular, the objectives of the current study are: 1) to examine the meanings and structure of the experiential consumption of gospel music, and 2) to explore symbolic exchanges of the gospel culture within and across the communities defined by gospel music consumption. There is a dearth of research on consumer behavior related to African Americans and their cultures in general. There is no prior study on the experiential consumption of Black gospel music in consumer research. While the shortage alone does not rationalize our motivation for the study, we justify the significance of our study because of the tacit impact of the music making and symbolic exchanges on consumer well-being and welfare aside from its contribution to consumer culture theory.

METHODS

We conducted an interpretive study to empirically explore how consumers of Black gospel music inside and outside the gospel communities consume the musical experience and the entire gospel culture. Following methodological approaches stemming from contemporary social sciences that have been applied to consumer research (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Charmaz 2000), we employed participant observation and a variety of interviewing techniques, such as ethnographic interviewing, focus group interviews, and in-depth personal interviews. Ethnographic interviewing is a particularly valuable method to apprehend consumer experiences because the interview setting in situ evokes the consumption experiences in the past and the present (Holt 1997). Specifically, interviews took place in the lounge of churches, the dining room of the local addiction rehabilitation center, in the living room of the informant’s home, and inside the sightseeing bus. People were more likely to talk about their experiences with gospel music and

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culture in these sites than in the conference room that was also used for formal interviews.

The study was conducted in several sections of New York City between April 2007 and March 2008. The selection of interview sites was crucial because gospel culture was objectified, consumed, and marketed in divergent ways depending on the geographical location within the city. Harlem, predominantly the home of the African American community, in particular, is considered a focal point for our study since it is socio-historically the center of the development of gospel culture in the North East along with Philadelphia. Also, Harlem is the strategic site for the gospel industry as it became the tourism destination for Others to view and appreciate supposedly authentic black community and gospel culture.

In sum, 27 people were interviewed, which consisted of 12 males and 15 females. All of them but three were descendents of Africans and, to a varying extent, part of gospel communities. When they were asked to identify their cultural background, most of them preferred to call themselves simply New Yorkers. Seven people identified themselves as something else, such as Caribbean or Southerner. Three people from non-gospel communities consisted of two tourists from Japan and one Jewish female from New York. The ages of informants ranged from 14 to 83, with the median age of 40 years. These people were selected on the basis of their self-claimed, highly involved consumption experience with gospel music and culture. The duration of the interviews ranged between 20 and 60 minutes. The informants included students, administrative staff, office clerks, the music director of gospel choirs, the executive director of an addiction rehabilitation center, recovering addicts, and retired school teachers. In other words, the sample included both white- and blue-collar, lower to middle class, and urban gospel consumers. We began interviews with less structured questions and modified them as we felt needed, adjusting to emergent research questions and to informants’ responses. All the interviews were either video or audio recorded, and they were subsequently transcribed for analysis and interpretation.

Along with the interviews, we conducted participant observations. We studied participants of concerts, special events during Black history month at the local historical society, which was targeted to a general audience, and at the large concert hall which was targeted to descendents of Africa, supposedly heavy gospel music consumers. We joined an organized commercial sightseeing tour and traveled to Harlem with tourists by chartered bus and saw a gospel concert performed by members of the local addiction rehabilitation center. We took notes manually where digital recording was not allowed. We talked informally with participants of concerts and sightseeing tours about their experience with consuming gospel music and culture.

In analyzing the data, we tried letting the data speak first rather than approaching them with a theoretical frame postulated ex ante. Before coding the data, we explicated, explained, and explored the narratives in the transcription following the hermeneutic triad (Czarniawska 2004). Then, we examined data instances, compared conceptual similarities and differences, and sorted emergent themes. During the core analysis when we discussed emerging concepts, we went back to the narratives and examined data iteratively. We repeated the cycles of inquiry until it had reached saturation. All the names that appear in this paper are pseudonyms, followed by the informant’s age in parentheses.

