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Fashion, Social Media, and Identity Expression: An Intersectional Approach to Understanding the Fashion Consumption Patterns of Black Middle-Class Women

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**Fashion, Social Media, and Identity Expression: An
Intersectional Approach to Understanding the Fashion Consumption
Patterns of Black Middle-Class Women**

by

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Dedication

I want to dedicate this work to the 18 black women who graciously agreed to participate in this project. Without their openness and transparency, this work would not have been possible. I hope this dissertation does their experiences justice. I also want to dedicate this work to all of my black sisters who have been told their opinions are invalid and treated like their lived experiences are insignificant. You are all important, your points-of-view are valid, and you deserve a voice. This is my humble attempt to share a portion of your story that others so frequently overlook and ignore.

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**Fashion, Social Media, and Identity Expression: An
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The ability to freely express one's identity through apparel is a staple of U.S. cultural freedom. The rise of social networking sites (SNSs) have increased these liberties, as fashion-related user-generated content has curtailed much of the influence of fashion industry powerhouses. This ability to freely use apparel to express identity, however, is not fully available to all Americans—particularly members of historically marginalized groups like black middle-class female consumers.

In spite of this marginalization, these women have historically impacted popular fashion trends, frequently use SNSs to exchange fashion-related information, and have strong buying power. Despite their value, however, knowledge of their apparel-related consumption behaviors is limited. Using an intersectional theoretical approach guided by theories of black feminism and black respectability politics, this study utilized Photovoice and in-depth interview methods to explore the complex relationship between black middle-class female identity and apparel-related consumption. The four themes that emerged from this data (cultural double-standards and appearance, the respectability politics of fashion, within-group differences, and #BlackGirlMagic) provide valuable theoretical and practical

insights, including increased evidence for the use of an intersectional approach in Consumer Culture Theory research, a proposed extension of the Model of Situational Ethnicity and Consumer Behavior, and suggestions for cultural-relevant marketing and advertising messages, both on and off-line.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The U.S. apparel market is one of the biggest in the world, with a combined market value of \$331 billion dollars (Statista, 2011). These apparel related products (e.g., clothing, shoes, and accessories), however, have importance beyond functionality, as they serve as a “visual language” that communicates—correctly or incorrectly—a person’s occupation, personality, religious beliefs, current mood, desires, cultural values, etc. (Davis, 1992; Lurie, 1981; McCracken, 1986; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). The casual apparel (e.g., t-shirts, jeans, sportswear, loser-fitting or more revealing items, etc.) are widely considered staples of American fashion, and can communicate cultural values commonly associated with American culture (Clemente, 2014; Ferdman, 2015). For example, purchasing and wearing these products not only communicates a desire for comfort and practicality, but also communicates the “fast and carefree” lifestyle commonly associated with U.S. democracy, a national identity that is believed to encourage individualism, and transcend and eliminate socio-cultural boundaries (Clemente, 2014; Ferdman, 2015).

This idea of American fashion individualism, or the ability to express one’s identity through apparel choices in a way that transcends social expectations and cultural status constraints, increased in popularity in the mid-twentieth century when casual attire became increasingly popular among trend-setting, college-aged consumers (Clemente, 2014; Ferdman, 2015). For example, college students’ personal desires for practicality over formality often resulted in defiance of campus dress codes, such as wearing the sweaters and shorts restricted to gym activities to class meetings (Clemente, 2014). Today,

consumers have furthered this idea of fashion individualism through their increasing use of social networking sites (SNSs) (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, Snapchat, etc.). In fact, much of the influence of fashion powerhouses on apparel trends have been replaced by images, blogs, tweets, videos, etc., created and exchanged by individual consumers and consumer communities on SNSs (Bansel, 2015; Bautista, 2013; Cartner-Morely, 2015; Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, and Silvestre, 2011; Mohr, 2013; Sellors, 2014). This is especially true for Instagram, a mobile photo and video-sharing SNS, which has recently been described as the new heart of the fashion industry (Cartner-Morely, 2015).

Despite this increased fashion individualism associated with U.S. apparel-related consumption, the ability to freely use apparel to express personal identities, cultural status, group belonging, desires, etc., is not fully available to all Americans—particularly those who are members of historically marginalized groups (i.e., populations with historically restricted access to political rights and economic resources in American society) (Bourdieu, 2012; Trigg, 2001; Veblen, 2007). Black women, for example, spend the most on apparel products across all racial groups (Mintel, 2013), yet due to their membership in at least two historically marginalized groups (i.e., women and black Americans), they are restricted in the ways they may communicate their cultural, social, and individual identities through apparel-related consumption and style. These limitations are evident in past research that examines apparel consumption patterns of black consumers; the research collectively suggests that their historically marginalized position in American society leads to complex and strategic uses of fashion apparel in identity expression not seen or necessary in white

consumers (Coleman, 2013; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Lacey, 2007; Lamont & Molnar 2001; Miner, 2009).

Despite this marginalization, black women have historically impacted popular fashion trends (Condry, 2006; hooks, 2012; Kitwana, 2002), frequently use Instagram and other digital platforms to create and exchange information on apparel related products (Carlos, 2011; Mintel, 2014), and are twice as likely than other users to log on to Instagram daily (Mintel, 2014). Additionally, middle-class black females specifically are experiencing a rapid increase in buying power (Burrell Communications Group; 2012).

All of this suggests that black middle-class females are arguably one of the most valuable apparel consumer markets; still, the research exploring the desires and motivations behind their consumption of these products is limited. Too often, ideas concerning black females' consumption experiences are solely rooted in racial group belonging (e.g., how strongly a black woman identifies with the black racial category, as well as the experiences that result from this identification), which ignores the significant impact gender and social class identities may also have on their apparel consumption practices (Crockett et al. 2011; Gopaldas & Fischer, 2008; Gopaldas, 2012). Additionally, though these consumers are frequent users of Instagram, and actively use this SNS to create and exchange information related to fashion, style, and apparel purchases (Carlos, 2011; Mintel, 2014), no research exists that explores the motivations and outcomes behind this use of this SNS. The current study attempts to fill these research gaps by addressing the following questions: (1) How does the intersection of race, gender, and class identities manifest itself in black female middle-class consumers' uses of apparel consumption in

identity expression? (2) How do social settings, situations, and environments impact black female middle-class consumers' uses of apparel consumption in identity expression? (3) How does the use of apparel consumption in identity expression differ between consumers within the black female middle-class consumer group? (4) How do black middle-class females use SNSs to inform the expression of their intersecting identities through apparel consumption?

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS: CONSUMER CULTURE THEORY

In addressing the aforementioned research questions, the primary goal of this project is to contribute to the field of consumer culture theory (CCT)—an interdisciplinary body of research that explores consumer identities, consumption practices, and behaviors within the everyday cultural contexts in which they occur (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Belk 1988). Although CCT research does not include a singular, uniform framework, the central theoretical questions uniting this body of work are related to “the relationships among consumers' personal and collective identities; the cultures created and embodied in the lived worlds of consumers; underlying experiences, processes and structures; and the nature and dynamics of the sociological categories through and across which these consumer culture dynamics are enacted and inflected,” (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 870).

Arnould and Thompson (2005) identify four interrelated research domains in which CCT contributes to theory building in marketplace contexts. First is “consumer identity projects,” or a consumer's use of marketplace materials (e.g., products, services,

advertisements, brands, etc.) to construct and communicate a diverse, coherent identity (see Ahuvia, 2006; Hill, 1991; Hill & Stamey, 1990; Hirschman, 1992; Holt, 2002; Mick & Fournier, 1998; Murray, 2002; O'Guinn & Faber, 1989; Otnes, Lowrey, & Shrum., 1997; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Thompson, 1996). For example, Schau and Gilly (2003) examine how consumers incorporate objects, brands, institutions, and commercial enterprises into personal webpages to communicate aspects of their identity. Second is "marketplace cultures," which examines the intersection of culture and the marketplace by conceptualizing consumers as culture producers and group creators (see Belk & Costa, 1998; Cova, 1997; Holt 1995; Kozinets 2001, 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander 1995; Thompson & Troester 2002). Kozinets (2001), for example, examined behaviors within the *Star Trek* fan community to uncover how consumers utilize product and media consumption to create subcultural spaces for self-expression and communal belonging. Third is "the sociohistorical patterning of consumption," or the institutional and social structures (e.g., race, class, gender, ethnicity, etc.) that impact consumption (see Belk, 1992; Bristor & Fischer, 1993; Dobscha & Ozanne 2001; Fischer and Arnold 1990; Mehta & Belk, 1991; Reilly & Wallendorf, 1987; Thompson 1996; Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994; Wallendorf, 2001; Wallendorf & Reilly, 1983). For instance, in their examination of consumer uses of fashion to communicate identity, Thompson and Haytko (1997) highlight the impact gender identity and membership have on this consumption process. Fourth is "mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies," or the ways in which mass-media messages reproduce consumer thoughts and actions in ways that support or reject dominant

societal interests (see Hirschman 1988; Lears, 1994; Murray & Ozanne, 1991; Murray, Ozanne, & Shapiro, 1994). Hirschman and Thompson (1997), for example, explore the relationship between non-advertising forms of mass-media, consumer interpretations of advertising messages, and purchases through a framework that positions advertising and mass-media as producers of societal ideologies that can impact product preferences.

In terms of theoretical contribution, perhaps most notably, this research builds on CCT theories concerning identity projects and the sociohistorical patterning of consumption. This study not only furthers current theory in these CCT fields by adding increased complexities to understandings of the marketplace experiences of black women (i.e., the fashion consumption context and SNS context), but also works to build the young but growing family of CCT theories concerning intersecting identities (i.e., race, gender, social class, etc.). Recognizing these identity convergences is not only relevant to understandings of black-middle class female consumers, but also provides broader insights in relation to other consumer groups with multiple marginalized identity coordinates. It also lends needed depth to the practice of audience segmentation based on race, gender and socioeconomic status. More details on the importance of intersectional identities within the CCT framework is further explicated in the following discussion.

THEORETICAL APPROACH: INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectionality, a concept which argues that membership in multiple cultural groups “intersect” to create a unique lived experience that influences consumption practices (Crenshaw, 1991; Crockett et al., 2011; Collins, 2009; Crockett et al. 2011;

Gopaldas, 2012; Gopaldas & DeRoy, 2015; Gopaldas & Fischer, 2008), is the overarching theoretical lens that guides the discussion, data collection, and data interpretation of this dissertation. As mentioned previously, the use of an intersectionality framework is currently advocated by CCT scholars (Crockett et al., 2011; Gopaldas, 2012; Gopaldas & DeRoy, 2015; Gopaldas & Fischer, 2008; Henderson & Williams, 2013; Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013; Thomas, 2013; Williams & Henderson, 2011), and the exploration of the unique merged social identities of black female consumers is a rich starting point from which more complex and accurate understandings of the consumption practices of this group may be produced (Gopaldas & Fischer, 2008; Gopaldas, 2012).

There are three major benefits of using an intersectionality framework. First, its use avoids overgeneralizing research findings to every member in the cultural group under study (Gopaldas & DeRoy, 2015). The results of a race-only study on black consumers, for example, can overlook the impact of gender, social class, etc., on consumption behaviors.

Second, intersectionality is useful in uncovering how marginalized group intersections influence access and disadvantages in consumption practices (Collins, 2009; Crockett et al. 2011; Gopaldas, 2012; Gopaldas & DeRoy, 2015; Gopaldas & Fischer, 2008). This is especially important in the current study's exploration of black middle-class female consumers, as it offers a way to capture how their combined marginalized racial, gender, and social class memberships have been the historical and primary cause of their ideological, political, social, and economic subjugation (Collins, 2009; Crockett et al. 2011; hooks, 2000).

