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ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the socialization process of black women consumers in relation to their haircare practices, reflecting what they have learned about their race and the social stigma and how they deal with it. Such process is distinguished by displays of power and discourses within the consumer's social network.

INTRODUCTION

Consumers are made, not born. In the field of consumer socialization, the pioneering study of Ward (1974) focused on the development of children and teenagers as consumers, highlighting the lasting effects of their early learning throughout life. Ward's work inspired numerous studies, generally focusing on the effects of marketing on children and adolescents, as well as ethical and regulation issues (Belk, Mayer, and Driscoll, 1984; Butter, Popovich, Stackhouse, and Garner, 1981; Donohue, Henke, and Donohue, 1980; John, 1999; Moschis, 1985). Later, such perspective was expanded to encompass the socialization of the consumer in adulthood (Barnhart and Peñaloza, 2013; Casotti and Campos, 2011; Ekstrom, 2006; Moschis, 2007, 2012; Schau, Gilly, and Wolfenbarger, 2009; Shah and Mittal, 1997; Smith and Moschis, 1985). However, consumer socialization related to race is a field yet to be theoretically explored (Ekstrom, 2006).

This research focuses on the socialization process of black Brazilian women in relation to the consumption of hair products and services and what hairstyle represents in social terms (Santos, 2012). In Brazil, blacks and *pardos* (mixed race) comprise 51% of the population (Ipea, 2013), and women in this group embrace a variety of hairstyles; indeed, some use their hair to reflect a political stance against prejudice and to engender racial respect (Globo.com, 2015).

Until its independence in 1822, Brazil was a Portuguese colony. Throughout the colonial period, slavery was practiced. Some female slaves worked as domestics and lived in the houses of the wealthy, under better conditions than those living in the *senzalas* (slaves' quarters). Domestic services included cooking, breast-feeding and child-care for white children, companionship for white womenfolk and housekeeping. This slave group was well acquainted with the tastes of the masters and often exploited this in order to maintain a higher status (Freyre, 2006). This aspect of Brazilian history makes it possible to comprehend the cultural myth of a deeply relational nature, with people prizing relationships and avoiding direct conflict (DaMatta, 1986, 1997).

Brazil abolished slavery in 1888. Freed slaves remained marginalized in society, usually working low-paying jobs. Even now, Black Brazilians face inequality in many aspects of social life. (D'Amaro, 2011; IBGE, 2014). Even if qualified, blacks are unlikely to attain prominent positions in companies (Batista and Leite, 2011; Ipea, 2013), and this gap is reflected their wages. Using the income of a Brazilian white male as a benchmark (100%), white women earn the equivalent of 68.7% of the benchmark, black men, 52%, and black women, 38.5% (Ipea, 2013). However, debating racial differences is not part of formal education in Brazil (Gomes, 2003). Racism is veiled under the guise of social acceptance (DaMatta, 1986). In "a society in which there is no equality among people, veiled prejudice is a much more efficient way of discriminating against people according to skin color, as long as they know their place" (DaMatta, 1986, p. 46).

Goffman's concept of social stigma (1963) helps us understand the socialization process of black women in their consumption habits. A stigmatized person is one who has characteristics socially considered as bad, dangerous, or weak (Goffman, 1963). Link and Phelan (2001) criticize this individualizing perspective and indicate that the concept of stigma has to take into consideration some interconnected components that have influence on it. They "apply the term stigma when elements of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination co-occur in a power situation that allows the components of stigma to unfold" (Link and Phelan, 2001, p.367). To a degree, the process of socialization through consumption of these women must reflect the intensification or superimposition of the stigma they face (Lamont and Monár, 2001). Their stigma seems to be reflected in the cultural myth of beauty standards of Brazilians, who value Eurocentric aesthetics (Freyre, 2002).

We seek support in the analysis of power and discourses relations proposed by Foucault (Foucault, 2015; Machado, 2007) to elucidate the socialization process of black consumers. According to the philosopher, power and discourses are always related in a way that is neither fixed nor predetermined and, therefore, must be investigated and understood. Power manifests itself not (only) as a binary opposition between dominated and dominants or as a set of laws and punishments, but as a network of subtle, sophisticated and unstable relations. Power relations are inherent in economic processes, relations related to expertise, kinship relationships, sexual relationships and all social institutions, which are therefore instantiations of socialization.

