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## Social categorisation and group identification: how African-Americans shape their collective identity through consumption

Virág Molnár and Michèle Lamont

This chapter analyses how a low-status group, black Americans, use consumption to express and transform their collective identity and acquire social membership, i.e. to signify and claim that they are full and equal members in their society. More broadly, we analyse the twin processes by which this group uses consumption to affirm for themselves their full citizenship and have others recognise them as such (what the literature on collective identity calls 'group identification' and 'social categorisation'). We document these processes by drawing on exploratory interviews conducted with black marketing experts specialising in the African-American market who provide us with distinctive readings of the meaning of consumption for blacks. These experts are viewed here as individual black consumers and as members of an occupational group organised around increasing the place of consumption in individual social identities.

In the next section, we discuss the place of group identification and social categorisation in the creation of collective identity. We argue that for blacks the formation of collective identity is centred around defining their place in US society, i.e. finding various ways to demonstrate their social membership. The following section pieces together the literature on black consumption to show how focusing on group identification and social categorisation improves our understanding of the meaning of consumption for this group. We identify an alienationist, resistance, and discrimination perspective and propose a 'social identity' perspective: this allows us to accommodate the subjective meaning of consumption practices without predefining it as resistance while taking into consideration the role of cultural producers – in our case, marketing professionals – in providing normative definitions of social membership for their black clientele. The fourth part turns to evidence from seven marketing specialists. Our interviews suggest that marketing specialists (1) shape the meanings of 'the black consumer' for the public at large and the advertising industry in particular; (2) promote normative models of collective identity for blacks that equate social membership with consumption. They also believe blacks use consumption to (3) be recognised as sharing the

collective identities most valued in American society (middle-class membership in particular); and (4) transform the meaning attributed to the category 'black', enact a positive vision of their distinct cultural identity (e.g. as fashionable or proud black people), and affirm their distinctiveness for themselves and others.

We show that, for most of these marketing specialists, mainstream society is equated with 'elite society', perhaps because the acquisition of expensive goods is taken to 'objectify' social membership by making it undeniable: these experts view 'buying power' as a true mark of personal worth and racial equality, and as a powerful rebuttal to racism. Hence, marketing specialists provide to most blacks an ambiguous message about social membership: that it is out of reach to most of them. They make no reference to alternative bases of commonality such as common humanity, cosmic destiny, physiology, culture, territoriality, education, religion, or nationality.

We interviewed marketing specialists in black advertising agencies in New York and Chicago, where most of the agencies in this organisational niche are located.<sup>1</sup> Our interviewees are all black and work at agencies that map the full spectrum of the field, ranging from moderate Afrocentric to mainstream-oriented marketers. Drawing on a list of the top national firms specialising in marketing to the black population (see appendix) we sent letters to the chief executives of these firms asking for their collaboration. The letters were followed by phone conversations where we provided some information on our objectives and set up a face-to-face or phone interview with a marketing specialist employed by the firm. Of the nine firms we contacted, all but two were willing to collaborate. Two of our respondents were found via snowball sampling. Respondents included senior executives of large firms as well as self-employed strategic planners. Interviews lasted between forty-five minutes and two hours.

### Collective identity and the study of consumption

In order to bring new insights into the consumption literature, it is useful to turn to recent writings on social identity offered by Richard Jenkins. This author describes collective social identity as constituted in a dialectical interplay of processes of internal and external definitions. On the one hand, individuals must be able to differentiate themselves from others by drawing on criteria of commonality and a sense of shared belonging within their subgroup. On the other hand, this internal identification process must be recognised by outsiders for an objectified collective identity to emerge. Jenkins's framework captures these internal and external moments of the collective identification process. He draws on analytical distinction between groups and categories, i.e. 'a collectivity which identifies and defines itself (a group *for* itself) and a collectivity which is identified and defined by others (a category *in* itself)' (Jenkins, 1994, p. 23). He contends that the internal-external dialectic can be mapped on to the interplay of processes of *group identification* and *social categorisation*.<sup>2</sup>

The dynamic interplay of group identification and categorisation can be investigated in a number of social contexts ranging from routine public interaction to official classification schemes (e.g. census categories, institutionalised marketing clusters).<sup>3</sup> We explore this dynamic in the realm of consumption, a social activity where it is particularly salient. In doing so, we propose a 'social identity' approach to consumption which centres on the role played by consumption in internal and external definitions of collective identity. More specifically, we examine a range of social process including: (1) how cultural producers (here specifically, marketing specialists) identify and define categories of consumers, which categories become objectified and shape the cultural tools available for the formation of collective identities; (2) how such cultural producers offer cues and cultural models to people about how to achieve full social membership;<sup>4</sup> (3) how individuals use consumption to signal aspiration to membership in symbolic communities (as citizens, middle-class people, etc.); and (4) how consumers perform, affirm, and transform the social meaning attributed to specific collective categories (here, what is common to blacks, but also, eventually, to women and other groups). The first two points address the social categorisation process in the making, i.e. the production of external definitions, while the latter two points address the role of consumption in the group identification process, i.e. the production of internal definitions of collective identity.

Consumption is a particularly felicitous point of departure for examining the symbolic aspects of collective identity beyond our concern for the dynamic between internal and external processes. Indeed, its symbolic efficacy in 'identity work' does not require that individuals be connected through networks and engage in face-to-face contact:<sup>5</sup> It can operate either at the level of bounded subcultures, or at the level of widely shared cultural structures, of 'hidden codes that make individuals and groups predictable and dependable social actors' (Melucci, 1996, p. 8), and that exist beyond the enactment of specific interpersonal typification or ties.<sup>6</sup> Consumption thus constitutes a useful lens for understanding how membership is acquired in symbolic communities.<sup>7</sup>

We now review the literature on black consumption in the United States to show how it can be improved by focusing on processes of internal and external identification.

### Theories of black consumption

Our reading of available research on black consumption practices suggests that the latter are understood as (1) a source of alienation, (2) a means for expressing resistance to dominant society; and (3) a site for discrimination. We argue that the 'alienationist' perspective downplays the subjective meaning that consumers attach to their consumption practices and predefines consumption as repressive while neglecting its role as a site for identity formation and in the transformation of the meaning attributed to blackness as a category.