Third, the use of an intersectionality lens avoids the mistake of reducing the interpretation of the behaviors, desires, and beliefs of the consumers under study to an additive summary of the practices associated with each isolated group identity (i.e., gender, social class, or race) (Crockett et al. 2011; Gopaldas & Fischer, 2008; Gopaldas, 2012). Instead, this theoretical perspective acknowledges the co-existence of these identities and the ways in which they converge to develop new and unique social experiences within consumer groups (Crockett et al. 2011; Gopaldas & DeRoy, 2015; Gopaldas & Fischer, 2008; Gopaldas, 2012).

In the case of black middle-class women, three primary factors concerning the multiple social identities of these consumers must be considered before attempting to add complexity to perceptions of their expression of identity through apparel consumption practices. The first, referenced previously, is the historically marginalized position of the race and gender identities of this market (i.e. black and female), which has impacted their expression of identity through apparel (Coleman, 2013; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003; Lacey, 2007; Lamont & Molnar 2001; Miner, 2009).

Second, the social-class status of these women is unique, and thus can have a distinctive effect on the expression of identity through clothing. For instance, American definitions of social-class differ from many other countries, as class in the U.S. is implicitly encoded in race; upper and middle class is commonly perceived as white, while working class and poor is commonly interpreted as black or another non-white racial or ethnic group (Andreasen & Hodges 1977; Fiske, 1996; Gaines, 1996; Lacy, 2007; Lamont & Molnar 2001). This means that an act of social class identity expression made by a black female

may be interpreted differently than if the same act was made by a white consumer. The purchase of a luxury Rolex watch by a white individual, for example, can be viewed by some as a sign of refinement and prestige, while the same purchase by a black or other non-white individual can be defined by some as a vulgar and ineffective attempt at communicating social status (Lamont & Molnar, 2001).

Third, research suggests that the climate of a social setting adds an additional layer of complexity to the ways in which these intersecting social-cultural identities of black female middle-class consumers influence their apparel consumption (Stayman & Deshpande, 1989; Zmud & Arce 1992). More specifically, a social setting in which they perceive one of their historically marginalized identities (e.g. black or female) to be stigmatized may cause these women to take extra care to ensure that their apparel choices separate them from styles commonly associated with the stigmatized group identities or stereotypes. Conversely, a social setting in which they perceive one of their historically marginalized identities (e.g. black or female) to be embraced can cause these women to choose apparel items and styles that display identification with the celebrated group identity.

Although several CCT researchers stress the importance of applying an intersectional lens to analyses of social-cultural categories of consumers, to the researcher's knowledge, only three studies (Nejad & O'Conner, 2016; Peterson, 2017; Thomas, 2013) have explicitly answered this call. Thus, this current research is addressing this specific theoretical need in the context of black female consumers.

Additionally, Kaiser (2012) highlights fashion-related consumption behavior as an ideal context for studies of intersectionality, as fashion “highlights the multiple intersections and entanglements among gender, race, ethnicity, national identity, social class, and other facets of our identities” (p. 12). Thus, this project also addresses this call to apply an intersectionality framework to the context of fashion consumption behaviors.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Before one can fully understand the factors that can impact black middle-class females use of apparel-related consumption in identity expression, one must first understand the broad role that fashion and consumption play in communicating and interpreting identity. Chapter 2 opens with an overview of this process, including an explanation of the more recent role SNS usage plays in the fashion industry and in fashion-related consumption. Next, the potential boundaries that culture inflicts on these consumption practices are discussed, and the concept of cultural hegemony is introduced to further explicate how and why some consumers possess the freedom to express a wider array of identities.

This theoretical discussion will then turn its focus to the complex intersecting cultural identities of black middle-class female consumers. This conversation opens by establishing the importance of this study’s intersectional approach through a discussion of the inadequacies of the historical unidimensional racial and gender binaries frequently used to describe experiences of black women (e.g., white/black and male/female). Chapter 2 closes with a discussion of the two theoretical schools of thought (e.g., black feminism and

black middle-class identity politics) used in the current study to conceptualize the identity complexities of the black middle-class women under study.

Chapter 3 provides the details concerning this dissertation's methods of participant sampling, an overview of the Instagram SNS context explored in this study, and the two-stage data collection process of Photovoice and in-depth interviews. This chapter concludes with a description of the thematic analysis used to uncover the four overarching themes from the collected data.

These four themes are presented in chapter 4, while chapter 5 provides a detailed discussion of the theoretical contributions of this dissertation. Specifically, evidence supporting the value of intersectional frameworks in studies of black consumers will be outlined by extrapolating the four thematic findings to the broader theoretical understandings of black feminism and black respectability politics. Second, the observed impacts of these identity convergences on apparel-related consumption practices will be addressed through a proposed extension of Stayman and Deshpande's (1989) model of situational ethnicity and consumer behavior. Chapter 5 concludes with a discussion of the implications of these contributions, the limitations of this dissertation, and suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

AN OVERVIEW OF APPAREL CONSUMPTION AND CONSUMER IDENTITY EXPRESSION

In the field of consumer research, the concept of identity is commonly defined as a consumer's overall sense of self (Kleine, Kleine, Laverie, 2006). This conceptualization of identity, however, is not clear-cut; it is comprised of numerous characteristics, social factors, group memberships, etc., that are intertwined and constantly shifting (Kleine, Kleine, Laverie, 2006; Negrin, 2008; Stone, 1965). Because of this complex and fluid nature of identity, using words to fully express and define who we are can be difficult and inefficient (Kaiser, 2012). Thus, consumption practices become key in consumers' expressions and negotiations of identity (Kaiser, 2012; McCracken, 1986; Rafaeli, Dutton, Harquail, & Mackie-Lewis, 1997).

In modern consumer culture, physical appearance (i.e., skin color, body type, hair texture, apparel-related choices, and personal grooming) often functions as a metaphor for identities (Kaiser, 2012). In many situations, how a person looks supersedes their actions when evaluating others (Negrin, 2008). As apparel and personal grooming are the only aspects of appearance that can be completely altered or changed, they are key behaviors in providing consumers with the agency to modify how their identities are "constructed, experienced, and understood," (Barnard, 2002, p. 9). More specifically, apparel-related products are a key tool used by consumers to communicate information about themselves, assist in navigating social interactions, and solidify membership in different cultural groups (Crane, 2000; Davis, 1992; Rafaeli, Dutton, Harquail, & Mackie-Lewis, 1997; Roach, 1965).

This power of apparel-related products to communicate identities is due to the cultural and societal meanings they possess beyond utility and commercial value (McCracken, 1986). These goods serve as tangible representations of various social group memberships within a culture (e.g., social status, class, race, gender, sexuality, religion, etc.), and thus are useful tools for exhibiting cultural identities and indicating differences between and within social groups (Barnard, 2002; Bourdieu, 2012; Coleman, 2013; McCracken, 1986; Miner, 2009; Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Trigg, 2001; Veblen, 2007). Since the late nineteenth century, however, popular American perceptions of identity expression through apparel-related products have increasingly situated this practice as a means for strategically communicating individual identity characteristics (Crane; 2000; Negrin, 2008; Stone, 1965). These products, for example, can be used by consumers to represent character traits, articulate desires, current moods, and also communicate who they are not (Bourdieu, 2012; Crane; 2000; Freitas, Davis, & Kim, 1997; Negrin, 2008; Thompson & Haytko, 1997).

This move towards individualism in identity expression through apparel consumption is marked by several historical occurrences, most notably (1) the nineteenth century “democratization” of the garment industry, which made a wider array of apparel products available to a broader consumer base at more affordable costs (Crane; 2000; Negrin, 2008), and (2) the mid-twentieth century transition towards more casual attire in previously formal settings (Clemente, 2014; Ferdman, 2015). An additional current trend contributing to this idea of individualism in identity expression through fashion is the

increasing popularity of SNSs as platforms for apparel-related information exchange and consumption. More details concerning this trend are outlined next.

The influence of SNSs in Apparel-Related Consumption and Identity Expression

The recent rapidly increasing consumer use of SNSs (i.e., web-based services that allow individuals to create and exchange information with other users) have transformed the fashion industry (Bansel, 2015; Cartner-Morely, 2015; Mohr, 2013; Sellors, 2014). For decades, a handful of big names and brands dominated the fashion industry, and dictated societies fashion trends and rules (Sellors, 2014). Most recently, however, user generated content (i.e., images, videos, text, etc. created and distributed by consumers) on SNSs have revolutionized the apparel industry by providing customers unlimited space for expressing and negotiating their identities through fashion (Bansel, 2015; Mohr, 2013; Sellors, 2014). Individual consumers can now influence fashion meanings and trends in unprecedented ways (Sellors, 2014).

Although these behaviors are observable across a diverse set of SNS platforms (e.g., YouTube and Snapchat), Instagram stands out from the others (Cartner-Morely, 2015; Peterson, 2017). Recently, Instagram was dubbed the new heart of fashion, as hundreds of thousands of self-proclaimed fashion experts and influencers utilize its easy-to-use platform to instantaneously communicate information concerning apparel-related consumption and identity (Cartner-Morely, 2015; Peterson, 2017). This is particularly true for black female consumers ages 18-34, as they are not only the most frequent users of

Instagram, but also commonly use Instagram to create and distribute fashion content related to individual identities that the mainstream fashion industry overlooks (Mintel, 2014).

Is Identity Expression in Fashion Solely Controlled by Consumers?

Despite these recent moves towards individualism in popular conceptualizations of identity expression and apparel consumption, this process is not completely free from social and cultural influences. This is due to two primary characteristics of identity. First, as mentioned previously, the term “identity” refers to the broad, overarching concept that encompasses all aspects of the consumer self. Thus, each individual’s identity is comprised of numerous characteristics, beliefs, experiences, and cultural group memberships that are intertwined and hard to separate. To illustrate this point, Kaiser (2012) offers the example of gender and sexuality identities. A dress, for instance, has historically served as a symbol for female heterosexuality. Because this apparel item has simultaneously held meanings related to both these identities for centuries, it is difficult to use a dress to communicate only one of these identities (i.e., the gendered female identity) without implying the other (i.e., the heterosexual female identity).

Second, identities are not aspects of the self that can be fully established by the individual consumer. Instead, identities are only “announced” and effectively communicated when others recognize the intended meanings attached to the fashion or apparel-related items she adorns (Kaiser, 2012; Stone, 1965). Because fashions have multiple and fluid meanings, the identity one attempts to convey through apparel-related consumption can be completely different from the identity actually communicated to others

(O’Cass, 2004). Thus, a consumer may only fully embody an identity if her possession of this identity is recognized by others (Stone, 1965). A contemporary example that illustrates this point is the strategic use of apparel related items in “Slut Walks”—feminist-based political marches designed to call attention to rape-culture, issues of sexual consent, and to speak out against shaming women for exercising sexual freedom. (See Brison, 2011; Dow and Wood, 2014; Valenti, 2011). To visually communicate the active choice of reclaiming agency over the body, many participants purchase and wear apparel that broader society has advised women to avoid or else accept the risk of becoming a victim of sexual assault (e.g., skirts with high hemlines, midriff or low-cut shirts, visible undergarments, lingerie, etc.). While this active selection of apparel to communicate strength, individual agency, opposition to social gender norms, and alignment with feminism is understood and received by some, others interpret this use of apparel as a degradation of the “sacredness” of femininity.

The discussion thus far has summarized the practice of expressing identity through apparel-related consumption, outlined the rationale behind claims of individualism in fashion and identity expression, and explained how SNSs—particularly Instagram—function in sanctioning agency for black women in these consumption practices. Additionally, the previous section outlines how the complex nature of consumer identity, as well as the multiple meanings assigned to apparel-related products prevents consumers from possessing full control in this process of consumption and identity expression. However, to fully grasp the slippery nature of apparel-related product meanings and their potential impact on the consumption practices of black middle-class female consumers,

one must have an understanding of cultural principles and categories, and the role they play in creating and altering product meanings. This information is covered in the section below.

