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Consuming Manhood: Consumer Culture and the Identity Projects of Black and White Millennial Males

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**Consuming Manhood: Consumer Culture and the Identity Projects of
Black and White Millennial Males**

by

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Dedication

My faith in the Oneness of life guides my thoughts and actions. It is through this faith that I have come to recognize my successes as not simply my own. They are unique expressions of the One life articulating through me, as me. As such, I dedicate this body of work to Spirit and Its many incarnations. This work is the result of wisdom garnered from both sides of the veil. I humbly dedicate this to those that came before, those that walk with, and those yet to be.

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Consuming Manhood: Consumer Culture and the Identity Projects of Black and White Millennial Males

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This study qualitatively examines the synergetic relationship between marketing communication, identity formation, and consumer behavior within the context of black and white males of the Millennial Generation. The sample consisted of 20 males between the ages of 18-29; ten self-identified as black and 10 self-identified as white.

This project expands the knowledge base of consumption/identity research by incorporating intersectionality into the present body of consumer behavior work. A consumer's identity project is far more complex than what is represented by current consumer behavior scholarship. Consumers must navigate multiple sites of identification that constantly shift in importance and involvement. To more closely reflect consumers in the flesh, this study incorporated multiple sites of identity projects into the analysis. By taking a more "true-to-life" approach to consumption/identity research, this project unearths new knowledge that is proximate to the lived experience of consumers.

Consumer culture theory (CCT), a division of consumer research that moves the discussion of consumption behavior deep into the realm of cultural impact was used as the conceptual focus of this project. Autodriving was utilized to collect data. This form of photo elicitation involves the use of informants taking photos of a particular phenomenon and then “driving” the interview by discussing the photos they have taken. In the context of this study, informants were furnished a disposal camera and asked to photographically document representations of the following: achievement & success, morality, humanitarianism, nationalism, and freedom. Informants were strongly encouraged to also visually document anything that did not fit into the abovementioned categories but represented something they found particularly interesting or offensive. To examine the impact of marketing communication on the informants’ identity projects, print advertisements featuring different configurations of masculinity and manhood were explored.

Three key themes emerged from the data. All informants used the marketplace to express values. The concept of identity elasticity was developed to explain the significant difference in identity potentiality between white and black informants. Many white and black informants shared the perception that they live in a post-racial society. However, the experience of a post-racial society was highly divergent based on racial formation.

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Chapter One

Introduction and Purpose

Millennials represent the new face of America. The Millennial Generation¹ is estimated at 80 million members, which positions it as the largest generational cohort in U.S. history (Pew Research Center, 2010). In 2015, Millennials will comprise 50% of the U.S. workforce, and by 2017 the Millennial Generation will possess the most buying power of any generational cohort, surpassing that of Baby Boomers. In addition to their immense marketplace power, Millennials also engage with life in distinctive ways. The Millennial Generation is shifting away from traditional media, such as print media and television, and embracing new technology including the Internet and social media platforms (Pew Research Center, 2010).

Media consumption is not the only realm where Millennials differ from previous generations. A Wall Street Journal (Kalita & Whelan, 2011) article entitled “*No McMansion for Millennials*” demonstrates how Millennials hold a worldview and desire a lifestyle divergent of that possessed by their parents. For example, the Millennial Generation strongly prefers an urban lifestyle where living space may be limited, but communal amenities are ample, which is in stark contrast to the suburban sprawl lifestyle popular with their parents.

The prominence and considerable monetary potential of Millennials is undeniable. Their vast size and impending buying power holds with it the future success

¹ The term Millennial Generation is used to classify individuals that were born between 1978 and 1994.

of companies in the marketplace. Advertisers and brands must find ways to communicate to this demographic congruent with the Millennials distinctive worldview, which requires garnering a keen understanding of who Millennials are and want to be. At present, there is a dearth of academic research that examines how the unique identity projects of Millennials shifts their relationship to, and understanding of, marketing communication and the marketplace. This project began the process of filling that research void by addressing the following: How do males of the Millennial Generation see themselves and the world around them? How does marketing communication influence their ideas of self and community? What purpose does consumption have in the formation and expression of their identity? What role does their socially-constructed racial formation play in their identity project?

This project encompasses an empirical study wherein the synergetic relationship between marketing communication, identity formation, and consumer behavior are explored among black and white males of the Millennial Generation. In an effort to not conflate the differing socialization practices of differing gender orientations, this project focused on the experience of male Millennials. Subsequent studies will explore this topic from female and transgender perspectives. From a socio-historical viewpoint, blackness represents a position of marginalization, while whiteness typifies a location of privilege (McIntosh, 2003; Collins P. H., 2000; Hoch, 1979). This study only examined black and white males because of this dramatic juxtaposition of influence. By focusing the examination on racial extremes, the impact race has on identity projects was more apt to come to light.

Purpose of the Study

Given the unique nature of this project, it will encompass a qualitative-exploratory approach. Exploratory research is best suited for situations where little to no scientific knowledge exist (Stebbins, 2001). Previous consumer research has mainly focused on understanding how particular elements of identity relate to consumption, leaving the field with few insights into how marketing communication interacts with multiple sites of self, and how multiple sites of identity are (re)constructed, negotiated, and managed through consumption. The sociological theory of intersectionality provides the necessary framework to more accurately investigate identity, marketing, and consumption. A product of the multiracial feminist movement, intersectionality theory perceives sites of identity as inextricably linked, rather than as independent units. Personal characteristics such as race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and nationality are viewed as interacting on several and often overlapping spheres. From an intersectional perspective, an understanding of the self requires a clear comprehension of how identity characteristics interrelate with one another, societal systems and structures (Collins P. H., 2000). Adopting intersectionality for consumer research positions this study in uncharted waters, because it requires shifting from dominant positivistic forms of consumer research to methods more aligned with existential-phenomenology. The section that follows details the fundamental differences between positivistic and existential-phenomenological research approaches, and why the use of existential-phenomenological methods best suits this study.

The dominance of positivist modes of research in the area of consumer behavior is a key reason why there is currently a dearth of intersectional consumer research, which relies on existential-phenomenological methods. Positivistic consumer research assumes that consumers have distinctive properties that are measurable and that these properties can be divided into primary and inconsequential attributes. Furthermore, it is believed that the elements that comprise consumers act independently of one another, and that consumption practices can only be understood by dismantling the individual elements of consumer behavior and studying them in isolation. Because it is assumed that elements of consumer behavior perform the same under isolation as they do in unison, the analysis process is viewed as having no effect on how the consumer behavior functions (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989). The positivist research perspective also presumes that we live in a dualistic world. That which occurs outside the body is perceived as objective and real, while events that happen within the body are recognized as subjective (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989, p. 134). This perceived duality compels positivists to view material goods as existing independently of human experience, since goods belong to the external (objective) portion of the world and experiences to the internal (subjective) portion. Such a view allows for only one “true” description of the world to exist. Positivistic research approaches seek to discover the absolute “reality” of consumer behavior by deconstructing consumption practices and analyzing particular attributes in isolation of one another.

The existential-phenomenological research perspective is in stark opposition to positivism. Thompson et al. (1989) describe this alternative perception of human

experience as “...subscribing to a contextualist worldview. Existential-phenomenologist do not wish to study individuals separate from the environments in which they live or the interaction of the two (which implies separation), rather, the study is of the totality of human-being-in-world” (p. 135). Existential-phenomenology focuses on lived experience, as opposed to “objective” descriptions, which often denotes an attempt to describe an event detached from its contextual environment (Pollio, 1982). The tenets of existential-phenomenology correspond with the goals of intersectional analysis. Unlike positivist approaches, existential-phenomenology focuses on describing human experience as it is lived; this provides the opportunity to investigate multiple sites of identity simultaneously.

Data collection occurred in a three phase process – Phase 1 & 2 involved photo-elicitation, which is an innovative approach to qualitative work wherein informants are asked to take pictures of a phenomenon and then those pictures were discussed during an in-depth interview. This approach was first used in a marketing context by Heisley & Levy (1991), when they used it to investigate the practices involved with family dinner preparation and consumption. The researchers noted how photo-elicitation enabled informants to more effectively return to an experience and reconstruct what they were feeling, thinking, and doing. Due to its ability to increase informant involvement in the process of collecting and interpreting data, photo-elicitation has also been cited as an approach that can advance the study of human communication and as a means of democratizing qualitative research (Novak D. R., 2010). The final stage of data collection involved informants viewing and discussing a collection of print ads featuring

various configurations of masculinity and manhood. The purpose of this phase was to specifically examine the role advertising played in their identity projects and consumption practices.

The sample consisted of 20 informants - 10 self-identified as white and 10 self-identified as black. All informants were between the ages of 18-29. A diverse mix of SES was intentionally sought so that identity projects could be examined across varying sociographic contexts.

Overview of Study

The specifics of this study cannot be fully understood without a firm understanding of identity projects. Therefore, Chapter 2 will begin with a deconstruction of the concept of identity projects by providing a detailed definition of the terminology and how it relates to consumer behavior. This will be followed by an overview of pertinent literature in the areas of marketing communication and consumer behavior. The methodological approach will be explicated in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 will detail the emergent themes that developed from the photo-elicitation and in-depth interview process. In Chapter 5 conclusions, implications, and limitations related to the emergent themes will be highlighted.

Importance of Study

This study expands the knowledge base of consumption/identity research by incorporating intersectionality into the present body of consumer behavior work.

Scholarship that investigates the relationship between consumption and identity typically approaches the topic using a unicontextual framework, such that only one contextual factor, such as gender orientation, is placed under examination. While this form of inquiry has provided considerable insights into how consumption practices impact identity, it is far from representative of consumers' lived experiences. A consumer's identity project is far more complex than what is represented in the current scholarship. Consumers must navigate multiple sites of identification that constantly shift in importance and involvement. In an effort to more closely reflect consumers in the flesh, this study will incorporate multiple sites (age, gender orientation, and racial formation) of the identity project into the analysis. By taking a more "true-to-life" approach to consumption/identity research, this project has the potential to unearth considerable new knowledge that is proximate to the lived experience of consumers.

Heightening the understanding of the lived experience of male Millennial consumers will enable marketing practitioners to develop more efficient and effective ways of communicating with this increasingly important demographic. As Syrett and Lamminman (2004) emphasize, "marketers who do not bother to learn the interests and obsessions of Millennials are apt to run up against a brick wall of distrust and cynicism" (p. 65). Utilizing an innovative methodological approach, this study provides critical insights relating to the lives of male Millennials as consumers to practitioners.

Chapter Two

Review of Literature

Deconstructing Identity Projects

As defined by Kleine et al. (2006), an identity project represents the process by which social aspects of the self are cultivated, preserved, disposed of, reconstructed, and maintained. This process is never complete and is in large part dependent on consumption as a means of expression. This process reconstructs conceptualization of the self from a singular whole to a series of role-identities that are continuously evolving.

As a construct, the phrase identity project brings together multiple conceptualizations of the self – providing a more holistic understanding. Identity theories are not viewed as competing, but as complementary – each helping to illuminate a particularly segment of the self. Tajfel's (1971) social identity theory informs the phenomenon of role switching, which is defined as the practice of shifting between distinct social identities. During the course of a given day, an individual will shift between multiple identity-roles – such that a middle-aged married male may move between the identity-roles of businessman, husband, and father within a 24 hour period.

The communication accommodation theory (Giles 1971) helps to explain the practice of code switching, which is the practice of shifting between two distinct cultures. This process is prevalent in the observance of holidays. In addition to celebrating Christmas, many African-Americans also observe Kwanzaa. Additionally,

individuals of the Jewish faith may recognize Christmas as a secular holiday, while also celebrating the religious significance of Chanukah. Code switching enables individuals to acknowledge and develop dominant and subcultural elements of their identity. Kelman's (1961) identification theory provides a framework to explore how cues, specifically cultural cues, can be utilized to prime or enhance elements of the self. Identification theory maintains that individuals spontaneously evaluate others by their perceived level of similarity. An individual may infer that she or he share numerous character traits with another person simply by observing similar physical characteristics, such as race/ethnicity (Williams, Lee, & Henderson, 2008). This perceived sense of similarity can result in individuals experiencing a heightened sense of identification with others that may only be superficially similar. Advertisers can prime this reaction by embedding their marketing communication with salient cues, such as utilizing a same-race spokesperson as the intended audience (Appiah, Black, White, Hispanic, and Asian Adolescents' Responses to Culturally Embedded Ads, 2001)

Cultivation theory and social cognitive theory point to the value of marketing communication as social communication. The cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) posits that high levels of media consumption will subtly shape an individual's worldview. This process is heightened for individuals that consume large amounts of media. For instance, Gerbner's "Mean World Syndrome" states that a person that consumes high levels of violent media will not necessarily become a more violent person, but will come to perceive the world as a violent place (Gerbner G. , Gross,

Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). Perceiving the world as a violent place will undoubtedly impact the ways in which one's identity project functions.

Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) illuminates the significance of vicarious learning. As Bandura (2008) states, "A vast amount of information about human values, styles of thinking, and behavior patterns is gained from the extensive modeling in the symbolic environment of the mass media" (p. 98). Vicarious learning involves four key subfunctions: attention, retention, production, and motivation. Attention requires the observer be aware of the modeling opportunity, if the person that is to be modeled has an admired status or possesses characteristics the observer likes and identifies with the possibility of gaining the attention of the observer is greatly increased. Retention involves the observer going beyond recognition of the observed behavior and actually coding the information in such a way that it becomes easily remembered. In the production phase the observer must be mentally and physically capable of producing the modeled behavior. Motivation determines whether the observer will actually perform the newly acquired behavior, if the observer believes that adoption of the modeled behavior will result in outcomes that s/he values there is a significant likelihood that the modeled behavior will be performed (Bandura, 1986).

Marketing communication provides all the necessary ingredients for vicarious learning to occur. Marketing communication generally features a message source the audience identifies with and finds likable. Therefore, it is highly probable that marketing communication would capture the attention of the audience, as well as provide enough relevance to warrant retention. Most audience members possess the physical and mental

production capacity to adopt modeled behavior featured in marketing communication. Furthermore, audience members typically find the messages contained in marketing communication to be salient, as highly favorable outcomes of product use are depicted. This in turn provides the motivation for audience members to adopt the modeled behavior. As seen through the lens of cultivation theory and social cognitive theory, the representations present in marketing communication may have considerable sway in regard to how identity projects function.

McGuire's (1979) distinctiveness theory provides insight into the role of individual and collective uniqueness. Distinctiveness theory postulates that the saliency of role-identities is greatly impacted by their frequency in a given context. If a male finds himself in an environment where all others are female, the male's gender orientation is likely to become a highly salient aspect of his identity.

The theoretical frameworks discussed above stress the importance that context holds with identity projects. Environmental factors constantly inform a person as to which aspects of the self to make salient, which causes the self to be in a perpetual state of motion and flux. As context changes so too does the self. It is also important to note that the process of shifting between role-identities is not always done consciously. Shifting from one identity-role to another is often done at the subconscious level (Markus & Wurf, 1987).

While many traits are contextually distinctive, McGuire (1978) also discusses the state of chronic distinctiveness, wherein a characteristic such as race/ethnicity becomes permanently salient to one's sense of identity. Unlike contextual distinctiveness, where

saliency varies with environmental factors, with chronic distinctiveness the given trait becomes a fixture of the self-concept (Grier & Deshpande, 2001). As such, the racial component of identity projects may serve as strong moderators of its overall functioning.

Exploring Identity Projects

There are two streams of research related to identity projects – the first stream focuses on transitional phases of life. These researchers investigate how identity projects are impacted by pivotal life moments that are developmental or situational in context. Schau et al. (2009) investigated identity projects from a life-stage perspective, wherein they examined shifts in consumption practices post-retirement serves as an example of this approach. The second stream, which is where the current study is situated, investigates the everyday or mundane elements of life. Well-known work in this area includes Fournier's (1998) investigation of consumer interaction with brands, Thompson's (1990) analysis of the everyday shopping experiences of married women, and Holt and Thompson's (2004) exploration of the mundane consumption practices of men. In each instance, the authors utilized everyday consumption practices to delineate a better understanding of identity projects.

Linking Consumption to Identity

As expressed by Belk (1988) the relationship between identity and consumption is certainly not new. In a paper dating back to 1890, William James comments that the Self can be defined as the sum total of all the tangibles and intangibles one possesses.

James states, “These things give [us] the same emotions. If they wax and prosper, [we] feel triumphant, if they dwindle and die away, [we] feel cast down, -- not necessarily in the same degree for each thing, but in much the same way for all” (Belk 1988, pg 139). In essence, James is positing that we are the sum of our possessions. Sartre (1948) posited that the purpose of possessing things is to enlarge the sense of self. In this respect the act of possessing synchronizes self and object in such a way that the distance that once existed between the two evaporates. Belk (1988) further expands upon James’ conception of Self by introducing his commentary regarding the thin line between what constitutes “me” and what is classified as “mine”. James offers the following, “...It is clear that between what [we] call *me* and what [we] call *mine* the line is difficult to draw. We feel and act about certain things that are ours very much as we feel and act about ourselves” (Belk 1998 pg 140). Clearly, the possessive way in which we describe our possessions (i.e. my car, my job, my wife) communicates that the Self can extend beyond the body and consciousness, to become embedded in physical possessions.

