Black Consumers: Understanding Experiences of Race in the Marketplace

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In line with the conference theme, this session presents three papers that consider the Black experience in the American marketplace. Across studies of market messages and offerings, these studies present explanations of how Black consumers experience the marketplace and provide some insights into how those experiences may be improved.

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Black Consumers: Understanding Experiences of Race in the Marketplace
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Paper #1: Light vs. Dark: Understanding the Roles of Colorism through Advertisements in the Marketplace
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SESSION OVERVIEW
Culture is an accepted factor in understanding and explaining consumer behaviors. Race, as one cultural component of the lived experience, is understood to be a factor in influencing consumer experiences, yet there remain opportunities to plumb the nuanced experiences of race in the marketplace. Recent scholarship explores some of the nuanced experiences and creates additional opportunities to examine how race influences consumption.

The theme of the conference, ‘What the World Needs Now,’ is addressed in this session examining Black consumers in the U.S. marketplace and their experiences with racism and discrimination. In the 1960s and 1970s, the examination of Black consumers was typically viewed relative to experiences of whites in the marketplace. More recently, scholars consider a range of positive and negative marketplace experiences had by Black consumers (Cowart, 2018; Foy & Ray, 2019; Green, 1999; Mitchell 2020). Building on prior scholarship, the three papers in this session consider the experience of Black consumers. Collectively, these papers contribute nuance to explanations of race and its impact on consumer experiences. Further, the increasing energy and focus to understand and address racism requires a broader understanding of the various ways that racism may be experienced by Black consumers in the marketplace as well as some mechanisms Black consumers may employ to manage experiences of racism.

Each of the three papers considers consumer interactions with the marketplace where the first two focus on print advertisements and messages within them, and the third considers the transformation of challenges into opportunities to experience joy. The first paper is based on an ethnography that examines colorism in market messages, and in particular print advertisements. In the paper ‘Light vs. Dark: Understanding Roles of Colorism through Advertisements in the Marketplace’ the phenomenon of ‘Blackfishing’ is examined. Though colorism is not new, ‘Blackfishing’ provides opportunities for direct (e.g., advertisements) and indirect (e.g., influencers) forms of racism and discrimination to propagate. In the second paper, ‘I Got Beef, But You Don’t: Understanding the Difference in Stereotype Perceptions in Media amongst Targeted African Americans,’ stereotypical messages centering on single Black parent households is the focus. Through experimental studies examining the relationship between stereotyped Black female (e.g., subservient) or Black male (e.g., athletic) and purchase intentions. The third paper titled ‘Black ‘Joy and Pain’: Finding Solace and Resistance in Live Music During COVID-19’ is a critical analysis of the ‘Verzuz’ phenomenon using netnographic techniques. The study considers how in the midst of the global pandemic, an entertainment form was birthed that transformed experiences of denied humanity and associated pains into collective joy and resistance for Black consumers.

Each of these studies has a link to systemic racism that seeps into the lived experiences of Black consumers in the U.S. marketplace, and perhaps the world when considering the African diaspora. While the studies do not necessarily provide answers on how to address systemic racism, they do shed light on its impact. And collectively, these studies offer a bit of what is needed now: an understanding of humanity as experienced by others.

Light vs. Dark: Understanding the Roles of Colorism through Advertisements in the Marketplace
EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Advertisements communicate through symbols represented in images and text (Scott 1994). Those images include individuals, which may be assessed on various dimensions including skin tone. Colorism is a form of discrimination that results in privilege or lack thereof because of one’s skin tone and is found in advertisements (Mitchell 2020; Walker 2005). The study examines the role of colorism in the marketplace.

Colorism may be found in advertisements where models of different skin tones are presented as representative product users. Actions that could be viewed as colorism are found in most cultures, and consumption is often found in support of such actions. For example, the preference for lighter skin in other communities has been apparent given the types of products used for skin lightening. Although products such as skin whitening creams have health risks, interest in these products increases due to the pressure of beauty standards (Adbi et al. 2021). The literature provides examples of how consumers depend on products to maintain a favorable status in society that impacts them emotionally.