Culture and the Creation of Apparel Product Meanings

Culture can be defined as how people make sense of and evaluate the world (McCracken, 1986). It is the “blueprint” used to guide human activity, and it defines the behaviors and objects that trigger, guide, and result from these activities (McCracken, 1986). The meaning that culture ascribes to the world is understood through cultural principles and cultural categories (Bourdieu, 2012; McCracken, 1986). Cultural principles are the ideas or rules individuals use in evaluating people, places, objects, or situations (Bourdieu, 2012; Trigg, 2001; McCracken, 1986; Veblen, 2007). These principles not only serve as tools in navigating life, but also play a role in dividing societies into smaller fragments called cultural categories that individuals can more easily interpret and understand (McCracken, 1986).

There are several cultural categories that are often invoked to sort humans in American society, including race, gender, and social class (McCracken, 1986; Omi & Winant, 1994; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). These cultural categories, however, are not inherent; they are ideological constructions containing meanings that must be learned and adopted by individuals within a culture (Barthes, 2012; Bourdieu, 2012; McCracken, 1986; Trigg, 2001). For instance, what it means to be black and female in the U.S. is socio-culturally constructed; the meanings are learned over time and continually negotiated. However, these constructed meanings also are often intangible. In other words, these

cultural principles hold no concrete meaning; they are not fixed, they are hard to enforce, and they are hard to clearly and universally define. Because of the abstract nature of cultural meanings, tangible entities – such as people and apparel-related products – play a vital role in providing a concrete understanding of the workings of a given society, and thus a window into the intangible qualities of that society. In fact, it is the relationship between cultural principles, objects (i.e., apparel), and people that give all aspects of culture tangible meanings (Borgerson, 2005; M'charek, 2013).

Individuals, including black women, purchase and utilize these goods to communicate alignment with cultural principles and membership in cultural categories (Bourdieu, 2012; McCracken, 1986; Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Trigg, 2001; Veblen, 2007). For instance, one may strategically use apparel when interviewing for a job as a tangible display that she is able to identify with and conform to the institution's culture and expectations. This use of apparel-related consumption, however, is not simple or standardized; several characteristics of culture complicate these processes. For example, one must first know the preferences or taste of members in a cultural category before she can use fashion to communicate belonging in that group (Bourdieu, 2012; Trigg, 2001; Veblen, 2007). Members of the upper and middle class categories, for example, often engage in the consistent negotiation of these taste preferences to ensure they are only fully understood by members within the category (Bourdieu, 2012; Trigg, 2001; Veblen, 2007). This process plays a role in restricting upward class mobility, as those attempting to enter the upper or middle classes are unable to fully grasp these constantly changing taste

preferences, and thus are unable to fully communicate belonging through their apparel choices (Bourdieu, 2012; Trigg, 2001; Veblen, 2007).

Two additional factors complicating the use of apparel-related consumption to communicate belonging in a cultural group are the ability of these products to hold multiple meanings, and the fluidity characteristic of these meanings (Bourdieu, 2012; Veblen, 2007). Product meanings constantly shift due to changing cultural principles. For example, wearing pants in Western society was once seen as a practice reserved for men; a product that helped tangibly distinguish men from women. By the mid-twentieth century, however, the entrance of an increasing number of women into the workforce, as well as laws outlawing public school requirements that young women wear dresses (e.g. *Education Amendments of 1972*) altered the cultural standards that reserved pants as a cultural object exclusively associated with the male category.

Similarly, the definitions communicated through an identical product purchase may change based on the group membership of the consumer (Bourdieu, 2012; Collins, 2007, Dyer, 1997; Gaines, 1996; hooks, 2012; Omi & Winant, 1995; Veblen, 2007). As mentioned previously, the purchase of a Rolex by a white individual, for example, can be viewed by some as a sign of refinement and prestige, while the same purchase by a black or other non-white individual can be defined by some as a vulgar and ineffective attempt at communicating social status (Lamont & Molnar, 2001). Interestingly, product definition shifts like the one illustrated in this example are often triggered by the physical attributes of the consumer that are historically tied to membership in racial or gendered cultural categories (Collins, 2007; Dyer, 1997; Glick & Fiske, 1996; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

This shift mirrors the cultural practice of permanently restricting full cultural-group membership (e.g., race or gender) to specific individuals based on physical features (e.g., skin color, facial features, body type, genitalia, reproductive organs, etc.) (Collins, 2007; Dyer, 1997; Fiske, 1996; Gaines, 1996; Glick & Fiske, 1996; Lipsitz, 1996; Omi & Winant, 1995; West & Zimmerman, 1987). In the case of black female consumers, cultural principles enforced by institutional decisions automatically place these consumers into the black and female cultural categories, while simultaneously restricting their access to whiteness and maleness (Collins, 2007; Dyer, 1997; Glick & Fiske, 1996; Omi & Winant, 1995; Thompson & Haytko, 1997; West & Zimmerman, 1987). As a result, these consumers are not free to use apparel to fully embody white or male identities.

As this previous example of black female consumers suggests, cultural category restrictions are not delegated equally across consumers groups; membership in certain categories comes with more freedom, rights, and power to communicate desired cultural identities through apparel-related consumption (Collins, 2007; Dyer, 1997; Dyer, 2012; Glick & Fiske, 1996; Omi & Winant, 1995; West & Zimmerman, 1987). This process of unequal power distribution is best explained through the concept of cultural hegemony.

Cultural hegemony, cultural privilege, and cultural constraints

Cultural hegemony explains the process by which cultural power is distributed and maintained (Barthes, 2012; Debord; 2012; Hall, 2012; Meehan; 2012). The concept suggests that within a given society, a small minority of people hold the power to establish and define aspects of a society and its cultural groups and principles. This

power is then used to maintain control over the subjugated majority (Barthes, 2012; Debord; 2012; Hall, 2012; Meehan; 2012). The key to retaining this cultural control is not forcing the majority into submission; instead the subjugated majority must consent to relinquishing their power to the dominant group (Barthes, 2012; Debord; 2012; Dyer, 1997; Hall, 2001; Hall, 2012). Once this power is relinquished, the dominant group retains the exclusive ability to define and establish cultural principles. This process situates the dominant group's norms concerning success, desirability, and normalcy as the ideal example the subjugated majority must follow (Barthes, 2012; Collins, 2012; Debord, 2012; Dyer, 1997; Dyer, 2012; hooks, 2012; Omi & Winant, 2005).

The caveat to holding cultural hegemonic power is the constant struggle to maintain power; the dominant majority must consistently convince subjugated populations that consenting to the power of the majority is in the best interest for society as a whole (Barthes, 2012; Debord, 2012; Dyer, 1997; Omi & Winant, 2005). This consent is typically accomplished by creating cultural principles that form and define cultural categories deemed different and inferior to the dominant group (Collins, 2012; Dyer, 1997; Dyer, 2012; hooks, 2012; Lipsitz, 2006; Omi & Winant, 2005). The key to making this process successful is through labeling the established differences as: 1) inherent and irreversible, and 2) inferior to that of the dominant group (Dyer, 1997; Dyer, 2012; Hall, 2001; Lipsitz, 2006; Memmi, 2001; Omi & Winant, 1995). This difference is typically solidified by defining subjugated cultural categories as the polar opposite of the dominant group (Dyer, 1997; Hall, 2001; Collins, 2013; Glick & Fiske, 1996). As a result, once membership in a group opposite of a dominant category is established, access

to membership in the dominant group is restricted (Collins, 2007, Fiske, 1996; Gaines, 1996; Lipsitz, 1996; Omi & Winant, 1995).

Two examples of American cultural category types used to establish oppositional difference between dominant and subjugated groups are race and gender (Dyer, 1997; Glick & Fiske, 1996; Lipsitz, 1996; Omi & Winant, 1995). In the case of black female consumers, the cultural principles used to define these categories result in the automatic placement of these consumers in the marginalized American cultural categories of black and female. As these categories are defined as innately different from the dominant white category and the dominant male category, the ability of black female consumers to communicate distance from their subjugated positions or full belonging in dominant groups is limited (Gaines, 1996; Glick & Fiske, 1996). Conversely, because consumers with full membership in dominant groups possess the power to alter popular cultural perceptions, they also possess the privilege to assume desired characteristics of marginalized groups without negative consequence (Collins, 2012; Dyer, 1997; Dyer, 2012; Hall, 2001; hooks, 2012; Lipsitz, 2006; Memmi, 2001; Omi & Winant, 2005).

One illustration of these privileges and restrictions is the appropriation of stigmatized hairstyles historically rooted in black culture. Specifically, white models and celebrities possess a cultural privilege that permits them to redefine these styles as trendy, while simultaneously shedding the stigmas of blackness attached to these fashions. Black individuals, however, are unable to communicate these new, desirable definitions without negative stereotyping. For example, black actress Zendya Coleman encountered backlash for her dreadlocked hairstyle at the 2015 Oscar's. E! News host Giuliani Rancic suggested

the hairstyle ruined Zendya's entire appearance, and asserted her dreadlocks appeared to smell of "patchouli oil and weed". Conversely, Rancic praised an identical hairstyle worn by white celebrity Kylie Jenner, claiming that Jenner's dreadlocks were "edgy" and "fashion forward", (See: Cubria, 2015; Kelly, 2015; Vultaggio, 2015).

The impact that the privileges and constraints of hierarchical cultural categories lend to apparel consumption and identity expression practices are also present in physical and digital marketplaces, including SNSs. Although early perceptions of digital spaces suggested these platforms functioned as a purely democratic space in which consumers are free to construct and negotiate identities as they see fit, many scholars argue that technology, including digital spaces, are socially constructed, and thus cannot be fully separated from the off-line social and cultural experiences of users (Brandtzæg, 2010; Hendriks & Zouridis, 1999; Pookulangara & Koesler, 2011; Schwarz & Thompson, 1990, van Dijck, 2013). As a result, consumers' use of SNSs to create and exchange apparel-related information is shaped and contained by their cultural background (Pookulangara and Koesler, 2011), including race (Brock, 2012; Florini, 2014; Sharma, 2013), gender (Bamman, Eisenstein, & Schnoebelen, 2014; Eslen-Ziya, 2013; Schwartz et al., 2013), and social class (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008; Schradie, 2012, 2015).

The above discussion of culture, apparel meaning creation, and the use of fashion in identity expression illustrates how this consumption practice is shaped and constrained by membership in broader societal groups (e.g., race, gender, and social class). Additionally, the inclusion of cultural hegemony in this conversation explicates why and how the freedom of marginalized consumer groups (e.g., black women) to fully embody

some cultural group identities is limited. This information is integral in understanding the larger cultural context in which marginalized consumer (e.g., black middle-class female) apparel-related consumption for identity expression occurs.

In this exploration of black middle-class females' use of apparel consumption in identity expression, it is also necessary to understand the intricacies of the intersectional identities unique to these women that influence this consumption practice (Gopaldas & Fischer, 2008; Henry, 2005). These complex identities are discussed in the following section.

THE COMPLEXITIES OF BLACK MIDDLE-CLASS FEMALE CONSUMER IDENTITY

As mentioned previously, black middle-class female consumers possess multiple intersectional identities that collectively impact their use of fashion consumption to communicate identity. Thus, the use of an intersectionality framework is a rich starting point from which more complex and accurate understandings of the identity and consumption practices of this group may be produced (Gopaldas & Fischer, 2008; Gopaldas, 2012). To fully understand the necessity of an intersectionality framework in this current study, it is first necessary to understand the historical development of the unidimensional cultural categories in which black middle-class women are frequently cast, and how these categories overlook key aspects of these consumers' experiences that impact identity expression through fashion. This information is provided next in a discussion of race and gender binaries.

