



“Shopping while Black”: Black consumers’ management of racial stigma and racial profiling in retail settings

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Abstract

This article draws on qualitative interview data collected from 55 African Americans residing in the New York City area to examine African Americans’ experiences of consumer racial profiling or “Shopping While Black.” I find that racial discrimination alters African Americans’ experiences as consumers. Racial stigma in retail settings impacts the consumptive process for Blacks in two central ways. First, retail settings are often sites where anti-Black bias is made evident, requiring Black shoppers to navigate racial hierarchies while procuring goods. Second, discrimination alters the experience of shopping, arguably raising the costs and reducing the rewards derived from consumption. When a store’s sales staff is hesitant to serve Black shoppers or suspects that they are prospective shoplifters, shopping no longer becomes a form of leisure. A qualitative assessment of Blacks’ reports of racial stigma and discrimination in retail settings reveals that race can change the meaning and status attached to goods, when they are sought out or owned by racial minorities. By examining Blacks’ experiences of retail racism and the cultural strategies they adopt in responding to occasions when they are treated discriminatorily, this research brings to light Blacks’ experiences of discrimination on the ground, while also examining how racism impacts the quality of Black consumers’ experiences.

Keywords

Racial profiling, racial discrimination, racial stigma, consumption, African Americans, African American consumer

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Retail stores epitomize the marketplace as central sites of economic exchange. Simultaneously, they are sites of micro-interactional relations that allow ample opportunities for customers, sales staff, and security personnel to engage in racial profiling. Research has consistently documented that African Americans encounter discriminatory treatment while shopping (Crockett et al., 2003; Feagin, 1991; Gabbidon and Higgins, 2007; Ludwig, 2001; Lamont et al., 2016; Lee, 2006; Schreer et al., 2009) and that retail workers, particularly in stores located in predominately White neighborhoods, frequently display racial prejudice against Black customers (Dabney et al., 2006; Lee, 2006). Despite evidence that discrimination occurs in retail settings and that disparities in access to goods and services exist along racial lines, little theoretical work has addressed how racial minorities perceive, understand, and respond to discrimination on the sales floor and how their experience of unfair treatment alters their consumption. To the extent that race is discussed as a factor impacting consumption, the focus tends to be on racial minorities' mobilization of goods as expressions of their ethnic identity and their participation in cultural activities (Banks, 2010; Chin, 2001; DiMaggio and Ostrower, 1990; Lamont and Molnár, 2001). We know comparatively little about how processes of ethno-racial exclusion operate in the market and qualitatively alter the marketplace experiences of minority consumers.

This article aims to generate new empirical knowledge about African American consumers, their perception of racism in retail settings, and the variety of responses they adopt when confronted with racial stereotypes while shopping. It draws on qualitative interview data from a sample of 55 middle- and working-class Blacks residing in the New York City (NYC) area.

Scholars have argued that there is an increased emphasis on the "experience" being part of what is purchased and customer service as being instrumental in creating brand loyalty and affecting patronage (Atwal and Williams, 2009; Dion and Arnould, 2011). Thus, examining how race affects the consumer "experience" is important. By analyzing Black customers' experiences on the ground, this research highlights the range of strategies Black shoppers adopt to contest their mistreatment, which arguably raises the costs and reduces the rewards derived from consumption. Their experiences also highlight how the marketplace affirms the traditional racial order, privileging some consumers and disadvantaging others.

In this study, nearly all respondents perceive that racial stigma is pervasive in retail settings. Retail stores are places where Blacks encounter strangers and are perceived as members of a discredited group. I find that anti-Black bias, which is particularly pronounced in high-end stores, negatively impacts Blacks' shopping experiences, as Black shoppers often perceive that they are sorted and classified in alignment with racial stereotypes and subject to poor service and inferior treatment.

Rethinking consumption in light of retail racism

Research has demonstrated that historically and contemporarily Blacks have been viewed as second-class citizens in consumer markets (Lee, 2006; Weems, 1998).

An audit study conducted in 2009 found that Black customers were more likely to arouse suspicion and that Black testers were followed around and monitored at a higher rate than comparable Whites (Schreer et al., 2009). Other researchers found that Black patrons encounter longer wait times when attempting to procure goods (Williams et al., 2015). Gabbidon and Higgins (2007) found that Blacks are nearly 10 times more likely to report having experienced “consumer racial profiling” than other races. They also conclude that Blacks who are more educated are more likely to report having experienced discriminatory treatment in retail settings than those with little education. Research suggests that middle-class status does little to buffer Blacks from discrimination in retail settings (Feagin, 1991; Lamont et al., 2016; Lee, 2006).