**SYMBOLIC CONSUMPTION OF GOSPEL MUSIC**

Black gospel music is symbolic of the Christian, African American subculture. Various meanings are embedded in the consumer’s experiential consumption of the music within the fuzzy perimeter of subculture. For some, the subculture is well defined with the reinforcement of a strong religious boundary. For example, Tamara (31), whose father was a pastor, says “the whole being raised in church is a part of it. So, it in a way is a culture because the people in church, you know, we all have our own way.” Inspirational, encouraging, uplifting, and strengthening are the words most frequently used by our informants to characterize the meanings of the gospel music.

Lyrics of gospel music are the good news, the Divine message. For Daria (58), it is her extended self, symbolic at different levels simultaneously, as it connects her with her ancestry, faith, and culture and music. Spreading activation, shifting the meaning back and forth, she states: “To have the Gospel come from the Book and the Book is old and it was my mother’s, it was my father’s and now it’s mine, so my children, it’s just old stuff hereditary. It carries the message in music.” The message reminds the faithful that they should continue to stand up and not to give up. Ronald (31) claims that it not only evokes emotion but also invokes a motion; gospel music helps him to take the extra step.

Gospel music is perceived to possess remedial and analgesic properties. Jim (83) says it is a remedy for both physical and psychological pains, and quoted Mahalia Jackson out of his memory: “Blues tells the world your troubles, but, Gospel tells the world your troubles and what the solution is.” Troubles may be specifically related to consumer behavior: dilemmas and frustrations caused by acquisitions and possessions. Brenda (40) claims: “gospel music allows me to look beyond the material things and see what the real quality, the substance of life is.” Gospel music in the religious context helps people tolerate personal difficulties in quotidian circumstances as Imogene (61) says:

> I take Him into the doctor’s office, my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and anyone else who would go with me—that’s John, Paul, Peter—they all go into the waiting area to get it together cause most times our best bet is to take notes before going into the doctor’s office that includes prayer and anything else you got going on.

Clinical and therapeutic uses of music have been studied, and their effectiveness in medical, psychoanalytic, and behavioral fields has been attested to (Bunt 1997). However, gospel music can be beyond therapeutic; it comes to the mind of the faithful as a form of prayer, which is invocatory, and aids consumer decision making as discussed by Imogene above.

**Nature of Experience versus Consumption Orientation**

Analyzing the narratives of the informants, we found the texts can be categorized in terms of the nature of experience and the orientation of consumption. The nature may be either purely musical with a void of religious context or liturgical within ceremonial context. On the other hand, the consumption orientation may be autonomous or syncratic. The music alone can be consumed by individuals, while gospel music, as part of cultural experience, can be shared with other members of the community, or Others who do not share the heritage yet desire to have the cultural experience. Some of our informants said that gospel music is both a form of worship and a kind of entertainment. As a means of entertainment, Johnson (2005, 59) points out that “we live out the contradictions of our lives, and an aversion to religion does not exclude persons from making personally meaningful connections to gospel music...” But such purely musical experience may be regarded as sacrilegious by the faithful. For example, when listening to gospel music in a concert hall, both the choir and the audience get “lost”
while entertaining each other in antiphonal reverberations. Tamara (31), an informant from the gospel culture, says: “it’s a lack of sincerity.”

The Symbolic Consumption of Gospel Music

Based on the nature of experience and the consumption orientation, we consider that music as a conduit for indulgence, a means to induce personal reflection, a device for communication with others, and a channel for transcendent experience. These are diagrammatically summarized in Figure 1. The following narratives of informants provide us with insights.

Music as Indulgence. Excessive consumption of gospel music may signal the individual’s proclivity towards withdrawal. The moderate state may be considered as indulgent behavior. Some informants discussed the relaxing efficacy of indulging in gospel music. Linda (52), for instance, is likely to spend her Sunday morning with a cup of coffee listening to gospel music. It enlightens her day. She is Catholic but does not go to church regularly. Nevertheless, starting a day with gospel music is the right course of behavior.

Gospel music, like popular music, can evoke a nostalgic past while indulging with it. For example, Linda (52) recollects her difficult youth and how she dealt with problems by listening to *What a Friend I Have in Jesus*. Similarly, Jim (83) recollects how his aunts on the farm used to always sing as they worked: “They picked cotton, and they chopped cotton … and when the season was over, they would sing songs like: ‘So glad, I done got over, I’m so glad.’”