In contrast, the 'resistance' approach overemphasises the consumers' ability to shape the meaning of consumption against dominant consumption narratives produced by advertising. Simultaneously, it predefines the meaning of consumption as individual or collective resistance, and cannot account for instances where individuals use consumption to gain social membership. Finally, the 'discrimination' perspective offers a unidimensional view of the cultural impact of the marketing industry by downplaying or ignoring recent efforts of black and white firms to combat racial discrimination and transform racial stereotypes.

Focusing on the use of consumption in internal and external identification processes allows us to integrate these neglected, yet crucial, aspects of black consumption. In contrast to the alienationist perspective, we pay careful attention to the subjective meaning individuals attribute to their consumption practices. In contrast to the resistance perspective, we also avoid predefining subjective meaning as counter-hegemonic. In contrast to the discrimination perspective, we pay attention to the positive role played by corporations in shaping the collective identity of blacks. We also analyse subjective understandings of consumption in relation to the dominant social narratives about consumption that are produced by marketing professionals and influence the external definitions (or social categorisation) of black consumers. Hence, our 'social identity' perspective is a substantial addition to the three dominant perspectives by (1) focusing simultaneously on the congruence and interaction between individuals' self-understanding as consumers and the production of external definitions by marketers and society at large, and (2) treating as complementary different aspects of black consumption that are either ignored by the available literature or described independently of, or in opposition to, one another.

### **Conspicuous consumption and alienation**

The first perspective describes the multiple alienating effects of consumption for blacks. However, it neglects the subjective meaning blacks attribute to consumption and how they use the latter to transform positively their collective identity (more specifically, the external categorisation processes, i.e. how 'mainstream society' views them).

The perspective describes how blacks consume to compensate for oppression, exploitation, discrimination, and humiliation: consumption offers immediate gratification and inclusion in mainstream society for affluent and not so affluent blacks alike. However, consumption also has negative consequences in that it erodes racial solidarity and subordinates 'uplifting the race' to private wealth accumulation: it takes blacks away from their 'real' interest of racial solidarity. In the words of Cornel West, blacks have fallen into the clutches of 'corporate market institutions ... [that] have created a seductive way of life, a culture of consumption that capitalises on every opportunity to make money'. Market forces threaten the very existence of black civil society

as they produce a form of nihilism, i.e. ‘the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and most important lovelessness’.<sup>8</sup> Herein lie the alienating effects of consumption.

Along similar lines, Carl Husmoller Nightingale offers a dreary account of how inner-city black children define social integration by inclusion in ‘mainstream America’s mass market and hence compensate for the economic and racial exclusion they face in other parts of their lives’.<sup>9</sup> Like George Lipsitz, he understands commodity purchases as ‘symbolic answers to *real* problems’ (Lipsitz, 1990, p. 9, our emphasis). Marketing specialists devise advertising strategies to capitalise on this illusive and ultimately inefficient search for a compensatory identity. They produce images that equate personal worth with conspicuous consumption (Nightingale, 1993, p. 152) and indirectly have devastating effects on the life of the inner city (e.g. the increasing number of clothing-related armed robberies, ‘sneaker murders’, and the rise of girls’ violence over jewellery; Nightingale, 1993, p. 152, and see also Austin, 1998, p. 157 n. 33). In this context, drug dealers come to be idolised for ‘their ability to combine glorification of blackness – by linking race to prowess in matters defiant, sexual, and violent – with virtuoso performances of conspicuous consumption’ (Nightingale, 1993, p. 152 n. 13).

The perspective describes the affluent black middle class as similarly alienated and prone to engage in a desperate quest for status by means of consumption. In the 1940s and 1950s, E. Franklin Frazier portrayed middle-class blacks as ‘making a fetish of material things or physical possessions’ to satisfy their longing for recognition and to ‘seek an escape in delusions involving wealth’.<sup>10</sup> However, ‘behind the masks’ the black bourgeois struggled with insecurities and frustrations stemming from the futility of efforts to acquire membership in mainstream America, and with self-hatred and guilt for ‘elevating himself above his fellows’ (Frazier, 1957, chapter 10).

Today’s ‘buppies’ (upwardly mobile black professionals) are similarly described in the popular press as ‘ambitious and acquisitive, determined to savour the fruits of integration by any means necessary’ (George, 1992). They strive for career advancement and material wealth (designer wardrobes, elegant houses, furnishings, and fancy cars) to gain an ever elusive social acceptance, as their white counterparts often remain reluctant to acknowledge their status. Hence they experience a disillusionment, which is described in Benilda Little’s novel *The Itch* in powerful terms: her characters feel that the rest of the world ‘either did not see them at all or viewed them as kind of backdrop, treating them with either benign hostility or total indifference. This was the thing that bonded these people ... most Black people who had become successful’ (Little, 1998). They suffer from a ‘cultural schizophrenia’, as they are expected to ‘check any ethnicity at the door’ despite being members of the upper middle class. Similarly, Henry Louis Gates describes the lives (and alienation) of middle-class blacks as predicated on ‘the premise of an inverse relationship between class and colour, where upward mobility implies a flight from racial identity’.<sup>11</sup> Hence, whereas

consumption leads poor blacks to alienation because it provides a false remedy to their social marginality, it leads middle-class blacks to be doubly alienated, i.e. to be alienated from their own race as well as from the mainstream society, in their pursuit of an ever elusive integration. And indeed, poor and working-class blacks view the blossoming black bourgeoisie as pre-occupied with conspicuous consumption, absorbed in egotistical pursuits, and drifting away from 'uplifting the race' (Hampton, 1985, p. 1).<sup>12</sup>

The 'alienationist' perspective resonates in some respects with the Frankfurt school's outlook on the perils of the 'culture industry' and mass consumption.<sup>13</sup> Commodity fetishism is posited to generate 'false consciousness' as people embrace the illusion that consumption will bring them fulfilment, just as they remain unaware of the inherent limitations of capitalism. In the alienationist perspective, as in the Frankfurt school's humanistic critique of capitalism, relations of production (exploitation) are construed as more real than either relations of consumption or collective definitions of social membership. At the same time, consumption and money are seen as intrinsically repressive forces, which precludes the possibility that individuals use them to transform their collective identity and improve their position in the status hierarchy.