Black consumers’ disadvantage in the marketplace is due in part to social structural conditions, such as residential segregation and the organization of the marketplace. Charron-Chénier et al. (2017) argue that Blacks’ unequal access to goods and services is a consequence of retail desertification in segregated neighborhoods, restricted access to credit, and discrimination. Together these factors produce racial disparities in spending. Similarly, Mukherjee (2011) argues that segregation has resulted in the “spatial containment of black consumers.” Small and McDermott (2006) find that Black neighborhoods tend to have fewer commercial establishments. In fact, they find that Black neighborhoods are more likely to have retail deserts than poor White neighborhoods, an occurrence that scholars have termed “retail redlining.” From a structural vantage point, systemic racism and discrimination serves to limit Blacks’ access and options in the market.

Retail venues also function as symbolic sites where Blacks have struggled for full inclusion and racial equality, in part, because of the utility of goods as signifiers of status. During the Civil Rights movement, Black communities used their purchasing power for political ends, boycotting stores, movie theaters, and other public venues that maintained discriminatory policies. Protest leaders called on fellow Blacks to “withhold the dollar to make the white man holler” (Kusmer and Trotter, 2009: 364). Mukherjee (2011) contends that Blacks’ ownership of goods previously reserved for Whites is one method that Blacks contest claims of inferiority.

Much of the literature to date has not adequately grappled with the degree that Blacks’ consumption has been restricted, constricted, or taxed, or examined the degree that Black prosperity is punished in the market. If, as Mukherjee (2011) contends, “black access to material goods,” particularly goods that signify luxury, disrupts “the racial logics of white superiority and black inferiority,” then Blacks’ procurement of goods, particularly those that are seen as reserved for elites and prestige rewarding, may be regulated more intensely. The act of distinguishing which consumers are worthy of service or deserving of goods can function to heighten the status of goods and contribute of their exclusivity. It may reproduce the existing racial order. Few empirical studies have examined how racial bias, stigma, and discrimination in the marketplace not only compels or constrains

racial minorities' consumption but also contributes to the construction of a racial hierarchy in the market.

Wherry (2008) draws attention to the symbolic boundaries and social hierarchies that are asserted and maintained in the marketplace. He argues that price, a "seemingly neutral, scientifically objective instrument," is often used to "assess the positive and negative qualities of individuals occupying different social positions in society" (p. 364). Though he does not explicitly address racial discrimination, he suggests that a person of low-status often encounters "negative assessments" and that they face characterizations that may be harder to absolve. Building off of his claims about price, one might argue that racial minorities, due to their perceived low-status, are more likely to be characterized negatively, irrespective of the price they pay or how they view themselves as consumers. For example, a Black person may see their purchase as a way of rewarding themselves for their hard work. However, a store salesperson may view them as buying something that they cannot afford and consider their purchase inappropriate given their low social rank. If retail settings are places where racial hierarchies are maintained, and even embedded into the branding and the status attached to goods sold, then Black consumers are at risk of being viewed through a racialized lens, which results in their being considered as undesirable by sales staff. Race and racial stigma are then important variables to consider when examining the cultural consumption of racial minorities, but also the underlying social hierarchies at play in retail settings.

Data and methods

This study investigates how Blacks' perceptions of racial stigma operate on the retail sales floor and how their experiences of retail racism alter their consumer experience. It draws upon data collected between 2009 and 2011, from interviews with 55 middle- and working-class Blacks living in the NYC metropolitan area. In order to maintain respondents' anonymity, each respondent was given a pseudonym, which is used throughout the text. All respondents self-identified as African American or Black. All respondents, except for two, were also born and raised in the United States. Respondents' class status was determined by their level of education together with their occupation. This determination is consistent with research that indicates cultural consumption is tied more closely to educational attainment than to income (Schor, 1999).

Middle-class respondents are defined by their level of education, having or attained a college degree was a minimal requirement. A total of 12 of the middle-class respondents additionally had advanced degrees. Middle-class respondents all worked in occupations identified by the Bureau of Labor Statistics as managerial or professional. A few also worked in supervisory roles in service-related occupations. Working-class respondents typically had some college or had attended a trade school. They tended to work in lower tier white-collar jobs (e.g. secretary) or in solidly blue-collar jobs (e.g. firefighter).

This study focused on non-poor Blacks because their consumption is less likely to be constrained by the lack of economic resources. That is, non-poor Blacks have discretionary income and account for a significant fraction of all Black spending (Baker, 2013). Middle-class respondents formed the majority of the sample, though members of the working-class were included for comparative purposes.

In-depth interviews supplied abundant information about study participants' cultural orientations and racial attitudes, as well as their engagement in the market and detailed information about the contexts and conditions under which they encountered stereotypes and discrimination. Respondents were asked details about their experiences of shopping, including where they shopped in general and for particular items (clothes for work, clothes for leisure, etc.). They were also asked about their interactions with store staff and to recount if they had been treated differently while shopping because of their race. Respondents were also asked about places or occasions where they felt they had been stereotyped. If they indicated they had encountered unfair treatment or stereotypes in retail settings, they were asked to describe how they reacted or responded to such treatment or categorization.