The ways in which individuals respond to the withholding or loss of particular possessions also serves as an indicator that self-identity can extend to the things we consume. Belk (1988) demonstrates how the practice of withholding personal possessions, which is regularly utilized by military training camps, monasteries, boarding schools, and prisons (among other sites), corresponds with a lessening of self. In place of personal possessions many of these institutions provide individuals with standardized items. The result of replacing personal with standardized possessions is a substitution of a unique self for a communal sense of self (Belk 1988; Snyder and

Fromkin 1980). The grief that accompanies the loss of a treasured possession may partially be brought about by a diminished sense of self. Victims of theft were found to mourn the stolen possession in much the same way that they would grieve the loss of a loved one; in both instances an aspect of the self is perceived as lost (Belk 1988; Maguire 1980; Rosenblatt, Walsh, and Jackson 1976).

Previous work pertaining to self and consumption clearly indicates that a strong relationship exist between self-identity and consumption behavior. However, it must be understood that no single possession can represent the self in its entirety. A complete sense of self, in all of its contradictory splendor, can only be gleaned by an examination of all the objects of consumption (Belk 1988). Discussion of the self/consumption relationship has concentrated on self-identity as a whole. What follows is a review of literature that investigates particular aspects of self and consumption behavior.

Personal Values and Consumption

The means by which I am investigating identity projects is through personal values. This research indicates that values are a central aspect of behavior, including consumer behavior. Instead of specifically asking informants to tell me about their consumption practices, we discussed values, which provided the opportunity to explore areas of their identity projects of which they may not have be consciously aware. Clawson and Vinson (1978) note, “Values may prove to be one of the most powerful explanations of, and influences on, consumer behavior” (pg. 400).

Numerous studies have documented a relationship between values and consumption patterns (Vinson et al. 1977; Kahle 1983, 1985, 1986; Beatty et al. 1985; Novak and MacEvoy 1990). While varying in methodology, these studies share the commonality of linking value orientation to modes of consumer behavior. For instance, Kahle (1983) found that individuals who value fun and enjoyment in life tend to drink alcohol, ski, dance, bicycle, backpack, camp, and (among heterosexual men) read Playboy magazine more than people who place other values above fun and enjoyment in life. Carman (1978) presented a framework wherein he posited that the salience of instrumental (transitional) values is based on terminal (long-term) values, and out of this relationship salient interests and activities are determined. In turn, consumption behavior is influenced by each of the abovementioned constructs. Carman (1978) goes on to state that consumption behaviors then provide a feedback loop; some consumption behaviors, such as media exposure or product purchase, alter the saliency of values, interests, and activities. This framework suggests that there is a symbiotic relationship between values and consumption: one constantly informs the other.

Research concerning the transitional self lends further credence to this possibility. Schouten's (1991) investigation of aesthetic plastic surgery uncovered that the surgical alteration of one's body can be a powerful symbolic act that may assist a person in reintegrating a self-concept made ambiguous in the course of a major life transition. Andreasen (1984) found that when an individual is experiencing a role transition or identity reconstruction they may become more likely to consume goods that would have been unattractive or unwanted by their former self. These findings further

signal the existence of a synergistic relationship between personal values and consumption behaviors. This study utilized personal values as one mode of interrogating the meanings that lie behind consumption behaviors.

In addition, a history of literature discusses the relationship between values and consumption. Vinson et al (1977) posited that there is a strong relationship between salient values and consumption. Kahle and Kennedy (1989) encouraged using values as means of segmenting consumers. Thompson and Troester (2002) reiterated the use of values as markers of consumption, while also demonstrating the fragmented and contextual nature of values. Richins (1994) used levels of materialism to explore differences in consumption practices. Consumption was used as a means of expressing values. Low materialism consumers were found to value possessions with interpersonal ties, such as picture frames and travel souvenirs, while high materialism consumers valued possessions that communicate high financial worth, such as large homes and luxury cars. The current study shifts the investigation from how possessions communicate personal values to how personal values communicate possessions.

Understanding what values Millennials find salient is pivotal to the purposes of this study. Social historians Neil Howe and William Strauss have done considerable research with Millennials. In the process they have become preeminent authorities on the Millennial Generation. Their extensive research includes several books relating to the generational traits and lifestyle choices of Millennials (Howe & Strauss, 2007; 2000; 1993; 1991). Their findings are based on comprehensive survey data compiled in partnership with market research firm, Crux Research. Based on the empirical research

of Howe and Strauss, as well as other Millennial scholars, the following five values appear particularly salient for members of the Millennial Generation: Achievement & Success, Moral Orientation, Humanitarianism, Nationalism/Patriotism, Freedom.

Achievement and Success:

Achievement and success have long been fundamental to U.S. culture. These values are typically measured in conjunction with economic accomplishments and material rewards. Success is often equated with bigness and newness (Williams 1970).

Millennials are prone to set high goals for themselves. As explained by Howe & Strauss (2007) “as accountability and higher school standards have risen to the top of America’s political agenda, Millennials have become a generation focused on achievement – and are on track to becoming the smartest, best-educated young adults in U.S. history” (pg 4).

Moral Orientation:

Millennials are positioned as holding traditional values. In stark contrast to the rebellious nature of Generation X, Millennials generally embrace the traditional belief that social rules and standards are essential ingredients to a prosperous life (Howe & Strauss, 2007).

Humanitarianism:

Millennials appear to possess a strong desire to improve the world and its inhabitants. In their survey of over 800 Millennials, Hershatter and Epstein (2010) found considerable increases in the rate of volunteerism among high school students, unprecedented rates of individuals and organized clubs conducting social improvement

projects. These findings mirror broader U.S. culture, wherein much emphasis is placed on helpfulness, personal kindness, aid and comfort, spontaneous aid in mass disasters, as well as on impersonal philanthropy (Williams 1970).

Nationalism | Patriotism:

The attacks and aftermath of 9/11 occurred during the formative years of many Millennials. As a result, terrorism and patriotism became essential elements of the value-forming messages communicated to the Millennial Generation during key cognitive phases of their life (Jonas-Dwyer & Pospisil, 2004). U.S. citizens generally feel some sense of loyalty to their country, its national symbols, and its history. Foreigners observe how U.S. citizens value the U.S. flag, national anthem, and how U.S. citizens believe that the United States is the greatest country in the world (Williams 1970).

Freedom:

Historically, U.S. citizens tend to favor individual initiative over group conformity and rights of the individual over rights of the collective. However, this paradigm may be shifting among Millennials. The Millennial Generation typically place high value on teamwork. Millennials' affinity for team work may be a product of their upbringing, as media messages (e.g. Barney and Friends) and life experiences (e.g. team sports and collaborative educational environments) fostered a team-oriented life approach rather than one that is individualistic. While favoring teamwork Millennials also generally carry an inflated sense of worth. As Howe and Strauss (2007) discuss, "From precious-baby movies of the mid-80s to the media glare surrounding the high

school class of 2000, older generations have inculcated in Millennials the sense that they are vital to the nation and their parents' sense of purpose" (pg 4).

Racial Identity and Consumption

There is a deficiency of consumer behavior research examining the relationship between race and consumption, particularly in respect to how the practice of consumption relates to the formation, maintenance, and (re)configuration of racial identity. As Podoshen (2008) states, with respect to African Americans, early race-related consumer behavior literature typically investigated basic shopping needs and was mainly concerned with exploring how African American consumption patterns differed from that of white Americans. More recent work has incorporated products outside of the utilitarian domain to focus on novel areas such as innovative communication (Hirschman, 1980), couponing (Green 1996), brand loyalty (Wilkes and Valencia 1986), and political ideology (Crockett and Wallendorf 2004). These studies have provided new ways of understanding black consumers; however, much remains unknown in the area of consumption practices and the racial component of identity projects. LaMont and Molnar (2001) undertook an examination of consumption and collective black identity. Their findings suggest African Americans may utilize conspicuous consumption as a means of shaping and (re)affirming a collective sense of blackness. LaMont and Molnar (2001) explain their assertion as follows: "Blacks carry a stigmatized social identity on their body. This is why it is particularly important to display visible signals of high status, in order to counteract racism, [and] to conspicuously distance themselves from

the ‘ghetto black’ stereotype” (pg 37). This practice of consumption would indicate that in instances where black and white consumers have similar purchasing patterns, the ways in which those products are consumed can differ tremendously. Podoshen (2008) says it best when he states, “Marketers must play closer attention not only to actual purchases [made by African Americans], but also to the underlying reasons for their specific purchases” (pg 211). This study accepted Podoshen’s call by deepening our understanding of the relationship between consumption and black identity.

Consumer research that juxtaposes the white majority with a racial minority group typically focuses on the racial minority for measures of difference. As Burton (2005) indicates, in the realm of consumer research whiteness is rarely examined. This creates a frame of reference wherein the white majority is situated as “normal” consumers and the racial minority group is constructed as “other” (e.g. abnormal) consumers. Aside from Hirschman’s (1981) definitive article on Jewish consumption behavior, very few marketing articles discuss white racial identity or the intricacies that exist within white ethnic groups. Many cite statistics that support the contention that unlike many racial minorities, white consumers generally do not possess strong ties to their racial heritage. Yankelovich (2005) found that 67% of black consumers believe that their roots and heritage were more important to them today than they were five years ago, as opposed to 43% of white consumers. Yankelovich (2005) also uncovered that 59% of black consumers make a great effort to become more connected to their heritage, versus 22% of white consumers.

While these figures clearly suggest how racial identity is far more salient among racial minorities, there are indications beyond the boundaries of consumer research that support a rising critical awareness of white racial identity. According to Burton (2005), the study of whiteness within academia began in the early 1990s, with Roediger's (1991) *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. This examination of whiteness was then followed by Ruth Frankenberg's (1993) *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, which constructed a framework for naming and identifying whiteness. The vast majority of current scholarship regarding whiteness expands on the concepts presented in these two texts.

The coming of a national minority majority has made whiteness a recent topic of discussion within the world of popular culture as well. In late 2009, *Newsweek* contained an article entitled Red, Brown, and Blue that discussed the history and possible future of whiteness in the United States. In their February 2009 issue, *The Atlantic* featured an article that asked the following questions: "If the end of white America is a cultural and demographic inevitability, what will the new mainstream look like—and how will white Americans fit into it... What will it mean to be white when whiteness is no longer the norm?" Considering the newfound interest in whiteness in academia and society at-large, it is feasible that white Millennials perceive their racial identity differently than previous generations. For these reasons, this study critically examined how consumption practices relate to conceptions of racial identity among black and white Millennial males.

Gender Performativity & Consumption

This study examined the ways in which black and white Millennial males are attempting to (re)define maleness through their consumption behaviors. Most early research pertaining to gender and consumer behavior classified gender as a fixed construct directly linked to femaleness or maleness (e.g. biological sex). As Palan (2001) illustrates, early researchers generally conflated gender with sex and conceptualized gender as a dichotomous feminine/masculine concept. This oversimplification caused gender to become fixed; maleness was equated to masculinity, which included attributes like independence, assertiveness, individuality, and rationality, while femaleness coincided with sensitivity, community, intuition, and considerateness (Cross and Markus 1993; Easlea, 1986; Meyers-Levy 1988). The conceptualization of gender has progressed over time; most researchers currently utilize a two-dimensional model of gender that views femininity and masculinity as two separate, orthogonal dimensions that coexist within an individual (Palan 2001). This conceptualization heightens the fluidity of gender, enabling the feminine and masculine aspects of the self to shift according to context. Due to the socially-constructed nature of gender, this form of conceptualization better replicates the lived experience of consumers. However, the ideology that maleness closely assigns with masculinity and femaleness with femininity lingers on, particularly in the world of marketing communication (Hupfer, 2002).

If the ways femininity and masculinity are used to express self-identity are fluid rather than fixed, it would follow that the ways consumption is utilized to buttress

configurations of the masculine and feminine would also shift. Lyons' and Willott's (2008) qualitative study with young New Zealand women demonstrated that shifts in alcohol consumption related to reconfigurations of gender identity. Between 1995 and 2000 the rates of alcohol consumption remained constant among men but increased for women (particularly among young women). As Lyons and Willott (2008) note, "Alcohol consumption has been linked to the construction of traditional masculine identities, and gender stereotypes link drinking to manliness. Increases in women's drinking may therefore be seen as reflecting changes in women's social positions" (pg 695). In this instance the act of alcohol consumption may be integral to a larger social project wherein the definition of womanhood is undergoing a reconfiguration. In their investigation of gender expressions at a goth festival, Goulding and Saren (2009) detected that "goths, through their versatile gender performances allow themselves to subversively play with gendered meanings and in so doing, show how they can be re-signified" (pg. 33). As evident by these studies, consumption practices may be employed as a means to construct and reconstruct notions of gender.

Overviewing Consumer Culture Theory

The rise of capitalism and its progeny, the commodity, has coincided with the synthesis of consumption and identity formation. As explained by Belk (1984), as society shifts from a "we" orientation to a "me" orientation the role of possessions increases in the identity-defining process. Marketing scholars have investigated the linkage between consumption practices and the (re)formation of identity for numerous

years in a number of contexts (e.g. Belk 1984, 1988; Fischer 1994; Goulding and Saren 2009; Hogg and Mitchell 1996; Hogg et. al. 2009; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; McCracken 1988; Schouten 1991; Shankar and Fitchett 2002; Kozinets 1999; Schroeder and Zwick 2004; Sirgy 1982; Ustuner and Holt 2007), and much has been ascertained. The relationship between consumption and identity is dynamic, synergistic, and continuous. While obvious to many in retrospect, perhaps the greatest finding has been the revelation that the marketplace holds significance beyond the economic – the marketplace and the consumerism that it spawned are key components of the socialization and cultural development processes.

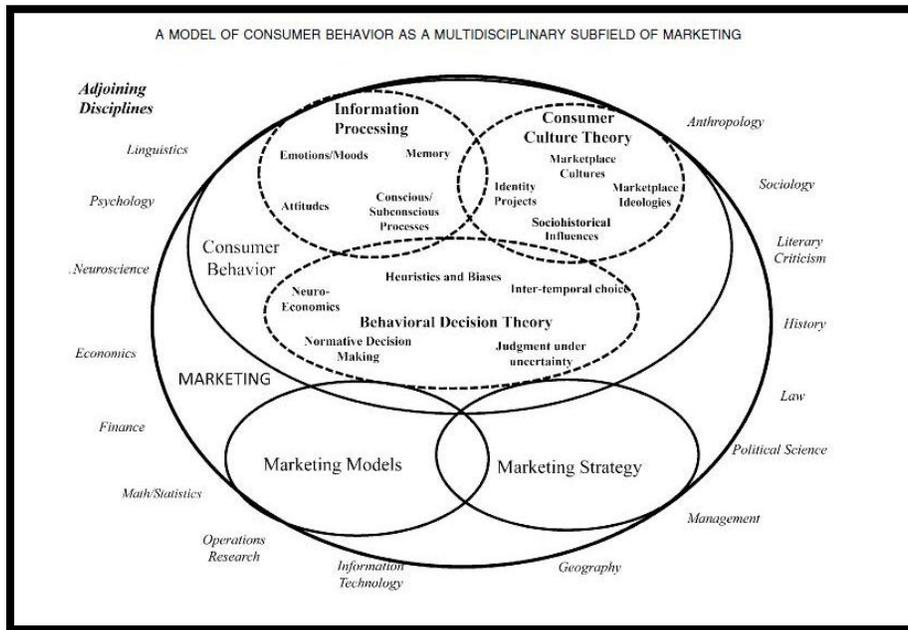
The field of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) incorporates this understanding into its scholarship far more than any other division of marketing research. CCT "refers to a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationship between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings" (Arnould and Thompson 2005). CCT perceives the relationship between consumers and consumption as social and cultural phenomena, rather than as solely economic or psychological. While the rise of CCT has begun to fill a substantial void in marketing scholarship, there remains a dearth of research examining the relationship between marketing communication, consumption, and the formation of identity, particularly among marginalized communities.

Existential-phenomenology falls under the larger conceptual umbrella of CCT. As opposed to information processing theory (IPT) and behavioral decision theory (BDT), which generally hold firm to the tenets of positivism, CCT tends to focus on the

lived experiences of consumers. While all three subareas of consumer behavior attempt to understand how consumers acquire, consume, and dispose of marketplace commodities, each area possesses distinct assumptions and associations (MacInnis & Folkes, 2009) The following figure, taken from MacInnis and Folkes (2009), visually illustrates the multidisciplinary nature of consumer behavior.

Figure 1

Multidisciplinary Nature of Consumer Behavior



As demonstrated in Figure 1, consumer research related to identity projects is a feature of CCT. As Arnould and Thompson (2005) explain, CCT is a collective of theoretical approaches that attempt to address the relationships between consumer behavior, the marketplace, and cultural meanings. While theoretical perspectives vary among CCT practitioners, each “share a common theoretical orientation toward the study of cultural complexity that programmatically links their respective research efforts” (Arnould and Thompson 2005 pg 868). CCT as a categorical area of study is rather young, Arnould and Thompson coined the moniker in their seminal 2005 JCR article “Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research”. As evident in the article’s title, the research stream designated as consumer culture theory dates back to the mid-1980s. However, Moisander, Penalosa, and Valtonen (2009) astutely point out how the conceptual and ideological underpinning of CCT has a long and storied lineage. The foundation upon which CCT is built was conceived from the theoretical frameworks of Karl Marx, Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Levi-Strauss, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, Mary Douglas, Pierre Bourdieu, and many other iconoclastic thinkers of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries.