Moreover, where there is power, there is resistances that follow different types of logic and are irregularly distributed within the power network. Studies in the area of consumer behavior stress the role of resistance and anti-consumption (Cherrier, 2009; Hogg, Banister, and Stephenson, 2009; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Suarez, Chauvel, and Casotti, 2012; Thompson, 2014; Sandikci and Ger, 2010). In this context the question that guides this study is: *How the relations of power and discourses influence the consumer socialization of black Brazilian women in a context that devalues their racial origin, especially vis-à-vis haircare practices?*

METHOD

As data collection method, in-depth interviews were used in this research (McCracken, 1988). Fifteen women, aged between 28 and 52, wearing different hairstyles were interviewed. The interviews were conducted in 2015 and each lasted about an hour, resulting in approximately 320 pages of transcription. Five interviews took place at the interviewee's home, which provided an opportunity to photograph their hair products. The remaining interviews took place in public spaces at the interviewee's convenience. The data was subsequently analyzed and organized in categories that would indicate the presence or absence of a certain aspect (Bardin, 2006). An additional development in the analysis involved interpretations, taking into account the context in which a given aspect is present and inferences that might arise from it (Bardin, 2006; De Geer, Borglund and Frostenson, 2004). The objective was to shed light on what lies beneath the analyzed data (Mozzato and Grzybowski, 2011).

FINDINGS

Hairstyles worn by black women reflect what they have learned about their race and the social stigma that black people endure in their socialization process within the sphere of consumption. Such process is distinguished by subtle and dynamic displays of power within the consumer’s social network. These manifestations of power consist of myriad relations with learnings about society as a whole and, more precisely, with the consumer’s learnings. Power can affect the development of new areas of learning and exert influence to make them fit a dominant standard, one that dictates what is “true” and often perceived as absolute. Simultaneously, in the context of a critical self-awareness of race, learnings about resistance emerge in the relation between a black woman and her consumption. Nevertheless, these critical learnings can also bring about change in the active power structure, inducing social change, albeit somewhat slowly. All of this is reflected in consumer behavior.

We developed a conceptual framework (Figure 1) that highlights: (a) power and displays of discourse in the socializing network; (b) the core tension that emerge for those consumers and that revolves around fitting into, or resistance to, the prevailing standard in society; and (c) new discourses and practices, driven by how those consumers deal with such issues.

Power and Discourses Displays Influencing Socializing Processes

In Brazilian culture, the prevailing aesthetic standard is that of the “white biotype.” Curly afro hair is popularly known disparagingly as “bad hair.” The esteem for Eurocentric aesthetics represents a power display that directly affects black women’s connection to their hair, engendering discourse and considerations on how to deal with this situation. Straightening of hair, thereby “erasing” racial traits, becomes a “normal” practice for some. Claudia (age 57, relaxed curls) said, “I thought that straightening your hair was normal, because my hair had to look the same as a white girl’s.” Having lived abroad for many years, Ana Paula (age 38, straightened hair) experienced a contrast in relation to other cultures: “In Europe, I had the kind of hair everyone wanted to copy. Here [in Brazil], you’re encouraged to straighten your hair; but abroad, people are encouraged not to straighten it and to keep their identity.”

Since childhood, the socialization process surrounding hair and what it entails develops in families and at school. Magda (age 45, hair extensions) recognizes the role of the parents in the reproduction of social representations based on prevailing beauty standards: “At home, the expression [bad hair] cannot be used; it was even the subject of a quarrel with my mother. She told me that one of my daughters had bad hair. She told me it was because she was conditioned by society to do so.” Ana Paula, although the daughter of a white straight-haired woman, had in her black father a figure driving her to straighten her hair: “My father, who suffered a lot of prejudice — I don’t know if he wanted to protect us — always encouraged us to straighten our hair.”

Mothers are particularly important in the socialization process of black women as regards teaching them how to deal with their hair. Magda reproduces aspects of what she had learned with her mother in the socialization process with her own daughters, and made sure they always combed their hair. Amanda (age 38, braided), although the mother of a boy, makes sure he develops an awareness of his roots and to prize natural hair.