Respondents were recruited using a multi-site, multi-source protocol. They were identified through using a variety of standard qualitative practices, including drawing upon organizational and institutional referrals in addition to snowball sampling. All interviews were conducted in person and were approximately 2 hours long. Each interview was transcribed and coded with the use of ATLAS.ti and TRANSANA, both qualitative data analysis software programs. Descriptive and interpretive codes were applied to the transcripts and subsequently used to determine if patterns existed across respondents (Miles, 1994).

From these self-reports emerged a typology of the stereotypes Black shoppers encountered and the range of responses to maltreatment that respondents adopted, which are outlined in the "Findings" section. There are obvious limitations to using self-reported data when researching discrimination. Questions may arise as to the accuracy of respondents' reports, particularly given the fact time may have elapsed since the incident occurred. Nonetheless, to compile a comprehensive list of types of retail experiences Blacks had, I did not place a boundary on when respondents reported having experiences where they believed their race negatively impacted their consumer experience. Questions may also emerge as to how can one be sure that racial bias or stereotypes were the root of the service failure. Even if respondents' subjective reports of their experiences are difficult to triangulate, gauging Black shoppers' perceptions of their cumulative discriminatory experiences is an important means to uncover the nature of racial stereotypes in retail settings, as well as, to determine how Black shoppers' experiences are affected by such treatment. Furthermore, although this study draws on self-reported data, research has demonstrated that racial minorities are aware of when discrimination is occurring, and their perceptions of discrimination are accurate (Harrell, 2000), thus much can be learned from their accounts.

The sample selected met the theoretical objectives of this study, and the analysis of respondents' firsthand accounts addresses the question of how respondents perceive that their race impacts their experience as consumers. The findings reveal how Blacks view that race conditions their experiences as consumers, and thus useful conclusions can be drawn from an analysis of these respondents' experiences.

Findings

African Americans in this study indicated that their experiences in the market are not free from racial stereotypes or discrimination. Stores and shops were places where they ran the risk of encountering poor treatment and instances where their legitimacy as consumers was called into question. Respondents reported that they had experienced discriminatory treatment in a range of retail establishments, from boutiques to big-box stores, and while trying to procure a broad spectrum of types of goods, from personal items to big-ticket items such as furniture. Retail racism was pervasive, taking place in grocery stores, as well as in stores that sell luxury wares. While it is beyond the scope of this article to gauge how frequently African Americans report unfair treatment or service failure depending on the type of retail store (boutique vs big-box store), or the type of commodity or service being consumed, it should be noted that stores that sold high-end apparel were often mentioned by respondents as hot-spots of discriminatory treatment. It was often in these stores where they sought to purchase expensive clothing or jewelry that they felt the sting of racial stereotypes.

Anti-Black bias was exhibited by salespeople, as well as, store security personnel, customers, and some stores and brands were viewed as racially exclusionary. In the forthcoming section, I review Black shoppers' impression of the retail sales floor and the stereotypes they perceived were pervasive when they shopped. Their reports reveal that a racial hierarchy is evident in the marketplace and that Blacks are not viewed as "ideal" consumers. Second, I review the ways that Black shoppers perceive that racial biases are manifested in inferior service and the ways that they anticipate or adapt to such treatment. Lastly, I discuss how taking steps to prevent against discrimination or having to react to retail racism alters Black shoppers' consumer experience.

Racial stereotypes operating on the retail sales floor

For Black customers, their race is often hyper-visible while out shopping, being not only salient but also eliciting negative stereotypes. Of the 55 total respondents 44 (80%) recalled having an experience where they perceived that racial stigma and stereotypes were evident when they shopped. Two related stereotypes were pervasive in their accounts: (1) the association of criminality with blackness, specifically Blacks were seen as potential shoplifters, and (2) the association of poverty with blackness, that is, Blacks were assumed to be too poor to be able to make a purchase (Table 1).

Table 1. Types of retail discrimination reported by respondents.

Type	Total (<i>N</i> = 44 out of 55 respondents)	
Shoplifter or thief	26	59%
Black and poor	23	52%
Poor service/no service	23	52%

In many instances, various stereotypes operated in tandem. For example, respondents might be both ignored by sales staff because they were seen as unfit and followed around by a store's security personnel. Of the 44 respondents that reported experiencing unfair treatment, 26 experienced being followed around or suspected of shoplifting. Respondents indicated that they were followed around in a range of retail settings; drugstores, boutiques, and big-box stores, and when shopping for mundane everyday items, as well as, luxuries. Respondents believed that the association of blackness with criminality meant that they were subject to added policing. For example, Amare, a professional working in the finance industry, notes that whenever he goes into a high-end Italian fashion store "the security guard—it's like him and I are holding hands. Like he's on me." Sharon, a middle-class advertising professional, made the racial connection clear as she states "Because I'm black, they think I'm going to try to steal something."

Furthermore, respondents distinguish between surveillance and receiving personalized attention, as Lisa, a managing partner of a successful start-up, notes, sales staff are "following you (around), but not asking if you need help." Additionally, they observe White customers benefitting from less scrutiny and a freedom to come and go and shop as they pleased. They also believe that they are often subject to unnecessary security practices—having their bags searched upon leaving a store after having made a purchase while White customers are not subject to similar searches. When taken together, these experiences had a lasting impact on the Blacks.