The conceptualization of culture is the key point of departure between CCT and the two dominant streams of consumer behavior research, behavioral decision theory (BDT) and information processing theory (IPT). CCT investigates the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption (Arnould and Thompson 2005). In so doing, it situates culture as multifarious and overlapping, which provides for the opportunity for many meanings (some that may be contradictory) to coexist

simultaneously within and between cultural groups. As Arnould and Thompson (2005) explain, “Consumer culture denotes a social arrangement in which the relations between lived culture and social resources, and between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, are mediated through markets” (pg 869). Conversely, in BDT and IPT research, culture is generally excused or positioned as uniform sects and subsets that are distinct from one another, such that American culture is a homogeneous entity distinctly different from Chinese culture and vice versa. This form of framing lacks the openness and fluidity needed to properly examine the complexities of culture within and between groups.

Another fundamental difference between CCT and BDT and IPT is the treatment of socio-historic context. Whereas BDT and IPT typically ignore or at best marginalize the ways in which previous conceptualizations impact present understandings, CCT actively incorporates the socio-historic framework as a means of explicating consumer behavior. Ideological lineage stands as the final significant differentiator. As stated earlier, there is a strong tradition of iconoclastic thinking in CCT; however, BDT and IPT are based on the principles of Economics, which for many years used the construct of “The Economic Man” as the foundation from which research was developed, conducted, and analyzed. The tenets of “The Economic Man” include three critical traits: 1) the Economic Man is completely informed, 2) He is infinitely sensitive, and 3) He behaves rationally (Edwards 1954). While most BDT and IPT researchers of today no longer ascribe to these wildly false (and sexist) assumptions, economic utility

remains the focus in much of the research coming from these two streams consumer behavior inquiry.

The differentiators that separate CCT from BDT and IPT position CCT as the most appropriate research perspective for this study, which attempted to excavate consumption nuances that potentially exist within and between young black and white males. CCT is the only framework of the three that enables the complexities of culture to be explored within the socio-historic context applicable to black and white males of the Millennial Generation.

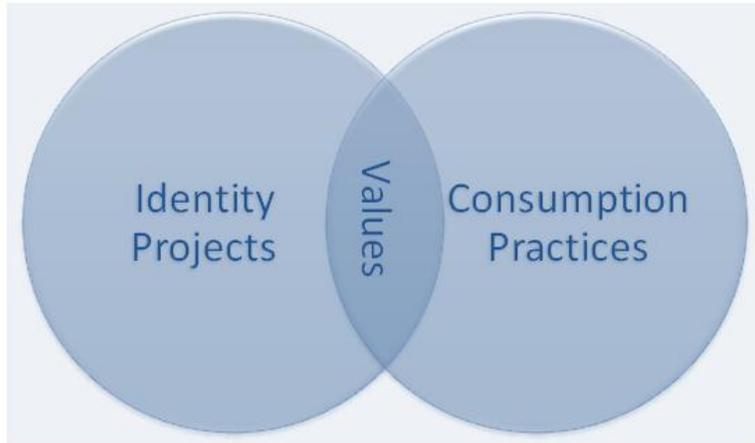
As such, the most appropriate methodological approach is one that explores the lived experience of consumers. Photo-elicitation is a data-collection method that enables personal experiences to be captured and deeply explored. This study used a two- part photo-elicitation approach. Rather than explicitly asking informants to document consumption practices, this study utilized photo-elicitation on a broader scale. Limiting informants to domains of consumption may also limit the breadth and depth of how they communicate their lived experience. Preconceived notions of what is (and what is not) consumption, as well as social desirability bias, may cause informants to suppress significant portions of their experience that they do not want others to know about or are held in subconscious regions.

This study began by asking informants to document a subset of dominant values associated with the Millennial Generation. The reason for this is twofold. First, previous research has indicated that personal values act as the point of connection between identity projects and consumption practices (Vinson et al. 1977; Kahle 1983, 1985,

1986; Beatty et al. 1985; Novak and MacEvoy 1990; Hitlin, 2003). By asking informants to engage with their values this study examined their identity project and consumption practices in tandem. Secondly, directing informants to visually document values (as opposed to specifically asking for consumption behaviors) required them to formulate tangible representations of abstract concepts, providing the opportunity for profound breakthroughs to emerge. For instance, a far more meaningful discussion materializes from a photo in which an informant associates a luxury vehicle with achievement and success, than from a picture that simply features a luxury vehicle an informant finds appealing. While the photo could be identical in these instances, the experience related to that photo is not. Relating the car to a particular value ties it to the realm of identity, which deepens its connection with the informant. The process of transforming concepts, such as freedom, humanitarianism, and success into things with materiality generated the potential to reveal critical links between identity and consumption. Figure 2 visually demonstrates the relationship between identity, values, and consumption.

Figure 2

Interdependent Relationships: Identity Projects, Values, and Consumption



Chapter Three

Methodology

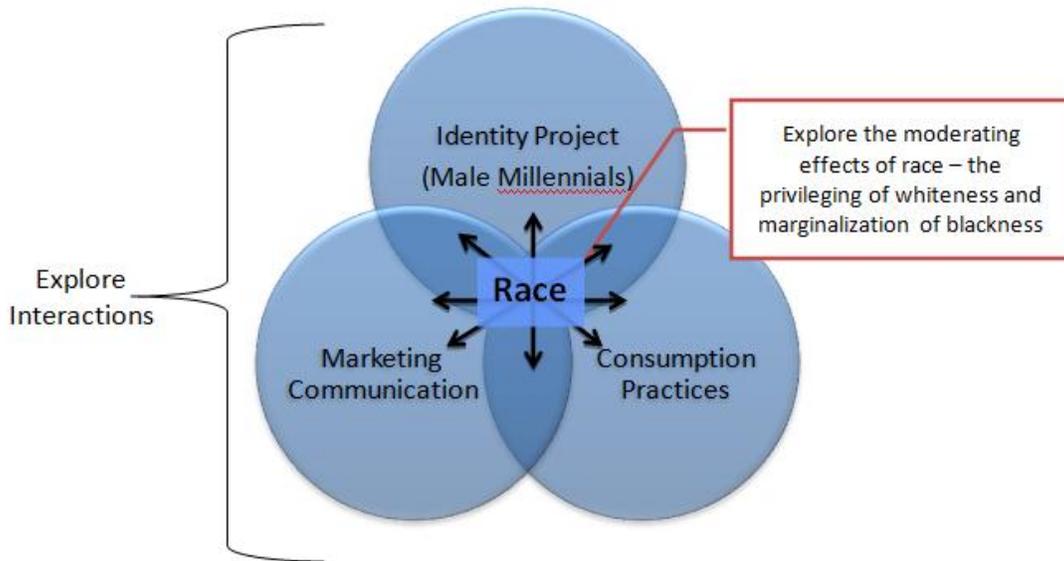
Research Question

RQ: How do the identity projects of male Millennials interact with marketing communication and consumption practices? What impact (if any) does race have on that interaction?

In an effort to remain true to the tenets of exploratory research the areas under investigation were intentionally broad in scope. In keeping the research question broad the study was provided flexibility and open mindedness, which are necessary components for conducting effective exploratory research (Stebbins, 2001). While the topics explored were expansive, the unit of observation was not. Points of data collection were clearly defined as males of the Millennial Generation. Racial formation was positioned as a moderator, so that the historical positioning of blackness and whiteness could be investigated. This process is visually depicted in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Visual Depiction of Research Question



Millennial Generation Overview

There are approximately 80 million members of the Millennial Generation (otherwise known as Gen Y), which makes this generational cohort the largest in U.S. history. The vast majority of Gen Y are the offspring of Baby Boomers. As such, many have seen (and rejected) the lifestyle choices made by their parents. The ways in which Gen Yers perceive the typical milestones of living, such as marriage, career, and child rearing, are drastically different than those of their parents. High rates of divorce, unemployment, and general disillusion among Baby Boomers has shifted the way Gen Yers approach life – they are far more willing to postpone marriage and children, as well as redefine what it means to have a successful career (Huntley, 2006; Greenberg &

Weber, 2008). Couple these value shifts with the monumental social and cultural changes brought about by the expansion and convergence of media, and you have a sector of the population that identities self, community, and world in a wholly unique way (Geraci & Nagy, 2004). This study focused on the Millennial Generation as a means of obtaining a better understanding of their inimitable way of thinking and being.

Gender Orientation Overview

Previous research has revealed how identity projects differ greatly by gender orientation (Archer, 1989; Archer and Waterman 1988; Cramer, 2000; Money, 1973). The end goals and measures of success are considerably different among individuals classified as male, female, and transgender. As Cramer (2000) indicates, interpersonal relationships are an integral part of female identity development, while male identity development is much more concerned with issues of self-definition, separateness, and autonomy. This divergence in attribute saliency demonstrates that gender orientation moderates key constructs of identity development.

Additionally, Adams & Shea (1979) established a correlation between identity and level of ego development, coupled with Cohn's (1991) finding, gender acts as a moderator for ego level, providing further evidence for the isolated study of identity formation by gender orientation. In an effort to not conflate the divergent ways in which identity formation occurs between gender orientations this study solely focused on individuals classified as male. In addressing gender orientation this study maintained the position established by Butler (1990) wherein gender is characterized as the effect of

repeated acts that (re)produces the naturalization of gender orientation. This positioning of gender provides the opportunity to displace the often assumed essentiality of gender to actively investigate the ways in which consumption is employed in gender performativity.

Socio-Historical Significance of Race

This study references the historical and political importance of race. As a socially constructed phenomenon, race, and its relationship to identity development is constantly negotiating its past configurations with post-racial aspirations. In the context of U.S. culture, race has long been used as a marker of worth, be it economic or cultural. The fields of science (in the form of eugenics) and advertising have exploited the concept of race as a means to privilege white Americans and oppress populations of color. As Black (2003) states, “The entire eugenicist enterprise [was] founded on racist and class elitist assumptions set out to prove the unfitness of wide sections of the American population [they] classified as ‘degenerate’ (pg 99).” Sofair and Kaldjian (2000) found that the eugenics movement in the United States was much larger than previously believed. In 1944, 30 states had enacted sterilization laws based on the tenets of eugenics; from these laws more than 40,000 sterilizations were performed. Among those sterilized, racial and ethnic minorities were disproportionately represented.

Eugenical sterilizations did not fall out of favor until the 1960s. Some scholars suggest the racist tenets of eugenics lives on in the science of genetics (Mehler 1997; Kevles 1995; Holtzman and Rothstein 1992). Building on the fervor of eugenics

advertisements of the early 1900s featured minstrel-inspired characters like B&G Food's Rastus and The Quaker Oats Company's Aunt Jemima to further frame Blackness as mentally and socially subordinate. While these characters have undergone numerous image reconfigurations, the racist ideology of the past remains embedded within them. This study examined the ways in which racial identity informs consumer behavior and self-identity because of the historical impact of race in advertising and U.S. culture.

Photo Elicitation Overview

Photo elicitation involves the use of informants taking photos of a particular phenomenon and then “driving” the interview by discussing the photos they have taken (Zainuddin, 2009). The benefits of photo elicitation are well documented in the social sciences. Photo elicitation enables informants to more effectively return to an experience and reconstruct what they were feeling, thinking, and doing at that time (Venkatraman and Nelson 2008). Interviews that use visuals and text activate more of the brain than interviews based solely on words (Harper, 2002). Furthermore, previous research indicates that thoughts are image based and language is used as a means of explaining mental images to others (Christensen and Olson 2002; Damasio, 1994; Pinker, 1997; Zaltman, 1997).

Utilizing an image-based approach like photo elicitation gives informants the ability to express their thoughts and feelings in a manner that adheres to their innate cognitive processes. Additionally, the areas of the brain that are used to process visual information are older than the sections that process verbal information; therefore the use

of photo elicitation provides for the opportunity to gain insights that involve deeper elements of the human consciousness (Harper, 2002). The abovementioned qualities of photo elicitation greatly benefited this study.

The incorporation of images into the interview process can trigger latent memories, evoke multi-layered responses, and elicit more concrete information (Collier and Collier 1986; Samuels 2004). However, as Evans (1999) notes, it is important to understand that the visuals that become the basis of photo elicitation are not objective representations of informants, but rather a means by which the investigator and the informant can collaboratively come to understand the meanings embedded within the visuals. Therefore, meaning should not be gleaned from a photo in and of itself; meaning should be derived from the particular context of each visual representation (Schlegloff, 1997). As Price and Wells (1997) suggest, the context that assisted in the production and verbal accounting of each image played an integral role in the development and execution of the methodological approach.

Croghan et al. (2008) provide a firm foundation upon which the contextual aspects of utilizing photo elicitation can be synthesized. In their photo elicitation examination of young people's constructions of self, the informants' photographs were not understood as "authentic representations of self, but as product[s] of the task that was set" (pg 348). Framing photo elicitation in this manner enables the investigator to remain keenly aware of the contextual limitations inherent in the process.

In regards to informants, it is necessary to be conscious of the finite amount of time and potential picture-taking opportunities available to them. It is also vital to

understand the a priori meanings embedded in the act of personal photography. Croghan et al. (2008) state this thusly, “In giving young people disposable cameras, we invited them to participate in a genre of personal snapshot photography that has a particular history and set of expectations” (pg 348). Snapshot photography is generally approached as an intimate and domestic genre, wherein everyday life is celebrated – photos are used to portray life as one wishes it to be seen, favoring the best over the worst of their experiences (Holland 1997). The camera itself also presents limitations. The use of disposable cameras with inbuilt flash and automatic focus blunts informants’ ability to edit, and to adjust aperture and shutter speed, which can severely hamper individual expression (Croghan et al. 2008). While far from perfect, photo elicitation provides informants the opportunity to produce images rich in detail, and to some reasonable degree, to reflect their personal preferences.

As Harper (2002) states, “elicitation interviews connect core definitions of the self” to society, culture and history (pg 13). Photo elicitation grants informants the means by which they can openly and more effectively communicate on cultural topics that they generally find difficult to verbally discuss. Croghan et al. (2008) found informants identified as racial minorities were prone to represent their racial identity in the photographs they took. However, those same informants generally presented a de-racialized self within verbal-only interview settings. Their investigation also found that photo elicitation offered informants an opportunity to explore other potentially sensitive aspects of the self, such as religious views. Given that this study critically examined the value set and the racial identity of informants as they pertain to consumption practices,

photo elicitation represented the most ideal methodological approach for obtaining meaningful data.

In the context of this study, photo-elicitation was utilized to explore the relationship between identity and consumption. Informants photographically documented representations of dominant values in American culture and then discussed the details surrounding their chosen representations. This methodological approach was first utilized in a marketing context by Heisley and Levy (1991), who used photo elicitation to investigate consumer behavior related to evening meals. The photos taken during their study enabled the complexities of family dynamics to emerge during the interview process. Utilizing photo elicitation also allowed the authors and the informants to develop a “negotiated interpretation of consumption events” (pg 257). It also provided a means to give the informant increased voice and authority in interpreting such events. Lastly, photo elicitation created the necessary distance so that informants could see familiar and mundane aspects of their life in unfamiliar ways (1991: pg 257).

Sample Selection, Recruitment, and Procedures

Specifically, the sample consisted of two groupings of informants, each grouping having 10 informants:

Group 1: Self-identified black males between the ages of 18-29

Group 2: Self-identified white males between the ages of 18-29

The primary investigator used a convenience sampling approach. However, every effort was made to construct a diverse sample, consisting of young men with

varying educational, economic, and personal backgrounds. Informants received compensation of \$75 US for their participation. Please refer to Table 1 for a summary of the informants that participated in the study.

Table 1
Respondent Table

Pseudonym	Race	Age	Location	Identifier	SES
Michael	Black	28	Austin	Ph.D. Student	Middle-class
Richard	Black	20	Austin	Undergrad Student	Middle-class
William	White	22	Austin	Undergrad Student	Working class
Carl	White	18	Austin	Undergrad Student	Upper-class
Fredrick	White	26	Los Angeles	Film Crew Member	Middle-class
Gregory	Black	25	Austin	Graduate Student	Working class
Ronald	Black	21	Los Angeles	Unemployed	Working class
Aaron	Black	22	Austin	Undergrad Student	Middle-class
Walter	White	23	Austin	Undergrad Student	Middle-class
David	Black	18	Austin	Undergrad Student	Working class
Warren	Black	21	Austin	Undergrad Student	Working class
Jay	White	26	Los Angeles	Ph.D. Student	Middle-class
Paul	White	29	Austin	Single Father	Working class
Kent	White	19	Austin	Undergrad Student	Working class
Charlie	White	19	Austin	Undergrad Student	Middle-class
Marcus	Black	21	Austin	Undergrad Student	Working class
Philip	White	18	Austin	Undergrad Student	Middle-class
James	White	19	Austin	Undergrad Student	Upper-class
Donald	Black	24	Austin	Admin Assistant	Middle-class
John	Black	22	Austin	Graduate Student	Middle-class
Wayne	Black	21	Austin	Graduate Student	Middle-class

As Arnould and Epp (2006) point out, qualitative research is typically purposive in aim rather than predictive. Meaning that the goal of most qualitative data collection is to uncover how consumers *think* about consumption, as opposed to quantitative research which usually aspires to ascertain the distribution of characteristics or demonstrate some

predictive analytics within a particular population. This divergence in purpose leads the two research paths to have distinctive sampling methods. While quantitative research generally adheres to the basic statistically-grounded tenet that the larger the sample the better, qualitative data collection does not follow suit.