Historical Unidimensional Categories of Black Middle-Class Female Consumers

Two of the most common unidimensional cultural category types used to describe black female consumers are race or gender (Collins, 2009; Gopaldas & Fischer, 2008; Gopaldas, 2012). The cultural principles used to define the groups within each of these categories speak to the privileges or restrictions consumers experience when communicating identity through apparel-related consumption (Gaines, 1996; Glick & Fiske, 1996). These restrictions and privileges are best understood through a discussion of the history, development, and cultural impact of the race (i.e., white/black) binary and the gender (i.e., male/female) binary.

The white/black binary

The concept of whiteness considers what it means to be classified as a white person in western society, and the privileges and powers directly related to being defined as such (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Dyer, 1997; Lipsitz, 2006). This cultural category evolved in the United States as a means to establish and maintain an unequal distribution of wealth, access, and opportunity across American culture that benefits individuals classified as white; it privileges white as the cultural norm and characterizes non-white individuals as outside of that cultural norm (Bonilla-Silva; Dyer; 1997; Lipsitz, 2006).

Interestingly, looking at the research that has sought to illuminate the evolution of whiteness, the concept of whiteness is defined solely by what it is not (Dyer; 1997; hooks, 2012; Lipsitz, 2006). This tautologically strategy is typically enforced through an ongoing process of defining non-white cultural categories, and doing so by invoking overgeneralized cultural principles that simultaneously position whiteness as the opposite

(and ideal norm) of each definition. Like the concept of cultural hegemony suggests, this practice typically involves the use of negative stereotypes to define non-white groups, which results in the positioning of white groups as their more desirable and superior opposite (Dyer, 2012).

This practice has two main results. First, it allows whiteness to displace negative characteristics onto non-white groups, and thus position whiteness itself as the best and strongest group, deserving of power and privilege (Dyer, 1997; Lipsitz, 2006). Second, it allows whiteness to represent a non-raced human “norm,” which removes whiteness from dialogues concerning the “problem of race” (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Dyer, 1997; Collins, 2013; Lipsitz, 2006). As a result of this removal, the white category occupies the space of solely representing the normative definition of what it means to be American (Dyer, 1997; Collins, 2007).

Whiteness, like other cultural hegemonic groups, maintains its power by convincing non-white groups to consent to their marginalized position in America’s historical racial hierarchy (Omi & Winant, 1994). This consent is typically achieved through creating and upholding “common sense” cultural principles that support the idea of the superiority of whites and the inferiority of non-whites (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Dyer, 1997; Collins, 2013). These ideas ease the consciences of those classified as white by promoting the idea that the power and privileges granted to them are due to their individual efforts and characteristics (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Collins, 2007; Collins’ 2012; Dyer, 1997; Lipsitz, 2006; Omi & Winant, 1994). Similarly, these ideas silence the opposition of non-whites by suggesting their subjugated positions are due to a lack of effort and an innate

inferiority to whites (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Collins, 2007; Collins' 2012; Dyer, 1997; Lipsitz, 2006; Omi & Winant, 1994). For example, these processes frequently emerge in conversations concerning affirmative action programs and college admission. It is often argued that admission should be based solely on merit—those who are the most intelligent and work the hardest will succeed in their educational endeavors, regardless of race (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). While this logic is not innately discriminatory, it ignores the economic and institutional factors (e.g., disparities in disciplinary enforcements, and lack of access to higher quality education resources and programs) that disproportionately impact non-white populations (American Psychological Association, 2012). Instead, broken familial structures, lack of motivation, laziness, and an alleged internalized inferiority “plaguing” non-white populations are used to fully explicate racial college enrollment disparities (e.g., 55 percent white undergraduate enrollment compared to 14 percent black enrollment; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). In other words, if non-white populations were simply as motivated or hard working as white populations, they would experience the same educational successes enjoyed by white individuals (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). Thus, through the concept of cultural hegemony and this example of college admission, it becomes apparent that whiteness, and the belief in white supremacy, is less a practice of direct or individual contempt, and more a wide social system designed to protect the privileges of whites (Dyer, 1997; Lipsitz, 2006).

Conversely, the concept of blackness is situated as the absolute opposite of whiteness (Dyer, 1997; Fredrickson, 2009; Lipsitz, 2006). The idea of racial blackness in the United States arose in the early stages of American colonization, as the number of

African slaves grew to outnumber the (white) settlers from Europe (Collins, 2012; Fredrickson, 2009; Hall, 2001). To ensure that the freedoms of these European settlers were protected, the category of blackness was put forth as a means of quickly (and permanently) categorizing individuals as either free (i.e., white) or enslaved (i.e., black) (Fredrickson, 2009; Hall, 2001). Several cultural principles were used to justify this automatic categorization of Africans as “black,” and thus devoid of the rights and freedoms provided to those classified as free (white); those principles were that Africans were, by definition, savage, ignorant, immoral, etc. (Collins, 2009; Collins, 2012; Fredrickson, 2009, Hall, 2001; hooks, 2012). These cultural principles were hegemonic tools; by force and also in subtler ways, the ruling whites were able to obtain the consent of the African majority in relinquishing their power to the white minority, and this relinquishment served as proof that white citizens were naturally better qualified to control the workings of the country (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Collins, 2012; Fredrickson, 2009; Hall, 2001).

Because this binary of whiteness and blackness has existed and been explicitly and implicitly intertwined into U.S. laws and policies since the country’s formation (e.g., *Dred Scott Decision*, 3/5 Compromise; “stop and frisk” laws), these race categories and corresponding defining principles are erroneously interpreted as natural, fixed, and true by individuals across racial groups (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Dyer, 1997; Lipsitz, 1996). This naturalization of racial principles and categories has several effects on American culture, especially those classified as black. First, because the primary criteria initially used to sort individuals in the black race category were physical features (e.g., skin color, facial features, hair texture, etc.), it was (and still is) erroneously assumed that individuals

categorized as black are born possessing the negative and inferior cultural characteristics that had historically been ascribed to blackness (Dyer, 1997; Fenton, 2003).

Secondly, because the category of white is historically associated with the most desirable cultural principles, many believe that all individuals classified as white are inherently better fit to maintain control of American culture, solely due to their membership in the white category. Thirdly, because blackness was situated as the antithesis of white, it is impossible for individuals classified as black to claim full membership in the white category or to be granted full access to the powers associated with such membership (Dyer, 1997). Fourth, because whiteness was equated with free citizenship and blackness with slave status, white also grew to define what it means to be an American citizen (Fenton, 2003).

In total, these four effects of binary white/nonwhite group membership categories exert their weight in anticipated and unanticipated ways. For example, a movement led by political activist Rev. Jesse Jackson in the late 1980s to lay claim to the cultural label African American as a means of identifying and referring to black Americans (Wilkerson, 1989), had the unintended consequences of positioning individuals in the white category as simply “American” and all other individuals as something fractured from that wholly American identity (e.g., African American, Asian American, Native American, etc.; Lipsitz, 1996).

The cultural principles and norms created and maintained by this black/white binary speak directly to the limitations that black middle-class female consumers face when using apparel goods to communicate full membership in “general” American (i.e., white) cultural

categories. For example, black consumers often use apparel products as a tool for expressing their humanity and status as a full and citizen in American society, but this use is hindered by the physical characteristics that initially placed these consumers in the black category. For example, black middle-class women often adopt modest styles of dress (e.g., knee-length skirts and tops with high-cut necklines) as proof that the black stereotypes of hypersexuality historically used as a justification for enslavement are untrue (Gaines, 1996; Higginbotham, 1994). This use of apparel, however, is not always successful, as these hypersexual stereotypes are historically defined by physical characteristics of the black body (i.e., skin color, full lips, curly lips, and the buttocks) (Burrell, 1993; Qureshi, 2004). Because of this historic attachment to physical characteristics, the perceived hypersexual black female body visually competes with modest clothing styles. In fact, because these established visual markers of hypersexuality stereotypes are so entwined with cultural understandings of blackness, these stereotypes often overpower the efforts of black females to effectively communicate their modesty, their humanity, and their worthiness of full citizenship in American society.

These restrictions stand in stark contrast to the experience of white consumers, whose cultural privilege allows them to appropriate aspects of blackness through consumption, without assuming the negative stereotypes associated with this marginalized cultural category (hooks, 2012). One popular example of this practice is seen in white consumers' consumption of apparel historically rooted in hip-hop culture. While the consumption and styling of these apparel items originated in self-empowerment movements built by inner-city working-class black communities, some white consumers

who also identify with this empowerment rhetoric have consumed and adopted these styles (hooks, 2012; Lamont & Molnar, 2002). Many of these hip-hop apparel styles have further been adopted by popular American (i.e. white) culture, but without the attached cultural meaning of empowerment, and renamed “urban” (hooks, 2012). This appropriation allows white consumers to use apparel to express the principles of hip-hop empowerment – or, as is the case with mass appropriation, merely share in the visual aesthetic – without donning the negative stigmas attached to inner-city black working-class experiences (hooks, 2012).

While this discussion of the white/black binary shines light on the ways in which racial identities impact the apparel-related marketplace experiences of black middle-class women, it does not address the complexities added by gender—specifically the cultural meanings attached to definitions of female identity, and the privileges granted to male group membership. In fact, discussions of blackness and black racial politics often prioritize the lived experiences of black males, which situates maleness as the privileged identity within blackness (Collins, 2009; Dyer, 1997; Fiske, 1996). Specifically, the conditions, agendas, and lived experiences of black men often take precedence over those of black women (Collins, 2009). This practice is also evident in social issues that impact both black males and black females, as the experiences of the latter are erased from these conversations. One recent example of these omissions and erasures is the lack of media coverage and social discussion concerning the black female victims of police violence. While over 20 black women have died in police-related incidents since 2012, only one death (i.e., the passing of Sandra Bland in 2015) garnered national media coverage or broad societal acknowledgement (Clark, 2016; Crenshaw, Ritchie, Anspach, Gilmer, & Harris,

2015). Comparatively, the police-related deaths of three black males (e.g., Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Terrance Crutcher, and Keith Lamont Scott), received coverage in 2016 alone. In fact, the image of the black male has become the sole face of this social justice issue; as black male police-related violence has not only received significantly increased media attention, but the names of these victims are still a relevant aspect of these political conversations concerning race.

More details and examples concerning the female gender experiences omitted from discussions of race are discussed next.

The male/female binary

The concept of gender considers what it means to be female, what it means to be male, and the maintenance of a distinction between the two (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Like race, gender identity is often reduced to a binary in which femaleness is situated as the opposite of maleness (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Ingraham, 1994; West & Zimmerman, 1987). In the U.S., the cultural principles used to determine gender are most frequently associated with biological characteristics (e.g., chromosomes or genitalia) determined at birth and physical characteristics thereafter (e.g., long-hair, breast, hips, etc.) (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Glick & Fiske, 1996; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Based on these characteristics, individuals are placed in one of two cultural categories: female or male. Historically, patriarchy, a hegemonic social system in which the privilege of institutional and political control is granted to the male category, has influenced cultural interactions in the United States (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Similar to other hegemonic cultural systems, patriarchy maintains power by convincing females to consent to the power and control of males

(Collins, 2007; Glick & Fiske, 1996; West & Zimmerman, 1987). This is typically achieved through the establishment of “common sense” gender cultural roles that support the argument that males are innately better fit to command the running of a society.

Historically, classification in the female category restricted members to the child rearing and domestic responsibilities of the family, while the male was the de facto head of the family (Glick & Fiske, 1996; West & Zimmerman, 1987). This classification also was accompanied by laws and norms that limited females’ access to educational and economic capital, thus barring the females from the economic power and social mobility freedom made explicitly available to males (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Gopaldas, 2012; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Sexual reproduction (i.e. the ability of women to bear children) was used as the primary evidence in arguing that the “natural” role of women was to forgo education and assume economic dependency in order to birth and raise children and serve the family (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This also resulted in positioning women as the weaker gender; a “burden” for men to protect and provide for since the women had no means of earning income or improving the status of the family (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 492). As a result of their lack of autonomy, power and financial freedom, the ability of women to communicate their identities through fashion consumption was constrained by the demands and preferences of the family patriarch (e.g., a husband, father, etc.), and the lack of full control over the earning and spending of the monetary funds necessary to purchase these products (Crane, 2000; Negrin, 2008).