The second stereotype that respondents reported encountering while shopping was that they were too poor to afford to make a purchase. Indeed, 23 out of 44 respondents noted that this negative perception was in play. Daniel, a training specialist for a medical firm, remarked that when he shops at a luxury department store, the salespeople are thinking "look at this African American buying stuff that he probably can't afford." While there is no way to know what the store's staff actually think of Black shoppers without asking them directly, the assumption that Blacks are too poor to make a purchase, and therefore unworthy of being served or deserving of derision was consistently mentioned by respondents as part of their shopping experience, particularly at stores where high-end items were sold.

Respondents also describe interactions with sales staff who are explicit regarding their prejudicial assumptions. For example, Darryl, an associate at an investment

bank, describes an occasion when the salesperson voiced his opinion. As Darryl explains,

I walked in and then I asked the guy like how much something was going to cost. And I thought it was too expensive so I was like nah, nah, I'm not . . . And I was like cool about not wanting to buy it. And the guy replied, oh, you knew you weren't gonna buy this before you even asked me. Or like, you know you didn't want to buy this anyway. And I was kind of like, excuse me? But he didn't want to say nothing else. So that's how I knew it was more like a racial slur.

Similarly, Sharon describes an occasion when a sales clerk told her that she need not try on a dress. As she recalls,

I was in [a store] and the lady just straight up told me "Yeah, I don't think you should try that on. It's \$800 dollars." And I was like, I want to try it on, thank you. So already making assumptions from that. And that was clearly a race thing to me, because other people were trying stuff on and it was the same price and I didn't hear her say that.

While Sharon was insistent that she be allowed to try on the pricey dress, her experience reveals the extent that a store's sale staff can serve as gatekeepers, actively working in subtle ways to police Blacks' consumption. A store's sales staff often treated Black customers poorly in an effort to "protect" the prestige associated with a good, particularly when the products for sale were expensive.

Respondents also indicated that store personnel evidenced the assumption that Blacks did not belong in the store by "telling you the price of something before you asked for it" (Lisa) or by pointing out where the store's sales section was located without the customer asking about it. All of these occasions serve to remind Blacks that retail spaces are not democratic places.

In the forthcoming section, I extend the discussion beyond Blacks' perceptions of the stereotypes they encounter while shopping, to examine how stereotypes impact Black shoppers' experiences, making their consumption qualitatively different as a consequence of negative perceptions of their racial group.

Encountering service failure

When negative racial stereotypes are salient, Black consumers report experiencing service failure, which includes being ignored and receiving inferior service. While stereotypes emerged in diverse retail settings, Blacks' perception of service failure was most pronounced in stores that catered to an exclusive clientele. Black customers' perception of service failure might have been more pronounced in these stores because of higher expectations for personalized attention and assistance.

A salesperson's disinclination to serve Black customers was often indicated by an unfriendly tone of voice or when Black shoppers noticed that other customers were being helped before or instead of them. For instance, Jeff, a sales manager at a large insurance company, describes a time when he felt his race negatively affected his ability to receive a salesperson's assistance. As he notes,

I was walking around and trying to get help, like "excuse me, could I—" "Oh, I'll be with you in a second," and then you see them helping someone, then someone else comes over and asks them a question and they help them . . . People were sort of, didn't care.

Like many respondents, Jeff perceives racial bias to be behind his difficulty in gaining assistance. Racial bias was most evident when sale staff proceeded to help other customers rather than help them. Being ignored, made to wait, and skipped over are all examples of a lack of recognition, and Jeff was hardly unique in his experience of this form of unfair treatment.

Alysha, an analyst at an investment bank, recalled an interaction with a sales woman, which was similar in character to Jeff's experience. As she describes,

This woman just was not helpful, and I thought she was just an unhelpful salesperson. But then I would see like, you know, fill-in-the-blank white girl comes in, and she's just like, "Oh I'll get you this, Oh I'll get you that," you know, as opposed to the one time, "Oh you need any help?" You know, and she wasn't as doting as she was for this other person.

Alysha believes that helping her was seen as a much lower priority than helping White customers. Having these types of experiences signaled to Black shoppers that they were not esteemed and desirable customers. When their race resulted in social exclusion, they reported feeling uncomfortable, frustrated, and displeased while shopping, indicating that racial bias detracts from the pleasure that shopping might otherwise afford Black customers.

When faced with social exclusion and discriminatory treatment, most respondents adopted non-confrontational strategies, mainly exiting the store and refusing to make a purchase. Although some, mostly middle-class women, vocalized their discontent and also took steps to reduce the risk of being stereotyped as poor, including cultivating social ties with sales staff and consciously demonstrating loyalty to particular brands or stores. A minority of respondents even went so far as to purchase things they did not want just to disprove negative racial associations that indicated that Blacks were not ideal customers. Regarding the relative salience of the different types of responses, the most frequently used strategies were non-confrontational in nature; many respondents just left the store or they avoided stores if they felt that their presence was prohibited or unwanted.