As illustrated below, instead of defining the natives' point of view as fundamentally mistaken, the 'social identity' perspective argues for an agnostic stance that entails a suspension of belief concerning the ultimate consequences of consumption. Also, instead of viewing all consuming activity as the product of media manipulation and the seed of false consciousness, this perspective shows how the meanings that individuals attribute to consumption are played out in their definition of the distinctive features of the groups they belong to (i.e. in the process of group identification). Finally, it also considers how, in so doing, individuals react to external definitions of their collective identity as blacks, transforming the meaning of blackness for themselves and for others. For instance, inner-city black children generate fashions distinct from 'mainstream' ones, that come 'from the outside'. Although they may appear to emulate consumption patterns of affluent whites in order to gain membership in mainstream society, they can also be actually striving to meet standards most valued among their peers, which standards may or may not bring them status in society at large (Hall, 1992, p. 263).<sup>14</sup> This process can entail either self-definition as a goal in itself, or resistance to mainstream practices of granting social prestige and recognition.

### **Consumption and resistance**

The second perspective understands consumption as a site where individuals express resistance and defiance to mainstream society and create and transform the meaning of commodity to suit their own purposes, against the dominant meanings provided to them by the advertising industry. This approach underplays the alienating forces of modern consumer culture and refocuses attention to the polysemous nature of commodities. As described by Paul Willis,

consumer goods are 'raw materials' for everyday creativity and consumption is an open-ended activity involving a great deal of interpretive freedom and negotiation rather than passive acquisition (Willis, 1990, p. 19).

This perspective frames black consumption as 'an active, celebratory process' (Gilroy, 1987, p. 211) where transfiguration of meaning is achieved by 'blackening' mass-produced goods so as to subvert domination and contest their dominant, 'mainstream' meaning. Black men and women who bleach their hair shades of blond nowhere found in nature provide a handy example to this practice (Austin, 1994, p. 160; see also White and White, 1998). Hip-hop culture, B-boy and B-girl rebellion also poignantly illustrate the expressive use of consumption in contemporary black culture. B-boys and B-girls 'molded by hip-hop aesthetics and the tragedies of underclass life ... combine the explosive elements of poverty, street knowledge and unfocused political anger' (George, 1992). Their elaborately designed sneakers, gold chains, inverted baseball caps, and rap music, or the survivalist look (classic hunting coat over baggy khakis and Timberland boots, camouflage fatigues and thermal half-face masks) 'taps into a post-Vietnam understanding of the urban terrain as a daily guerrilla war' (Cardwell, 1993, p. 5; see also Moore, 1993). The attire literally mobilises the polysemy of consumer goods to wage what Umberto Eco called a 'semiotic guerrilla war'.<sup>15</sup>

A variant of the resistance approach, advocated by Paul Gilroy, focuses on the use of consumption as a means of collective action with the black community. For Gilroy, hip-hop culture in particular symbolises a site of oppositional meaning and collective strength. It is a cultural practice that brings atomised individual consumers together and fosters collective action by generating an alternative public sphere. Thus Gilroy points to the potential link between the black empowerment movement and the mobilising force of expressive black cultures through consumption (Gilroy, 1987, p. 34; see also Gilroy, 1993).

John Fiske extends this argument in his analysis of the cultural dimensions of 'looting' in the racial protests that followed the Rodney King verdict in Los Angeles. He understands looting in this context as 'an appropriate, available and effective site for political protest' (Fiske, 1994, p. 469), a form of collective social action employed by blacks to articulate their resistance against racial discrimination, oppression and alienation. In the same fashion Lizabeth Cohen offers a historical account of the significance of consumption in the civil rights movement. She underlines that blacks have associated their sense of citizenship with unrestrained access to consumer goods and services from the 1950s onwards. She also shows how the personal experience of indignity (or 'diss') in everyday interactions and the political effectiveness of organised boycotts of stores, restaurants, and buses in the struggle for desegregation, rendered the sphere of consumption a central scene of a social movement (Cohen, 1992).<sup>16</sup>

This perspective is largely faulty for predefining the meaning of consumption as resistance, thereby downplaying the role of dominant social narratives.

This predefinition involves romanticising and exoticising responses to social marginalisation and overestimating the political radicalism of consumption. In contrast, the ‘social identity’ perspective understands the distinctive meaning of commodities like Timberland boots and baggy fatigues created by black urban youth as aiming at the construction of a culturally distinct group identity that does not necessarily have a counter-hegemonic dimension. It also leaves open the possibility that blacks who think of their expressive culture and sense of style as superior to that of whites simply consider this to be a form of distinctiveness, as opposed to resistance. At the level of social categorisation, the social identity perspective examines how blacks transform the dominant meanings of social membership associated with specific commodities, which meanings are made available by marketing specialists (i.e. the preppy Nordic image of Tommy Hilfiger clothes). Finally, it also considers the importance of consumption for acquiring membership in mainstream society (via the purchase of expensive sneakers, for instance, which signals one’s purchasing power), another issue that the resistance perspective cannot tackle given its constraining premises.

### **Discrimination and the disadvantaged consumer**

A third perspective on black consumption focuses on consumer discrimination and on the racialisation of consumption.<sup>17</sup> It describes how blacks encounter stereotypes (as dangerous, without buying power, etc.) in shopping and how these stereotypes are enacted in the retail sector, often under the guise of security measures. An example is provided by Patricia Williams, a distinguished black legal scholar and lawyer, who recalls how she was ‘buzzed out’<sup>18</sup> of a Benetton store in New York City after the salesperson determined that she was an unpromising client, based on her racial characteristics only. She wrote an article denouncing ‘the rhetoric of increased privatisation, [that] in response to racial issues, functions as the rationalising agent of public unaccountability and, ultimately, irresponsibility’ (Williams, 1991, p. 47).

A large-scale study reporting on in-depth interviews with middle-class blacks suggests Patricia Williams’s experience is not an isolated event, but is shared by an overwhelming majority of middle-class blacks. In fact, the incidence of discrimination is highest in commercial settings such as restaurants, retail stores, hotels, and banks, and it takes the form of poor service (or no service), excessive surveillance, or redlining.<sup>19</sup> Consumption is a central site of discrimination and one that is particularly hurtful to blacks, because this discrimination sends the message that they are excluded from the ‘American dream’ (Feagin, 1991, pp. 101–16).