Lighter skin tones have been favored by members of many ethnicities and cultures and have often been associated with positive connotations in society, while darker skin tones have been portrayed negatively (Cowart 2018; Foy & Ray 2019; Harrison 2005; Mitchell 2020). Conversations surrounding light and dark skin tones in the Black community can be traced to slavery. More specifically, enslaved people assigned work roles based on skin tone (lighter-skinned slaves as house workers and darker-skinned slaves in the fields), and enslaved women were often raped resulting in mixed race enslaved children who may receive preferential treatment based on skin tone (Reece 2018). Such colorism is found in marketing mediums and specifically in print advertisements. Prior research finds that the skin tone of models varies depending on if ads are targeting Black or White consumers, however most models in those ads have lighter complexions (Mitchell 2020). Similarly, the degree of a consumer’s ethnic identification also influences receptivity to the skin tone of models. Research finds that the stronger a consumer’s ethnic identification, the more positive the evaluations of advertisements featuring darker-skinned individuals (Green 1999, Cowart and Lehnert 2018).
Colorism is evident in advertisements, yet a phenomenon has emerged on social media that reflects colorism. This phenomenon, ‘Blackfishing,’ is derived from ‘blackface’ which encompasses a range of temporary visually transformative racist acts that were prevalent during the Jim Crow era (Brundage 2011). ‘Blackfishing’ is the use of market offerings (from cosmetics such as bronzers and tanning sprays to digital alteration, or even cosmetic surgery) to alter one’s appearance to that of a Black or a mixed-race individual (Bell 2019). The preference for darker skin by lighter-skinned individuals has been found in literature (Veras 2016), and ‘Blackfishing’ encompasses the acts associated with this preference. The prevalence of ‘Blackfishing’ with models and celebrities in print advertisements and on social media (Kowalczyk & Pounders 2016; Osarogiagbon 2020), is likely to spur consumer outrage.

The present study aims to examine the prevalence of colorism in the form of ‘Blackfishing’ and how those roles influence consumption. More specifically, this study will examine: 1) How individuals perceive of their skin tone?, 2) How does self-perceptions of skin tone influence consumer behaviors?, 3) How has the existence of ‘Blackfishing’ influenced consumers’ perceptions of print and social media advertisements?; and, 4) To what extent does ethnic identification extend to which ‘Blackfishing’ influences consumption?

This ethnographic study extends themes found in extant literature on colorism and focuses on understanding how consumers experience ‘Blackfishing.’ Various sources of data will be employed in this analysis. Data collected through interviews focuses on consumers’ experiences of ‘Blackfishing’ and how those consumers may participate in ‘Blackfishing.’ As this phenomenon is evident from Asian cultures, American cities, to African villages, individuals from various backgrounds are included in the study. A content analysis of print magazines targeted to Black and White audiences will be included (Mitchell 2020) as will publications targeted across different classes of consumers. Further, to gain a broader range of experiences of ‘Blackfishing,’ a netnography will be conducted in online communities found on Facebook, Twitter, Tik Tok, and Instagram (Kozinets, 2020).

Preliminary themes emerging from the data suggest an extension on prior research. More specifically the themes include the introduction to colorism during childhood as a part of socialization, emotional impacts of colorism that influence the consumption experience, and how colorism impacts the symbols emerging from print advertisements the importance of the connection between ethnic identity and print advertisements. Prior research identifies roles for colorism in marketing. It is anticipated that the study will extend findings related to ‘Blackfishing’ in print advertisements and contributes an explanation of how consumers’ perceptions and experiences of colorism in the marketplace have evolved over time.

I Got Beef, But You Don’t: Understanding the Difference in Stereotype Perceptions in Media amongst Targeted African Americans

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Fact: A majority of black children lived in single-parent homes (NCES, 1996). However, the stereotypical nature of the depiction of a single black mother and children in an advertisement leads to great debate within the black community. Several print and television advertisement produced in recent years have attempted to depict this phenomenon by utilizing single-parent images in targeted marketing campaigns (KFC, 2007). As a result of this and similarly targeted advertising, thousands of debates among consumers are being produced, with the concern that these images perpetuate stereotypes of minority consumers. While some participants of these debates feel that these depictions are accurate representations of the targeted populations, others feel that these images continue to reinforce negative stereotypes in the minority community.