Javon, an associate at private equity firm, a man who was both well-educated and financially well-off, noted that he avoids shopping at one particular men's clothing store altogether because of negative experiences he has had there in the past. As he explains, "They really do make me feel uncomfortable as a black man. And I think it's also because I'm—they figure their style and the price points are not for young people, they're not for black people." Javon's comments indicate how certain goods or stores may be perceived as off-limits or inappropriate for certain consumers, race being one metric used to determine suitability. Middle-class respondents often experienced discriminatorily treatment when shopping for clothing necessary to meet the dress code requirements of their workplaces. Thus, to prevent feeling "uncomfortable" Javon avoided shopping at that store altogether, but he could not avoid shopping for well-tailored dress shirts and suits in similar high-end stores.

While Javon avoided certain stores altogether, Monique, a hair stylist, refuses to make a purchase when she believes she is treated discriminatorily. As she states on one occasion "I didn't buy anything, simply based on the fact that I was being followed." Most respondents were like Monique; they curtailed their shopping at the particular moment that they experienced poor treatment based on the idea that they were not the "right" kind of customer or a potential shoplifter.

Several respondents indicated that they did not window shop to disconfirm negative perceptions that Blacks were not serious about making a purchase and therefore less desirable customers. Additionally, they quite consciously avoided stores that were not in their price range and when they shopped, they intended to buy something. Jada describes her shopping trips as operating with a mission. She states, "When I shop, I go where I know I'm going to get something. Even if I don't know what I'm going to get...like I don't window shop on Madison Avenue just for the heck of it." Melanie, an administrative assistant, indicates that she aims to be respectful of a salesperson's time. As she confesses, "When I go, I don't window shop...if I'm going in the store, I'm coming to buy something." However, she often encounters retail workers who treat her like helping her would be a waste of their time. As she notes, "They don't ask you if you need help, because I guess they figure I'm just coming in there to BS or waste time and to window shop." Melanie goes on to remark that she always shops with the goal of making several purchases, and therefore she limits her shopping to just a few times a year. Respondents, like Melanie, illustrate that the pleasure reaped from leisurely perusing a store is restricted when in part they feel compelled to focus their efforts on retrieving whatever they came to the store to purchase. Thus, Black shoppers limit where they shop, but also face constraints on their opportunities to browse, conduct research, and at times to comparison-shop.

For a minority of respondents, their being subject to stereotypes shifted their goals in a different way. Some shoppers feel they have to prove that they belong in the store. Three respondents indicated that they purchased items that they did not intend to buy to demonstrate that they could afford to shop wherever they might be. This approach is non-confrontational but is a way of contesting unfair treatment. Lisa, for example, states that "I've made a purchase that I didn't want to

make, just to prove a point.” Similarly, Damon notes that depending on his finances he has purchased something to show that he can afford it when he senses that the store staff believes he cannot afford to shop there. As he recounts,

There are times when I’ve done it, and, you know, I’ll regret it, and say, like I know I really didn’t need that and I’m not even sure if that person remembers me. But in my mind, I kind of say to myself, maybe they won’t treat the next guy that looks like me that way. So maybe if I go back in there next time, they might hop to and say, “Oh, how’s it going?” You know and treat me a little different.

By making a purchase, or in Damon’s case several large purchases, respondents intend to challenge negative stereotypes of Black shoppers and to discourage sales staff from treating them poorly in the future. In this way, their consumer experience is not halted but is transformed. However, this strategy was enacted by only a few middle-class shoppers, which suggests that having access to economic capital might matter for the extent that this approach is adopted.

One of the proactive strategies respondents used was to demonstrate that they could afford to shop wherever they might be. They also worked to reduce the likelihood they might encounter unfair treatment or poor service by establishing ties to sales staff and making a special effort to demonstrate brand loyalty. By demystifying themselves as strangers and building relationships with a store’s staff they believed they could reduce the likelihood of encountering service failure. Jada, a television marketing professional, notes “when I go places, I build relationships with the people who [work there], like if I’m going to shop there a lot because, for me, the service is just as important as the product I’m buying.” By shopping consistently at a particular store or with particular sales staff, Jada hopes to reduce the risk of encountering status misrecognition and poor treatment. Doing so also helped to negate the stereotype that Blacks are unwilling or unable to make a purchase. Additionally, by building a personal relationship and a history of transactions, respondents feel they have more leverage if they were ever treated poorly. Being a loyal customer may help them to make the case that their patronage is valuable. As Tasha notes,

I do tend to shop places where I’m a cardholder. I will buy something Chanel from Saks before I go to Chanel and buy it, cause I feel like it gives me a little more leverage. I can be like, I’m a cardholder, I’ve been a loyal customer since whatever year... Like I’ve always shopped here. You can pull up my card savings. You see the amount of money I spend... I do think it gives you a little bit of leverage if I am... treated differently.

Jada and Tasha draw on social capital and aim to build strong ties with sales staff to mediate against negative perceptions of their racial group.