Additionally, because this male/female binary was ingrained in western society and its attendant religions even prior to the formation of the U.S., these categories and their

corresponding defining principles were interpreted as natural, fixed, and true by individuals across the gender groups (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Ingraham, 1994; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Similar to definitions of race, the use of physical features became markers of gender and the roles ascribed to that gender; thus it is/was impossible for individuals classified as female to claim full membership in the male category or to be granted full access to the powers associated with such membership (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Ingraham, 1994; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Although this brief survey of the gender binary sheds light on the cultural definitions of female identity that can hinder black women's use of fashion to express identity, the cultural definitions tied to femaleness do not fully acknowledge the cultural experiences of black women. One reason is that, similar to the omission of females in conversations of blackness, black women are notably absent in feminist conversations about gender – such conversations frequently prioritize the lived experiences of white women, which ignores the impact of black cultural group membership on the gendered female experience (Collins, 2009; Fiske, 1996; hooks, 2000). Historically, for example, white femininity has been the American cultural ideal of female physical beauty, while black femininity has been the undesirable polar opposite (Dyer, 1997). For instance, the long and straight hair, slim noses, light-colored eyes, and fair skin associated with white European populations hold a historical position as the ideal physical beauty traits across cultures impacted by slavery and colonialism (Dyer, 1997, Thompson, 2009). Because, as referenced previously, blackness is defined as the total opposite of whiteness, the physical characteristics associated with blackness (short and curly hair, broad noses, dark eyes, and

dark skin) hold a historical position as the least desirable physical features (Gilchist & Thompson, 2012; Thompson, 2009). Because of this, throughout history, black and other non-white women have experienced increased pressures to utilize fashion and other consumption practices in ways that alter their appearance to fit these white feminine beauty ideals (Dyer, 1997). This trend is particularly evident in black women's relationship with hair. Historically, the majority of hair-related advertising messages targeted towards black women encouraged these consumers to straighten their hair through the use of hot combs, relaxers, etc. (Gilchist & Thompson, 2012; Thompson, 2009). While the current era is experiencing a cultural movement that encourages black women to embrace natural hair textures, the expenditures for wigs, weaves, and extensions within this market are still rapidly increasing (Mintel, 2015). Additionally, while white femininity is historically defined as sexually pure, black femininity has been situated as its hypersexualized polar opposite (Collins, 2009; Dyer, 1997). Because of this, black female consumers often strategically use apparel-related consumption to fight against this stigma (Gaines, 1996; Higginbotham, 1994; this will be explored in more depth below).

Additionally, neither gender nor race binaries consider the impact that social-class can have on black women's use of apparel-related consumption in identity expression. For example, the expectation to forgo employment to take care of home and family is an economic privilege not afforded to all women. This is especially true for black female consumers, whose families were historically impacted by racial sanctioned economic restrictions, such as barred access to high-paying employment opportunities and affordable housing (Lipsitz, 2006). To ensure the survival of the household, these women were

required to contribute to the household income in addition to assuming the household's domestic duties (Collins, 2009). Additionally, as is the case of unidimensional discussions of race, gender binaries do not acknowledge the different cultural experiences, interactions, and expectations that can impact apparel consumption practices within black populations (Gaines, 1996; Higginbotham, 1994).

The previous discussion of the history, development, and impact of racial and gender binaries helps to further understandings of the various cultural identities of black middle-class females, and begins to explain why examining each group identity in isolation is inefficient in capturing the complexities of the cultural experiences of these consumers. It is also important to reiterate here that unlike many black male and white female consumers, black women have coexisting marginalized race and gender group membership. These identities intersect to create a cultural dynamic in which black women exist as an “outsider within” each of these groups; shouldering the marginalized cultural definitions of each category (i.e., blackness and femaleness), while simultaneously restricted from many of the available privileges of these broader group identities (i.e., maleness and whiteness) (Collins, 2009; Dyer, 1997; Fiske, 1996; hooks, 2000).

Because of the different experiences created by this intersection, and the complete omission of social class from the unidimensional binaries of race and gender highlighted in this section, it is now clear why an intersectionality framework is necessary in the current examination of black middle-class female's use of apparel related consumption in expressing identity. The two theoretical schools of thought that capture these intersections and guide this study's analysis are explicated next.

BLACK MIDDLE-CLASS FEMALE INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITY FRAMEWORK

The current study utilizes two theoretical approaches to articulate the intersectional identity of black middle-class consumers: (1) black feminism and (2) black respectability politics. The former is explicated next.

Black Feminism

Black feminism is a conceptual school of thought that argues that all of the identities attached to the multiple marginalized group memberships of black women intersect to create frequently overlooked but important and unique lived experiences (Collins, 2013; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Fiske, 1996; hooks, 2000). Instead of conceptualizing these intersections as a space where black females experience “more” racism, sexism, etc., than other members of each corresponding category, black feminism positions these intersection as theoretically and practically important, and thus deserving of recognition (Collins, 2013; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; hooks, 2000). For example, there are many historical stereotypes and stigmas attached specifically to black women that still impact their current lived experiences (Collins, 2009; West, 1995). The “Mammy” stereotype, for instance, has its roots in slavery and serves as the stereotypical symbol of black women in domestic or service work. Mammy is described an overweight, asexual care giver who exists to nurture and support white individuals. She is a hard worker and fiercely protective of the white families she serves, but she is also cognizant and accepting of her subordinate place in America’s racial hierarchy. Collins (2009) identifies the Mammy persona as a representation of the ideal black female relationship with elite white male power, as Mammy constantly and selflessly nurtures and supports their

efforts, without demanding equal treatment or support. In fact, this ideal is implicitly ingrained in American society, as black women who fail to assume this selflessness can encounter social backlash (Collins, 2009)

Conversely, the “Sapphire” stereotype functions as the antitheses of Mammy (West, 1995). She has a large stature, but is not obese, and is characterized by her loudness, hostility, and brashness. She is particularly stigmatized for an alleged desire to criticize and demean others—particularly black men. Black women continue to encounter accusations related to this stereotype today, as any display of anger or frustration is often stigmatized as hyperaggressiveness (West, 1995).

The “black matriarch” or the “black single-mother” is a more recent maternal stereotype attributed to black women. Unlike the Mammy, who is rewarded for her submission with the love of the white elite, the black matriarch functions as a warning to black and white women for the outcomes of challenging the gender status quo (Collins, 2009). Specifically, her alleged mistreatment and domination of black men marks black women as undesirable marital partners, and forces these men to abandon their relationships and families. This stereotypical gender role reversal allegedly initiated by the black matriarch is often pinpointed as the cause of black poverty and the “demise” of the black family structure, as various government reports (e.g., The 1965 Moynihan Report) attribute black poverty to the forced absence of black patriarchal figures (Collins, 2009) .

Additionally, the “Jezebel” is characterized as the “bad” hypersexual black female temptress with a lust so uncontrollable, it is impossible for her to experience rape (West,

1995).. This stereotype is historically used as a justification for the high incidence of sexual assault against black females; thus functioning as a tool in the exploitation of black female sexuality. Specifically, this stereotype strips these women of their sexual agency and choice, while simultaneously making their bodies freely consumable for men (Collins, 2009).

Most recently, the “black lady” persona has developed as a stereotypical representation of black middle-class women (Collins, 2009). The character of the black lady represents a combination of attributes linked to previous black female stereotypes. For example, due to a strong work ethic, the black lady experiences significant professional success. However, like the Mammy, these successes are contingent on consistent selfless efforts that place the good of others before the care of self. Despite this work ethic, like the black matriarch, she is stigmatized for being overly-independent and desiring to assume roles traditionally delegated to men. This overdependence marks the black lady as poor marriage material, and thus susceptible to single motherhood (Collins, 2009). Lastly, the black lady is characterized as overly aggressive and emasculating, which like the Sapphire, often results in accusations of hyperaggressiveness that can mark one as “difficult” to work with.

The stereotypical representations of black women outlined above are also important in conversations concerning the marketplace experiences of black women. Though these characters are rarely explicitly used or referenced, their implicit presence exists in contemporary marketing messages (Burrell, 2010). These implicit messages not only impact the way white consumers view and interact with black individuals and

culture, but they also are internalized by black consumers, and can influence their subsequent marketplace experiences (Burrell, 2010).

Black feminism gained popularity as a theoretical concept through the work of scholars like Kimberle Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, and bell hooks. However, its roots are situated in the feelings of dissatisfaction and exclusion many black women experienced during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and the Feminist movements of the 1970s. For example, though the civil rights' goal of black racial advancement was to overcome racism and advance the cultural position of the entire race category, the experiences of black women were frequently omitted from these conversations (Collins, 2007). Political arguments involving race frequently positioned black males as the primary victims of racism, thus their protection from these experiences was top priority (Simien, 2006). As a result, when issues came to light concerning the unique experiences of racism that black women encountered due to their gender as well as their race, their experiences were viewed as not as urgent as those of black males (Collins, 2007; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Simien, 2006). For example, in addition to privileging the experiences of black men in conversations of police-related deaths within the black community, the current conversations concerning the high incidence of law enforcement-related sexual assault against black women garners little attention (Clark, 2016). This lack of attention is significant, as sexual misconduct is one of the most frequently logged complaints against police (Clark, 2016; Sedensky & Merchant, 2015). The practice illustrated through this example not only ignores the unique experiences of racism that black women encounter due to their gender, but also overlooks the experiences of sexism

that black females may experience in their encounters with black men (e.g., sexual or domestic abuse) (Simien, 2006).

Similarly, though positioned as a sisterhood powerful enough to transcend and overcome racial differences and inequalities, the feminist movement was criticized for prioritizing the lived experiences, rights, and freedoms of white women at the expense of women of color (Collins, 2007; Fiske, 1996; hooks, 2000). As a result, when issues related to race were raised, they are often viewed as unnecessary and counterproductive to the advancement of women as a whole (hooks, 2000). For example, the results of a 2016 national research study administered by SheKnows—a women’s life digital media company—suggest that women of color are less likely to identify as a feminist, despite higher reported incidents of encounter sexist behaviors (i.e., sexual harassment and lack of advancement in the workplace) (Melony, 2016). Black women were the most skeptical, as they reported feelings of exclusion from feminist movements. Specifically, they indicated a belief that feminism privileges mostly white, upper middle-class and educated perspectives, and ignores issues related to race, class, etc. (Maloney, 2016). This practice not only ignores the unique experiences of sexism that black women encounter due to their race (e.g., stereotyping as an exotic, hypersexual being), but also overlooks the overt and covert experiences of racism black females experience in their encounters with other women (Simien, 2006).

Black feminism is commonly applied in theoretical discussions of intersectional black female identities because it articulates the importance of recognizing these identities, and provides examples of cultural stereotypes unique to these groups. In addition to this

theory, the current study also applies arguments from the field of black respectability politics. Although much of this scholarship does not explicitly invoke the term intersectionality, its ideas and arguments speak directly to the intersectional black middle-class female experience. These ideas are outlined in the subsequent section.

Black Respectability Politics

Unlike the rigid social class boundaries reticent of nineteenth century western European societies, the definitions of class in the U.S are more fluid and vague (Fiske, 2012; Fussell, 1992). This is particularly true for the American middle-class, as membership in this group is historically more closely aligned with maintaining a persistent work ethic (i.e., all individuals have an equal opportunity for success, as long as they work hard) than acquired financial assets (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Fussell, 1992). Because of this ambiguity, membership in the middle-class within the United States can be determined by an array of cultural values and goals, most notably the desire for economic stability and financial independence, the desire to provide advanced education for children, asset acquisition, belief in hard work, an emphasis on planning and saving, and a general fear of living paycheck-to-pay check (U.S. Department of Economics and Statistics Administration, 2010; Fiske, 2012; Fussell, 1992).