Since the purpose of most qualitative research is to better understand (rather than map or predict) how consumers think and behave deciding on the most appropriate sample size is a much more fluid process. Fournier (1998) used a sample size of three in her article, “Consumers and Their Brands: Developing Relationship Theory in Consumer Research”. Fournier’s article was honored with the Best Journal of Consumer Research (JCR) Article of 1998 award and honorable mention in the prestigious JCR Ferber Award competition. In two exercises of consumption introspection, Holbrook (2005) and Gould (1991) utilized a sample that consisted solely of themselves. In both instances, their findings were published in highly respected marketing journals, *Journal of Business Research* and the *Journal of Consumer Research* respectively.

Arnould and Epp (2006) provide five general rules of thumb for qualitative sampling: 1) studies should focus on information-rich sites of analysis; 2) sampling should be maximized for observation and/or response heterogeneity; 3) boundaries should coincide with allotted time and monetary resources; 4) sampling should be framed in a manner that enables the uncovering, confirmation, or qualification of particular processes or constructs and 5) data collection among participants should continue until a saturation point is reached wherein the investigators are no longer learning new things. This study strictly adhered to these tenets.

The study was implemented in two phases. Each phase consisted of the following:

Phase 1:

Informants had the option to use their own digital camera or be furnished with a disposal camera with 27 exposures. As they went about their typical daily schedule informants were be directed to visually document representations that epitomize or contradict five values found to be significant to Millennials (Howe & Strauss, 2007; 2000; 1993; 1991; Lancaster & Stillman, 2010; Greenburg & Weber, 2008; Twenge, 2006). The values to be photographically documented include the following:

Achievement and Success, Moral Orientation, Humanitarianism, Nationalism/Patriotism, Freedom. Each informant was instructed to using their camera to visually document people, places, and things that represented or contradicted each value mentioned above.

Informants were strongly encouraged to also visually document people, places, and things that did not fit into any of the above categories but represented something they found particularly interesting (or offensive). Informants were asked to keep a brief log that provided a short description of each picture and (if applicable) the abovementioned value it related to. Informants were given approximately 10-14 days to complete their photography and contact the Primary Investigator so that arrangements for phase 2 could be made.

Phase 2:

Informants participated in an in-depth interview in person or via Skype when a face-to-face interview was not feasible. During the interview they explored and discussed the photos they took during Phase 1. To examine the impact of marketing communication on the identity project of the informants, print advertisements featuring different configurations of masculinity were also explored during the interview process.

Informants viewed an assortment of print advertisements depicting different formations of manhood and masculinity. After viewing the collection of print ads informants discussed 4-6 ads they find particularly interesting (2-3 that they liked and 2-3 that they disliked). The aim of this exercise was to explore the ways advertising impacts perceptions of manhood and masculinity. Specific areas investigated included:

- 1) Are there representations of manhood and masculinity featured in advertisements that are viewed as more authentic than others?
- 2) How are representations of manhood and masculinity featured in ads internalized – are there characteristics of the representations that become incorporated into personal identity projects?
- 3) How do informants perceive the interaction of race and masculinity in representations of manhood featured in advertisements?

Phenomenological interviews differ considerably from those conducted in positivistic qualitative research. As Thompson, et al. (1989) explain:

The goal of a phenomenological interview is to attain a first-person description of some specified domain of experience. The course of the dialogue is largely set by the respondent. With the exception of an opening question, the interviewer has no a priori questions concerning the topic. The dialogue tends to be circular rather than linear; the descriptive questions employed by the interviewer flow from the course of the dialogue and not from a

predetermined path. The interview is intended to yield a conversation, not a question and answer session (p. 138).

It is with this understanding in mind that a loosely structured interview guide (Appendix) was constructed and utilized. The overall flow of the interview process was dictated by Thompson et al. (1990) emergent dialogue approach, where questions stem organically from researcher-informant interaction. When utilizing emergent dialogue, the interviewer remains intimately attuned to the course of the conversation, so that follow-up questions lead to descriptions of experiences. Interview questions are not intended to support (or refute) theoretical hypotheses (Thompson et al., 1989)

In relation to interviewers and respondents, a number of studies have demonstrated how factors such as race, ethnicity, and gender can significantly impact interaction effects (Anderson et al., 1988; Webster, 1996; Weeks and Moore 1981; Williams and Heikes, 1993). Therefore, in an effort to increase the level of comfort with discussing issues of race, the self-identified gender and racial background of interviewee and interviewer coincided in this study.

Chapter Four

Findings

This chapter reports the three key themes that emerged from the data. As demonstrated by previous consumer behavior research, consumption practices strongly correlated with personal values. The second significant theme involved perceptions of identity possibilities. White informants generally perceived a broader range of potential identity roles than black informants. The final central theme to emerge from the data pertained to perceptions and experiences relating to a post-racial society. However, the experience of a post-racial society was highly divergent based on racial formation. The section that follows expounds on each of these themes by exploring visual documentation and quotations of informants.

Values Linked to Consumption

Informants utilized the symbolic nature of consumer culture as a means of expressing values. Although informants were free to use any form of representation, the use of branded products and services dominated their documentation. Products and services were used as a way of documenting each of the five values they were asked to pictorially represent. The linkage between consumer culture and values is well documented in marketing scholarship (Vinson, Scott, & Lamont, 1977; Kahle & Kennedy, 1989; Thompson & Troester, 2002; Richins, 1994; Clawson & Vinson, 1978); the findings of this study further illustrate the relationship that exists between these two

concepts. Figure 4 below provides a representative sample of how informants utilized branded products and services in their documentation of values.

Figure 4

Branded Items as Symbols of Values



Achievement and Success

Informants most utilized brands to pictorially document the values of achievement and success. High-end vehicle brands, such as Lexus were documented as emblems of success by white and black informants. Distinctions surfaced between black and white informants while exploring the tenets of the luxury car/achievement and

success relationships. Most notably, black informants expressed a positive correlation between price and achievement. That is to say, the more expensive the vehicle, the greater the achieved level of success. White informants communicated a more complex relationship between luxury cars and success, wherein brands that commanded exorbitant price tags were deemed garish. In other words, for white informants the linkage between expensive vehicles and achievement and success was not perceived as perennial. The excerpts that follow are emblematic of the sample and effectively demonstrate these differences in perception.

In relation to black informants, Gregory provided the following statement while explaining why he documented his newly acquired Lexus (Figure 5) as a symbol of achievement and success:

Figure 5

Lexus – Achieving Success



When I had my Nissan, I kept it clean. I got it repainted and stuff. I was the same dude then as I am now. Just because I have a different car, people treat me differently. When I'm on the highway and I want to go 75 in the fast lane and there's somebody going 60, they get out of the way, where as in my Nissan nobody did that. People always comment when I drive through campus, they're like I didn't know you had a Lexus. I'm like, damn, you didn't even talk to me when I had my Nissan; I honked at you and you never waved when I had my Nissan. So I really do think people value that and there's a level of achievement and success...that comes along with that. [I]t's so hard not to feed into that because it feels good...people hold you on this pedestal, even if it's based on materialism or whatever the case may be...it is very satisfying. **(Gregory, 25-year-old, black male, Administrative Assistant & student)**

Gregory's experience pre and post the acquisition of a Lexus seems to validate his belief in the symbolic meaning of luxury cars. While driving a Nissan, Gregory communicates a life experience void of distinction; the treatment he receives from others is pedestrian at best. However, with the arrival of his Lexus comes an air of prestige. People begin to take notice, and he is afforded privileges unknown to him as a Nissan owner.

Admittedly, he has not changed – he is “the same dude” now as he was then. In the absence of personal change he is left to conclude that his reversal of fortune is due to his new acquisition.

The act of embodying his Lexus with symbolic meaning is by no means remarkable; however choosing to embody it with achievement and success does stand as a curious task. Given the attention upswing Gregory received as a result of purchasing a Lexus, why not emblemize his purchase with qualities associated with cachet and prestige? The life experience of Gregory post-Lexus seems directly related to a heightened level of prominence and notoriety, which can result from the attainment of success. But is it not also true that success can be obtained in the absence of increased

status and prestige? It is only by collapsing achievement and success into prestige and status that Gregory is able to mark his Lexus with the distinction of achievement of success. High-end vehicles embody achievement and success because Gregory has chosen to correlate and define these characteristics with a life experience full of prominence and prestige. Gregory's assessment of achievement and success was commonplace among black informants as a whole.

Black informants expressed a correlation between premium automobiles and success that was positive and perpetual. As the cost and extravagance of a vehicle increased, so did the level of success (i.e. prominence and prestige) attained. While discussing vehicles as markers of achievement and success, Gregory stated the following:

Having a Lamborghini Gallardo or a Diablo, or something like that, would be really, really, nice, and you would never have to question, you could pull it to the front of any place and they would know that they're supposed to valet your car, whereas even though I drive a Lexus, which is really nice now, if I were to pull up in front of the AT&T Center they'd be like, can I help you. **(Gregory, 25-year-old, black male, Administrative Assistant & student)**

Gregory clearly communicates that premium cars offer varying degrees of prominence. While his newly attained Lexus affords him an increased level of status, Gregory envisions an even higher degree of prominence with a more exotic and expensive vehicle. Like Gregory, black informants in general expressed a belief that achievement and success equated to prominence and status, which could be obtained in increasing quantities with the acquisition of high-end vehicles.

White informants gravitated to premium automobiles as a way to document achievement and success also, however, the reasons they offered as to way they did so provided points of distinction. White informants generally expressed that high-end vehicles represented a variation of achievement and success (i.e. monetary success), but did not symbolize all that achievement and success could mean. The following statement provided by Walter when asked to discuss his pictorial documentation of a Dodge Viper (Figure 6) is representative of white informants as a whole:

Figure 6

Dodge Viper – Mainstream Notions of Success



I thought it represented a mainstream idea of achievement and success...hav[ing] a lot of money, really nice car, hot trophy wife, a big house...I felt like there really isn't any other reason to have a car like that other than to display material wealth. To me, this isn't necessarily my idea of success...success to me would be a fulfilling life that's not necessarily measured by monetary value but by personal success with relationships or character, a person of good moral fortitude...good relationships with the people he loves...there are a lot of really rich people out there that are just

horrible people and there are a lot of dirt poor [people] that are the picture of humanity. (**Walter, 23-year-old, white male, student**)

Walter communicates that there is a distinction between what is generally perceived as a successful life and his personal measurement of achievement and success. While the masses categorize success by means of extrinsic factors, Walter extends the definition to include intrinsic factors, such as personal growth and interpersonal relationships. Walter's redefining of achievement and success repositions premium vehicles as a partial embodiment of a successful life.

In stark opposition to the black informants, the white portion of the sample communicated that the symbolic relationship between high-end vehicles and achievement and success suffered from a ceiling effect. White informants held the belief that purchasing the most expensive vehicle on the market would not necessarily garner the greatest symbolic benefit. In fact, such a practice could hinder the amount of symbolic exchange. Walter explained this process while discussing his pictorial documentation of a convertible Porsche (Figure 7) as follows:

Figure 7

Porsche – Just Enough Prestige



A Porsche is the right amount of prestige...you know what a Porsche is and what it means, a certain amount of wealth but it's not really gaudy. A Porsche has an understated coolness about it, which I like and identify with. I feel like ideally you should want to have a certain amount of class, but there's a way to be classy without telling people you're classy. **(Walter, 23-year-old, white male, student)**

Essentially, Walter is describing a form of cultural capital. Pierre Bourdieu constructed the concept of cultural capital as a means of highlighting the noneconomic factors that promote disparities in the educational attainment of children from different social classes (Bourdieu, 1977). Cultural capital is defined as accumulated cultural knowledge that confers power and status. Said differently, cultural capital involves non-financial assets that stimulate social mobility beyond economic means (Barker, 2004). In relation to Walter's comment, it takes a heightened level of cultural capital or accumulated cultural

knowledge to understand the value of understating economic capital. Walter demonstrates an awareness of the distinguishing characteristic that separates “old money” from the nouveau riche – subtle restraint.

The historical positioning of blackness may provide an explanation for the differing views of black and white informants. Previous research indicates that black Americans use conspicuous consumption as a means of expressing a collective identity and countering their marginalized status (Molnar & Lamont, 2002; Lamont & Molnar, 2001). Conspicuous consumption is categorized as lavishly spending on products and services with the intent to visually display income and wealth (Veblen, 1994). Equating achievement and success with prestige and status and holding the belief that ultra-luxury brands such as Lamborghini and Ferrari with a higher level of prominence may be young black males overcompensating for their marginalized status. As a group that is generally portrayed as society’s underclass, attaining prominence and status may be perceived as a means of affirming full citizenship to themselves and others.

Morality

Both sets of informants used branded items to document morality. In many instances, informants chose to highlight a brand as a way of expressing a contradiction of morality. Fredrick documented the Hummer H2 shown in Figure 8 as a contradictory signifier of morality. In the excerpt that follows, Fredrick displays an awareness of the fluidity in which products can embody symbols.

Figure 8

Hummer H2 – A Symbol of Amorality



I took this [picture] a few blocks away from my apartment... it's kind of a nutshell [of] what I'm talking about when I say I'm not a huge fan of excess. What we've got here is just a huge lumbering gas guzzling, I mean, it seriously looks like the next thing they're going to buy is a Panzer Tank or something. Why do you need to drive something that big? ...it's really hard to describe how it hits you on a deeper level, but when you see it you're just disgusted by it. It's people who have the money buying ridiculous things because apparently it fits into a class image they have of themselves, things that are just totally unnecessary and just a waste of money, [and] horrible for the environment. **(Fredrick, 26-year-old, white male, Film Crew Member)**

Fredrick's statement illustrates that he is aware of the shifting symbolic meaning of consumer products. For Fredrick, the H2 represents an excessive lifestyle that directly harms the earth and its inhabitants, but Fredrick understands that the H2 may hold an

alternative symbolic meaning for others – for some it reflects the social class to which they belong or deem aspirational. As expressed in the work of Kniazeva and Venkatesh (2007), in today’s postmodern consumer culture “what symbolizes joy today, will become a symbol of guilt tomorrow, because these symbolic meanings are not permanently assigned to their material carriers, but are made up by the consumers” (p. 431).

The ways in which informants utilize branded items to express values suggest that consumers construct symbolic meanings using the most salient portions of their value system. In the case of Fredrick, modesty and moderation are fundamental to his value system. As such, he constructs the symbolic meaning of branded items based upon these salient values. A consumer that strongly values financial security may conversely infuse a branded item like the H2 with a symbolic meaning that emphasizes its ability to communicate high financial worth (Richins, 1994).

Another informant, Kent held health and diet as the most salient features of his life. These attributes were so critical to him that he made a drastic life change and became a vegetarian shortly before participating in this study. Kent commented that his focus on leading a healthy lifestyle was motivated by a desire to maintain a fit body and uphold a moral obligation to be a steward of the earth. As he states:

I’ve become a vegetarian recently and so I’m trying to transition to a point where I’m doing my part morally and however I can to clean up the planet both energetically and physically. **(Kent, 19 year old white male, Student)**

Kent’s emphasis on living a moral life through the practice of vegetarianism influences the ways in which he assigned symbolic meaning to branded items. When asked to

discuss his pictorial documentation of empty fast food containers (Figure 9) Kent offered the following:

Figure 9

McDonald's as Morally Corrupt



I hate McDonald's because the food's bad and they know it's bad, and they just want to make money. They literally couldn't give a shit about people's health. There are so many people in this country, [that] have to go to McDonald's because of the price...it just sucks that the people who can't afford [healthy] food have to eat shitty food because these companies have no moral obligation to treat people with respect...
(Kent, 19-year-old, white male, student)

In mainstream U.S. culture, McDonald's has come to symbolize a number of positive traits, such as ingenuity and global expansion. Some have gone as far as to state that McDonald's and its "Golden Arches" encapsulate the "American way of life" (Ritzer, 1983). Kent's ardent attachment to issues of health compel him to bypass the

symbolic meanings of McDonald's largely promoted in mainstream society, and focus his attention on the dietary risk posed by the popular fast food chain. Since much of the food offered by McDonald's is high in calories and fat, Kent assigned a negative symbolic meaning to the brand as a whole. Kent's experience with the McDonald's brand demonstrates the critical role salient values have in the construction of symbolic meaning.

Nationalism | Patriotism

In some instances informants utilized a historical perspective to emblemize brands. Jay's explanation for documenting a Jeep Wrangler as an emblem of nationalism (Figure 10) models this form of constructing symbolic meaning.