In this discrimination literature, a number of legal scholars also examine how blacks are taken advantage of in commercial transactions. In particular, Regina Austin explores how blacks’ labelling as deviant legitimises *de facto* limitations on their right to shop and sell freely.<sup>20</sup>



It is assumed that blacks do not earn their money honestly, work for it diligently, or spend it wisely. When blacks have money, they squander it and cannot save it. If blacks are cheated in the course of commercial transactions, it is because they cheat themselves either by being unsophisticated or incompetent consumers or by making it difficult for a decent ethical person to make profit from doing business with them. As a result, individual entrepreneurs feel perfectly justified in taking advantage of blacks as a means of privately policing or controlling blacks' spending malefactions. (Austin, 1994, p. 151)

The perception of black consumers as dubious and deviant often jeopardises their recourse to legal remedy for discriminatory treatment. At the same time owners of retail stores claim that they resort to tight security and surveillance because the laws crafted to deter and punish shoplifters are insufficient and ineffective.

Austin argues that similar social and legal mechanisms constrain the leisure activities of blacks. Local authorities often refuse to rent public spaces, auditoriums, concert halls for rap music or reggae concerts or issue a licence to a bar or restaurant that caters to a black clientele 'in the name of curbing or controlling crime, violence, aggression, or social irresponsibility or incivility' (Austin, 1998, p. 3). In fact, Austin argues, while security concerns are ritualistically evoked, there is a more fundamental reluctance to facilitate or host alternative yet legitimate cultural practices that are at odds with mainstream culture. In her view, the above examples demonstrate that racism does not necessarily proceed through readily apparent notions of superiority and inferiority: it is increasingly disguised in the form of neutralising language and insidious rationalisation.<sup>21</sup>

The main failing of the discrimination perspective lies in ignoring the efforts on the part of American corporations to transform the external definition (or social categorisation) of blacks by diffusing a positive portrait of black consumers and by sponsoring a wide range of 'pro-diversity' community events. Marketing specialists are hired as consultants by firms, such as Denny's Restaurants, that have been targeted as racist, in an effort to improve their image. This suggests that corporations increasingly understand the symbolic and economic interest of reaching out to blacks as consumers. Simultaneously, they play a very active role in reshaping the collective identity of blacks. The images they are projecting in advertising often affirm to blacks and to the population at large that African-Americans have considerable buying power and are part of mainstream American society (as professionals, college graduates, home owners, etc.). These images constitute a powerful counterweight to negative portrayals of blacks diffused by the news media. This remains unnoticed by proponents of the discrimination perspective, who tend to view the construction of an alternative black public sphere as the only workable solution to the problem of pervasive racism.<sup>22</sup>

### Marketing specialists interpret the profile of the black consumer

Ethnic or multicultural marketing became the marketing mantra of the 1980s in the United States. This new marketing paradigm views the market as divided into segments and aims at gathering information regarding the customs, traditions, rituals, relationships, and identities of these segments of potential consumers. The three predominant segments are 'blacks', 'Hispanics', and the 'general market'. The black segment is pursued by top advertising agencies and by (often black-owned) black advertising agencies, which have been around since the 1960s. These black agencies have received considerable attention in the recent wake of 'ethnoconsumerism' (Venkatesh, 1995) as they engaged in a fierce struggle with top advertising agencies to control the black market (Lloyd and Hayes, 1995, p. 92; Ayres-Williams, 1998, p. 153). Just as it is the case with 'general market' agencies, these black agencies have come to define black consumers as fundamentally distinct, and contribute to producing and reinforcing this distinctiveness. We want to explore what precisely this distinction is made of.<sup>23</sup>

The shift to segmented ethnic marketing has entailed a broadening of the technical tools used by marketing specialists, including the incorporation of interpretive approaches such as ethnographies and personal interviews, to better capture ethnic cultural worlds. These new developments make specialists in black marketing a particularly suitable source of information on black consumers. Again, interviews with members of this professional group provide us with interpretations of the distinctiveness of black consumers, both from the perspective of their expert knowledge of black consumption and from that of their own personal experience as black consumers.

We structure our analytical description by tracing processes of external and internal identification in order to show how our social identity perspective sheds light on dimensions of black consumption that are neglected and/or not integrated by the three perspectives just reviewed. First, we focus on external categorisation and describe how marketing specialists believe (1) blacks use consumption to transform objectified definition of the category 'black' by providing evidence that they share the collective identities most valued in American society; (2) corporations and marketing specialists themselves contribute to transforming the meaning attributed to the category 'the black consumer'. Second, we turn to internal identifications and show that marketing specialists underscore how blacks use consumption to express their commonness and enact the most positive aspects of their collective self-identity. In the process, we emphasise the meaning of consumption for black consumers (namely, our marketing specialists) and also highlight the positive uses of consumption for gaining social membership; without pre-judging its ultimately detrimental effect on the position of blacks, hence challenging central claims of the alienationist perspective. Moreover, we show, *contra* the alienationist, resistance, and discrimination perspectives, that marketing specialists and corporations can have a positive effect on the dominant social

identity of blacks by providing images of blacks as socially inserted, dotted with buying power, and living stable mainstream lives to the stereotypical association between blackness and poverty. We offer a counterpoint to the resistance perspective in particular, which exaggerates consumers' agency and neglects the powerful impact on dominant social categorisation of these identity narratives construed by the marketing industry.<sup>24</sup> Our social identity perspective offers a framework for analysing in an integrated fashion aspects of consumption that are depicted in isolation from one another in the literature, and more specifically, the use of consumption to gain acceptance (stressed by the alienationist approach) and the creative use of consumption to express identity (stressed by the resistance approach).

### **How consumption shapes social categorisation: achieving membership and changing the meaning of blackness**

The marketing specialists we interviewed discussed at length the centrality of consumption as a way for blacks to affirm and gain recognition of their full membership in American society. This is framed by them both as an empirical observation, and implicitly as a central feature of the normative model of social membership they diffuse to black consumers. Marketing specialists believe that blacks use consumption to signify and acquire equality, respect, acceptance, and status. Interviewees also consistently prioritise a market-driven notion of equality that equates social membership with high socio-economic status.