This middle-class identity however, is complicated when it intersects with cultural principles associated with race. For example, the middle-class fear of income reduction that forces one to live paycheck-to-paycheck is intensified for black individuals, as they frequently encounter institutional and economic restrictions due to their blackness (Collins, 2007; ESA, 2010; Fiske, 1996; Lipsitz; 2006). Additionally, on a larger societal scale, race

in the U.S. is historically coded into cultural definitions associated with class categories (Fiske, 1996; Gaines, 1996). As a result, class difference is frequently interpreted as racial difference, with upper and middle class commonly interpreted as white, while working class and poor is commonly interpreted as black or another non-white group (Andreasen & Hodges 1977; Fiske, 1996; Gaines, 1996; Lacy, 2007; Lamont & Molnar 2001). Because these racialized interpretations are implicitly engrained in cultural understandings of class, they can often override evidence of alignment with the defined middle-class values and goals outlined above (Andreasen & Hodges 1977; Fiske, 1996; Gaines, 1996; Lacy, 2007; Lamont & Molnar 2001).

This incorporation of race into class definitions has two primary impacts on black female middle-class consumers. First, it limits the ability of black middle-class consumers to fully assimilate into American (i.e., white) culture through economic success and advancements (Fisk, 1996; Gaines, 1996). Secondly, it allows black middle-class consumers to obtain the precise amount of economic success and advancement needed to establish a class hierarchy within the black racial category (Collins, 2009; Fiske, 1996). The former impact will be addressed first.

The abolition of slavery allowed some members of the black racial category to achieve economic mobility through professional advancement (Gaines, 1996; Higginbotham, 1994). These black doctors, lawyers, and educators formed a minority group within the black category frequently referred to as the black middle class. Membership in this new group was (and still is) based on adherence to a set of cultural principles grounded in (1) obtaining cultural status and authority in the U.S., (2) assimilation into American society,

and (3) securing universal recognition of their humanity in the U.S. (Gaines, 1996; Higginbotham, 1994). These cultural principles are frequently referred to as respectability politics (Gaines, 1996; Higginbotham, 1994).

These politics are rooted in the ideas of decency and morality, and were linked to responsible consumption practices, financial independence, and maintaining a neat and modest physical appearance (i.e., personal grooming maintenance and appropriate fashion choices) (Gaines, 1996; Higginbotham, 1994). It was believed that the stereotypical and discriminatory cultural principles associated with the black category were the fault of “bad blacks,” thus members of the black middle class expended significant effort through respectability politics to separate themselves from “underdeveloped” black working-class or poor individuals (Gaines, 1996; Higginbotham, 1994; Lacey, 2007).

These politics, however, have one primary characteristic that prevents membership advancement from the black to white category: the politics are rooted in the very constructions of blackness they were designed to overcome (Gaines, 1996). In other words, it is impossible to eliminate the stereotypical and discriminatory cultural principles designed to restrict the black middle class to the black category because respectability politics reaffirm their importance. It is important to note, however, that the politics of respectability are not intended to shed all cultural identification with the black race. Instead, the goal is to find a balance between being American (i.e., successfully identifying as a full member of the white category and obtaining the associated powers), while retaining aspects of a black identity (Higginbotham, 1994).

Interestingly, the bulk of the responsibility for adhering to respectability politics and racial uplift principles historically falls on the shoulders of black middle-class women (Collins, 2009; Higginbotham, 1994). Black mothers in particular experienced this pressure, as their female cultural categorization dealt them the increased responsibility and pressure of rearing respectable and morally responsible children (Higginbotham, 1994). The fashion of black middle-class females in particular also fell under the close surveillance of respectability politics, as these consumers were constantly instructed to avoid the “gaudy colors, conspicuous designs” and “culturally unique designs” associated with underdeveloped blackness and also believed to attract the sexual advances of both white and black males (Higginbotham, 1994, p. 201).

So far, this discussion has provided several insights concerning how the incorporation of race into social-class definitions impacts black female middle-class consumers use of apparel consumption to communicate complete belonging in American (i.e., white) cultural spaces and full eligibility for the rights accompanying such membership. The cultural principles of respectability politics provide black female middle-class consumers with guidelines in which to separate themselves from “underdeveloped blacks” while taking steps to alter perceptions of the black race category through various activities, including responsible consumption practices. These politics also provided black middle-class females in particular with a guide to the respectable apparel choices that display their ability to assimilate into American (i.e., white) culture. However, at the same time, the historical incorporation of race into class definitions prevents black middle-class female consumers from communicating full membership in American (i.e., white) cultural spaces, as

historically, cultural principles associated with working-class and poor were used to define the cultural category of blackness. Full membership is also limited by the incorporation of the very cultural principles designed to protect whiteness into the workings of black middle-class respectability politics.

As mentioned previously, the incorporation of race into class definitions also impacts black female middle-class consumers by granting them room to achieve the precise amount of economic success and advancement needed to create the social class hierarchy (and its corresponding conflicts) that exists within the black racial category (Collins, 2009; Fiske, 1996). This impact will be discussed next.

Though a primary goal in respectability politics is the uplift of the black race, its use resulted in disrupting racial solidarity within the black cultural category. On one hand, the economic advancements of members of the black middle class and the elimination of overt segregation laws, allowed these consumers to leave the neighborhoods in which black populations were once ghettoized, thus creating geographical separations within the black cultural category (Collins, 2009; Molnar & Lamont, 2002). Additionally, the use of the stereotypical definitions of blackness within black respectability politics to mark working-class or poor black consumers as different inadvertently stripped “authentic” blackness from black middle-class individuals (Collins, 2009; Collins, 2012). In the eyes of many working-class or poor black individuals, middle-class black consumers are “race traitors;” so engrossed in assimilation and self-advancement efforts that they lost sight of the goal of racial uplift (Collins, 2009; Collins, 2012; Molnar & Lamont, 2002).

Interestingly, the co-option of stereotypical cultural principles by respectability politics to create difference within the black category is also successful in stripping “authentic” blackness in the eyes of members of the white category. As middle-class black individuals achieve economic advancement, they are placed in cultural situations in which interactions with white individuals increase, particularly in professional, educational, and residential settings (Collins, 2012; Lacy, 2007; Molnar & Lamont, 2002). Because the cultural principles associated with blackness are framed as the absolute opposite of whiteness, middle-class black individuals must be perceived as “different” from the stereotypes defining blackness to successfully navigate these historically white spaces (Collins, 2012; Molnar & Lamont, 2002). As a result, these middle-class black individuals are often perceived as an “exception to the rule;” the racial anomalies that do not fit the negative stereotypical principles used to define authentic blackness (Collins, 2012; hooks, 2012). This stripping of authentic blackness, however, has a caveat; it removes the privilege middle-class black individuals have in freely claiming a black identity that is recognized as equally genuine to that of the negative stereotypes associated with the black working-class and poor (Collins, 2012; hooks, 2012). Consequently, these individuals are fixed in a contradictory space in American culture where they are the exception to the rules defining blackness, but their opportunities for advancement are capped by the “black” physical features that prevent full racial category mobility (Collins, 2009; Dyer, 1997; Collins, 2012; Fiske, 1996).

This stripping process provides even further insights into the ways in which black middle-class respectability politics impact black female middle-class consumers’ use of

apparel consumption. More specifically, this stripping may complicate the ability of these consumers to use fashion consumption in communicating an authentic black identity, or a black identity interpreted to be as accurate and valid as the negative stereotypes historically used to define blackness.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The review of literature outlined in this chapter opened with an overview of the broad role that fashion and consumption play in communicating and interpreting identity, and an explanation of the more recent roles SNSs play in fashion-related consumption. The concept of cultural hegemony was also introduced to address the unequally distributed societal restrictions encountered by some consumer groups—including black women—that limit their ability to effectively communicate desired identities through fashion consumption.

This chapter also solidified the importance of using an intersectional approach in examinations of black middle-class female consumers by revealing the inadequacies of historic unidimensional racial and gender binaries (e.g., white/black and male/female). Chapter 2 closes with a discussion of the two theoretical frameworks (i.e., black feminism and black middle-class respectability politics) used in the current study that conceptualize the intersectional identity complexities of black middle-class women. The specific recruitment strategies, data collection techniques, and analysis methods used in this dissertation are outlined in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Methods

This current research uses a 2-stage data collection process to explore the consumption and styling of fashion-related products. The first stage involved the compilation of participant fashion photo journals through the use of Photovoice methods, and the second stage involved follow-up in-depth interviews. These interviews involved discussion concerning the participant's lived experiences related to their intersectional identities, their photo journals, and their use of Instagram to inform their fashion-related preferences and purchases. These methods collectively addressed the following research questions:

1. How does the intersection of race, gender, and class identities manifest itself in black female middle-class consumers' uses of apparel-related consumption in identity expression?
2. How do social settings, situations, and environments impact black female middle-class consumers' uses of apparel-related consumption in identity expression?
3. How does the use of apparel-related consumption in identity expression vary within the black female middle-class consumer group?
4. How do black middle-class females use SNSs to inform the expression of their intersecting identities through apparel-related consumption?

SAMPLING STRATEGIES AND PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

A purposive sampling approach was used in the recruitment efforts of this study. This particular approach to sampling selects respondents based on a predetermined set of desired participant characteristics, and the set objectives of a study (Crossman, 2017). Specifically, a homogeneous purposive sample was recruited, as this dissertation desired

to understand how a shared set of characteristics (e.g. black middle-class females) impact apparel-related consumption behaviors.

The recruitment process utilized snowball sampling methods—a non-probability method of convenience sampling commonly used in qualitative research inquires (Arnould & Epp, 2006; Cohen & Arieli, 2011; Marshall, 1996; Noy, 2008)—to recruit participants. This sampling process involves the identification and recruitment of additional participants by current individuals enrolled in the research study. Although the non-probability of this sampling method garners some criticism for being non-random, biased, and ungeneralizable, McCracken (1998) notes that the end goal of qualitative research is not to “survey” the terrain of a phenomenon (i.e., address generalizable “what” questions), but to “mine” it (i.e., illuminate and understand “why” and “how” questions) (p.17; Marshall, 1996). Additionally, the random sampling desired in quantitative research to ensure generalizability and avoid sampling error may result in a sample frame that does not exemplify the specific participant complexities of interest in a qualitative research study. Marshall (1996), for example, compares this sampling result to randomly asking a passerby questions concerning car repair instead of asking a car mechanic. Because of this difference in end goals, the benefits of random sampling accorded to quantitative research are not universally applicable to qualitative studies, but instead may negatively impact data quality (Arnould & Epp, 2006; Marshall, 1996; McCracken, 1998).

Additionally, snowball sampling is a particularly useful recruiting method in explorations of marginalized populations, and for studies with multiple participation eligibility requirements (Cohen & Arieli, 2011; Hughes, Fenton, & Hine, 1995; Noy,

2008). This is primarily due to the fact that these groups are often difficult to locate and identify within the general population through the use of alternative sampling methods. The current study meets these criteria, as it not only requires the participation of members of a marginalized cultural group, but also involves multiple qualifications for study enrollment (e.g., individuals who self-identify as black, female, and middle-class, who also use SNSs to gather fashion-related information).

The sample for this study consisted of 18 black middle-class women, who each received a \$50 Amazon gift card as compensation. The appropriate sample size in qualitative CCT research can vary, as some published studies (particularly in the field of researcher introspection) have as few as one participant (Gould, 1991; Holbrook, 1986, 1987; Lehmann, 1987). The most important criteria for sample size however, is that recruitment should continue until the research questions are “adequately answered” (Marshall, 1996, p.523). This criteria is also referred to as the saturation point, or the point in the data collection process when new findings or information cease to emerge from the data (Arnould & Epp, 2006; Marshall, 1996). In the current study, saturation was reached at 18 individuals.