With its hypnotic quality, some gospel music help induce the consumer to withdraw from the outside world temporarily to recollect things from the past, to relieve from present pains, and to avoid confronting future difficulties. For instance, it induces Jim (83) to recollect his hard days:

I was addicted to heroin for many, many years… And during one of my drying out periods, I heard this guy singing and playing the guitar, ah, a gospel song, and his voice was so beautiful and clear that it got me back into gospel … And it’s always had a deep spiritual meaning and something so spiritual. It was so different from other music that you can hardly explain it.

When the music is felt sublime, it brings the consumer a spiritual cleansing. More recently, Jim’s indulgence with the music led him to acquire an iPod so that he can play gospel songs and sing along with them while he is cooking in the kitchen. The technology has aided enhancing consumer’s indulgent behavior while it united sublime and mundane, or sacred and secular, in consumers’ daily lives.

Music as Personal Reflection. Storr (1993, 95), in criticizing Freud, discusses true sources of religious sentiments, which originated from “a sensation of eternity, a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded-as it were, ‘oceanic.’” Such sentiments may be provoked by introspection, keenly conscious observation of the self. Linda (52) says that gospel music helps her feel closer to her spiritual “ultimate” relationship with God. For Tamara (31), it is a way to put her beliefs to music, a form of expression for her, as she could identify herself with the messages.

Not only personal nostalgia, but gospel music also evokes collective historical experience. Malcom (35) associates it with slavery and the repugnant ordeals that African Americans underwent. Roy (29) links the historical experience and personal sentiments through gospel music. He explains:

I like the earthliness of the Negro spirituals that remind me of the Black experience. In Orangeburg, South Carolina, where
I went to high school, ... they used to do a lot of breeding of slaves. And they sold them in the slave market in Charleston... so when you hear those Negro spirituals ... it speaks to an experience that I’m basically a product of the breeding.

Roy is a southerner who was born after Jim Crow. Although he did not experience segregation, he learned about the hardships of black people at church while growing up. As an indigenous South Carolinian, he believes that he is a descendant of slaves. Thus the collective history is felt immediate as his personal history. Gospel music is not only juxtaposed to his memory of the history, but also it has served to condition him to reflect on his identity.

Music as Communication. When the music is sung in a group, the shared music-making experience is a powerful source of communication. Gospel music is important to Malcom (35) because “it’s [his] connection to the community.” When Leticia moved from New York to Cleveland, the first thing she did was to look for the right church to join. She had three evaluative criteria: the preacher, church members, and the gospel choir. Our other informants similarly narrate the significance of gospel music as a galvanizing and solidifying force in the community.

The music, however, does not have to be communicated in a large group. The musician and an individual audience can have deep philosophical communication. For Krista (28), listening to the Yolanda Adams song Open My Heart gave an answer to her personal problem, because of the perceived similarity between her circumstances and those of the singer: “you know, [the singer] is in a room and she’s talking to God and... she’s questioning I guess the situation and she just has to make her decision...” Religion, spirituality, and consumer decision making are united through Krista’s subjective feeling and thoughts in communicating with the Divine, which is mediated by her musical experience.

Furthermore, the communication is aimed to salvage the doomed. Steve (52) who traveled with the gospel choir to a prison in Louisiana describes his recollection from “the Underground Railroad Tour”:

We were at a prison in Louisiana called the Louisiana State Penitentiary. We were on death row singing for young men, 16 and 17 years old, and no one had ever done a concert on death row before at this Angola State Penitentiary. And I recall ... these were young men who were maybe never going to see outside or maybe they were going to die there. And, I can remember singing for these young men and just hoping that they can get some kind of idea of freedom, even inside of death row.

Having grown up in a dysfunctional family, Steve became a problem child, and then, a drug addict. Then he was taken to a gospel choir, and the music-making experience changed his life. In penitentiaries he visited, he and the choir members were self-designated missionaries. While communicating the good news with inmates, Steve thought he could have been there if he had not been exposed to gospel music. Thus the communication through music can also function to reflect the self and enhance the self respect.