Marketers interpret the buying habits of blacks as strongly guided by a desire to be recognised an equal and full participating member of society and to disprove the stereotype of blacks as belonging to an underclass deprived of buying power. This desire is manifested in distinct consumption patterns: in comparison with whites, blacks spend disproportionately more on items that they view as affirming their equal standing. Marketers cite familiar data that lower and higher-income blacks alike purchase more premium brands and luxury products than whites. As the chairman and chief executive officer of one of the main national black marketing firm put it, 'We have more money, or disposable income, for attainable status symbols. It is how we acquire the American dream' (see also Fisher, 1996, p. 15). A strategic marketing specialist from Chicago also emphasised this. According to her, black people consume voraciously because they want to be viewed as good and worthy:

Whites will wear jeans but have wallpaper and carpet at home. They do not have to worry about who they are and what they look like when they go out there. When blacks walk out the door they are affected by this . . . Whites gain more respect through purchases. Blacks with Rolexes are stereotyped as engaging in conspicuous consumption or showing off, instead of gaining prestige by it. They buy their way in, but money does not trump blackness.

For this respondent, however, money still remains a ‘passport to acceptance’. ‘Acceptance is the first hurdle that blacks have to overcome. The problem is not “not having the ability” but “being accepted for having the ability”. Money is a universal door opener.’

Blacks carry a stigmatised social identity on their body. This is why it is particularly important to them to display visible signals of high status (e.g. high-quality clothes), in order to counteract racism, to conspicuously distance themselves from the ‘ghetto black’ stereotype, and, as one respondent put it, to disconfirm the view that blacks are ‘uninteresting’, i.e. unlikely to bring benefits through networking. The need to signal worthiness through conspicuous consumption is potentially as powerful as the all-pervasive experience of racism that blacks face on a daily basis. Indeed, we were told that every time blacks interact with whites, they feel the need to refute racist beliefs. In the view of most of our respondents, this is accomplished by driving the best car, drinking the best scotch (especially in public settings), and being impeccably groomed. In contrast to other stigmatised groups (e.g. gays or, in earlier eras, the Jews or the Irish), gaining membership involves not only offering warranties that one personally belongs: it also involves transforming the meaning of the visible stigma, or of the category as a whole. Hence, for blacks, collective status is at stake, whereas, for upwardly mobile whites, mobility is framed in more individualistic terms. To put it differently, for blacks as compared to whites, gaining membership through consumption constitutes a collective act.

In this context, it is interesting to note that data on consumption behaviour confirm that ‘dressing up’ or ‘getting clean’ is more crucial to blacks than to whites. Indeed, black women spend 41 per cent more on personal care services than white women. Also, on average, black households spend four times as much on boys’ suits and sports coats as their white counterparts. They also spend 46 per cent more than white households on girls’ skirts, 67 per cent more on girls’ accessories and 86 per cent more on boys’ footwear.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, despite their lower median household income and lower household expenditures in a lot of product categories, black households outperform white households in pouring money into status consumption.<sup>26</sup> They save 4 per cent of what they earn, but are twice as likely as whites, when they purchase a car, to opt for an expensive foreign model such as an Audi, BMW or Mercedes (Reid, 1995, p. E1). They are also significantly more likely than whites to shop at department and speciality stores. (It is the case for 41 per cent of blacks as compared to 32 per cent of whites.) Along these lines, one respondent noted that blacks resist buying stocks and bonds, precisely because they are not a visible form of wealth that one can point to, both to demonstrate to oneself that one ‘has it’ and to offer concrete proof of one’s social membership.

The normative model of social membership adopted and implicitly promoted by respondents equates it narrowly with consumption and makes no reference to other bases of commonality such as common humanity, cosmic destiny, physiology, culture, territoriality, education, religion, nationality, or

citizenship.<sup>27</sup> For example, a black top executive working for one of the largest black advertising agencies in the United States believes that consumption is a more important means of signalling and acquiring status for blacks than education or membership in the black Church. In his view, branded consumer goods, often referred to as ‘portable status symbols’, are obtained more easily than employment, housing, or membership in certain groups and organisations. Also, when asked what images of blacks they try to convey, this and other marketing specialists often described black people shopping at Saks Fifth Avenue and engaging in consumption patterns that are characteristic, not of the average American, but of the top 5–10 per cent of the population, black or white. Although some referred to marketing campaigns aimed at K-mart consumers, implicitly or explicitly, all stressed that consuming luxury items, and not ordinary items (‘Remy Martin, not Coors beer,’ as one of them put it), provides social membership.

These findings raise concerns about the unintended consequences of these marketing messages: marketers offer to most blacks the contradictory idea that they cannot afford the social membership for which they strive. Moreover, when asked whether they have any reservations about targeting luxury goods to inner-city poor blacks who cannot afford them,<sup>28</sup> one interviewee replied that marketers should not judge consumers’ decisions, blacks or whites: in line with neoclassical economics, he believed it is the role and privilege of sovereign consumers to make choices after proper deliberation. Therefore, ‘some people may buy a Hilfiger coat, but buy only this one coat for two years and wear it every day’.

Marketing specialists believe that they also play a progressive social role, which consists largely in diffusing to clients and to the world at large a more positive image of blacks and a more accurate view of the diversity of the black population, particularly in terms of its purchasing power – what one called demonstrating ‘positive realism’. By doing so, they explicitly shape meanings predominantly associated with blackness and transform the external identification aspect of black social identity. This is achieved by, for instance, encouraging corporations to be respectful to blacks, because ‘blacks mostly want to consume products that treat them right’.<sup>29</sup> It also means publicising the support of corporations for African-Americans (e.g. corporate sponsoring of African-American artistic or athletic events) and fighting the prejudices of conservative whites employed by marketing agencies that target the general market, publicising basic facts concerning the socio-economic diversity and purchasing power of the black population, and *ipso facto* contradicting the racist assumption that most blacks fit the underclass stereotype.

The ability of marketing specialists to diffuse a definition of social membership as acquired through consumption and to reframe the meaning of ‘the black consumer’ (especially concerning class diversity among African-Americans) should not be underestimated: billions of dollars are invested to diffuse this message. Hence it is extremely likely to influence the formation of the collective identity of African-Americans, both for themselves and for

the public at large. Interviewing a wider range of black and white consumers is needed before we can assess the extent to which the identity of black consumers is indeed reshaped by these images.

### **Consumption and group identification: what 'black' means to 'blacks'**

We now turn to marketers' descriptions of the meanings that blacks give to consumption, which we consider from the perspective of its impact on how blacks define themselves as a group (i.e. on internal identification processes). These descriptions have to do with how blacks define themselves to themselves through consumption, by using commodities to express a self-identity they all value as blacks. Consumption is described here as a means to perform and affirm collective distinctiveness (including racial pride), primarily for oneself. It is also a mean to treat oneself well while rebutting stereotypes.