The key to understanding these disagreements lies in the examination of consumer self-concept. Understanding the multidimensionality of self-concept (Sirgy, 1981, 1982; Heath and Scott, 1998) in the context of minority targeted advertising will increase ad effectiveness for practitioners and reduce the perceived perpetuation of stereotypes among minority consumers. As suggested by Hunt (2007), the discipline of marketing has a responsibility to practitioners, the discipline, society, and its students. A deeper consideration of negatively perceived advertising will not only reduce the separations that exist within society but will allow for an improved image of the discipline.

Several studies have examined the perpetuation of minority stereotypes in both print and television advertising (Paek and Shah, 2003; Donovan and Leivers, 1993; Taylor and Stern, 1997; Colfax and Sternberg, 1972), as well as the general portrayal of minorities in the media (Henderson and Baldasty, 2003; Mastro and Greenberg, 2000; Green, 1999; Mahtani, 2001; Mastro and Stern, 2003). However, none have examined the way in which self-concept can influence the likelihood that advertising is perceived as negative, or stereotypical. Therefore, this study will address the questions: Do some individuals consider an image stereotypical while others do not? Do perceptions of stereotypes vary by racial group? And, do perceptions of stereotypes within advertisements negatively influence consumer purchase intentions? We address these questions and attempt to determine if these perceptions can be used to understand purchase intentions. In addition, this study will utilize the Racial-Ethnic Self-Schema (RES) model (Oyserman, et al., 2003) and provide a quantitative analysis that explains the perceptions and purchase intentions of minority consumers following perceived negative self-relevant activations in advertisements.

An exploratory pilot was completed in order to assess the spokesperson characteristics of race, gender and the stereotypical scenarios prior to the creation of ads. The first vignette is female-specific and takes place at a cosmetic counter of a department store. The second is male-specific and takes place on a basketball court. The purpose of the scenarios was to describe an advertisement in which the characters are positioned in situations to prime for either high or low stereotypical profiles. We have developed the following pretest Hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Blacks will view the female-specific ad in which the black woman is in a servitude position as more stereotypical than the ad in which she is being served.

Hypothesis 2: Blacks will view the male-specific ad in which the black man is dunking the basketball as more stereotypical than the other two ads.

One-way ANOVAs were computed comparing the level of perceived stereotype of blacks in gender specific advertisements among African-American respondents. A significant difference was found in the ads ($F(5,26) = 3.85, p < 0.05$) when comparing the perceptions of stereotype among African-American females in advertisements featuring women. A significant difference was also found in the ads ($F(5,26) = 10.71, p < 0.05$) when comparing the perceptions of stereotype among African-American males in advertisements featuring men.

This analysis will contribute to the advertising and marketing literature by demonstrating that a multi-level approach is necessary to prevent the occurrence of perceived stereotypes and to predict product purchase intentions among targeted consumers. Additional-
ly, we examine how development of a Racial-Ethnic Self Schema is used to moderate the effects of stereotypes displayed in the marketplace, specifically advertising. RES Schema (developed in 4 structures) allows some consumers to reduce the anxiety associated with negative stereotype portrayals in advertising, thus allowing them to cope with the stresses of a marketplace inundated by colonially re-gurgitated tropes.


EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In the African American community, the novel coronavirus and enduring racial discrimination has spawned a double pandemic (Blake 2020; Addo 2020). Statistics recently released by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC 2020) underscore how COVID-19 and racism are intersecting and further exacerbating the corporeal well-being of Black people in the United States. The CDC reports that the odds of a Black person contracting and dying from COVID-19 are more than double that of a White person, and their chance of hospitalization is nearly five times higher. The CDC links these significant discrepancies in health outcomes to discrimination and systemic racism. Explicitly discussing how the health of African Americans and other marginalized ethno-racial groups is adversely impacted by structural forms of racism found in healthcare, education, criminal justice, housing, and banking. Additionally, more than eighty municipalities across the United States, have officially declared racism a public health crisis, and many local hospital systems and school districts are starting to follow suit (Mock 2020). As such, society appears to be ready to acknowledge that while viruses (like SARS-CoV-2) may not discriminate based on race, they circulate within a culture that does, resulting in greater impacts on communities of color.