Figure 10

Jeep Wrangler – An Historic Figure of Nationalism



I think that the Jeep Wrangler is sort of a symbol of freedom and it has been since World War II. Back then it was the Jeep Willys...was sort of a symbol for that war...before Hummers took over you could go on any military base and see a hundred Jeeps. It's also a sense of nationalism...it's a patriotic thing. **(Jay, 26-year-old, white male, Ph.D. student)**

Instead of utilizing its present-day image to create symbolic meaning, Jay shifts his attention to the historical significance of the Jeep brand as a method of forming meaning. In late 2009, the Jeep brand was 13th on the list of top selling car brands in the United States, making it a small niche brand (Bunkley & Vlasic, 2009). Through the influence of history and nostalgia, a comparatively meager car brand is able to stand as a signifier of U.S. nationalism. This phenomenon has not gone unnoticed by marketing executives at Jeep – in recent years the company has introduced vehicles, such as the Patriot and Liberty that summon Jeep’s historic lore.

Humanitarianism

While exploring branded items related to humanitarianism among white and black informants, it became evident that brands can embody multiple symbolic meanings for a given consumer. When asked to discuss his decision to use the McDonald’s logo as a contrary symbol of humanitarianism (Figure 11), Philip provided the following:

Figure 11

McDonalds: A Love | Hate Relationship



I love McDonalds. I think it's delicious. But I don't like to see the way the food is made...I know what I'm eating because I've seen *Super Size Me* and I've read *Fast Food Nation*...I know everything about McDonalds...I know it's not healthy but it's good. It's cheap. **(Philip, 18-year-old, white male, student)**

Philip maintains a complicated relationship with the McDonald's brand. His classification of the brand as contradictory to humanitarianism seems to underscore that he perceives their product offerings as detrimental to society. However, Philip also displays a deep appreciation for the brand that appears to center on the pleasure the brand offers. The information Philip has garnered in respect to how McDonald's develops its products has led him to embody it with negative symbolic meaning, while the gratification he has received from his personal experience with the brand directs him to also bestow it with positive symbolic meaning.

Freedom

Further illustrating the fluid and fragmented nature of postmodern consumer culture, Michael documented a small, black-owned retail establishment as representative of freedom (Figure 12). The following excerpt details his reasoning for doing so:

Figure 12

A Black-Owned Business – Personal and Collective Freedom



I want to have my own business one day. I'm making moves to acquire one... Ultimately I'm going to get to a place where I can dictate and control. I think that's powerful, man. How many of us can say that, it takes on a whole different spiritual realm when I get up or you get up or when a person gets up to do what they want to do and not have to go to a place where somebody is telling them what to do. That means that it opens when you get there and you control who you hire. You control what you sell. You control the business. That's what I want. **(Michael, 28-year-old, black male, Ph.D. student)**

Michael is vividly clear in his conceptualization of freedom – it starts and ends with self-determination. Business ownership symbolizes freedom for Michael because

he perceives it to be a path to gaining control. Having the ability to make decisions for himself seems supremely important to Michael. His decision to highlight a black-owned business attaches additional meaning to his conceptualization of freedom. Specifically utilizing a black business moves the discussion of freedom from a personal to a collective level. The freedom Michael speaks of is not just his own. Michael's desire to own a business extends from a personal yearning for control as well as from a collective aspiration for black empowerment.

Identity Elasticity

Among informants, the data indicates that race moderates the interaction between identity projects and the marketplace. Informants that shared a similar racial identity also tended to possess corresponding perceptions of identity possibilities. A preponderance of the white informants perceived a broad range of identity possibilities. White informants were also more amendable to trying and incorporating consumption practices that extending their sense of self. Conversely, black informants predominantly demonstrated a narrow view of identity possibilities and commonly displayed a reluctance to attempt consumer behavior that existed outside the realm of their preconceived understanding of feasible identities. The ways in which informants engaged with the marketplace corresponded to the level of malleability they assigned to their identity project. In the current research, this relationship between perceived possible selves and consumption practices is termed identity elasticity.

A fundamental concept in economics, elasticity represents the variability to change a construct (e.g., price or income) possesses in relation to changes in other

parameters (e.g., demand or supply) (Friedman, 2007). Spoken in the language of economics, elasticity is a measure of variable responsiveness. This responsiveness is measured by calculating the change in one variable given a unit change in another variable (Marshall, 1920). In a given context a construct can be elastic or inelastic.

A construct that is elastic experiences a wide range of variability given relatively small changes to related variables. When economists describe the demand for a commodity as elastic, they are stating that the demand for that commodity quickly declines as the price increases. Choice serves as a key reason for the quick decline. When consumers have a wide array of product alternatives they tend to exhibit high levels of price sensitivity. For instance, fast food restaurants are highly elastic. Due to the volume of fast food restaurant options typically afforded to consumers, when a particular restaurant increases its prices, consumers generally react by shifting their patronage to one of the many alternative fast food restaurants available to them.

Inversely, a construct that is inelastic will undergo little to no change in response to changes in other parameters. When economists classify the demand of a product or service as inelastic, they are proclaiming that demand remains fairly constant even with price fluctuations. Here again choice functions as a critical factor. A good example of this is gas prices. The price elasticity of gasoline consumption is estimated at -0.64 (Goodwin, Dargay, & Hanly, 2004). Automobile transportation is fundamental to U.S. culture. Cars are used to travel to and from work, complete basic errands, and in conjunction with leisure time. Gasoline remains the dominant form of automotive fuel in the U.S. Due to a lack of viable alternatives, consumers purchase gasoline at relatively

the same levels even when faced with significant price increases. Consumer behavior will not change until comparable products enter the market or consumers perceive existing products as viable alternatives

In the current research the concept of elasticity provides a framework to explicate the identity beliefs and consumer behaviors of informants related to this study. The white informants typically possessed an elastic identity, which enabled them to have more expansive consumption practices, while black informants generally exhibited an inelastic identity wherein they demonstrated a more fixed range of consumer behavior.

Informants communicated their identity elasticity by providing specific examples of their consumption practices and the purposes they served. For instance, Carl, a white informant, stated the following regarding his shifting consumption of music:

I've started to get into more rap music. I like Kid Cudi...Wiz [Khalifa]...[and] Chitty Bang. It's appeal[ing]; like these rappers have a certain appeal to preppy kids... A lot of kids who are preppy try to act sort of more urban...by listening to rap...I'm starting to get into rap. There are some white rappers too I like. This kid, his name is Sammy Adams, he's from the East Coast, and a kid named Chris Webby, East Coast white rappers who are pretty big, Mike Posner, Mac Miller, they're all very popular among white people. I have a feeling that black people really don't accept them as rappers the same way that white people accept them as rappers. I guess some people would think that they're posing, but they like to rap. They're not trying to do something extraordinary. They're just doing what they love to do. **(Carl, 18-year-old, white male, student)**

Carl communicates that he (along with many of his white counterparts) are quite willing to consume hip hop culture, which is socially positioned outside the boundaries of their "preppy kid" identity role. The consumption of hip hop music is appealing precisely because it enables Carl (and others like him) to at least momentarily extend

their perception of self to be more urban. The term urban is, in large part, synonymous with blackness and black culture (Squires, Friedman, & Saidat, 2005). Therefore, the consumption of hip hop music provides Carl the opportunity to align his perception of self with the perceived beneficial aspects of black culture, such as coolness and fashionability (Appiah, Black, White, Hispanic, and Asian-American adolescents' responses to culturally embedded ads, 2001; Spiegler, 1996; Rossman, 1994), without carrying the burden of negative aspects of blackness, such as racially-based discriminatory practices. However, Carl also communicates a proclivity for non-urban hip hop, and while he is acutely aware that others (particularly listeners of hip hop that are black) may classify this form of hip hop as inauthentic, he still chooses to consume it because "they're just doing what they love to do" (Hess, 2005). By choosing to move beyond the boundaries of their whiteness, and incorporate a historically black cultural movement into their sense of self, the white rappers that Carl consumes exemplify and reinforce an elastic identity.

Many white informants communicated that their consumption practices were mainly driven by a sense of exploration and a desire to experiment. When asked to discuss the types of music he likes to listen to, James gave the following response:

I love driving and listening to rap...I really don't know the name of the artists, but I just know what I like and what I don't like...My professor last semester would always have some songs playing before every class and I really liked all of those. They're kind of different types. Lately my friends have been listening to a lot of techno like Deadmau5 and Bass Head...DGTS is cool too. **(James, 19-year-old, white male, student)**

James demonstrates a willingness to expose himself to and consume a wide range of musical forms. His disclosure that he is not particularly familiar with the names of artists indicates that James is more concerned with how well the music corresponds with his personal taste than with the cultural meaning a given artist may symbolize. Without an a priori genre of music assigned to his racial identity, James is free to consume on his own terms. James goes on to discuss how his relationship to music differs from that of black males he's familiar with:

I feel like they kind of research it more. So then they might have a lot more diverse library – where I just know about Lil Wayne, Kanye and just different artists like that. They may only be focused on just that style of music, that genre. They research it more so they know a lot more about it, whereas they may not know classical music and go and look for different artists in that. **(James, 19-year-old, white male, student)**

In this statement, James seems to be referencing the relationship hip hop culture, particularly rap music, has with dominant notions of black male identity. Unlike white male identity, dominant notions of black male identity are closely linked to rap music (Clay, 2003). It is widely assumed that young black males have a deep affinity for rap music. As a testament to the strong ties that exist between dominant notions of black male identity and rap music, several black informants communicated that they felt pressure to incorporate elements of hip hop culture into their sense of self – to do otherwise was to risk alienation from the black community. David stated it thusly:

You get viewed down if you're not in[to] hip hop and wearing all the latest little fashions...you're looked at as a kind of lame person. You know? **(David, 18-year-old, black male, student)**

David's comment illustrates another way in which young black males must contend with predetermined notions of identity, while young white males maintain a greater sense of

freedom to define identity markers themselves. For young black males, involvement in hip hop culture represents a prerequisite for sustaining a sense of racial identity: the deeper the level of involvement, the stronger the bond.

Richard communicates the typical inelastic identity demonstrated by black informants through consumption practices:

I went to a middle school that was [predominantly] white and then a high school that was [predominantly] black...when I was in the [predominately] white school, people were like you're black, so you have to be good at basketball, and you've got to do this, this and this. And being so young and not really being around black culture, the only time I saw black people was my family and on BET...So I felt like I had to be like that. So I'll have this big old afro and wear FUBU...I got to high school and I saw [black] people doing the same thing. The cool guys were the ones that were the toughest and had the saggiest pants and big tall t-shirts. I thought I had to be like that. **(Richard, 20-year-old, black male, student)**

Richard explains that his consumer behavior conformed to an agreed upon understanding of what young black males do and do not do. Black male identity was predetermined and explicitly communicated to Richard while attending the predominantly white middle school and a majority black high school. In both instances, black male identity was defined along narrow parameters, which hinged on stereotypical associations of black manhood – sports, hip hop culture, and hypermasculinity. In order for Richard to maintain a sense of black male identity, he felt it necessary to confine his consumption practices to products and services that were representative of the black male stereotype conveyed and generally accepted as truth by those within his sphere of influence. To do otherwise was to risk a loss of racial identity, which could result in ostracization from the black community. As expressed by David, the most effective way

to disassociate from the narrowly defined tenets of black male identity occurred through relocation.

Amarillo was just so small. You can get into things that [you] weren't supposed to get into, especially being a black male myself, you just end up either going to jail or having kids. It was just a really bad environment for me. So I felt that I should try something new and explore a new place in Texas... **(David, 18-year-old, black male, student)**

David illustrates the strength stereotypical associations of black manhood possess. In David's mind, it was only a matter of time before he found himself consumed by a predetermined sense of self that would result in jail or premature parenthood. In the confines of Amarillo, where those within his sphere of influence accepted and adhered to narrowly defined parameters of black male identity, David's future had already been decided. The only viable option perceived by David was to relocate to an unfamiliar area where alternative perceptions of self could take root. David goes on to explain the identity elasticity shift that occurred as a result of his relocation:

I think it's kind of helped me, kind of be more like, be more myself. Like back in Amarillo, the neighborhood I grew up in, you had to be more of, kind of like a thug, which I can't really consider myself that at all. You kind of had to reach that to be accepted in that neighborhood that I grew up in, but now I can listen to the music that I like, and wear the things that I like to wear, and just be myself. **(David, 18-year-old, black male, student)**

While a change in environment may offer some degree of freedom from the inelastic identity perpetuated by black male stereotypes, there are clear limitations. As McKittrick (2006) reveals, spaces and places are social productions that derive their meaning from the broader cultural context in which they are found. Dissimilar spaces

can embody and project similar social meanings for its inhabitants. While urban centers and suburbia possess dissimilar geographic characteristics, the ways in which young black males are perceived to navigate each space is analogous. Furthermore, young black men take with them physical attributes, such as skin tone, that can cue black male stereotypes and override the social meaning embedded in geography. A young black male shopping at a high-end establishment may not benefit from the cultural capital instilled in the geographic location, because his very skin acts as marker of stigmatization (Lamont & Molnar, 2001). Gregory discusses his inability to escape the tenets upon which black male identity is assumed as he moves through various spaces and places, because of the pervasiveness and fluidity it maintains:

When I'm here at the office, when I go to lunch, when I'm in class, there are no people that really understand my identity and what I feel as a black man, so it's like people are always placing me in their boxes, and it's so easy just to fit that box, or fit in that box. **(Gregory, 25-year-old, black male, Administrative Assistant & student)**

Gregory speaks of the pervasiveness of black male stereotypes and the allure of simply abiding by predetermined notions of self. Gregory moves through a world wherein his identity is always already assumed to be known. If his personal sense of self is incongruent with that which is assumed by society, he has one of two options: he can either struggle to prove himself different than the assumptions held by others or shift his personal sense of self to align with the beliefs of others. Gregory communicates an awareness of this situation and has assessed that the latter option requires far less energy and time than the former. The danger of pursuing the path of less resistance and fitting into the narrow box Gregory speaks of can be seen in the following excerpt. Michael

discusses the impact associated with internalizing the narrowly defined conception of black manhood projected by society:

All these young black men by...by 22, 25, for me it was 25. I was supposed to have a mansion, I was supposed to have Nia Long as my wife, I was supposed to be in the NBA making \$10 million...We got these things in our head, and then when you reach 24 or 25 years old and you see that you're nowhere near, that it does something. It deflates your whole; you can see it. When these guys were 18, they were supposed to be playing college ball, or they were supposed to skip college and go right to the NBA. It's sad. Some of these guys can't even let that stuff go. These guys are...my age, even older, still talking about coming back and stuff. **(Michael, 28-year-old, black male, student)**

The power of Michael's comment lies in its explanatory prowess. He reveals that for him and other young black males, identity is something achieved rather than explored. Black males become black men through the acquisition of highly specific identity roles and coveted consumer culture artifacts. It is presumed that these things will be obtained while in one's youth. A confluence of personal limitations and structural inequalities creates an environment where an infinitesimal portion of the black male population will actually acquire what is prescribed. As Michael astutely points out, due to a general nondisclosure of success rates, young black males begin the process of internalizing their failure when they come to the realization that they are unable to attain the requirements for black manhood imagined by society. Michael goes on to communicate how some young black males are unable to recover the sense of loss resulting from the internalization process; unable to create or imagine an alternative sense of self, they become fixed to the only perception of self they have known.

Michael's statement also illustrates the heteronormative nature of predetermined black male identity. Leap (2007) defines heteronormativity as "the principles of order

and control that position heterosexuality as the cornerstone of the American sex/gender system and obligate the personal construction of sexuality and gender in terms of heterosexual norms (p 98).” Michael’s proclamation demonstrates how predetermined black male identity assumes young black men will engage in heterosexual relationships and adhere to historically heteronormative institutions, such as marriage. The application of heteronormativity to predetermined black male identity requires young black males outside the boundaries of heterosexuality to either deny their sexual self or risk isolation from dominant notions of black manhood. The perception of queerness as contradictory to black male identity was mentioned on numerous occasions by various black informants:

I think a lot of black men are homophobic...because the stereotype of black men is to be like super macho and superman... That’s the complete opposite of gayness. **(Richard, 20-year-old, black male, student)**

Manliness is a natural thing. So for a guy to be feminine and manly, it contradicts. It’s laughable to see a homo thug, some dude who’s all manly, but he’s gay. It goes against each other. **(Ronald, 21-year-old, black male, unemployed)**

I just think people don’t know enough about it. They don’t even want to accept that it exists, especially when it comes to black masculinity. It’s the complete opposite of what it means to be a man is to be with another man. **(Gregory, 25-year-old, black male, Administrative Assistant & student)**

The relationship between black male identity and homosexuality as discussed by black informants is best understood in a socio-historical context. As Ward (2005) notes, homophobia among black males in the U.S. can be viewed as a consequence of three areas of black culture 1) religious beliefs, 2) historical sexual exploitation, and 3) race

survival consciousness. Black churches generally adhere to strict interpretation of scripture and are distrustful of the contextual approaches that have become more common among white-dominant congregations (Brown, 2002; Fowlkes, 2003; Reed, 2003). Douglas (1999) positions scripture as the cornerstone of homophobia in the black community; however, she also places the literal reading of scripture in historical context – literal interpretation of the Bible provided enslaved Africans with faith of eventual freedom.