Music as Transcendent Experience. Daniel (49), the director of the gospel choir at one of the African Episcopal Methodist churches, differentiates gospel music from other types of Western music by pointing out that it is an oral tradition rather than being written down. As such, he believes, “it’s kind of in a different way and it comes more, you know, initially from within and it just keeps coming from within.” Malcom (35), a musician, plays both gospel and jazz. When he plays jazz, he caters to the crowd’s mood. On the contrary, when he plays gospel music, he concentrates on the spirituality and his feelings for appreciating Creator for life, health, strength. He says: “the connection [with the Creator] is so important. I shy away from what the audience vibes or what the congregation would get me to do. But, I communicate with the Creator first.”

For Catherine (60), a singer and a devotee in the choir, the performance is a dedication to the Divine:

When I first sang in the choir, you said to me, ‘good job my sister.’ And I said, ‘to God be the glory.’ It’s not about me, it’s about Him. It’s not a performance to us, it’s a ministry. We don’t sing these songs because we want the congregation to say, ‘Good job Catherine,’ ‘Good job Imogene.’ No. We want God to get the glory. We want those persons who hear us to feel God is within us when we project these songs.

Her zealous and affirmative pronouncement in a heroic tone suggests that she experiences a kind of psychic syncope while feeling a divine purpose in music. Similarly, during music making, singers and audience in call-and-response often appear not to be fully in conscious control of their behavior; they are out of quotidian time and space, or experiencing “cerebral eclipse” (Becker 2004). These trancers experience positive musical emotions, often accompanied by physiological arousal. The “forestructure of understandings” about musical experience is, however, conditioned by the community (Gergen 1991 cited in Becker 2004, 69) as musical emotion is culturally constructed (Geertz 1983). Transcendent and evangelical experiences can be elicited strategically by the religious community (Becker 2004, 98).

SYMBOLIC EXCHANGES OF GOSPEL COMMUNITIES AND OTHERS

Gospel music functions more than a source of entertainment or a liturgical accompaniment. As a social and cultural agent, it intermediates symbolic exchanges of gospel communities and other communities. In that process, authenticity of blackness was appropriated and re-appropriated reflecting the efforts to adjust to the perceived authenticity of each other. As Johnson argues (2005, 80) “‘blackness’ may exist as a floating signifier in various cultures, but the consequences of its signification vary’ and manifest in various ways, such as music, depending on the cultural environment. The opinions toward the consequences vary: the expropriation of black culture; the co-optation of the cultural products by Others. Such amalgamation is viewed as the problem of cultural hegemony (Semmes 1994). In Figure 2, we illustrate the exchange process among and between gospel and non-gospel communities.

Consuming the Gospel Culture as Others

Consumers from non-gospel communities market, diffuse, assimilate, participate, and spectate the gospel culture. Some consumers approach gospel music with intrinsic motives to experience humanistic-oriented spirituality (Emmons and Paloutzian 2005) which is characterized as a universal human phenomenon, and its manifestation phenomenological. Granprie (65), a Jewish New Yorker, occasionally goes to church in her neighborhood, to listen to gospel music. Her experience exemplifies such spirituality induced by experiential consumption of gospel music:

At joint Passover and Easter celebration, the rabbi and the pastor talk about the similarity. About two years ago, at the end
of the service, everybody got up and sang *We Shall Overcome* together holding hands. And, that made me cry because it brought me back to the 60s, the whole Civil Rights Movement, and all the things that had not happened. So, it was a very emotional experience. I started teaching in 1964, and that was the height of the Movement, and I was teaching in the Black communities in Brooklyn… It was a difficult time because those of us were idealistic.

The propinquity of Jews and Christians she heard and experienced in her personal history and the collective history of her cohorts created a collage of memories, which were synthesized by her musical experience. By participating in the liturgical service as Others, the consumer seems to experience the music as an agent to personal reflection and nostalgic feelings.