In the eyes of our interviewees, their distinctive expertise as black marketing specialists resides in their ability to tap the cultural identity and needs of blacks (i.e. going beyond 'just putting white people in ads'). They believe that this is a requirement for a successful marketing campaign aimed at blacks, and that black agencies have an advantage over their white counterparts in reaching this goal: not only do they have more native insight into and 'natural affinity' with that black culture, but also they have more personal experience and invest more energy into understanding what makes blacks resonate with an ad or identify with a specific product. In particular, black marketers spend considerable time trying to understand how blacks differ, and believe they differ, from whites and what makes blacks relate to one another<sup>30</sup> – what defines their collective identity. Whereas general market agencies often tend to underplay the black/white distinctiveness, black marketing agencies capitalise on it by using what they believe to be authentically black frames of reference. Their work also consists of making blacks believe that consuming is the most adequate way of expressing cultural distinctiveness and gaining acceptance to mainstream society simultaneously by displaying formidable purchasing power.

Marketers discuss the intrinsic rewards blacks attach to consumption, which has implications for developing a positive collective identity as blacks. They affirm that self-expression is a source of personal pride for all human beings, and consumption is a means for achieving this for whites and blacks alike. For instance, a female executive explains, 'Consumption brings in the pride. "I want to look good. I want to be seen. Make it green or yellow," i.e. visible . . . Blacks try to put on the dog, they like to "get clean". It makes them feel better . . . and they do it for themselves.' However, for blacks, this has both an individual and a collective dimension, to the extent that they use consumption to signify who they are collectively as blacks. In particular, an interviewee indicated that blacks use fashion differently than whites, as it is a dimension of black expressive culture that is superior to 'bland, low-key and not particularly stylish' white culture. Moreover, several marketers view

blacks as taste makers and trend setters in mainstream society, not only in fashion but also in urban lifestyles and music.

Other interviewees underline the importance of consumption in the positive internal identification of blacks by pointing to the use of distinctively black practices to affirm cultural commonness and belonging. Paraphrasing James Brown, one in particular explains that African-Americans use consumption to 'say it out loud that I am black and proud'. 'Now black pride is the recognition of the motherland, Africa. It becomes a personal statement about what "black" and "African-American" mean to you. This often leads to purchasing black artefacts to affirm who you are even if you live in [white upper middle-class] Westport, Conn.'

Another example of this collective affirmation by means of distinctively black practices is adopting a hairstyle that affirms one's racial pride (e.g. being able to 'work for IBM without straightening my hair'<sup>31</sup>). As one respondent puts it, a growing number of African-Americans use consumption to express that 'I can get in and out of corporate America, but I remain this proud black person'.

Respondents also discuss the importance of consumption in signalling blacks' sense of a good life and general well-being, and in simultaneously affirming one's worth and status for oneself in the face of pervasive discrimination – which we also consider as part of the internal racial identification process. In the eyes of a respondent who defines herself as 'very materialist', a top-brand car communicates that:

you can afford it and you are worth it, i.e. you are worth the best. When your history tells you that you are less than, and only worthy of the worst, it feels terrific to be able to say, 'I don't care what you might think, I know I am worth it.' It feels very good. When you don't see yourself represented with relevance and respect, if you can get it for yourself, it's important.

She suggests that the ability to consume is integral to affirming her self-worth and racial (group) identity simultaneously. It helps counterbalance negative external categorisation: consuming rebuts racism not only for others, but also to oneself by providing material support to one's self-worth – positing, of course, that self-worth is correlated with buying power.

That consumption is used to facilitate the expression of a positive racial identity is also demonstrated by the insistence of marketing executives that blacks consume for their own satisfaction above all, as opposed to 'pleasing whites'. This is illustrated by the president of one of the advertising agencies who described the situation thus:

We are not trying to impress white people any more. We are not begging for acceptance. We just consume what we like. The attitude is 'I don't care if you don't like me. But through consuming I want to let you know that "I know". This is who I am. I want to be perceived as being "in the know".'

This interviewee is implicitly pointing to the role of consumption in leading one to acquire a self-image as being 'on the ball', i.e. as someone who knows

how the (status) game is played, and therefore as someone who needs to be contended with.

A positive group identity is closely linked with consumption, social membership, and the demonstration of purchasing power. In this context, the expression of cultural distinctiveness and racial identity is often framed primarily in terms of tastes slightly different from those of whites or in the use of different brands but of equal status within a product category (Cadillac versus Mercedes, Hilfiger versus Calvin Klein, Kool Aid versus Coke, etc.). Or else it simply means using the same goods differently. As one senior marketing executive who exclusively shops for clothes at Brooks Brothers puts it, 'I walk out of there and I have my own style, my own way of putting things together. I really don't look like the other white guy who shops there.' For these marketing specialists, their shared identity as blacks is largely defined and performed in the sphere of the market, through commodities, perhaps in lieu of through the affirmation of a cultural distinctiveness in aesthetic/expressive culture, through a shared religious culture, a shared history, or common patterns of social interaction. More interviews are needed before assessing how these various conceptions of racial commonness are articulated. Our data suggest that marketing specialists conceptualise their own racial belonging as well as social membership through consumption, just as they do for African-Americans in general.

## Conclusion

This exploratory study of consumption in light of the collective identification processes of group formation and social categorisation offers new analytical tools to examine the link between social identity and the practice of consumption. We trace how collective identity for blacks is manifested predominantly through the interplay of internal and external definitions of social membership in US society. We analyse the interaction between how marketing specialists, considered here as black consumers, use consumption to define their racial identity (for themselves) and how this group, as professionals, attempts to influence the widely available categorisation of blacks as a group, both for blacks and for mainstream society. This analysis helps us avoid some of the pitfalls of existing research on black consumption by accounting for dimensions of consumption that are neglected in the literature or by integrating and correcting dimensions that are generally considered independently from one another.

On the one hand, the alienation and discrimination approaches overemphasise the impact of the social categorisation process on blacks' use of consumption: in a nutshell, they equate the representations of blacks' social standing in advertising with blacks' self-understanding of their social membership. Unlike the resistance and social identity perspectives, they do not investigate the social processes by which blacks internalise and vest with new meaning the categories that are made available. And, unlike the social



identity perspective, they also neglect to analyse how black marketing executives transform the images of blacks that are available to blacks and to US society at large. On the other hand, the resistance approach overemphasises the power of group identification, i.e. how blacks use consumer goods in an innovative way to counteract social marginalisation and discrimination. Unlike the social identity perspective, this approach downplays the power of dominant social narratives produced by marketing executives and ignores how blacks use consumption to gain social membership.

