

## Paradoxes in African-American Consumption: An Examination of Marketing Strategies and Black Identity

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In Harris' view, the black post-slavery black middle class sought to model itself after the white capitalist system.<sup>1</sup> With the end of slavery, political letdowns and disappointing economic conditions effected blacks. Weems argues that the black community had no choice but to increase their racial solidarity.<sup>2</sup> In response to the marginalization they faced, blacks began to economically mobilize to create and cooperate among themselves. However, despite the emergence of black businesses, white ideals and aspirations were still evident within the black community. In addition, slavery's conclusion made blacks aware of their newfound freedom of mobility which spawned a black migration to larger cities of the North. Such freedom allowed room for cultural expression as evident in music, dress, and finances. Blacks could now, for the most part, do as they pleased with their time and with their money. This in turn, allowed self-expression and a visual cultural identity to surface. With slavery's conclusion, African-Americans have fought to be accepted by mainstream society to benefit from equal opportunity and access to resources. One of the areas African-Americans have sought equal access to is that of economic empowerment. This essay explores African-American spending habits—specifically their conspicuous consumption as a means of assimilating into mainstream America and their collective social identity through the process, as well as black consumer resistance to racism.

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<sup>1</sup> Abram Harris. *The Negro As Capitalist: A Study of Banking and Business*. (College Park: 1936), 49, quoted in Weems, Robert E., "Out of the Shadows: Business Enterprise and African American Historiography," *Business and Economic History* 26, no.1, (1936).

<sup>2</sup> Weems, Robert E., "Out of the Shadows: Business Enterprise and African American Historiography," *Business and Economic History* 26, no.1 (1997): 201-02.

Richard Jenkins defines collective social identity as a combination of internal and external definitions.<sup>3</sup> For collective identity to work, differentiating between oneself and others based on commonality and a sense of shared belonging within a subgroup, must be recognized by outsiders. Collectivity can either define itself, or be defined by others, i.e. *group identification* versus *social categorization*.

The most basic definition of consumption is the using up of economic goods. According to Lamont and Molnár<sup>4</sup>, sellers use cultural marketing schemes to attract certain racial groups in hopes of speaking to their cultural identity. The methods of targeting such groups are also a means of tapping the groups' aspirations to belong socially. In turn, consumers transform consumption into a new meaning for social membership in symbolic ways.

Most marketers use strategies to target black consumers based on the belief that consumption is a positive means of self and collective identity expression. They recognize that blacks have been historically marginalized and now want to be included among society. According to the Consumer Expenditure Survey, as a group, blacks today spend more money on items such as children's footwear, children's apparel, and footwear.<sup>5</sup> Sales and Marketing Management points out that black women spend 41 percent more than their white counterparts on personal care products.<sup>6</sup> Such spending habits reveal how blacks regard appearance as a means of being socially accepted and how marketing is directed toward them on this basis.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity* (London: Routledge, 1996), 23, quoted in Lamont, Michele, and Molnar, Virag, "How Blacks Shape Their Collective Identity," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 1, no. 1, (2001): 33.

<sup>4</sup> Michele, Lamont and Molnár, Virag, "How Blacks Use Consumption to Shape their Collective Identity," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 1, no. 1, (2001): 36.

<sup>5</sup> Consumer Expenditure Survey, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Sales and Marketing Management, 1991, May.

According to Lamont and Molnár, there is a black prioritization of conspicuously consuming for assimilation over strengthening public facilities such as churches and schools.<sup>7</sup> This is due to the fact that consuming goods associated with social status are portable, whereas something like attending the best school is not. This value system is what many critics of black consumption deem harmful to the black community. Because marketing is directed to as young a demographic as possible to ingrain the quest for social acceptance through consumerism, young urban blacks are bombarded with images and symbols of success that they cannot afford. Hip Hop Artist, Mos Def, in his song “Mathematics” comments:

Young teens and prison greens facin life numbers  
Crack mothers, crack babies and AIDS patients  
Young bloods can’t spell but they can rock you in PlayStation<sup>89</sup>  
Trying to fit the images pitched at them by marketers and further perpetuated by the black community, these blacks try to acquire material goods even though it is ultimately economically and socially detrimental to the community.