However, rather than focus on the despair that African Americans must contend with while living within a double pandemic, this study critically examines the ways in which Black joy materializes within the confines of a racialized global health crisis. We do so, because as Johnson (2015) notes, “… [B]lack joy allows us the space to stretch our imaginations beyond what we previously thought possible and allows us to theorize a world in which white supremacy does not dictate our everyday lives” (p. 180). Black joy has also been characterized as a site of resistance and self-care. Both Brooks (2020) and Packnett (2017) evince the way in which choosing joy while navigating the perils of racial oppression is a powerful form of self-preservation and resistance.

The myriad manifestations of denied humanity Black people endure daily is often conceptualized as all-consuming – leaving zero space for joy to manifest, but perhaps the framing of pain and joy requires an ontological shift when considering the lived Black experience. Perhaps, as West (2010) suggests, the two should be situated as coexisting rather than contradictory constructs. Such a reframing may allow us to (re)conceptualize Black joy as more than momentary reprieves from racial oppression to an ongoing and conscious practice of self-care and embodied resistance that emerges in the company of Black pain.

We attempt to develop such a conceptualization by directing our attention to what was once largely characterized as a quotidian aspect of social life – the consumption of live music. The global onset of COVID-19 in early 2020 and the extensive mitigation procedures that followed led to a near complete shutdown of the live music industry. In the U.S., lockdowns prohibited live music performances, leaving the industry decimated and millions of music lovers stuck at home without a key outlet of self-care and stress release (Blisstein and Millman 2020). In response, Swizz Beatz and Timbaland, two veteran African American music producers launched Verzuz live battle sessions on Instagram Live in late March 2020. Verzuz battles consist of two comparable music artists from Black music traditions, primarily hip hop and R&B, who play approximately 90-seconds of 20 songs from their music catalog in an alternating fashion during a three-hour live virtual session. Each battle is streamed on Instagram TV, with Apple Music/TV simulcasting the events from July 2020 to March 2021. The start-up social media platform Triller replaced Apple Music/TV as a simulcast partner after Verzuz was acquired by the platform in March 2021.

Although the live digital series is referred to as a battle, Verzuz leans more toward a “friendly competition” largely rooted in nostalgia. Most artists eschew playing new material in favor of long-loved classics. A virtual space of shared intimacy emerges as artists play and offer behind-the-scenes accounts associated with cherished songs from their music catalog as viewers openly recollect and share fond memories that accompany each song. Timbaland identifies the series as a celebration (Leight 2020). While not explicitly stated as such, the fact that the series has only featured Black artists thus far and most viewers (which often reaches into the millions) appear to also be Black, indicates that the series is a celebration by and for Black people. Neither artists nor Verzuz producers are paid for participating and organizing the battles, choosing a more altruistic purpose for the digital franchise -- Timbaland states “the money is the love that we get from the people” (Cochrane, 2020).

In this study, we examine how the Verzuz series offers a virtual space wherein Black joy is collectively constructed. We conduct a netnographic inquiry, an ethnographic approach to gaining consumer insights when studying online communities (Kozinets 2002, 2010). We employ the technique of “lurking”, which is an unobtrusive observation technique where researchers gather data without making themselves known to the community members (Kozinets 2010), potentially rendering richer and more authentic data. To date, the researchers have recorded several Verzuz live performances and collected Twitter and Instagram posts using relevant hashtags or replies to the performance posts on Instagram. Utilizing a critical visual reading and discourse analysis framework, data is currently being coded and interpreted using Dedoose, a web-based data analysis platform. While our analysis remains ongoing, preliminary findings suggest Verzuz’s may indeed be viewed and utilized by its viewers as a trusted source of Black joy. During the height of the coronavirus, this notion was encapsulated in a viewer’s posting to Instagram after the Teddy Riley versus Babyface event:

“Whether you’re grooving with DJ DNice on #ClubQuarantine, jamming to a Teddy Riley #verzuz Babyface battle, expressing yourself on Tik Tok with #DontRushChallenge videos, or binge watching #BlackAF and #InsecureHBO, do what you gotta do to protect your peace and find your #Blackjoy during these uncertain times. Laughter is good for the soul, and self-care fuels the movement. ♡ 🖤 💚” – theequityalliance

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