In contrast to the other approaches, by tackling the interaction between group identification and social categorisation processes, the social identity perspective does not prioritise only one of these dimensions. It gives due emphasis to the subjective understanding of black consumption practices without predefining the innovative potential of consumers in transforming the meaning of consumer goods. It also refines the analysis of the social categorisation process by showing, *contra* the alienationist and discrimination perspectives, that the 'categorising work' of marketers can have a positive impact in transforming the meaning of the category of 'blackness' (away from the underclass stereotype) and improve the symbolic status of blacks. Thereby, it offers a more balanced and integrated reading of social mechanisms that underlie blacks' use of consumption in defining their place in contemporary US society.

The interviews suggest that consumption is uniquely important for blacks in gaining social membership. Their experience of racism makes the issue of membership particularly salient, and consuming is a democratically available way to affirm insertion in mainstream society. This is facilitated by the prevalence of market-driven notions of equality, and an equation of social membership with purchasing power, found in US society at large, and promoted by marketing specialists in particular, both for consumers and for themselves. These marketing specialists play a central role in producing some of the dominant narratives associated with the category 'black'. In their view, by providing images of blacks as valuable consumers, they contribute to improving the collective social standing of blacks in the mainstream status hierarchy and counterbalance negative stereotypes of blacks as marginal, low-status and criminal elements of US society. Yet we noted that equating social membership with buying power makes it largely unreachable for a large number of whites and blacks alike.

At the level of the group identification process, our interviewees underscore the importance of consumption for the expression of collective cultural distinctiveness by displaying commonness, i.e. tastes that are characteristically black. Hence consumption plays a central role in internal identification processes as well as in group categorisation, in how a collectivity defines itself for itself through commonalities and a sense of shared belonging, and how outsiders recognise it as distinct. At the same time, the interviews also suggest that marketers promote the equation of social membership with conspicuous consumption. Consumption thus becomes a simple and effective

way of expressing both black cultural distinctiveness and membership in mainstream society by virtue of demonstrating equal purchasing power with whites. And through the dynamic interaction of internal and external definitions of social identity we witness the construction of the 'black consumer' and the transformation of the meaning of 'blackness'.

Of course, at this point our study of the group identification dimension suffers from a clear middle-class bias. Our interviewees are members of the upper middle class and are representatives of a profession that devotes all its energies to the role of consumption in social life. Therefore the broadening of our group of interviewees should be the logical next step for our project. The incorporation of a wide range of black and white consumers that vary across class, gender, age, and occupation will clearly shed new light on the interaction of internal and external definitions of collective identity. Thereby we also hope to sharpen the comparative focus of our analysis to (1) reveal how varying conceptions of social membership correspond to the views of marketing specialists and middle-class consumers, (2) explore more closely black and white differences, (3) extend the analysis to the study of the construction of race-specific tastes, and (4) explore whether other stigmatised groups (e.g. women or gays) understand consumption as an important tool for gaining membership.

By extending this exploratory study this way we hope to demonstrate the analytical potential of the social identity perspective in consumption research at large. This perspective can do more than transcend the limitations of alienationist, resistance, and discrimination perspectives. It can also help us move beyond existing paradigms that waver between postmodern arguments that advocate the individualisation and fragmentation of consumption profiles and deterministic approaches that reduce the association between social identity and consumption to a clear correspondence between consumption patterns and class position.

#### **Appendix: Top marketing firms specialising in the black ethnic market, 1997 (\$ million)**

- 1 Burrell Communications Group (167.999)
- 2 Uniworld Groups (162.000)
- 3 Don Coleman Advertising (111.000)
- 4 Chisholm-Mingo Group (73.712)
- 5 Muse Corder Chen & Partners (50.000)
- 6 Carol H. Williams & Advertising (48.500)
- 7 Sukes Communications (23.958)
- 8 Wimbley Group (23.000)
- 9 R. J. Dale Advertising & Public Relations (22.700)
- 10 Spike DDB (22.500)
- 11 E. Morris Communications (16.100)
- 12 Andersen Communications (15.000)
- 13 Caroline Jones (15.000)

- 14 Circulation Experti (12.500)
- 15 Vince Cullers Advertising (7.600)
- 16 Jesse J. Lewis & Associates (6.500)
- 17 The King Groups (6.000)
- 18 Visions USA (3.906)
- 19 Images USA (3.800)
- 20 Beach Advertising/Beach Graphics (3.394)

*Source* Roz Ayres-Williams (1998, p. 153)

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## Notes

- 1 The primary target of these agencies, the black population, is heavily concentrated in these metropolitan areas. In fact, blacks make up a large share of the population in several major metropolitan areas. More than three in ten residents of the New York metropolitan area are black. New Orleans, Baltimore, Atlanta, and Washington all have populations that are more than one-fourth black. See Fisher (1996) and Edmondson (1997).
- 2 A group is rooted in processes of internal definitions, while a category is externally defined. Jenkins defines 'category' as follows: 'A class whose nature and composition is decided by the person who defines the category; for example, persons earning wages in a certain range may be counted as a category for income tax purposes. A category is therefore to be contrasted with a group, defined by the nature of the relations between the members' (in Mann, 1983, p. 83).
- 3 For a full list see Jenkins (1997, p. 210).
- 4 On advertisers as meaning producers see Jackall and Hirota (forthcoming).
- 5 On identity work see Snow and Anderson (1987). On symbolic communities see Anderson (1991).
- 6 For more network-bound approaches to identity see Tilly (1998) and Somers and Gibson (1994). For a discussion of cultural structures see Sewell (1992), Hall (1992) and Wuthnow (1987). For a more macro view of institutionalised categories see Jeppeson (1991) and Dobbin (1994).
- 7 On this topic see also Lamont (1992).
- 8 Austin (1994, pp. 158–9), citing Cornel West (1993, pp. 5, 16, 14).
- 9 Nightingale (1993, p. 135) argues that the 'kids' experience of exclusion ... has made their participation in mass culture particularly urgent and enthusiastic, for the culture of consumption has given them a seductive means to compensate for their feelings of failure'.
- 10 They are constantly buying things – house, automobiles, furniture and all sorts of gadgets, not to mention clothes. Many of the furnishings and gadgets which they