The marketing strategies appear to be in direct opposition to black consumers although they claim to be beneficial to them. Black consumerism is often exploited and abused. To receive better treatment than the average-dressed consumer and to combat racial discrimination from retail salespeople, blacks often “dress up” while shopping. According to Austin, blacks “sell themselves in order to be sold to.”<sup>10</sup> Role-reversal techniques such as over-tipping racist drivers or waiters, or buying expensive goods despite actual necessity are used to combat racist service. By employing these methods,

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<sup>7</sup> Lamont, Michele, and Molnár, Virag, 38.

<sup>8</sup> Mos Def, Black on Both Sides, “Mathematics,” 1999, Rawkus Entertainment L.L.C.

<sup>9</sup> [www.mosdefinitely.com/lyrics/blackonbothsides/16mathematics.txt](http://www.mosdefinitely.com/lyrics/blackonbothsides/16mathematics.txt)

<sup>10</sup> Austin, Regina, “A Nation of Thieves: Consumption, Commerce, and the Black Public Sphere,” (Regina Austin, 1993), quoted in The Black Public Sphere Collective, The Black Public Sphere (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 224.

blacks hope to convince their antagonists that they are worthy of their services and do not fit the stereotypical black riffraff. This attitude reveals black acknowledgement of commercial discrimination and how certain stores, primarily the more upscale ones, refuse service to blacks on the implied notion that blacks do not have the financial means to afford such luxuries and thus do not deserve them. Austin explains that blacks are “cheated” because they pay the same price for the same commercial goods as whites and yet they receive racist treatment.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the negative treatment blacks receive in the commercial arena limits their consumption opportunities. They are faced with the choice of either continuing to be subject to consumer discrimination and trying desperately to disprove notions of racial consumer inferiority, or resisting racist marketing. These methods further exploit black consumption in that they force blacks to overcompensate for wrongful behavior that is not their own.

But blacks also resist racist marketing collectively and individually. The most common use of collective resistance to racist policies that hinder black assimilation through consumerism is the boycott. Refusing to contribute to the financial success of services that continue to abuse black consumers, the boycott has been perhaps the most effective way of making black appeals to just treatment readily understood. The Montgomery Bus Boycott is perhaps the best example of successful communal black mobilization and white response. Although the bus boycott did not solicit an immediate response, throughout its course blacks solidified their identity under a socio-political rebuttal of the status quo. They collectively understood the socio-economic injustices faced and mobilized together to combat them. In turn blacks involved in the boycott

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<sup>11</sup>Austin, Regina, 231.

were involved in a larger cultural movement—Civil Rights—for social justice which shaped black identity through consumerism.

Social resistance movements through consumer identity are an avenue that has benefited blacks. As evident since the zoot suit era, blacks have dressed stylishly to express themselves and reflect their social environment. Austin notes that the cut of the zoot suit was a reflection of World War II.<sup>12</sup> Utilized to allow movement, but attributable to the short cloth supply, swing dance accompanied the zoot suit as a means of distracting blacks from the poor working conditions they faced. Similarly, the later B-boy and B-girl style came out of poor black social conditions. Wearing baggy clothes, hats in various directions, chains, doorknocker earrings, Timberland boots, puffy coats, and listening to socially empowering music, hip hop style is perhaps the epitome of social resistance as a result of socio-economic conditions. The camouflage look often evident in hip hop is used by urban blacks as a way of making their daily “urban jungle” conditions evident to each other as well as to others who may be unaware.

Despite the resistant aims of such black cultural expression and identity through fashion and consumption, marketers outside of the black community have capitalized on such trends. World famous designers have now introduced elements of street style—graffiti imagery and logos, large earrings, etc.—into their collections, selling them at extremely high prices. They profit while the urban culture goes discredited and remains in dire straits. As pointed out in “Hip Hop: A Culture of Influence,” in the United States, names such as Tommy Hilfiger, the Gap, Ecko, and Enyce have used hip hop style, either by using rappers and hip hop artists to endorse their collections or blatantly fashioning their lines after urban trends, to seduce black youth into emulating rappers deemed

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 239.

cultural icons.<sup>13</sup> Such marketing schemes rob urban blacks of their raw cultural creativity while commercializing it. Young poor blacks recognize that social status is measured by physical stylistic appearance and associate value to keeping up on the latest trends. Although this was not the primary aim of urban style resistance, poor blacks still associate the more expensive merchandise with an opportunity for not only social mobility, but the chance to be like the cultural icons that marketers create. As a result, they continue to consume from these designers. In his song “All Falls Down,” hip hop artist and producer Kanye West points out the paradox of black consumer identity:

Then I spent 400 bucks on this  
Just to be like nigga you ain't up on this!  
And I can't even go to the grocery store  
Without some ones that's clean and a shirt with a team  
It seems we living the American dream  
But the people highest up got the lowest self-esteem  
The prettiest people do the ugliest things  
For the road to riches and diamond rings  
We shine because they hate us, floss cause they degrade us  
We trying to buy back our 40 acres  
And for that paper, look how low we a'stoop  
Even if you in a Benz, you still a nigga in a coupe<sup>1415</sup>

Here West addresses his personal spending habits and the motivation behind them. Such aspirations for acceptance are reflective of urban black motives for conspicuous consumption. He also notes how the desired assimilation ultimately fails in the eyes of society because race is the ultimate factor in attaining mainstream acceptance.

I say fuck the police, that's how I treat 'em  
We buy our way out of jail, but we can't buy freedom  
We buy a lot of clothes when we don't really need 'em  
Things we buy to cover up what's inside  
Cause they made us hate ourself and love they wealth  
That's why shorty hollering “where the ballas' at?”

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<sup>13</sup> Hip Hop: A Culture of Influence, prod. Youth Organizers Television, 28 min., Educational Video Center, 1999. Videocassette.

<sup>14</sup> West, Kanye, College Dropout, 2004, “All Falls Down,” Roc A Fella Records.

<sup>15</sup> [www.azlyrics.com/kanyewest/allfallsdown.html](http://www.azlyrics.com/kanyewest/allfallsdown.html)

Drug dealer buy Jordans, crackhead buy crack  
And a white man get paid off of all of that<sup>16</sup>

West's lyrics illustrate how despite the recognition of historical factors—ranging from black aspirations of white economic status, whites capitalizing from black consumer identity, and the internal cultural consequences of conspicuous consumption on urban blacks—these blacks still continue in their pursuit of acceptance by mainstream American society. The lyrics are further indicative of how black recognition of the paradoxical relationship regarding their identity in response to consumption does not imply an immediate discontinuation of such damaging behavior.

Today blacks primarily spend their money outside of the black community. However, that has not always been the case. As Weems points out, viewing economic power as a means to be accepted by society at-large and being subject to racial discrimination and segregationist policies, blacks mobilized to establish their own economic arenas.<sup>17</sup> Big cities with large black populations, such as Chicago, have had a historic black business presence. Similarly, Weems points out that black social movements and presences, such as Marcus Garvey's UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association) and the Nation of Islam, have had racially empowering economic aspects.<sup>18</sup> In this manner, blacks formed a collective identity through consuming their own goods. They were able to both define and benefit from their wants collectively. However, as times progressed a demand for racial integration—i.e. *Brown vs. Board of Education*—became widespread after World War II. Black businesses became a rarity as blacks began to pursue avenues outside of the black community. The result was stunted black business development based on the belief that it was

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, "All Falls Down."

<sup>17</sup> Weems, Richard, 202.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 204-06.

anachronistic, and dependency for goods outside of the black community. Thus, black consumer identity was in the hands of non-blacks.

Critics argue that full black consumer assimilation will never be attainable because style and status are consistently changing so that one can never fully keep up with it. Austin points out the argument critics have that the quest for status through consumption fosters unhealthy competition among blacks.<sup>19</sup> When everyone in the black community tries desperately to acquire these luxury item goods, the result is animosity, theft, violence, and in the worst cases, death. Similarly harmful, conspicuous consumption also affects the black family. When status is pursued by adults consuming that which they cannot afford, their children's futures are jeopardized.

The post Civil Rights era conditions associated with black economic development are still present today. With ambivalence toward creating black businesses, black collective consumer identity continues to be dictated by outsiders. In order for blacks to reclaim their consumer power I believe several things need to happen. First, blacks must realize that achieving social status by methods of conspicuous consumption are damaging to the self-image as well as the community. By affirming the belief that one's worth is determined by their possessions devalues the more important humanistic qualities of an individual. Secondly, if blacks are not made aware of the damaging effects of conspicuous consumption on the community, the same destructive effects will continue. I do not believe that it is wrong to want certain luxury items, however, I do believe that there should be more consideration of the consequences of such desirous behaviors. Lastly, I propose an increase in black businesses as a means of redefinition and cultural empowerment. By defining, creating, and consuming black goods, the black community

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<sup>19</sup> Austin, Regina, 236.

can strengthen its identity while economically benefiting, which can improve poor conditions in areas such as housing and education.

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<sup>1</sup> Sales and Marketing Management, 1991, May.

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