However, if family can prevent a black girl from having negative associations related to race, school may be the first environment in which the stigmatized face of what it means to be black in Brazil is revealed. Curly hair is an element of stigma, especially if blacks share a space with a white majority. They learn there is something “wrong” with their hair, their race.

I would get to school and the kids would tease me because no one has this kind of hair. Because I attended upper class schools, and I was the only black kid. (Ana Paula).

The job market, the media and the structure of products and services inculcate seemingly important socializing influences. A person’s hairstyle can mean the difference between landing a job or not. For the interviewees, getting their hair straightened made them more acceptable and served, in a sense, as a mechanism for fitting in socially, thus “erasing” traits of a socially devalued race. “The natural style is the least acceptable. When you go for an interview donning natural hair, you’re going to be eliminated just because of your hair,” says Ana Paula. Iconic black beauties, famous globally, are still lacking in Brazil. The recent presence of black female actors in Brazilian

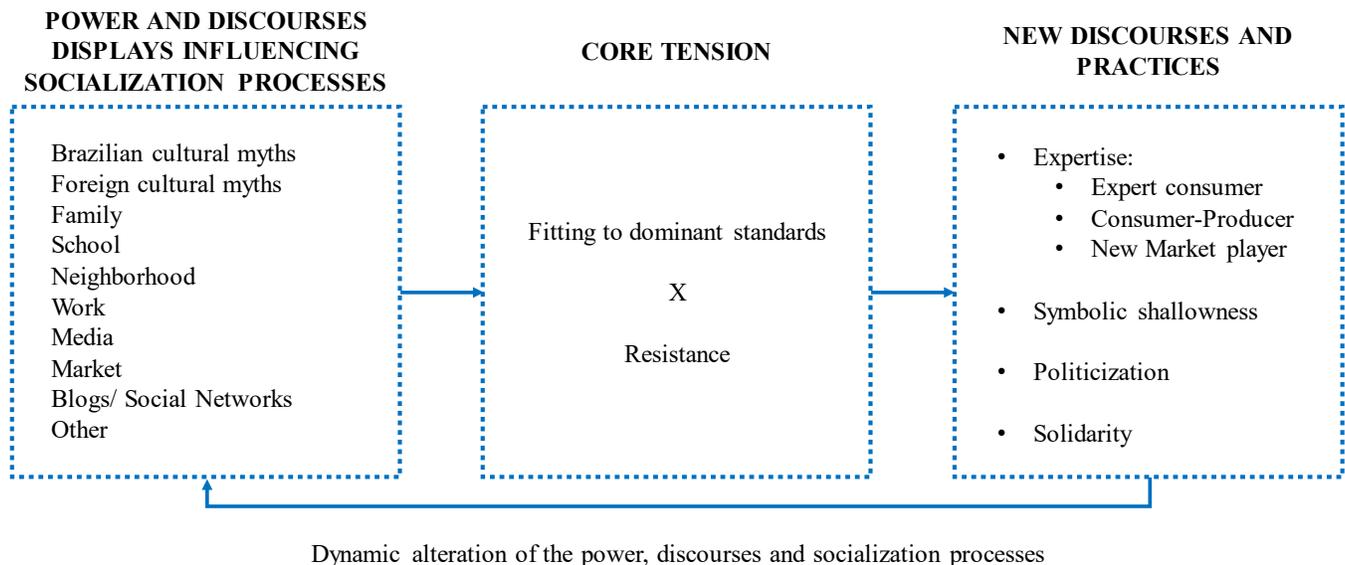


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

soap operas might have had an impact on the “new” aesthetic condition of identification of new possibilities of beauty. Products and services geared to such consumers appear limited compared to other consumer groups. Flávia (age 50, white dreadlocks), for example, claims she cannot find suitable products for her hair: “I can’t find them, not even for my daughter’s hair.” Consumption environments tailored to black consumers were cited as spaces that bring black women together, while also keeping them in touch with subjects that are particular and relevant to them. Magda recalls her experience at two black beauty parlors that, although they now longer exist, were a point of references in black aesthetics and definitive in terms of the racial socialization process. An alternative solution is to go online and check out the specialized blogs that can help black women look after their hair and bring them closer to issues related to race.

Core Tension

Black women learn, from very early, the centrality of the stigma they will have to face throughout life. A core tension arises and is reflected in consumption related to hair, i.e., whether to fit in socially or resist against prevailing beauty standards and social prejudice. Regardless of the interviewees’ attitudes, new tensions emerged.