While race was important, respondents perceived that it was not the only factor that impacts whether or not they are treated poorly. Non-racial factors, such as age

and whether they were shopping alone or in a group, also affects their retail experience. Mentioned by nine respondents, the most salient non-racial factor that affects their experience is how they are dressed when shopping. Even those who did not report having discriminatory encounters believe that their appearance is a major factor determining the service they receive. Clothing is a communicator of status, thus by indicating the importance of their dress, respondents reveal that perceptions of their class status impacts how they are treated. However, for most, altering the way they dressed is not seen as a viable means of reducing their chance of encountering racial stereotypes while shopping.

Two women were the exception. Christina, an executive administrative assistant, actively works at projecting an upscale image when she goes shopping. She takes care to “look as if I have a lot of money” when she shops. For her, this means wearing pearl earrings, a coat with fur cuffs, and dress slacks. Similarly, Vanessa, an independent consultant, notes that she also dresses the part to demonstrate that she is suitable to be served:

I like to prevent against poor service. If I'm ever out shopping and I pretty much, I'll know I'm gonna be out shopping because I hate it so much... I will try to look like I belong to be shopping there.

When asked to elaborate on what looking like she “belonged” entailed, she explained “Maybe wearing something a little more designer. Having on really fabulous shoes. Just being more high-end in general.” While most respondents acknowledged that being dressed more formally or projecting a professional look might buffer them or reduce the likelihood they would be perceived as a poor person, unlike Christina or Vanessa, they did not think it worthwhile to invest the time and effort in dressing up, or attempting to use goods to demonstrate their class position. As Curtis, a political staffer notes, although you might be treated unfavorably if “you’re going to [a high-end department store] with sweat-pants on” but that does not change the way he dresses when he shops there. As he states,

I don't really care about what I'm dressed like when I'm not trying to make a power move or something... I just dress for comfort. I'd wear slippers to [a high-end department store] to buy whatever I'm looking for.

Curtis' comments indicate that he does manage his self-presentation in certain contexts, when he is making a “power move,” yet he does not perceive shopping as an activity where it is worth his while to get dressed up for, even though he acknowledges that he runs the risk of being treated poorly if he does not do so.

Additionally, respondents indicate conveying their professional status via their dress does not always buffer them from status confusion. Vanessa recounts that wearing a black suit while shopping during her lunch break did not improve her

shopping experience at a high-end department store as other customers assumed that she must work there. As she explains,

I was actually in [a high-end store] one day in a suit just on my lunch break from work and I got in an elevator and these other two women got in an elevator and one of them was like, “oh, do you know where the bathroom is?” I was like, “oh, no, I don’t.” And then she gets irate and she’s like, “oh, my gosh, how come you don’t know where the bathroom is?” And I was like, I don’t know . . . And then the other one, she was like she doesn’t work here. So I was like, oh. ‘Cause I’m black.

Similarly, Robert notes that wearing a suit often results in an aggravating interaction with other customers who assume he works at the store. As he explains,

I’ve gotten, ‘Do you work here?’ Especially if I’m suited up on a day and I may go out after work to buy something. You know (I get) ‘Do you work here?’ Um, it’s like—Ah, I’m wearing a suit and I happen to be shopping. No, I don’t work here.

Vanessa and Robert’s experiences suggest that being Black in a high-end store is associated with occupying a low-status position and being dressed in a suit offered them no protection from this association. In fact, how they were dressed was re-interrupted in line with stereotypical assumptions of Blacks as being low-status.

Confrontational strategies were rarely adopted, though some respondents did verbalize their discontent. When frustrated by what they perceived was unfair treatment, some choose to speak up—asking to talk to someone in charge (e.g. the store’s manager)—or to directly confront the sales staff or customer at fault. Tasha describes her willingness to speak up when she perceived that she received poor service as a consequence of racial bias:

Oh, I’ll call the manager in a second . . . I called the manager . . . [and said] I am in this section. Three of your people are sitting at the register talking, and I need help, and no one’s come up to me. And they wrote me a letter, like they were so apologetic, and blah blah blah blah blah. So I mean, I am, like I will talk to someone.

While some respondents sought out people in positions of authority, others confronted the salesperson or store personnel at fault, often making flippant remarks or explicitly demanding the salesperson to stop treating them in a discriminatory fashion. Having to confront racism adds to the racialized burden they face in the quest to procure goods. Perhaps this response was rarely employed because of the additional stress and energy it required

Discussion

Despite claims that mass consumption has had a homogenizing and democratizing effect (McGovern, 1998), Blacks in this study perceive that they are at risk of being

evaluated as undesirable or unwanted customers because of racial stereotypes and stigma. These stereotypes and racial stigma have significant implications for our understanding of (1) how race influences the perception of a customer's status and worth and (2) how social hierarchies operate and are revealed in retail settings.