The second aspect of black culture that enables a clearer understanding of black male homophobia to come to light is the black community's general aversion to discuss any matters of sexuality. A history of sexual demonization has effectively privileged whiteness and denigrated blackness, creating an atmosphere wherein blacks avoid speaking publicly about matters of sexuality. To do so would risk confirmation of the dominant stereotypes long held in the US imagination (Ward, 2005; Douglas, 1999). Race survival consciousness represents the final area of black culture that impacts levels of homophobia among young black males. The Black Power movement attempted to construct black male identity as a struggle against white supremacy. In doing so, whiteness and homosexuality came to be understood as markers of weakness and femininity, and black male identity was oppositionally positioned as a site of hypermasculinity and hyper-heterosexuality (Ward, 2005). The comments of the black informants illustrate how these socio-historical factors coalesce and naturalize homophobia as an a priori characteristic of black male identity.

Black Male Stereotype

The data indicates that the identity elasticity of informants was related in large part to the existence (or absence) of an overarching identity narrative. Black informants communicated that society holds predetermined notions of black male identity that are based on stereotypical characteristics, such as hypermasculinity, criminality, and hyper-heterosexuality. Black informants discussed a process wherein these predetermined notions of black male identity guided their identity projects. Many black informants stated that their dependence on predetermined notions of black male identity was much greater during their formative years, but that they still struggle to define their sense of self on their own terms. Two black informants explained predetermined notions of black male identity as follows:

More of a gangster-type thug-type person; going out and having kids or going to jail, committing crimes, things like that; very ignorant in their views. That's kind of a stereotype that I've experienced...that's kind of what I've been seeing. **(David, 18-year-old, black male, student)**

They talk about how we're irresponsible. How we're not family oriented. We don't need family. That we're just extremely aggressive... I do not think those [things] are true...I feel like there are maybe some black men that are like that but there are some white men that are like that too. **(Richard, 20-year-old, black male, student)**

It is necessary to revisit notions of male identity (both white and black) from a socio-historical perspective to gain an understanding into the origins of the predetermined notions of black male identity discussed by the informants of this study. Prior to the end of enslavement, the "Sambo" figure represented the dominant discourse relating to Black masculinity (Boskin, 2007). This figure was perceived as dim-witted,

lazy, and happy-go-lucky. These are all traits that were clearly not associated with the dominant discourse of white masculinity. White manhood was configured around enterprising thought, strong work ethic, and judiciousness. Following the end of enslavement there was a turn in the dominant discourse of black male identity – the “Sambo” gave way to the “Brute Negro” (Riggs, 1987). As strikingly portrayed in the D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*, the “Brute Negro” (as he is presented in the blackface character of Gus) was innately savage, animalistic, and a predator of white women (Brown S. , 1933). This characterization is a far cry from the antebellum “Sambo.” While during slavery the dominant portrayal of black male identity framed black men as harmless imbeciles; post-emancipation the discourse had reconstructed black male identity and equated it with criminal savagery (Guerrero, 1993).

In order to understand this shift, the state of the nation must be examined. During the time of the “Sambo,” it was in the nation’s best interest to differentiate notions of black male identity from white male identity – the institution of enslavement demanded it. Proponents of enslavement created and disseminated representations of black male identity that justified slavery and assuaged white guilt (McElya, 2007). Correlating black male identity with an underdeveloped, childlike existence became part of the process of rationalizing and validating enslavement, particularly since under the tenants of slavery, masters are perceived to act as surrogate parents dutifully guiding the progress of all of those within the sphere of their influence. However, post-emancipation, “Sambo” ceased to be a productive site of black male identity discourse. In an effort to uphold white supremacy, black male identity was transformed from childlike to evil incarnate. By

aligning black male identity with criminality and savagery, the nation created the space to do whatever was necessary to contain the threat now viewed as inherent in emancipated black men. In the post-emancipation era, the dominant discourse regarding white masculinity was largely kept intact. However, notions of white male identity correlating with being a provider and protector are heightened (Kasson, 2002).

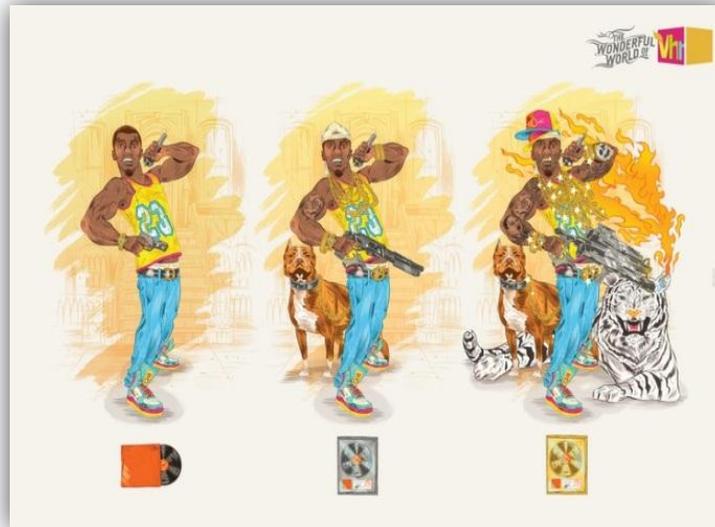
Undergoing a historical investigation of dominant historical discourses related to male identity reveals how present-day notions of black male identity share a lineage with the caricature of the “Brute Negro.” As noted by Ward (2005), “US media stereotypes developed during slavery such as that of the mammy, the jezebel, and the wild and hypersexual buck have their latter-day incarnations in the domineering matriarch, the ‘welfare queen’ and the violent and sexually promiscuous black man. The old images of blacks as bestial, lustful, wanton, lascivious, and promiscuous persist in the US psyche today” (p. 495). The black informants may, in part, avoid consumption practices that align with dominant notions of black male identity, such as a styles of dress associated with “gansta” or “thug” culture, as a way of disrupting the historical discourse related to black male identity.

Black informants were not alone in their awareness of predetermined notions of black male identity. White informants also communicated that they perceived there to be dominant notions of black male identity that were based in stereotypical attributes.

While discussing Figure 13, two white informants stated the following:

Figure 13

The Wonderful World of VH1



Actually to me that's kind of a negative stereotype for young black males. I've got a lot of friends that don't ever look like that...the guns and the pit bulls and just like that kind of seems like a negative stereotype for a lot of young black men. **(Jesse, 29-year-old, white male, Single father)**

[This] would be a little offensive, I think, if I were African American because it's just making this guy look like he is really pretty thug. There's definitely a stereotype that all black rappers own guns and own pit bulls and have a pet lion or pet tiger and are extremely violent... I think rappers now are dressing more white... I think some like Kid Cudi - he has the big glasses. He always wears skinny jeans, dresses in pretty cool hip shirts that would appeal to most white people. **(Carl, 18-year-old, white male, student)**

Carl's comment is telling on a number of fronts. In the first half of his statement, Carl demonstrates a keen awareness of black male stereotypes; he even goes as far as to

classify them as such. However, in the latter half of his discussion, wherein he comments on the shifting characteristics of black male rappers, he frames this transformation as a shift towards whiteness. In essence, this informant states young black men must embrace the “offensive” stereotypical notions of black male identity if they seek to possess a racial identity aligned with blackness. Incorporating signifiers outside the realm of the black male stereotype will be characterized as performing whiteness. For young black males, displaying a sense of self that appears incongruent with predetermined notions of black male identity is an ipso facto illegitimate form of black male identity.

Informants also communicated predetermined notions of white male identity as well. However, the stereotypes upon which they are based tend to be broader in scope, allowing for more expansive understandings of white male identity to surface. The comment that follows is indicative of how informants discussed predetermined notions of white male identity:

There are so many different things a white man could be. Even the stereotypes of white men, there’s not just like the white man stereotype; there’s the preppy frat white man and there’s the redneck white man, and I mean there’s so many different categories that a white man can be put in. If you’re black, you’re just black stereotype. There’s only one of those. There are a lot of different choices, and the possibilities that they could have, and it’s easier for them not to be stereotyped. They could kind of be neutral. **(Richard, 20-year-old, black male, student)**

As discussed by Richard, white males are perceived to have more latitude within their identity projects. There are preconceived markers of distinction, such as “preppy” and “redneck,” the former used to classify a white individual that possesses and proudly

displays hegemonic forms of economic and cultural capital, and the latter an identifier for a white individual that lacks economic and cultural capital. It appears that these two oppositional markers exist on a continuum wherein the vast majority of young white males have the ability to navigate the terrain that lies between, according to the informant.

The ways in which black and white informants interact with the marketplace appears to be influenced by the predetermined notions of their racial identity. Black informants generally expressed that their consumption practices (past and/or present) complemented the black male stereotype. The statement that follows exemplifies this type of disclosure:

When I look back at what I used to wear and how I used to dress, and how I do now, it's more like what I have now... is more of an individual person, whereas what I used to wear... you saw a theme. What I had is what you saw everybody else had, and what you saw in the media, the whole having a job, having a full-time job, a professional job, that's changed a lot. But also when I go out to wherever, to Wal-Mart or the store, or whatever, wearing baggie clothes and stuff really doesn't give me any satisfaction, and it portrays me in a way that I don't want people looking at me. **(Gregory, 25-year-old, black male, Administrative Assistant & student)**

As Simmel (1955) states, individual identities are simply a mass of collective identities – individual identities are rendered unique by the combination or configuration of its parts and not by the parts themselves. Gregory communicates a dramatic shift in his consumer behavior, wherein his consumption practices moved from a place of agreement with predetermined notions of black male identity to a space where he consciously avoided consumption practices that supported black male stereotypes. His change in consumption practices seems to coincide with a reconfiguration of the collective

identities that comprise his individual identity. LaMont and Molnar (2001) conceptualize consumption as a means of developing a collective (racial) identity. Viewing consumption practices in such a manner creates a space to explore why Gregory would engage in consumption practices that embrace black male stereotypes at one moment in time and repudiate such practices at another.

Collective identities encompass an internal and external component. Internally, in relation to racial identity, individuals of a racial group use perceived commonalities and shared experiences to differentiate themselves from other racial groups. Externally, members of racial groups find outward expressions that outgroup members will recognize as markers of the collective (racial) identity (Lamont & Molnar, 2001). Predetermined notions of black male identity may have enabled Gregory to form an internal sense of his racial identity. Consuming products marked as symbols of black male identity (e.g. baggy clothes) may have served to express the external portion of Gregory's collective (racial) identity. However, identity projects are dynamic. The introduction of a new collective identity – that of “young professional” required Gregory to reconfigure his collective identities to accommodate his reimagined overall sense of self. Having a full-time professional job expanded Gregory's identity project. Gregory's decision to abandon marketplace behaviors that supported predetermined notions of black male identity may have resulted from their incongruence with his budding professional-oriented sense of self.

Upon incorporating the collective identity of “young professional” into his identity project, being identified with predetermined notions of black male identity no longer provided satisfaction. The shifting nature of Gregory’s consumption practices underlines the fluctuation inherent to his identity project. This form of consumer behavior corresponds with the work relating to dissociative reference groups (White & Dahl, 2008; 2006). Dissociative reference groups refer to outgroups with which an individual avoids association. White and Dahl (2008; 2006) found consumers are more likely to avoid products associated with dissociative reference groups, particularly with products that contain high symbolic value. Gregory has classified those who adhere to dominant notions of black male identity as a dissociative reference group, and as such he actively avoids products that may identify him as a member of that group.

While Gregory simply chose to avoid consumption practices that support the black male stereotype, other informants prefer to engage in consumer behavior that actively repudiates dominant notions of black male identity. When asked to discuss his consumption of items associated with the Black Power Movement, an informant provided the following:

...blackness doesn’t totally put everything into who I am. I’m more than just blackness, but the way that race comes out, they put blackness at such a low level that you have to heighten your blackness.
(Michael, 28-year-old, black male, student)

Michael perceives dominant notions of black male identity as offensive and detrimental to his collective (racial) identity. Although Michael recognizes that his racial identity is not the sum of his individual identity, he consciously seeks out consumption practices

that refute hegemonic notions of black manhood. Instead of shopping at large well-known department stores, Michael seeks out black-owned businesses. Rather than wearing baggy clothes and diamond encrusted jewelry, Michael consumes dashikis and adorns himself in African-inspired ornaments. In an attempt to transform dominant notions of black male identity, Michael chooses to sacrifice consumption practices that express other sites of his identity and deliberately heightens his consumption activity related to his racial identity. Michael's consumption practices are consistent with previous work conducted in the area of racial/ethnic identification and consumer behavior. Consumers who hold a high level of racial/ethnic identification are far more likely to seek out vendors and products from individuals they perceive as belonging to their racial/ethnic group (Donthu & Cherian, 1994; Green, 1999; Deshpande, Hoyer, & Donthu, 1986; Williams & Qualls, 1989)

The data indicated that white and black informants engage in varying levels of negotiation. Amply aware of the dominant discourse concerning their prospective racial identity, informants attempted to balance predetermined notions of their racial self with personal conceptions of self. Carl explained his negotiation process as follows:

Guys in my fraternity mostly wear Polo. That's the one big thing. I don't own too much polo though. I own a couple of sweaters and I own some ties. I don't really own any Polo shirts though. It's not that important to me to wear Polo. If I see something I like I'll buy it. If I don't like it I'm not going to buy it just for the brand. **(Carl, 18-year-old, white male, student)**

Carl's statement illustrates the struggle that occurs to reconcile the collectivist and individualist aspects of the identity project. Triandris (1995) defines collectivism as

individuals who see themselves as an integral part of one or more collectives or in-groups. Individuals who perceive themselves as autonomous and independent are classified as individualist. People who are more individualist are motivated by their own preferences and needs and give priority to their personal goals (*Triandis, 1994*). Carl's comment demonstrates the complexity of the collectivism/individualism paradigm. Rather than embodying one perspective or the other, Carl's statement highlights how individuals negotiate between the two. Carl's desire to maintain ties to his fraternity compels him to engage in consumption practices that will align him with that in-group. However, Carl also seeks to sustain a unique sense of self, so he concedes to compromise. Deciding to consume a minimal amount of Polo branded clothing enables Carl to balance his need for in-group identification with his urge for an individualized sense of self.

In relation to black informants the negotiation process typically involved the black male stereotype. Many black informants expressed a concern about engaging in consumption practices that propagated predetermined notions of black male identity, even when those practices allied with their individualized desires. The following comment is emblematic of the negotiation process for black informants as a whole:

I think it definitely does influence what I buy because...I don't [want to] perpetuate that stereotype. Like with my hair I want to keep it clean. I don't want to have just like a huge fro because people just look at you and they're like oh, you've got a fro and you've got the pick sticking in it and stuff. I would say also baggy clothes. I don't really want to buy baggy clothes. But some things I'm sure that are stereotypical like Air Jordan's. I'm wearing Air Jordan's right now. I like Air Jordan's. I feel like it's something that I personally like and I'm not wearing them because black men should wear Air Jordan's. I'm wearing them because I like the way they look. I'll wear Air Jordan's

any day. I'm also not going to let that affect what I like. If I like it I'll wear it. **(Richard, 20-year-old, black male, student)**

In this excerpt Richard declares his knowledge of predetermined notions of black male identity and his wish to not be affiliated with them. Richard also communicates an understanding of the consumption practices that are indicative of the black male stereotype, and that he makes a concerted effort to avoid such consumer behavior.

However, Richard's avoidance of stereotypical products bears a limit. When a stereotypical product crosses into the domain of perceived personal desire, Richard suspends his avoidance of stereotypical products. Although Richard distinguishes Air Jordan's as a stereotypical product that has the potential to perpetuate the black male stereotype, he willingly negotiates his avoidance stance because he believes his desire for the item originates from a personal preference.

Crockett, Grier, and Williams (2003) discussion of the coping strategies deployed by black men when confronted with marketplace discrimination further explicates the negotiation process described by Richard. The authors detail the use of emotion-focused strategies, wherein black men internalize marketplace discrimination. Instead of placing blame for discriminatory practices on the institutions that produce them, black males perceive it to be their responsibility to take necessary steps to avoid victimization (Crockett et al., 2003). Baggy clothing is symbolically tied to the black male stereotype, which includes criminality as a key characteristic. For young black males, moving through the marketplace in baggy clothing is to invite marketplace discrimination. Richard may intentionally avoid symbolic markers, such as baggy clothing, as an emotion-focused marketplace discrimination coping strategy.

Post-racial Society: Perception versus Experience

Another way in which race is moderating the identity projects of the informants emerged with their perceptions and experiences of a post-racial society. The construct of a post-racial society assumes a social environment where racial preference, prejudice, and discrimination are obsolete (Squires, et al., 2010). Impressions of a post-racial America have in part been shaped by the election of Barack Obama as President, increased acceptance of interracial marriage, and shifts in advertising practices (Walker, 2003; Haq, 2010; Squires, et al., 2010).

A significant number of white and black informants perceive their generational cohort and the current era to be post-racial. However, informants communicated dissimilar experiences in relation to a post-racial society. Black informants expressed racialized experiences, such as race-based marketplace discrimination, while white informants typically described experiences that resembled their perception – with one significant caveat. Congruent with Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, white informants that communicated having meaningful interaction with racial minorities demonstrate a more nuanced understanding of the current moment and appear to be more sensitive to the possibility that others maintain a life experience divergent from their own.