**Performing the Gospel Culture for Others**

Gospel music is a creative agent of the Black community. It expresses and disperses their cultural ethos and aspirations (Semmes 1994). On the other hand, music, in general, influences the behavior of society. Summarizing the prior studies, Crozier (1995) contends that multiple factors--affect, arousal, emotion, and mood--induced by music contribute to social influence. Comparing the influence of rock and rap music and that of gospel music on young people, Jim (83) observes: “their behavioral patterns followed the pattern of the music.”

On the other hand, Jim (83) is a cathartic agent as the director of a choir and addict rehabilitation center: “I probably would not be so strong in the Lord if it wasn’t for gospel; but, it gives me a chance to express, really, to get people’s attention.” He does not do it as a show, though. Once Jim met a young man from Japan, a sound technician, who blatantly stated, “I don’t believe in God.” But when the recording project was completed, the young Japanese said, “You know, I’m going to try that Bible you were talking about,” and for Jim, it was the ultimate gratification of singing; introducing to somebody who does not believe in God, so that he may say “Hey look, maybe there’s something to it, the God thing.”

Performing and consuming music is a form of social identity. It provides the security of identification, assuring its own group identity while distinguishing the self from the others (Larson 1995). Our informants’ narratives further suggest that singing gospel music and performing gospel culture for Others function to engender new identities for those in the gospel communities. For example, at one church, singers are dressed in Africanized costumes at the concert. These costumes are not authentic but help the singers enhance their perceived African heritage. Each singer has two flags in their hands to wave at the audience. These flags, seemingly real, are only props to enhance their image of being descendents of Africa.

When performing and consuming the culture of Other, the music, as a creative agent, plays an intermediary role. In the process, music and other cultural products are accommodated to spawn and shape a new identity and new culture. Daniel (49) says, “Gospel will always be contemporary…[and] influenced by things that are happening outside of the church.” Leticia (33) who worked with Jay Moss, a prominent gospel singer, for a Black Heritage Celebration in Cleveland, Ohio, by inviting the Latino community, had this experience:

… I’ve never been in a particularly Latino church. But, they rocked it. You know, when they performed, they rocked it. A lot of people were into it. And it was something different. Now I was amazed. I was just like wow, okay. I need to visit your church too. Maybe I’ll learn some Spanish, but, I need to visit your church, too, you know…. I think contemporary music, gospel music has helped that grow… at a very fast pace.

The new identity engendered as a result of the heterogeneity of the audience has necessitated a new music to grow to address the differences. Gospel music with the tint of rap has spawned the new
gospel culture (Gooch 1996; Smith Pollard 2008). Referring to the controversial holy hip-hop, Daria (58) tells us, “I think if it reaches the people, it’s all good, ’cause you need a variety to reach different people. So it’s all good as long as the message is being put out there.” As part of the new generation of the gospel culture, Kelly (14) is insightful: “Young kids that don’t believe in God do not listen to gospel unless it’s hip-hop.” She says nobody should be offended, however, “because God is giving them that gift.”

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we investigated the meanings of gospel music and symbolic exchanges of gospel culture within and across gospel and non-gospel communities. Based on an ethnographic account, we analyzed the narratives of the informants and interpreted their lived experiences with consuming gospel music and culture. Based on the consumption orientation (i.e., whether the consumption is autonomous or syncratic) and based on the nature of experience (i.e., whether the gospel consumption is musical or liturgical), we found that gospel consumption was characterized as indulgent, reflexive, communicative, and transcendent. We discussed how gospel music mediates to define and redefine the meanings of gospel culture within and across gospel communities and Others.

Consumer culture theory is inclusive of “blurred genres,” reflecting the nature of social sciences (Geertz 1983). It does not seem, however, to raise a question whether experiential consumption of music gives us a good life or a happy one. The current study shows Black gospel music does not necessarily lead to either end. Poverty and the resultant social problems continue to exist despite the personal and cultural significance and the edifying properties of gospel music. Then why do we continue consuming the musical experience? Kivy (1993, 31) contends, “the best that we can hope from music is that it help to humanize.” Neither does the humanizing influence of gospel music alone contribute to improving consumer welfare. “The mind strives to imagine only those things which posit its power of acting” (Spinoza 1677 quoted in Curley 1994, 182). The results of the present study are best hoped to bring about more inquiry in to transformative consumer research.

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