Maria (age 42, straightened hair) explains why she straightened her hair: “everybody, my color or not, but has curly hair, would straighten their hair; so I didn’t want to feel different from the group.” Although straightening her hair may have favored Claudia in the job market, it limited her in other social situations: “I started working and I can remember the huge sacrifice at weekends. Everyone would say, ‘Let’s go to the beach’; and I’d reply, ‘How can I go to the beach? I’ll get my hair wet. It won’t dry at night, and I’ll have to curl it, use a dryer, use hair bobs.’ It was very bad.” Magda notes the cognitive mismatch induced by the prevailing standard: “When I was a child, I was always the black kid. But the beauty standard was white, so it was hard for me to identify with being black.” All the interviewees mentioned having heard someone—black or white—asking a black woman with straightened hair, “why don’t you just accept your hair?” They would reply that people who straighten their hair might suffer social rejection, given that in the minds of some doing so might be construed as “not accepting” oneself as a black person.

She thinks I have to wear natural hair, an afro or curly hair. I’m keen to be seen as an executive, so I think it looks great to have my hair straightened. I don’t know if that’s the ideal but, from my point of view, from everything I’ve experience since my childhood until now, I feel good about myself. (Maria).

Amanda reveals in her narrative the socializing influence from her family and friends, who were members of the black movement and would patronize the same beauty parlor: “[Those professionals] are benchmarks in afro hair and were very close friends with Mom and Dad [...] so customers such as Zezé Motta [actress] were the ‘black in evidence’.” Amanda wore natural hair during childhood and, later on, had it afro permed and braided: “Hair that’s part of my development as a human being. The thing about hair, to black people, is that it amounts to a symbol of resistance, of identity.” Magda shows the impact of resistance in her personality and gender identification by describing the change from a short haircut that is “androgynous” compared to other “more feminine” hair styles: “My shaved haircut [...] is my masculine side, which is very strong in the sense of ‘I will fight,’ so, now I have to work with the softer, more feminine side. And that’s where my hair fits in.” This interviewee’s argument explains how she appears to embody the socially constructed paradigm by associating gender issues and meanings to her black hair. Vilma (age 44, natural hair) sees the rise of a “new”

black woman who comes “learning to appreciate her hair” and hopes for social change driven by this new attitude: “She can appreciate letting her hair grow out and, in so doing, takes care of it so she can be beautiful, wonderful.”

New Discourses and Practices

To cope with the tensions, consumers pursue new discourses and practices that enables them to position themselves more favorably in social reality. Taking care of curly hair is described by the interviewees as a daunting task. The respondents are aware that white women have many more options in terms of products and that it is easier for them to take care of their hair, in stark contrast with the “reality” of black women, which is limited by the market. With such restricted consumption — caused by the dearth of suitable products and services for curly hair — consumers seek out expertise in the subject, both those who wish to straighten their hair and those who opt for natural hairstyles. Some become experts, that is, take ownership of specific expertise about their hair type. Amanda elucidates:

Because we are not represented in the mainstream so to speak, on television, in commercials, in major cosmetics brands, we use other tools. So we have blogs; we create a network of shared experiences. You pass it on to another [...] Much different from the relationship that whites have with their hair.

Other consumers, beyond assuming ownership of learnings about curly hair, may also perform activities traditionally performed commercially. As such, they are considered consumer-producers (Cova and Cova, 2012). Claudia explains that “usually, good products are not formulated for afro hair [...] so you have to plaster your hair with a product that is not meant for it, and wind up with a crazy mix that might end up working if it doesn’t make your hair fall out.”

Our last case related to expertise concerns a consumer who literally became a market player. Indeed, to some extent, Vilma became a hairdresser due to her unsatisfactory experiences with her hair: “I suffered a lot with that, so I said, ‘no; that’s enough! I’ll find a way to do my hair myself and I’ll become an expert in black people’s hair’”.