- acquire are never used; nevertheless they continue to accumulate things. The homes of many middle-class Negroes have the appearance of museums for the exhibition of American manufacturers and spurious art objects. The objects which they are constantly buying are always on display' (Frazier, 1957, p. 229–30).
- 11 Cited in Page (1992, p. 15).
  - 12 See also William (1997) who argues that the life of the underclass has deteriorated greatly owing to the flight of its most upwardly mobile residents. On the working class see Lamont (1992).
  - 13 For a description of the Frankfurt school approach to consumption see Slater (1997, chapter 4).
  - 14 Hall (1992, p. 263). See also Gans (1975, pp. 261–78).
  - 15 Umberto Eco, cited in Hebdige (1979, p. 103).
  - 16 Elizabeth Cohen (1992) cited in Fiske (1994, p. 481). See also Austin (1994, pp. 155, 165–6) about how boycotts have been employed by blacks on varying occasions as an effective strategy to protest against mistreatment as customers and how consumption has been viewed as an exercise of collective economic power. Feagin and Sikes (1994, pp. 348–50) also discuss the role of campaigns such as 'Buy black', 'Build black', and 'Black Dollar Days', and illustrate how the mobilisation of consumption is part of the repertoire of collective action used by blacks.
  - 17 An important body of literature, produced mostly in the field of economics, on consumer discrimination is not reviewed here in detail but deserves notice. For a review see Yinger (1998). See also Fix and Struyk (1993). This literature shows the resurgence of economists' interests in the problem of discrimination in market transactions. Although economic research inquires into the multiple layers of racial discrimination in the consumer market, analysis tends to be confined to specific product markets such as housing, car, and food markets, and its primary aim is to quantify the degree of discrimination. These studies usually do not explore the ramifications of racial discrimination on the social fabric of society and on the collective identity of discriminated groups. There is also growing research at the interface of economics and sociology examining unequal patterns of wealth accumulation or adaptation strategies of consumers under conditions of segregation. The latter research aims to complement both theories of consumer behaviour and institutional racism by scrutinising how black people in poverty cope with the burden of basic provision. See Olivier and Shapiro (1997) and David Crockett (n.d.).
  - 18 She is referring to buzzers, which are screening devices installed in increasing numbers in New York stores, expected to reduce the incidence of robbery. The door of the store will be unlocked by the salespeople or the owner if the buzzer is pressed by a desirable customer.
  - 19 Redlining is a practice by which, for instance, banks and mortgage institutions proscribe lending in certain (often predominantly black) neighbourhoods.
  - 20 For a survey of most common discriminatory instances see Austin (1994, pp. 148–50). For a detailed ethnographic account see Chin (1998).
  - 21 At the same time Caldwell (1991) notes that 'overt racist caricatures of the past expressed in the subtle, symbolic code of contemporary racism' also continue to prevail in some consumption-related contexts. The attack on African-inspired dress by employers forbidding female employees from wearing hair braids or kente cloth remains unchallenged, albeit the practice casts serious doubt over the

- expression of racial identity through the free choice of dress style. For more examples see also in Austin (1998, pp. 162–3).
- 22 Austin (1998) argues that the status of the black consumer will improve only if the status of the black producer and seller is enhanced. Black consumers will be able to shop freely if the production side of the black public sphere, i.e. black enterprise activity, is gradually expanded. So ‘[w]hat blacks need is a rational nationalism which focuses upon building a nonseparatist, expansive, cooperative black public sphere’ (Austin, 1998, p. 147).
  - 23 It should be evident that we understand the interpretations of black consumption by marketing specialists as social constructions that produce, but also react to, dominant narratives on black consumers.
  - 24 Again, the resistance perspective ignores the negative as well as the positive impact of marketers in shaping dominant social narratives.
  - 25 See *Chicago Times*, 28 August 1996, p. 1. See also ‘The African-American market: community, growth and change’, *Sales and Marketing Management*, May 1991, p. 75.
  - 26 The median money income of households in 1996 was US\$37,161 for whites and US\$23,482 for blacks (*Statistical Abstract of the United States*, p. 468, table 739).
  - 27 For an illustration of how different definitions of social membership are used in the drawing of racial boundaries see Lamont (forthcoming).
  - 28 Inner-city markets are aggressively pursued by marketing agencies because, for instance, as a study, *Catalysing Private Sector Inner City Retail Investment and Services*, suggests, inner-city residents strongly prefer brand products and are willing to pay more for them. The study’s findings also note that inner-city dwellers have up to six times as much purchasing power, per square mile, as surrounding areas and that their annual retail spending power adds up to US\$85 billion. The research, which focuses on six inner-city markets (Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, New York, Miami and Oakland), found that ‘quality’ brands are a form of insurance for consumers. See *Chisholm-Mingo Matters*, 2, November 1998.
  - 29 Research shows that blacks often go to the same stores where they know that they are treated right. They especially do not go to new stores when they are with their children because they do not want them to witness maltreatment. The 1993 Yankelovich African-American Monitor Survey showed that 61 per cent of blacks decide where to shop on the basis of whether they are ‘treated the same as other people’ (cited in Reynolds, 1993). Blacks know, for instance, that General Motors treats blacks well while Ford does not. Other companies show a lack of respect and lose their black customers by displaying negative images of blacks that are truly insulting. Domino Pizza had an ad saying that their pizza is so good that even savages will like it, showing the picture of a black man. Benetton had an ad portraying a handcuffed black man. When companies realise that they have estranged their black clientele, they will often approach black advertising agencies to try to have their image repaired.
  - 30 These marketers use a lot of interpretive, qualitative techniques. One marketing specialist gave us a detailed account of some of their special research endeavours – the grandmother research, father–son, mother–daughter, cab driver interviews – and mentioned that he often just hangs out with the black men in the office’s neighbourhood to engage in some informal ethnographic study.
  - 31 Hair care products are one of the few acceptable ‘exclusionary’ products that are sold to blacks. Moreover, hair grooming is probably the most well documented

area of blacks' distinctive consumption practices. See, for instance, Rooks (1996). Blacks are otherwise very sensitive to being the target of 'ghettoised', exclusionary products. The biggest marketing failure involved a menthol cigarette that was marketed only to blacks. It created a public uproar in the black community not only because the product was detrimental to health but also because the utterly negative campaign was confined to the black population.

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