The quote that follows represents the perception of many white informants:

I don't think our experiences are different enough to call different, if that makes sense, especially in the post-Civil Rights movement that we live in and how we have equality politically and culturally. There are differences in culture but not necessarily imbalances...in the world as I see it, and I think as the majority of people see it, a difference between black and white is negligible...I think a lot of the inequality comes from

the fact that we keep talking about it like racism, I think, is perpetuated by the fact that we consistently and ad nauseum create delineations between races. I think if we just stopped talking about everyone as different people and start talking about a shared common human experience then we're not going to have as much issue with racism or bigotry or difference of experience. **(Walter, 23-year-old, white male, student)**

In this passage, Walter situates race as an antiquated marker of difference. He points to the liberties acquired during the Civil Rights Movement as the watershed moment; injustices may have existed prior to this timeframe, but race-based equality has since become the law of the land. Walter goes on to proclaim that his racial formation does not tender him privilege, and if his race was marked differently, he would not experience discrimination as a result. Walter concludes his statement by suggesting that if individuals would cease to discuss issues of race and racism the last vestiges of inequality could be eradicated. In sum, Walter promotes a vision of a post-racial America.

The social environment expressed by Walter is in accord with the politics of color-blindness, which represents the dominant racial discourse of the post-civil rights era (Bonilla-Silva, Lewis, & Embrick, 2004; Bonilla-Silva, 2006). The politics of color-blindness defines equality as equal treatment under the law. When equal treatment under the law becomes the only means by which equality can be measured, systematic and institutional forms of racism are ignored. Turning a blind eye to structural modes of inequality shifts accountability for personal success and failure completely to individuals; one's lot in life becomes a reflection of her or his ability to adhere to a code of personal responsibility. Under color-blind politics, race is no longer a legitimate site

to discuss inequality because its socio-historical relevance is decontextualized, which renders its explanatory ability mute (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Brown M. , 2003). In such an environment, discussing matters of race and race-conscious remedies to inequality are classified as “playing the race card” or are often demonized as reverse racism. The excerpt from Walter parallels this ideology. He presumes that American society has attained a level of equality because he perceives that everyone is treated similarly. He also believes it to be counterproductive to discuss issues of race: social harmony requires that we cease to discuss our differences and merely concentrate on the shared aspects of our human experience.

In the following comment, another white informant spoke directly to this matter in relation to advertising while discussing Figure 14:

Figure 14

DKNY Men



There's one black guy that's there probably just to fill the quota. Like I said, my dad is a producer and he does commercials. He works in advertising. He always tells me for this shot we have to get an African American and for this spot we have to get a Hispanic couple. Sometimes, they purposely make the African American guy more intelligible, more intelligent than the white guy. They'll always have the black guy be the one with more knowledge. The white guy will always be the one who doesn't know about something, and the black guy will tell him what that something is.

Interviewer: How do you feel about that?

I feel like African Americans would complain more if they didn't [do it that way]... it's kind of reverse racism. **(Carl, 18-year-old, white male, student)**

White informants are not alone in their belief of a post-racial society. Black informants share their perception of society where race is no longer an issue. A black informant summarized this view of society in this way:

We don't care at all. That's the difference. We simply do not care. I mean we know the stereotypes, and we know that they're bull. Everyone is different. Everyone is their own individual. So yes, race is like a total nonissue for people our age unless their parents, you know the way they were brought up was Confederate, like they've got some Confederate parents or something, then they might share those ideals, but all of my friends and all of the people I've come in contact with even older people, I've got friends that I've met at Activision and they're like older guys, artists and stuff, actors, they're in their thirties, they don't even care. They don't care about race or look at it. They know the stereotypes and they joke the same way I do. I think it's a thing of the past. I think maybe older people that are still around might harbor onto those ideals but people of my age, I've never ran into anyone who has a problem with me because I'm black. I've never had a problem with somebody else because their Asian or Russian or whatever. **(Ronald, 21-year-old, black male, unemployed)**

Ronald provides a number of insightful disclosures in his statement. First, he seems to correlate race with the dominant stereotypes constructed around it. Using this form of logic it would follow that to be black (white) is to embody predetermined notions of

black (white) identity – it is to exemplify the stereotypes associated with being black (white). Because Ronald views stereotypes as faulty at best, and because he equates race with stereotypes, race as a construct is abandoned as a viable identifier. Race is perceived as an amalgamation of stereotypical characteristics and behaviors rather than a collective of phenotypic and cultural cues that suggest overlap in life experience. The forfeiture of race as an operable means of classification leads Ronald to adopt the politics of color-blindness.

Much like his white counterpart, Ronald stresses individuality and equality of treatment. Even when he speaks of the persistence of racism, it is in terms of individuals, not systems and institutions. Racism is labeled as actions by people that are overtly and intentionally discriminatory (e.g. raising your child to be a Confederate). However, researchers have shown that racism in the late 20th and early 21st centuries is comprised of subtle and subconsciously driven discriminatory actions (Collins P. , 2004; Sniderman, Piazza, Tetlock, & Kendrick, 1991; Hopkins, Reicher, & Levine, 1997; Harris, Henderson, & Williams, 2005; Schreer, Smith, & Thomas, 2009). The way in which Ronald defines racism causes him to overlook the subtle forms of racism that pervade society as well as systematic racism found in employment, housing, credit institutions, and the consumer marketplace (Pager & Sheperd, 2008; Yinger, 1998; Ladd, 1998). While Ronald states that he is treated equally by others, the barometer used to measure his level of equality omits significant fractions of prejudicial comportments.

Ronald positions his generational cohort as uniquely post-racial. Unlike the generations that came before, Millennials are perceived as cultivating a social

environment that is beyond race. Moving beyond race in this context is to employ the politics of color-blindness. Rather than healing racial wounds by confronting issues of race, Millennials attempt to disregard race altogether. Ignoring race provides for a space where multiculturalism can appear to flourish. Interracial relationships, long considered a taboo, are rather commonplace among Millennials. According to a nationwide USA Today/Gallup Poll conducted in 1997, fifty-seven percent of dating teenagers say they have dated someone of another race or ethnicity. The same poll in 1980 found that only 17% of teenagers in the U.S. had dated someone of another race or ethnicity (Specht-Jarvis, 2001).

On the surface, these numbers suggest race is far less salient for Millennials than previous generation, and that relations between racial and ethnic groups are vastly improving. However, further investigation of the polling data implies otherwise. When teenagers were asked what compels them to date interracially, 75% of the sample stated that it was out of curiosity, 54% mentioned a desire to try something different, and 47% replied a sense of rebellion (Specht-Jarvis, 2001). These responses indicate that many Millennials engage in interracial relationships because of race rather than in spite of it. Their feelings of curiosity, presumptions of difference, and perceptions of rebellion may be grounded in the very racial stereotypes they publicly renounce.

When our discussion shifted to his personal experiences within the marketplace Ronald communicated a lived experience that did not match his perception of a post-racial society. In the excerpt that follows, he discusses his apprehension to frequent a particular video arcade because of racial dynamics:

I think I kind of would be worried about people wanting to socialize and I might be being slightly racist here but Asian people take a little time; they need a little warming up before they just start being cool with an African American person. When I walked in there, I kind of got a couple of interesting looks, not too many, but enough to make me feel like okay, these guys probably don't get too many African Americans up in here. If I do go there I have to do like I said, establish relationships, talk to people, open up and stuff which really isn't a problem for me, but just going through the whole motions and the process, [I'd rather] play street fighter at home...I swear to God it was not that diverse in there. If it was more diverse I would have had different feelings towards it. I probably would have got a couple of games in. **(Ronald, 21-year-old, black male, unemployed)**

This admission contradicts Ronald's post-racial perceptions in a number of ways. The politics of color-blindness seem to no longer apply. By stating that people of Asian descent generally need time to "warm up" to an African American, he is discounting the practice of judging people as individuals. Embedded within Ronald's race-based assumption of people of Asian descent is the assumption that their treatment of him (at least initially) will also be race-based. Ronald goes on to communicate a belief that his racialized experience would not necessarily be permanent. He is confident that if he had been willing to take the time to establish personal experiences with the people of Asian descent in the arcade they could have reached a post-racial moment. However, the time and effort necessary was far more of an investment than he was willing to yield. Ronald's insistence that if the arcade had been more diverse (and by diverse we can assume he is referring to racial diversity) he would have felt comfortable enough to engage the arcade as a consumer, distinguishes race as the source of his discomfort. While Ronald communicates a belief in living within a post-racial society, his life experience, particularly in the marketplace is incongruent with this perception.

Many white informants stated that their lived experience corresponded with their perception of a post-racial society. They firmly believed that their racial formation did not factor into their interactions with others in and outside of the marketplace. While discussing his lived experience with race, a white informant offered the following:

I'm not treated differently for being white...and I haven't seen any obvious discrimination of black males in the same circles for reasons of their ethnicity. (**Walter, 23-year-old, white male, student**)

Walter is unequivocal in his response – race is a nonissue in his world. His whiteness is not perceived as a site of privilege, nor is blackness understood as a location of subjugation. Walter's lived experience may in part be explained by the invisibility of whiteness and a lack of interaction with the black community. White identity is rarely examined critically. Instead, it is typically positioned as natural, neutral, or average (Burton, 2005). Situating whiteness as such enables the privilege embedded within whiteness to remain concealed. As Rodriguez (2000) reveals, possessing an awareness of racial privilege is a provision for critically examining whiteness. The nascent academic field of whiteness studies and theoretical construct of whiteness theory attempt to disturb the naturalized state of whiteness by deconstructing the dominant discourses and practices used to shield it from visibility (Burton, 2009). Until these radically new ways of investigating whiteness permeate mainstream thought, Walter's understanding of whiteness can remain firmly intact.

During the interview process, informants were asked to discuss their level of interaction with people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. In Walter's case (and for the majority of white informants that shared his post-racial experience), meaningful

interaction among racial minorities, particularly African Americans, was woefully low. White informants that maintained relationships with African Americans and other racial minorities tended to communicate a more complex understanding of current race relations than those that did not. A white informant provided the following statement while discussing the racial dynamics of the advertisement featured in Figure 15:

Figure 15

Everybody's Work is Equally Important



Maybe they're trying to appeal to African Americans. I'm pretty sure they are. To me I didn't notice their racial identity right off. But like I said, I was raised with a lot of black people so I relate to seeing that. I might have skipped over it if I wasn't raised around black people as much. I might have just skipped past this one and never really noticed it...you know, in society a black man has been labeled as not a good father in the past. I've heard that before. I don't believe that...I have some [black friends] that are good and some that never do anything with their kids. They're horrible fathers, yes and equally the same with white friends. I've got white friends that don't, they're horrible fathers and

some that are very good fathers. **(Paul, 29-year-old, white male, Single father)**

Paul's proclamation reinforces Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, which posits that interpersonal contact is essential for reducing prejudice between majority and minority groups. Paul's assertion that his intimate proximity to the black community during his formative years enabled him to find meaning in an advertisement featuring only black models indicates the power of interracial interaction. Paul volunteers that he may have simply ignored the advertisement if he had a life experience void of meaningful interaction with black people. Paul's lived experience provides for a more nuanced understanding of what the ad in Figure 15 may represent. Embedded within his comment, Paul displays an appreciation for the relationship between dominant discourse, knowledge, and power. He acknowledges that there is a dominant stream of discourse that positions black fatherhood as inherently dubious. The high degree of interaction Paul has experienced with black males permits him to reject that discourse as truth. Due to his life experience, "good" and "bad" fatherhood is not the exclusive domain of whiteness or blackness; even in the face of dominant discourse that states otherwise.

The advertisement featured in Figure 15 was overwhelmingly liked by black informants. Their positive attitude toward the ad generally stemmed from its representation of black fatherhood. Black informants typically described the ad as extremely rare and highly unusual. They voiced that black men, particularly young black men, are not portrayed as actively taking part in the lives of their children. Many stated this as the first time they had seen such a representation. This ad was considered truly

exceptional because it not only featured a black father present in the life of his child but also a black father that appeared to be comfortable with his blackness. The male model's darker skin and dreadlocked hair connote a celebration of black culture as opposed to a willingness to acculturate or assimilate into white dominant culture.

The uniqueness of this ad affirms Foucault's (1972; 1977; 1980) conceptualization of discourse as the means by which knowledge is disseminated, and knowledge as both the creator and creation of power. Discourse is created and perpetuated by those who have the power and means of communication. Advertising functions as a mode of discourse, and the vast majority of ads lack the kind of representations depicted in Figure 15. This void generates knowledge – in this case, active black fathers are nearly nonexistent. While statistics indicate there are a higher proportion of fatherless children within the black community than found in the general population (McLoyd, 1990; Hacker, 2003; Connor & White, 2006), active black fathers are by no means chimerical. As discourse, Figure 15 acts as a counter-discursive element that may begin the process of shifting the dominant discourse relating to black fatherhood.

Chapter Summary

This chapter detailed three major themes that emerged from the data. Echoing the findings of earlier research, the informants of this study used consumption practices to communicate personal values. Both white and black informants demonstrated a propensity to engage consumer culture as a means of expressing their most salient values. However, white informants used a wide-range of brands to communicate values,

while black informants tended to utilize brands aligned with conspicuous consumption as a means of articulating personal values.

The second theme to emerge from the data was conceptualized as identity elasticity. White informants generally perceived a broader range of potential identity roles than black informants. This discrepancy seemed to be the result of black male identity being much more narrowly defined than white male identity in dominant discourses. These stereotypes narrow the perceived scope of viable identity roles of young black males. The breadth of consumption practices directly coincided with how expansive an informant viewed his identity possibilities. White informants tended to demonstrate a wide-ranging relationship with the marketplace, while black informants generally exhibited a restricted range of consumption practices.

The final central theme to emerge from the data pertained to perceptions and experiences relating to a post-racial society. A significant number of white and black informants held the perception that they live within a generational cohort where race is a nonissue. While many white informants described experiences that matched their perception, many black informants expressed experiences incongruent with a post-racial society. In support of Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, white informants that communicated having meaningful interaction with racial minorities displayed a more nuanced understanding of current race relations.

Chapter Five

Conclusions, Implications, and Limitations

The purpose of this study was to investigate the ways in which the identity projects of male Millennials interact with marketing communication and consumption practices. Additionally, this study examined the potential impact race has on the relationship between identity projects, marketing communication, and consumer behavior. As a qualitative investigation, the outcomes provide explanatory rather than predictive insights. While the study of identity projects as they relate to consumer behavior continues to garner attention, the implications of race and racism remain woefully under researched. Through this study, a clearer understanding of identity project complexities begins to come to light. The methodological approach does not provide for generalizations beyond the sample. However, findings do offer new ways of framing and conceptualizing the relationship identity projects have with marketing communication and the marketplace. What follows is a general discussion of the key findings along with their implications for academia and industry, and related areas of inquiry for future research.

The black and white informants of this study demonstrated significant areas of similarity and difference with relation to how their identity projects interacted with marketing communication and the marketplace. Both white and black informants utilized the symbolic meaning of commodities as a mode of value expression. Although informants were given the freedom to use any person, place, or thing as a way of

pictorially documenting values, every informant in the sample chose to employ (at least in part) consumer culture artifacts as representations of values. This practice reaffirms the significant role the marketplace has in the identity project process as demonstrated in previous consumer culture research (Belk, 1988). The symbolic nature of consumer culture provided informants a rich pool of value identifiers from which to choose. Since values represent the very building blocks upon which identity is (re)fashioned (Clawson & Vinson, 1978; Kahle, 1983; Carmen, 1978), it is fair to assume that if informants are willing to use the marketplace as a viable means of marking values, they too would utilize it to (re)assemble their sense of self. Informants differed by race in that black informants typically utilized commodities in the realm of conspicuous consumption as markers of values at a greater rate than white informants. This practice seems to be viewed as a way of countering the burden of having a stigmatized social identity and building a collective sense of blackness (Lamont & Molnar, 2001).

The dominant discourse pertaining to white and black male identity appears to impact how informants perceive possibilities of self. As a form of dominant discourse (Liess, Kline, & Jhally, 1997), advertising actively creates and reinforces predetermined notions of what white and black male identity is (and should be). White male identity is generally communicated in broad terms, as white males are depicted in a wide-range of identity formations. While stereotypes exist (e.g. “preppy” or “redneck”) none are so dominant that they over-determine white male identity in a general sense. This form of discourse enables young white males to conduct a multifarious identity project, wherein they can explore numerous and divergent identity roles. In contrast, dominant discourse

situates predetermined notions of black male identity within the narrow confines of black male stereotypes. Advertisements typically feature black males as urban, hypermasculine, and hyper-heterosexual. When depictions deviate from these characteristics, black males are no longer the focus an advertisement, but instead are generally relegated to secondary or tertiary positions to white males (Plous & Neptune, 1997; Bailey, 2006; Jackson, 1994). Discourse of this kind narrows perceived possibilities of self among young black males. Instead of perceiving a variety of possible identity roles, black informants mainly adhered to a limited scope of identity possibilities. Predetermined notions of black male identity were critical to the identity projects of every black informant. For some, their identity project and the consumer behavior that supported it aligned with predetermined notions of black male identity. Others made a conscious decision to completely disengage from consumption practices that reinforced black male stereotypes. The remainder actively negotiated between consumption patterns that coincided and contradicted predetermined notions of black male identity.