Besides the pursuit of expertise, we observed another adopted strategy using a discourse of *symbolic shallowness* in relation to black hair, aiming to break the link it has with issues of power and resistance. For Ana Paula, hair is “not necessarily a race thing: it has become a fashion accessory. Sometimes you’re into straightening it because you want to change the shape, the structure, just like you change your clothes.” This strategy of symbolic shallowing is directly at odds with the position of consumers who perceive their hair as an element of black women’s awareness-raising and politicization. As Marilda (age 47, hair extensions) explained:

It concerns accepting yourself as a black woman, accepting your beauty, your natural hair, the way a [black woman] is. Some will speak of ancestry; some will speak of the beauty of Africa, seeking to distance themselves from this Eurocentric beauty. As such, this hair is a proxy for a political place; it represents a political stance.

FINAL COMMENTS

Socialization studies on consumers reveal how an individual enters society, in a context in which, according to Foucault (2015), diverse, subtle and sophisticated displays of power are in place. The subtlety that Foucault refers to is even more expressive in a society such as Brazil’s, which has as a cornerstone a reverence for harmony in personal relations and an avoidance of open conflict, thus

Table 1: Black Female Consumers Socialization Universe

Power and Discourses Influences in Socialization Process	Core Tension: To fit or to resist?	New Discourses and Practices
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stigma and eurocentric aesthetics standard circulating in Brazilian culture • Contrasting in relation to mentioned foreign cultures • Parents raising (or not) critical awareness about racial issues • Exposure in school and other environments of white majority reinforcing stigma • Job market ruling acceptance of hair styles • Market offerings limiting consumption • Market environments and blogs tailored to black consumers promoting learning experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To Fit: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Felling of “belonging” in society and access to opportunities ◦ Social sanctions ◦ Cognitive dissonance about ethnic identity • To Resist: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Ethnic pride ◦ Feeling of social change trigger ◦ Social marginalization, restriction of opportunities and loss of a socially-constructed “femininity” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expertise: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Pursuing of new practices and expertise in order to cope with social “reality” ◦ Performing activities traditionally performed commercially ◦ Becoming a real market player • Symbolic shallowness as a strategical discourse • Politicization: Raising black women’s critical awareness with “new aesthetic preferences” • Solidarity with formation of social networks supporting consumption

engendering the appearance of tolerance towards diversity, while all the time a veiled discrimination prevails (DaMatta, 1986). The interviewees’ narratives show power relations in the most varied of spheres: the prevailing aesthetic standard; hiring in the job market; low representativeness of blacks in the media; emotional and partnership relations criteria; and — as concerns our study — the dearth of availability of suitable products and services in the market. Hearing from the interviewees that their hairstyle might be the deciding factor for their hiring is one of the situations that illustrates how hair, and all the attendant consumption, acts as a mechanism of social fit.

These subtle power relations affect directly the socialization process of black consumers. Throughout life, consumers seem to have contact with deconstructive socializing forces, which influence them with messages of the type, “I will teach you to not accept yourself.” Family appear to be relevant vehicle to raise critical awareness about racial issues, although not always does reality proceed in that direction. Family and relatives introduce young blacks to social representations, contributing to reinforcing or superimposing the stigma black people face, as well as aiding in accessing products and services.

If those consumers cannot find suitable products and services for their hair — if they do not see themselves portrayed the media — and if the market seems not to align with their nature and welfare — the pursuit of expertise in a network of racial solidarity is sparked within them. Such networks consist of shared practices and learnings about consumption, oftentimes, addressing gaps in the market. The alternative for such women is to socialize in a “private universe.” This reality contrasts with that of their white counterparts.

Co-creation can be an important marketing tool, promoting a narrowing of the gap between companies and black consumers and the development of products and services tailored to their reality. Solidarity networks developed by those consumers offer relevant clues for reshaping distribution and communication strategies. Blogs and virtual communities appear as enabling environments for fostering learning and practices related to this “private universe.” Additionally, appreciation of the tensions surrounding consumption is essential for crafting authentic advertising that is true to consumers’ reality and provides symbolic repertoire to maximize their welfare.

We suggest that future research investigate different generations issues in order to understand intergenerational cross-influences and the evolution of the consumer universe related to black hair over time. Our findings suggest that a specific study could be conducted

as to the different levels of expertise adopted by black consumers, focusing on their practices, competences and restrictions. Moreover, we would like to emphasize the contextual potential studied in our findings in order to explicate implications of consumption as a revealing element of the complex sociocultural mores embedded in relations of power, discourses and resistances.

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