Toward the first point, respondents' reports show that Black consumers perceive retail contexts as places where they experience status misrecognition. Fraser (2001) defines misrecognition as a form of "social subordination" in which people are prevented from "participating on par with one another in social life" (p. 24). Examples of misrecognition include instances when people are treated as "inferior, excluded, wholly other or simply invisible" (Fraser, 2001: 24). For Blacks, retail settings are fertile grounds for status misrecognition. Not only are the results of this study consistent with previous quantitative and audit studies that indicate consumer racial profiling exist, but the findings also show that their relatively advantaged class status does not buffer middle-class Blacks from encountering racial stereotypes. Considering that even high profile, powerful Blacks, including Oprah Winfrey and President Barack Obama, have revealed that they have been subject to discriminatory treatment while out shopping, there is ample evidence that race serves as a master status. The results are also consistent with Lamont et al.'s (2016) findings that "middle-class blacks are more likely to indicate that they have been 'underestimated or stereotyped as poor, low-status, or uneducated' than are working-class blacks" (p. 59).

To the second point the findings of this study indicate is that racial hierarchies are reproduced in market contexts. These results compliment research that has examined White customers comparatively privileged position in the market. For example, in her study of toy stores, Williams (2006) finds that because White customers are considered highly desirable, they benefit from added services, and extra efforts are made to ensure that they have satisfying experiences. Arguably, Whites' experiences as consumers are positively affected by perceptions of their racial group, which contribute to their sense of shopping as a pleasurable activity. However, when Blacks encounter stereotypes, are policed, and or have negative interactions with fellow customers, sales staff, store management, or store security, the quality of their shopping experience is negatively impacted, affecting if, when, and where they shop.

Stereotypes about Blacks being poor and criminal influence the degree that Black consumers are judged as not legitimate and worthy of service. Anti-Black bias, however, operating in retail settings, conditions how the status, honor, and prestige associated with owning high-status goods is interpreted. These findings show that Blacks' professional attire is reinterpreted in line with stereotypes. If Blacks anticipate that the status associated with goods might be reinterpreted in ways that are consistent with racially biased views, they might see the "status function" of high-status goods as defective or marginally useful. In other words, high-status goods may not confer status for Blacks in the same ways they do for Whites. Black consumers may deem possession or display of high-status goods as

an ineffective means to ensure equitable treatment. Perhaps this is why so few Blacks in this study managed the way they were dressed when shopping.

This research also raises questions as to the ways that race, more broadly, impacts consumption. Research has indicated that consumption is a means for Blacks to express their ethnic pride and/or to counteract racial stigma, notably, through the use of high-status goods. Curtis' comments reveal a central shortcoming of many who argue that Blacks use consumption of high-status goods as a method of asserting their equality. He engages in status enhancement strategies, using products to convey his class status, but he does not do so in *all* settings. Rather than being "cultural dopes" (Garfinkel, 1964), Curtis' remarks reveal that racial minorities demonstrate agency and strategically employ goods for status enhancement purposes. They determine when to use material goods for the purpose of mitigating the negative impact of racial stigma. Furthermore, respondents indicate that they are not always engaged in efforts to project their various social identities or preoccupied with the task of using material objects to assert their group memberships, whether based on race or class, even when they perceive that doing so might prove beneficial.

This research also reveals the strategies that Blacks use to navigate racial bias in the market. Middle-class status does little to thwart social exclusion in the market; blacks, therefore, take proactive stances to prevent being treated in a discriminatory fashion while shopping. Tasha and Jada, for example, emphasized developing personal connections with retail staff. The utility of drawing on social capital in order to prevent racial exclusion parallels Rivera's (2010) finding that the only Black club goers who were able to escape negative evaluations of their status, were those who had strong social ties to club regulars or nightclub staff. She found that doormen at an elite nightclub often scrutinize and negatively evaluate potential Black patrons, using their race as the sole as a criteria for rejection, because Blacks were viewed as "troublemakers" with limited spending potential. Future research should investigate how social capital may lessen status misrecognition, and help Blacks overcome the use of race as shorthand for consumer potential to spend. Given the organization of retail labor market, customers will likely find it challenging to forge long-term ties with sales staff due to an exceedingly high rate of turnover among retail workers and the fact that they tend to be part-time or seasonal, with schedules that are inconsistent and ever changing (Williams and Connell, 2010).

A shoppers' race can impact the experiential dimension of consumption. When Black consumers encounter anti-Black bias and stereotypes, which results in their refusal to shop at certain stores or having inferior experiences, then arguably race impacts their experience negatively. Black shoppers in this study indicate that they are subject to longer wait times, treated as if serving them is a low priority, and are made to feel out of place by sales staff, all factors that that negatively impact the benefits that accrue with the experiential dimension of consumption.

