Shopping While Nonwhite: Racial Discrimination in the Marketplace

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“Shopping While Black” refers to negative experiences that African American consumers often endure in the marketplace. Yet this term is antiquated because these experiences are not limited to them. This research examines prevalence of discriminatory experiences across both minority groups and marketing contexts, revealing stark differences with majority consumers.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
When New Yorker Denise Simon goes shopping, she is always on guard. She carries a small bag, keeps her hands visible whenever possible, and makes an effort to be overly friendly to sales clerks. She doesn’t have any reason to be wary except for one thing — she happens to be black. And if she doesn’t take these precautions, she fears she will once again fall victim to racial profiling (Norman 2009).

This particular incident is one of many that have surfaced in the last few years. For example, an African American teen was accused of theft recently after purchasing a belt at an expensive NYC department store, Oprah Winfrey has complained that a Swiss retail employee denied her the opportunity to purchase a designer purse, and President Barack Obama stated that he was watched in stores prior to his current international fame (Washington 2013). Instances like these are not limited to African Americans; such negative marketplace interactions also happen to other racial groups. A report prepared by Stony Brook University’s Center for Survey Research (2008) revealed that Hispanic Americans suffered from multiple forms of discrimination, including being stopped for questioning because of their racial identities. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development found that all minorities, from African Americans to Asian Americans to Hispanic Americans, continue to receive unequal treatment in the housing market, but face less blatant forms of bias than in the past (Gonzales 2013). The convergence of findings across contexts suggests racial discrimination is an issue faced by nonwhite citizens in their consumer relationships (Blank, Dabady, and Citro 2004).

Instances of racial discrimination toward minorities in exchanges have been widely reported in the popular press for many years. Whether such incidences are rare or common occurrences has yet to be determined but cannot be answered without empirical validation. Unfortunately, scholars and practitioners have conducted limited research on general perceptions of consumer discrimination across races to date, leaving the issue to be adjudicated using anecdotal evidence. With the return to a reflection on race concurrent with election of Barack Obama as president and contention that we may now live in a post-racial America (Valentino and Brader 2011), it seems an apt time to revisit this issue. Reconsideration of these concepts allows for a contemporary examination of issues regarding shopping while “nonwhite” (Baker and Meyer 2011; Bennett, Hill, and Oleksiuk 2012). To this end, we ask the following questions to guide our discovery: How widespread is racial discrimination in the marketplace, how does it manifest, and how is it perceived across minority and majority consumers?

Ultimately, we find that minorities perceive that they, or people like them, experience more marketplace discrimination than their majority counterparts. Across general and more specific marketplace experiences, evidence shows that consumers from minority groups identified for this research encountered more racially based discrimination than do white consumers. Additionally, marketplace experiences of minority consumers across groups were relatively similar, and juxtaposed against white consumers, minority consumers believed that non-white others experience more marketplace discrimination.

Though results support our hypotheses, there are a few notable exceptions. Study of general experiences show that discrimination by advertisements perfectly aligned with the hypotheses while there was a slight deviation in the results on discrimination in stores. When asked about discriminatory experiences perpetuated by advertisements, expected differences between the minority groups and their majority counterparts were evident, and there were no differences among Asian, Hispanic, and African Americans. The same was primarily true for experiences in a retail store and making a purchase, with the exception that African Americans perceived even greater levels of discrimination than the other two minorities. When a specific set of marketing contexts were considered, findings reveal the pattern that emerged previously of significant differences in discrimination between minorities and the majority appeared, with the only outlier a similarity between Hispanics and Caucasians for barriers preventing in-store purchases. The final portion of our results demonstrates that belief in level of discrimination toward nonwhites was significantly higher between all minorities and majority, though this result appears to have been driven by perceptions of African Americans.

These deviations from expectations assume a subtle pattern. Specifically, in rare occasions when there are differences in experiences or perceptions within minority groups, they occur because of data provided by African Americans. Our evidence suggests that African Americans believe that they are more often subject to discrimination than do other minority groups. They also believe that it is more rampant than do the other minority groups. These differences may be driven by any of a number of factors. Consistent with the historic nature of their subjugation in the U.S. and mistreatment in the marketplace, African Americans may still be disproportionately targeted. It may also be the case that participation in conversations and exposure to media coverage on “shopping while black” created a more developed ability to identify marketplace discrimination as well as greater sensitivity to subtle nuances. It is also possible that members of other minority groups process differently the overall impact of discrimination. When asked about very specific marketplace experiences, however, African Americans reported similar levels of discrimination to other minority groups. Disentangling the nature and source of differences in global perceptions versus actual experiences may be worthy of future research.