Additionally, all of the participants fell into the age range of the millennial generation (ages 20-36 in 2017). This choice was made based on the documented SNSs usage of this generational cohort. More specifically, a recent Nielson (2016) report pinpointed black millennials as leaders of digital advancement, as these consumers view social media as an extension of their identities, and over-index on their daily use of SNSs

compared to other black generations and the general population. More information concerning the participants of the current study are outlined in Table 1.

Pseudonym	Age	Location	Occupation	Shoe Size	Dress Size	Marital Status
Audrey	28	Austin	Archivist	10	8	Single
Erica	28	San Antonio	VA Fellow	7.5-8	4-6	Single
Gabby	29	Austin	PhD Student	10	14-20	Single
Grace	28	Austin	Sales Consultant	8.5-9	6	Single
Holly	29	Philadelphia	MBA Student	8.5-9	6-8	Single
Jacklyn	28	Austin	Small Business Owner	7-7.5	4	Single
Kaitlyn	24	San Francisco	PhD Student	9.5-10	6-8	Single
Kameron	28	Atlanta	Civil Engineer	6	6	Single
Karmen	27	Austin	Off-Camera News Reporter/Adjunct Professor	6	0-2	Single
Leslie	35	Dallas	Senior Business Analyst	8.5-9	6-8	Married
Lindsey	31	Charlotte	HR Professional	10.5	8	Single
Morgan	32	Dallas	Teacher	7.5-8	4-6	Widowed
Natasha	27	Austin	Paralegal	7	6-8	Married
Nicole	29	Austin	PhD Student	8	8	Single
Samantha	33	Atlanta	Collegiate Track Coach	10	6	Married
Sasha	28	Washington D.C.	School Program Coordinator	8	14-16	Single
Tiffany	27	Austin	Masters Student/Social Worker	10	6-8	Single
Vicki	31	Washington D.C.	HR Professional	7	2-4	Married

Table 1: Respondent Information

Seven criteria and corresponding screening questions guided participant selection, including, (1) self-identification as black (*What racial group do you most closely identify with?*), (2) self-identification as female (*What gender do you most closely identify with?*), (3) self-identification as middle-class (*What social class do you most closely identify with?*), (4) cultural experiences with race (*What racial category do others most frequently place you in?*), (5) cultural experiences with gender (*What gender category do others most frequently place you in?*), (6) cultural experiences with social class (*What social class category do others most frequently place you in?*), and (7) use of Instagram to gather and/or share fashion related information (*Do you use Instagram to express your personal style, get fashion inspiration, or make fashion related purchases?*).

These criteria were established for three primary reasons. First, individuals who do not self-identify as black, female, and middle class may not feel the need to negotiate these marginalized identities, and thus may not utilize apparel-related products in the ways seen in individuals who readily identify as such. Similarly, individuals who are not commonly categorized in these groups by society may not encounter the corresponding restrictions on identity expression, and thus may not express the apparel consumption practices used by individuals impeded by these limitations. Last, the purposeful recruitment of individuals who actively use Instagram to gather and exchange fashion related information was necessary to address this study's inquiries concerning the role of SNSs in apparel-related consumption and identity expression.

SNSs AND FASHION: THE RELEVANCE OF THE CONTEXT OF INSTAGRAM

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the rapidly increasing consumer use of SNSs have transformed the fashion industry (Bansel, 2015; Cartner-Morely, 2015; Mohr, 2013; Sellors, 2014). While a handful of big names and brands previously dominated the fashion industry and dictated societies fashion trends, the recent uptick in user generated content (e.g., images, videos, text, etc. created and distributed by consumers) on SNSs have revolutionized fashion trends by providing customers unlimited space for expressing and negotiating their identities through fashion (Bansel, 2015; Mohr, 2013; Sellors, 2014). As a result, individual consumers can now influence fashion meanings and trends in unprecedented ways (Sellors, 2014).

Although these behaviors are observable across a diverse set of SNS platforms (e.g., YouTube and Snapchat), Instagram—a free mobile application that allows its users to upload and share images, videos, and live recordings— presently stands out from the others (Cartner-Morely, 2015; Peterson, 2017). As mentioned previously, Instagram was recently dubbed “the heart of fashion”, as hundreds of thousands of self-proclaimed fashion experts and influencers utilize its platform to instantaneously communicate information concerning apparel-related consumption and identity (Cartner-Morely, 2015; Peterson, 2017). This is particularly true for black female millennial consumers, as they are not only the highest and most frequent users of Instagram, but also commonly use Instagram to create, distribute, and consume fashion content related to their marginalized intersecting identities that the mainstream fashion and beauty industries overlook (Mintel,

2014). Because of these factors, Instagram is an appropriate SNS context for the current study.

Users can perform two primary functions on Instagram that are of particular interest to this study. First, they can share original content with their approved “followers” (i.e., users subscribed to an individual’s account) by uploading images or videos to their personal profile. Additionally, users can simultaneously upload each post to their other linked SNS accounts, including Facebook and Twitter. In response, subscribers are able to “like” each post, provide text-based comments, or individually send the post to another user through a direct message.

Second, users can perform content/information searches on Instagram. There are three methods available to users for collecting content. The first involves following another user’s account, which allows all of this user’s uploaded content to appear in the followers’ personal Instagram “feed” (i.e., the account homepage that includes a scrolling list of the daily posts of all of the accounts in which a user is subscribed).

The next method of content collection is the search function, which allows users to utilize keywords to comb the entire platform for desired content. Users can perform these keyword searches in four ways. The first is by Instagram handle—or username—which produces a list of the most relevant accounts. The second is via Hashtag; a word or phrase preceded by the number sign (“#”) (e.g., #fallfashion2016). Hashtags are optional descriptors users may include in the text descriptions of their uploaded content, which allow these posts to be appear in the search results of the corresponding hashtag. The third is a geotag search, or the location in which a picture or video was taken. Similar to

hashtags, these optional geotags can be attached to posts, which allow this content to appear in the search results of a specific location. The last method of content search and collection includes browsing the explore page. This explore page uses algorithms (i.e., unique formulas used to return the most relevant results to a user) to instantaneously produce a results page containing the content of most interest to the individual user. These explore page results are typically based on the content uploaded by the subscribed accounts of a user, a user's previous keyword searches, and previous posts "liked" by a user.

STAGE 1 METHOD: PHOTOVOICE

Photovoice (also referred to as photoelicitation, photo-interviewing, or reflexive photography) is a qualitative data collection method in which participants are requested to photograph objects, surroundings, or situations that speak to their lived experiences with the research topic for a pre-established period of time (Allen, 2012; Heisley & Levy, 1991; Novak, 2010; Wang & Burris, 1997). The resulting photographs are then utilized as a conversational piece around which an in-depth follow-up interview is constructed (Heisley & Levy, 1991; Novak, 2010). One of the main primases behind this method's use of photographs captured by participants is that pictures encapsulate implicit cultural meanings that can be extracted through follow-up conversations (Collier, 1979; Heisley & Levy, 1991; Levy, 1963, 1981). It is important to note here that the pictures do not hold meaning on their own; it is the combined use of photographs and the accompanying interviews that bring value and true meaning to the phenomenon under study (Collier & Collier, 1986; Schlegloff, 1997).

There are several benefits of using Photovoice methods that are particularly useful in this current study. First, the use of photos taken by participants allows them to address important questions relevant to a study's topic that the interviewer may not know to ask (Heisley & Levy, 1991). Additionally, photos can "elicit" unexpected answers or forgotten information from respondents that would not surface otherwise. These outcomes are possible due to the discussion of the photographs that allows the participant to retroactively step outside her lived experience, and view the familiar objects, contexts, or happenings depicted in the photographs in new ways (Collier & Collier, 1986; McCracken, 1988). This feature is valuable in this current research, as a key point of its data and analysis includes tangible (i.e., apparel-related) objects. More specifically, the use of pictures offers this research concrete visual examples of the fashion and styling choices of the participants, and how these choices reflect their identities. Additionally, because these visual examples are provided by the participant and not the researcher, it lends further authenticity to the data of this project.

Second, the stories these photos elicit from participants aid in illuminating the participants' personalities, cultural values, processes of situation interpretation, and reactions to these social situations in everyday life (Heisley & Levy, 1991; Levy, 1963, 1981)—complexities that cannot be captured by verbal or textual information alone (Collier, 1979; Heisley & Levy, 1991; Novak, 2010). This feature is particularly useful when the research involves explorations of the lived experiences of historically marginalized groups (Novak, 2010). More specifically, the use of their own photos and the accompanying shared stories provide unique depth to the data, while simultaneously

democratizing the research process by allowing them to define what is important (Heisley & Levy, 1991; Novak, 2010). This feature is valuable in this current research, as this study not only examines the complexities of the identity expression of a consumer group in which few prior studies exist, but also navigates an intersectional marginalized identity that research frequently overlooks.

Lastly, this method's use of photographs to prompt consumer responses can ease the conversational dynamic between the participant and researcher. For example, because many of the discussion prompts are the photos supplied by the participant herself, her role shifts from the subject under study, to a guide whose expertise is needed in understanding the data (Collier & Collier, 1986). This allows for a more relaxed and rich conversation, where the photographs serve as a third-party mediator; and the sharing of personal information becomes less about researcher intrusion, and more about sharing the details necessary in communicating the stories the picture elicits (Collier & Collier, 1986). This feature is especially valuable in this current research, as this study touches on sensitive topics related to marginalized identities and discriminatory treatment that can be difficult for some to discuss candidly.

Although this method is commonly applied in public health research, its use is argued to have substantial potential across disciplines, including consumer related research (Heisley & Levy, 1991). More specifically, the use of participant photography and corresponding interviews have proven useful in explorations of identity expression (Creighton, Oliffe, Butterwick, & Saewyc, 2013; Guy & Baunim, 2000; Thomas 2013); examinations of intersectional black American identities (Allen, 2012; Harrison; 2015),

and investigations of fashion-related consumption behaviors (Guy & Baunim, 2000; McCormick & Livett, 2012)—three key components of this current research. Because of these combined advantages, this method is both useful and appropriate for this study.

The Photovoice methods used in this current research required each participant to maintain a photo journal of her daily outfit selections for a period of 14 days. This specific time frame of analysis correspond to similar Photovoice research studies (Creighton et al, 2013; Guy & Baunim, 2000; Harrison, 2015). Similar to Guy and Baunim’s (2000) exploration of clothing consumption and female gender identity, each journal entry included an image of all the apparel-related items used to build an outfit (e.g., shoes, clothing, accessories, etc.) and a brief description of the social setting or situation in which each apparel ensemble was worn (e.g., school, work, church, gym, grocery store, etc.). In the case that participants wore multiple outfits in day, a new entry was created for each. All photos were taken with the participants’ personal pre-approved cellphone cameras, and these images omitted any personal identifying characteristics (e.g., faces). The entries were sent to the researcher daily via digital communication methods (e.g., text messaging and email). As seen in Creighton et al.’s (2013), after receiving the photographs and accompanying descriptions, they were uploaded to their designated file folder on the researcher’s personal laptop, which served as the digital fashion diary for each corresponding participant. At the end of the 14-day period, the researcher contacted the participant to schedule Stage 2 of the data collection process.