Service failure can have a racial dimension; service failure also functions to reproduce inequality by restricting Blacks' opportunities to acquire cultural

knowledge from the sales staff. Cultural knowledge about goods is transmitted on the retail sales floor. Racially biased sales staff are unlikely to exchange privileged information about products when customers are Black. While “pre-acquisition” activities, including browsing, researching, and comparison-shopping, all facilitate the accumulation of cultural capital, respondents in this study indicate that they often restrict when and where they shop, and purposefully avoid “window shopping.” In this way, retail racism not only curtailed the pleasure derived from the experience, but racial stigma may also limit the degree that Blacks develop a discerning sensibility about which goods are the “right” kind, which Zukin (2004) argues is gained through browsing and shopping around. Similarly, Zelizer (2011) highlights that a store’s sale staff inform prospective customers about products and brands. Shopping is a site of transmission of cultural knowledge. This process is restricted for racial minorities who are marginalized in retail settings, reducing their ability to gain an in-depth understanding of the subtle differences in aesthetics and the quality of products, as well as, what meanings to associate with goods or how to distinguish between the users of different types of goods. Joy et al. (2014) contend that a store’s sales staff, particularly in luxury stores, perform a curatorial function offering prospective customers “guidance and knowledge.” If Black consumers encounter retail racism, their opportunities to engage in “pre-acquisition activities,” browsing and comparison-shopping, will be limited. Thus racial stigma and stereotypes impose an added burden on Black consumers, raising the costs and reducing the rewards of participating in consumption, as well as, altering their actual experience on the ground.

Racial stigma and discrimination in the market affect (1) perceived status associated with goods when their owner is Black and status misrecognition, (2) the experiential dimension of shopping, and (3) the transmission of cultural knowledge on the sales floor calls attention to the ways that the function of consumption differs for racial minorities in a manner that has little to do with their use of consumption goods in the construction of their self-concept or group identity.

Conclusion

Most research on racial discrimination has tended to focus on identifying and accounting for discriminatory practices that take place in the workplace or during housing searches (Pager and Shepherd, 2008; Roscigno, 2007). Consumer markets are also important sites to investigate the persistence of racism and anti-Black bias. Shopping is a ubiquitous and nearly unavoidable activity, and retail stores are microcosms of the larger public sphere. Interactions in retail settings constitute micro-level instances of significant processes of racial inclusion or exclusion.

This research indicates that Black shoppers’ perceived racial stereotypes and discriminatory treatment are commonplace in retail settings and anti-Black bias contribute to an undesirable racial climate for Black shoppers. Racial stigma operating on the sales floor inhibits Blacks’ ability to reap the cultural and experiential

benefits that come with shopping and expose Blacks to added costs when enacting their consumption preferences. In addition to illustrating the effects of race on consumption, the findings of this research have important implications for what we know about discrimination and contemporary racism.

In many ways racism in retail settings is representative of contemporary experiences of discrimination; instances when race is highly salient, as Blacks are subtly subjected to differential treatment and social exclusion, but not prevented from participating or wholly denied access. Consequently, how Blacks perceive and respond to experiences in retail context may be indicative of how they respond to modern forms of racism more broadly.

The interactional nature of discrimination in retail settings results in the individuation of the experience of racism, as well as the adoption of individualistic responses, which represent a departure from collective action used in the past. While discriminatory treatment and service failure were widespread, no respondents in this study sought legal recourse or took part in organized collective or political oriented action, whether “buycotts,” boycotts, petitions, or picketing, when they believed they were treated unfairly because of their race. Their responses to unfair treatment demonstrate a retreat from the more proactive and collective strategies of the past. This reaction may be because respondents experienced discrimination that was subtle and elusive in form, and most saw their encounters as evidence of individual bias rather than of systemic and institutionalized racism. However, their responses, at best represent a short-term solution to a chronic and widespread problem.

Future research should consider appraising the effectiveness of the various coping strategies utilized. Social-psychological research has consistently revealed that discrimination has cumulative and recurrent effects. Continued exposure to racial discrimination can have negative emotional, psychological, and health-related effects. As Harrell (2000) states “the process of questioning one’s observations and perceptions, replaying a situation in one’s mind over and over again, attempting to explain it to others, and entertaining alternative explanations can be stressful above and beyond the original experience” (p. 45). Additionally, racism experienced in retail settings may uniquely contribute to Blacks’ racial alienation and middle-class Blacks’ misrecognition. Sentiments of racial alienation, as defined by Bobo and Hutchings (1996), range along a continuum from feeling incorporated and permitted access to societal resources to feeling completely excluded from such benefits. Bobo and Hutchings (1996) find that feelings of racial alienation are highest for Blacks when compared to other groups, and increase as Blacks’ incomes rise. The widespread nature of Blacks’ experiences of unfair treatment while shopping, likely contributes to Blacks’ racial alienation, as the inconsistency between national cultural claims that equate social equality with a person’s ability to spend money without restriction and Blacks’ consumers encounters with discriminatory treatment. Lastly, Black shoppers’ perception of the market as a place where racial hierarchies are evident and racial stereotypes are salient, has implications for retailers’ bottom-line. Considering that Blacks’ projected collective buying power in

2015 was US\$1.1 trillion, a figure that is expected to grow as more Blacks enter the ranks of the middle-class (Baker, 2013), retailers should work to ensure that all customers perceive that they are treated fairly.

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