This phenomenon was conceptualized as identity elasticity. A central concept in economics, elasticity represents the variability to change a construct (e.g., price or income) possesses in relation to changes in other parameters (e.g., demand or supply) (Friedman, 2007). In a given context a construct can be elastic or inelastic. A construct that is elastic experiences a wide range of variability given relatively small changes to related variables. Inversely, a construct that is inelastic will undergo little to no change in response to changes in other parameters. The white informants typically possessed an

elastic identity, which enabled them to have more expansive consumption practices, while black informants generally exhibited an inelastic identity wherein they demonstrated a more fixed range of consumer behavior, wherein they embraced, repudiated, or negotiated consumption practices congruent with predetermined notions of black male identity.

Dominant discourse relating to a post-racial society also emerged as a central theme from the data. Both white and black informants classified their generational cohort and the present moment as post-racial. Multicultural advertising practices coupled with discourse pertaining to the Presidency of Barack Obama and increased levels of interracial relationships support the perception of a post-racial society. A number of informants mimicked post-racial discourse by using the politics of color-blindness as a means of discussing race relations. Disparities emerged when discussion shifted from perception to lived experience. As opposed to their white counterparts, most black informants relayed a racialized experience of marketplace discrimination. White informants that lack meaningful interaction with racial minorities held a more simplistic (and often prejudicial) attitude about race relations than those that held strong ties with individuals of racial minority groups. This finding reinforces Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, which states that increased meaningful interaction among majority and minority groups leads to better relations.

In summary, all informants demonstrated an identity project that intricately involved marketing communication and consumer behavior. Advertising, along with

other forms of marketing communication were utilized as systems of social communication, wherein the possibilities of self were created and reflected. Consumption practices were instrumental in expressing values and displaying perceptions of self. Race regulated the symbolic meanings of marketing communication as well as the realm of consumption practices perceived as viable.

Implications

This study's findings propose profound implications for academia and industry. In regards to education, the findings stress the importance of incorporating issues of race and diversity into advertising and consumer behavior curriculum. The disparity between white and black informants in how they experienced marketing communication and the marketplace is a strong indicator that society has yet to achieve post-racial status. In relation to white students, providing classes that address issues of marketplace discrimination gives them the opportunity to experience the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) and potentially undergo transformational learning. These occurrences will serve them well as citizens and as future practitioners. Regarding students of color, multicultural and diversity-based curricula offer a safe space where they can express and explore the race-based discriminatory actions they have experienced in the marketplace. This is particularly significant as it counteracts the pull to internalize the covert forms of racism that are pervasive in today's marketplace.

Previous research (Burton, 2005) has reinforced the need for building multicultural marketing curriculum by highlighting three areas of need. Firstly, there is

an increased need for talent in the sphere of multicultural marketing as more marketing organizations develop programs and departments specifically aimed at serving multicultural markets. Secondly, more students are displaying an interest in pursuing a career related to multicultural marketing. Students are cognizant of the dramatic population shifts taking place across the U.S. and understand the value and potential of learning how best to serve multicultural consumers. The third need involves social justice and inclusion. By actively engaging issues of race and diversity in the classroom students of color along with their white counterparts are transmitted the message that everyone's lived experience is valid and worthy of scholarship. As Burton (2005) states: "by failing to fully integrate ethnicity into the syllabus, we as educators are denying and/or marginalizing the lived experience of many students from these groups" (pg. 152). In short, multicultural curriculum potentially benefits industry, academia, and broader society.

Offering courses specifically designed to address issues of diversity is a vital component of promoting multicultural curriculum. However, it is not the only one. A productive multicultural marketing curriculum agenda should explore issues of inclusion and equality across course offerings. Only discussing matters of diversity in multicultural marketing courses may have the unintended effect of marginalization. Courses that focus on issue of diversity in marketing bring matters that are generally overlooked in traditional marketing course to the forefront; however, in doing so, the two remain isolated from each other. Diversity issues, such as marketplace discrimination, take place within the context of traditional marketing practices. As such,

traditional marketing practices and issues such as marketplace discrimination should be explored and critically examined in unison. Separating issues of diversity from the everyday marketing practices in which they occur may limit the effectiveness of examining such issues. Additionally, students that specifically register for a multicultural marketing course most likely possess a high level of readiness and openness in regard to exploring issues of diversity. In some respects, this may lead to a situation wherein the instructor is “preaching to the choir.” When all marketing-related courses incorporate discussions of diversity, inclusion, and equality, a wider net is cast, and far more students can benefit.

Another beneficial effect of incorporating issues of diversity across course offerings is its ability to decenter and denormalize whiteness. Marketing scholarship rarely investigates whiteness in an explicit fashion. In scholarship wherein racial minorities are examined, it generally involves comparing the behavior of racial minorities to a white reference group. This research approach creates an environment where the actions of racial minorities are continuously measured against the normalized actions of whites. As demonstrated by Burton (2005), aside from Hirschman’s (1981) seminal work regarding Jewish consumers, marketing researchers have all but ignored consumption practices related to whiteness. The negation to critically analyze whiteness doesn’t stop with journal articles; whiteness also goes virtually undetected in the classroom material of traditional marketing courses. When issues of diversity are regulated to multicultural marketing class, whiteness remains the dominant point of reference in all other courses. However, when instructors introduce multicultural

concepts and constructs into traditional marketing coursework, whiteness shifts from the site of comparison to a site of analysis. By interrogating whiteness, students, scholars, and practitioners can develop a clearer understanding of the ways in which consumer behavior is structured by white faces and white spaces (Burton, 2009).

In regards to industry, these findings highlight the need for increased diversity within advertising agencies. Previous research indicates that racial minorities represent a minute percentage of those who work in the advertising industry (Drumwright & Murphy, 2009). Advertising is a form of dominant discourse (Liess, Kline, & Jhally, 1997), and this discrepancy creates an environment where racial minorities are all but absent in the creation of discourse that speaks to and about them. Using Foucault's (1980) conceptualization of power/knowledge, in which discourse (which is the joining of power and knowledge) is created and sustained by those who control and disseminate communication, the need for increased racial diversity in agencies becomes particularly evident.

The influence of advertising and other forms of marketing communication extends into the realm of identity. Advertisements provide audience members with potential modes of being that are particularly appealing because of the positive outcomes typically associated with their representation. Commercials do more than communicate product benefits. They introduce the viewer to particular ways of understanding one's own identity and the identity of others. For instance, beyond discussion of taste and calories, beer commercials engender and reinforce particular ideas about key identity locations, such as gender, masculinity, and sexuality. The fact that advertising wields

influence over identity projects does not make it special – interpersonal relationships exert considerable sway as well. However, advertising’s ubiquitous nature and ability to customize messages to audiences positions it as a “privileged form of discourse” (Leiss, Kline, & Jhally, 1986, p. 3).

As a mode of privileged discourse, advertising embodies a heightened form of Foucault’s power/knowledge. Foucault positions power and knowledge as inseparable – the act of knowing demonstrates control, and through the exertion of power, knowledge is (re)produced (Foucault & Faubion, 1994). Advertising presents ways of knowing, and in so doing, refutes and dismisses other ways of knowing. For example, advertisers broadcast and narrowcast ways of knowing black male identity. These ways of knowing generally coincide with stereotypes associated with black males. Black male identity as it is narrowly (and stereotypically) defined by advertising enters the realm of knowledge (i.e. truth), which in turn works to invalidate alternative forms of knowing black male identity. This is advertising as power/knowledge.

A bleak picture forms when the concept of advertising as power/knowledge is juxtaposed with the level of diversity found in the advertising industry. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2008, people of color held only 16% of jobs in the fields of marketing communication and public relations (Latino/Hispanic: 8%; African American: 5%; Asian American: 3%), while accounting for approximately 34% of the U.S. population. The situation is more alarming in upper management positions, where it is estimated that African Americans make up just 3.2%. Which is significantly below the 7.2% average found in similar professions (Newman, 2008).

Broadening racial minority participation in advertising is a matter of social justice. As the above stated statistics indicate, racial minorities are largely absent from the advertising industry, which also means that racial minorities have little to no input in how advertising utilizes its knowledge/power. The ways of knowing what it means to be a racial minority are constructed by individuals that have a very different life experience. Such a situation leads to the proliferation of racial minority representations that are disingenuous at best, and frequently downright prejudicial. Racial minorities should be integral to the process of creating and disseminating the discourse that ultimately shapes the ways in which they are perceived. The dearth of advertising diversity also means that the body of knowledge pertaining to the overall human experience (as constructed by advertising) is devoid of racial minority voices and experiences, which results in the overvaluation of European American voices and experiences. Increasing the presence of racial minorities in advertising will enable advertisers to project and reflect a fuller and richer knowing of the human experience.

The findings also suggest a relationship between the limited scope of black representations in advertising and the inelastic identities held by black informants. By increasing the level of racial diversity found at advertising agencies (particularly among creative departments), depictions of racial minorities could begin to broaden out. This in turn could positively impact the identity elasticity of Millennials that are similar to the black informants of this study. Furthermore, broadening the range of black male representations in marketing communication would not only address a social need, but could also prove to be beneficial monetarily to those in the marketplace. Since

individuals actively utilize the marketplace as a mode of identity expression, it would follow that as young black males increase their level of identity elasticity so too would their engagement with the marketplace. As identity roles that were once perceived as infeasible transition into the realm of possibility, the consumption practices related to those roles will also become possibilities. Expanding the ways in which black males are presented within the discourse of marketing communication will provide marketers the opportunity to simultaneously enact social good and to bolster their bottom line.

Limitations

The methodological approach used for this study garnered significant insights into identity projects. However it is not without its limitations. As a qualitative investigation, the outcomes provide explanatory rather than predictive insights that cannot be generalized to the broader population. Future studies will need to incorporate qualitative and quantitative approaches so that a richer understanding of identity projects and consumer behavior can surface. There are a number of contextual limitations inherently attached to the use of photo elicitation. Informants were given a finite amount of time (approximately 2 weeks) to capture their pictorial documentation. Given this time constraint, informants may not have presented the most ideal representations – if provided additional time some informants may have presented pictures that better represented their idea of particular values. Future researchers may want to allot additional time for photo taking to increase the possibility of receiving photos that best represent the intent of informants.

The very act of engaging in snapshot photography lends itself to a certain genre of expectations. Photos are typically used to portray life as one wishes it to be seen – favoring the best over the worst of life’s experiences (Holland, 1997). The use of disposable cameras with inbuilt flash and automatic focus blunts informants’ ability to edit, and adjust aperture and shutter speed, which can severely hamper individual expression (Croghan et al. 2008). In a number of cases certain photos taken by informants were unusable due to overexposure or blurriness. Future studies utilizing photo-elicitation may consider adopting the use of digital cameras, which have the provide informants more flexibility and control.

The sample also poses a number of limitations. While every effort was made to construct an economically and socially diverse sample, a significant proportion of informants were college students. Studies indicate that approximately 69% of Millennials plan to go, are in, or have already graduated from college (Pew Research Center, 2010), so the sample may be fairly representative of Millennials as a whole. However, the study provides a limited voice to the 31% of Millennials that have not and will not attend college. Geographic location also serves as a limitation. The vast majority of the sample was raised and/or currently lives in the southwest region of the United States. The geographic particularities of other regions of the U.S. received little to no attention. A final sample related limitation resides in the structuring of the Millennial cohort. Millennials represent a wide age range – 18 to 29. The ways in which younger members of this generational cohort responded to marketing communication and utilized the marketplace within their identity projects differed from that of older members of the

group. Future research related to Millennials would improve our understanding of the differences found within the cohort by differentiating between early and late stage Millennials.

Future Research

This study focused on a specific generational cohort – Millennials. Future projects may want to explore how advertising and the marketplace interact with the identity project of other age groups. As the life expectancy of Americans expands due to advances in science and medicine, it may be particularly of note for researchers to investigate the ways in which Baby Boomers (who currently represent the most lucrative generational cohort) engage marketing communication and the marketplace to make sense of their identity projects. Researchers may also consider performing a cross-generational analysis so that scholars and practitioners can begin to better understand the ways in which differing generational cohorts incorporate advertising and consumption practices into their identity projects.

Future studies may also want to broaden and narrow the examination of race and ethnicity. In an effort to maximize the explanatory power of race, this study focused on the extremes of racial formation – white and black. Ensuing studies could further elucidate how the social construction of race impacts the relationship identity projects have with marketing communication and consumer behavior by expanding the analysis to include other racial formations. Particularly Asian Americans and Latinos/Hispanics, given that as a collective Asian-Americans enjoy the highest median income of any race/ethnicity and Latinos/Hispanics represent the largest racial/ethnic minority group

(Humphreys, 2009). Further insights can also be garnered by restricting the investigation to one racial/ethnic group. This type of research approach can begin to uncover the multiple ways in which identity projects interact with advertising and the marketplace within racial formations.

Due to the varying modes of gender socialization, this study directed its attention to the identity projects of young males. Subsequent research in this area should also examine the identity projects of alternative gender formations, including female and transgender consumers. Investigating gender across its formations will enable scholars and practitioners to realize key areas of distinction and similarity between gender formations. Understanding how different gender formations utilize advertising and consumption practices within their identity projects will improve the way marketers serve their customer base.

Appendix

Interview Guide

I. Background Information | Ice Breaker

- a. Would you please tell me your name and age?
- b. Can you spend a couple of minutes letting me know what life was like for you growing up?

II. Photo-elicitation (Informant Photos)

- a. Of all the photos you took, which three represent your favorites? (Discuss favorites one at a time)
 - i. What is it about this picture that you like?
 - ii. (If applicable) What about this picture represents/contradicts [value]?
- b. Of all the photos you took, which three do you like the least? (Discuss least liked one at a time)
 - i. What is it about this picture that you like?
 - ii. (If applicable) What about this picture represents/contradicts [value]?
- c. If photos remain that the interviewer would like to explore:
 - i. Can you tell me about this picture?
 - ii. (If applicable) What about this picture represents/contradicts [value]?
- d. Were there any photos that you would have liked to have taken but were unable to? If so, please tell me about those situations.

III. Photo-elicitation (Print Advertisements)

- a. Of all these ads, which three represent your favorites? (Discuss favorites one at a time)
 - i. What is it about this ad that you like?
 - ii. Tell me a story about the people featured in the ad. What are they like? What brands do they use? What about them do you believe is similar to yourself? What about them is dissimilar?
- b. Of all these ads, which three do you like the least? (Discuss least liked one at a time)
 - i. What is it about this ad that you don't like?

- ii. Tell me a story about the people featured in the ad. What are they like? What brands do they use? What about them do you believe is similar to yourself? What about them is dissimilar?

IV. Potential Probing Questions: Consumption Practices

- a. What brand(s) best represent the person you are today?
 - i. What is it about (brand) that represents you?
- b. What brand(s) most contradict the person you are today?
 - i. What is it about (brand) that contradicts you?
- c. Have the brands you associate with changed overtime? If so, how so?
- d. What kind of organizations are you affiliated with?
 - i. What has been your experience with [organization]?
- e. What's a typical shopping experience like for you?
- f. Can you take me through your pre-purchase process? How do you typically decide on the things you buy?
- g. Where are your favorite places to shop?
- h. Where are your least favorite places to shop?
- i. Can you tell me about your favorite possession and the experience of purchasing it?
- j. Can you tell me about a purchase you made that you now wish you hadn't?
- k. Can you tell me about the music you listen to? How did you come to listen to the music you currently listen to?

V. Potential Questions: Identity & Values

- a. Can you tell me about your family and your relationship to them?
 - i. What is your role within the family? Tell me about an experience that illustrates this role.
- b. In what ways (if any) have you changed since high school?
- c. What is the source of your values?
- d. How do you define success? Tell me about a time when you felt successful.
- e. Can you tell me about a time that you felt particularly patriotic?
- f. Can you tell me about a time that you felt particularly free?
- g. Can you tell me about a time that you felt morally just?
- h. Can you tell me about a time where your actions were not aligned with your morals?

- i. Can you tell me about an instance where you made a purchase that did not coincide with your values?
- j. How often do you find that your values differ from other white (black) males in your age group? Can you tell me about an instance when this was so?
- k. How often do you find that your values differ from white (black) males in your age group? Can you tell me about an instance when this was so?

VI. Potential Questions: Forms of Manhood

- a. What does it mean to be a man? What attributes are needed to be a man?
- b. How did you learn what was needed to become a man?
- c. Can you tell me about an instance where you felt particularly manly?
- d. Can you tell me about an instance where you felt emasculated?
- e. How has your understanding of manhood changed overtime?
- f. How is manhood portrayed in advertising?
- g. Can you tell me of an instance where an ad portrayed manhood as you have defined it?
- h. Can you tell me of an instance where and ad portrayed manhood in opposition to your definition?
- i. Can you tell me about an instance where a shift in your understanding of manhood occurred?
- j. In what ways is your path to manhood different from white (black) men your age?

VII. Potential Questions: Navigating Race

- a. How often do you associate with white (black) men your age?
- b. Can you tell me about an instance where you felt uncomfortable around white (black) men your age?
- c. What are the dominant stereotypes of young white (black) men your age?
- d. Can you tell me about an experience where you felt stereotyped because of your race? Does this happen often?
- e. How do you cope with this stereotyping?
- f. In what ways do you think your generation perceives race differently than previous generations?
- g. Can you tell me about an experience you have had with someone of an older generation where these difference came out?

- h. How often do you find that your values differ from other white (black) males in your age group? Can you tell me about an instance when this was so?
- i. How often do you find that your values differ from white (black) males in your age group? Can you tell me about an instance when this was so?
- j. In what ways is your path to manhood different from white (black) men your age?

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