STAGE 2 METHOD: IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

Stage two of the data collection process included the use of phenomenological interview methods. These methods are unique qualitative techniques used to capture an understanding of the lived experiences of an individual, group, or population through a written and/or verbal interview processes (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989). The primary characteristic of a phenomenological interview approach that separates these methods of data collection from other research methods is that it does not attempt to extract and analyze consumer behaviors from the context in which they occur (Thompson et al., 1989; Giorgi & Giorgi 2003). More specifically, instead of methods that either (1) artificially separate consumers from their lived environments, or (2) explore a clearly defined interaction between consumers and environmental factors (which implies these factors are variables that can be separated), phenomenological methods consider “the totality of the human-being-in-the-world”, (Thompson et al., 1989, p. 135). Additionally, the end goal of a phenomenological data collection approach is not behavior prediction; it is to glean deeper understandings of consumers’ behaviors, attitudes, and values within a marketplace phenomenon (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2002; Goulding, 2005; Thompson, 1997; Thompson & Arnould, 1998; Thompson et al., 1989; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995).

The main characteristic of a phenomenological interview approach that makes its use in the current study useful and appropriate is that it actively acknowledges participants’ past and current experiences and surroundings, and how these criteria converge to form complex views and opinions that impact attitudes, values, and behaviors (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Mick & Buhl, 1992; Thompson et al., 1989). In other words, instead of focusing

solely on the purchase patterns of apparel-related products, these interview methods purposefully consider the impact that all aspects of a consumer's identity and her past and present lived experiences have on fashion-related consumption practices. This results in a more realistic view of the consumer "phenomenon" under examination, and avoids the production of overgeneralized research conclusions (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Mick & Buhl, 1992; Thompson et. al., 1989). Additionally, phenomenological interview methods have proven useful in past research examining consumer identity expression (Schouten & McAlexander 1995; Thomas 2013; Thompson & Hirschman, 1995), including explorations of identity and fashion-related consumption behaviors (Allen, 2012; Harrison; 2015; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Because of these combined advantages, a phenomenological interview approach was used in Stage 2 of the data collection process.

In the current study, each participant was contacted by the researcher to schedule an interview once Stage 1's 14-day photo journal was complete. All interviews were conducted in person or via video call, and audio recorded. The length of the interviews ranged from 90 minutes to three and a half hours.

Because the goal of the phenomenological interview approach is to obtain a first-person account of the phenomenon under study (i.e., fashion consumption for identity expression), and not prove or disprove existing theory, phenomenological scholarship advises that the pattern of dialogue within the interview should be set by the participant (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Thompson et. al., 1989; Thompson et al., 1990). In other words, with the exception of a broad opening question, instead of adhering to a predetermined question list that the researcher dictates to all participants, the researcher offers follow-up

questions to clarify participants' dialogue and prompt richer descriptions of their experiences (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Thompson et al., 1990). These follow-up questions are raised within the natural course of the interview conversation (which typically follows circular rather than linear patterns), and are tailored to the responses of each participant (Thompson et al., 1990). Because of these criteria, the current study did not use a rigid interview protocol. Instead, a loosely structured interview guide with potential discussion topics and follow-up questions was developed and used for each interview (see Appendix).

The interviews in this current study covered four primary topics: (1) the past and present lived experiences of the participant, (2) the complexities of the participant's black middle-class female intersectional identity, (3) the motivations behind and practices involved in styling daily outfits, (4) the sources of digital and off-line fashion inspiration, and (5) the preferred methods or outlets for fashion-related purchases. The specific interview strategies used in this study were inspired by the interview methods used in Thompson and Haytko's (1997) phenomenological study of fashion and identity expression. As seen in Thompson and Haytko (1997), prior to each interview, the participants were informed that the purpose of the interview was to explore black-middle-class females' uses of apparel in expressing their various cultural identities. Each interview opened with a "grand tour question" concerning their background (e.g., age, where they grew up, occupation, etc.), as these types of questions are argued to create a comfortable atmosphere for the respondent (McCracken, 1988; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Participant responses to these "grand tour questions" (e.g., "Tell me a little bit about your life growing

up in _____”) lead seamlessly to participant dialogue and storytelling related to the study’s topics of interest, most notably past and present lived experiences and intersectional identities.

When the participant stories did not naturally progress to topics of fashion consumption, the researcher used Thompson and Haytko’s (1997) opening question of “When you think about fashion, what comes to mind?” to gently steer the course of the conversation, as this prompt was “designed to begin... dialogue in an open-ended manner,” (p. 19). Similar to the approach used by Thomas (2013), during the conversation resulting from this question prompt, the interviewer displayed the entries from the participant’s Stage 1 fashion journal, and asked her to select her favorite three and least favorite three photos. Each photo was discussed individually, with dialog prompted by the statement: “Tell me a little bit about the process of assembling this outfit.”

If the topic of fashion and Instagram was not breeched before or during the discussion of the fashion journals, the researcher introduced the topic with the statement: “Tell me a little bit about some of your favorite fashion bloggers or vloggers (i.e., video bloggers)”. The majority of participant interviews ended with this dialogue concerning SNSs.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

The current study employed a thematic analysis for coding and analyzing the data. A thematic analysis is a “foundational method of qualitative analysis” that systematically codes and categorizes large amounts of visual and textual information to uncover broader patterns, or “themes”, across the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.4; Vaismoradi, Turunen,

& Bondas, 2013). Uncovering these themes necessitates a meticulous reading and re-reading of the data to uncover all relevant ideas that speak to the research topic and questions under study (McCracken, 1988; Spiggle, 1994)

Unlike content analysis, which utilizes coding to *describe* the data set, thematic analysis takes the examination a step further by using coding to provide a detailed and complex *interpretation* of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.4; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Additionally, unlike grounded theory or an interpretive phenomenological analyses, thematic analysis is not tied to a set theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Because of this, it can be used in a variety of studies and can effectively accompany a diverse range of theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006), including the use of black feminism and black respectability politics applied in this current study. These characteristics make thematic analysis an appropriate choice for this research project.

In the current study, each interview was transcribed via rev.com, an online transcription service. After receipt of each transcript, the document and photo journal were uploaded into Atlas.ti, a computer software designed for qualitative data coding and analysis. Each photo journal entry was then attached to its corresponding interview transcript within the software program. Following this step, the interview transcripts were read, brief descriptions summarizing the contents of each interview were drafted, and then these descriptions were linked within the program to the interview. Following these actions, the process of analysis used in this study was modeled from McCracken (1988) and Spiggle's (1994) stages for qualitative data analysis in consumer-related research. It is important to note here that these steps did not follow a rigid, linear process. Instead, the

process was iterative, or involved moving back and forth between stages and modifying codes and categories as the progression of the analysis revealed increased understandings of the data (McCracken, 1988; Spiggle, 1994).

The first step involved the labeling (i.e., coding) of data units called “utterances”. This coding process extracted data that was relevant to the study’s topic and assigned these units a label that marked them as an example of a broader idea or phenomenon. These utterances can (and did) vary in length and in some cases can (and were) assigned multiple meaning labels (McCracken, 1988; Spiggle, 1994). The labels created for and/or assigned to each utterance in this first stage initially only described that individual data segment, not its relation to the content of all of the interviews.

In the second stage, all of the utterances assigned to a label were examined in an attempt to better define the code in which they were meant to represent. At this point in time, any codes that spoke to the same idea were combined. Similarly, codes that described a diverse set of ideas were divided to create more accurate categories and descriptions. The final stage included an across-category comparison, which explored the relationships between code definitions and descriptors to uncover broader themes within the data. This overall process of coding and theme development involved both inductive and deductive strategies in which codes and themes were strongly tied to the data itself (i.e., inductive), as well as broader theories of black feminism and black respectability politics that speak to black middle-class female identity and apparel-related consumption (i.e., deductive) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The specific themes that emerged are presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Findings

The analysis of the photo journals and accompanying interviews revealed four general themes that collectively address each of the four research questions posed in the current study:

1. How does the intersection of race, gender, and class identities manifest itself in black female middle-class consumers' uses of apparel-related consumption in identity expression?
2. How do social settings, situations, and environments impact black female middle-class consumers' uses of apparel-related consumption in identity expression?
3. How does the use of apparel-related consumption in identity expression vary within the black female middle-class consumer group?
4. How do black middle-class females use Instagram to inform the expression of their intersecting identities through apparel-related consumption?

The first theme is *cultural double standards*, and provides understandings concerning the impact of the race, class, and gender identity intersections on the participants' stylistic choices. In this theme, the women describe societal double-standards that impose implicit constraints on their ability to communicate appropriateness through fashion. The second theme is *respectability politics of fashion*, which describes stylistic strategies participants use to communicate desired messages within the societal appropriateness constraints imposed on them. Third is the theme of *within group difference*, which explicates how the two different class and nationality origins observed in the participants impact their relationship with fashion-related consumption. The final theme is *#BlackGirlMagic*, which describes the ways the participants use apparel-related products to celebrate their identities and cultural group pride. Discussions of participants' uses of Instagram fall within this last

category, as the woman used this platform as a tool for identity celebration and a means for overcoming consumption barriers encountered in traditional retail spaces. These four categories are discussed further in the following sections.

CULTURAL DOUBLE STANDARDS AND APPEARANCE

The first theme that emerged across the interviews is “cultural-double standards and appearance.” This theme refers to the presence of implicit double-standards in society that constrain how participants use apparel-related products in communicating desired characteristics. This theme is separated into two subcategories. The first is the “black tax”, or the constant pressure black women face to alter their appearance to disprove negative historical stereotypes associated with black femininity. The second is “negating middle-class bourginess”, which includes the actions participants pursue to negate the stigmas of elitism and cultural abandonment tied to middle-class blackness. Details concerning the “black tax” will be discussed first.

The “Black Tax”

The baseline notion influencing participants’ discussions of the “black tax” is the presence of implicit societal double-standards in regards to economic, social, and institutional success. Participants suggest that these double standards are unequally allotted across the U.S. racial hierarchy, and that the effects of these double standards permeate every aspect of their lives. These standards are what the women referred to as the black tax—the endless burden to alter behaviors and appearance to disprove historical stereotypes associated with blackness. Payment of this tax is described as unavoidable, as this expense is necessary in proving they are worthy of their advancement and success in U.S. society. More

specifically, the participants suggest that the black tax requires black individuals to work twice as hard to capture the same achievements and successes as their white counterparts. Although this concept of the black tax was frequently used by participants in discussions of educational and professional advancement, it also impacts their day-to-day fashion related decisions. Audrey provides the following testament of this double standard on her fashion choices:

The black tax. Growing up and being told, you know, you have to be dressed twice as nice and work twice as hard just so you're not getting the wrong kind of attention. So, not giving yourself a reason to be seen in a way that's not flattering to you... so, like, "Oh, look at that girl," like, "What does she have on? "Those kind of comments. "Did you see what Audrey was wearing today? Did you see what that black girl ..." "Can you believe it? She thought that was appropriate?"... Like, not that kind of stuff... You have to look the part to be really taken seriously... to eliminate any kind of doubt ... that might be there before you even step into the space... and especially like people like me. People don't always know what I look like based on my name, so when I show up somewhere, if I'm black, that's a surprise, but if I'm black and dressed a little provocatively or dressed crazy, then that's gonna be a big problem (**Audrey, 28, archivist**).

Audrey's statements speak to the existence of the black tax and its role in her apparel choices in educational and professional settings. For her, any deviation from apparel-related appropriateness in school or workplace settings opens the door for criticism that extends past her appearance to her character. Thus, it is vital for her to make conscious efforts to dress "twice as nice" to avoid negative attention. This practice is of critical importance for initial meetings in professional settings, as the Anglo origin of her first name does not immediately imply to others that she is black. In Audrey's experience, the potential surprise of her blackness, coupled with attire deemed inappropriate would jointly work to her detriment. Because of this, she consistently avoids fashion choices that suggest

that due to race-related ignorance, she is not well-versed in the cultural standards and expectations—including dress-code standards—of her predominantly white industry.

Although educational and professional settings were the most common example provided in relation to the black tax and fashion related choices, this tax extends past these environments. Karmen, for example, provides the following illustration of how this tax is paid in day-to-day interactions:

I'm always 150% everywhere I go because I'm black. I don't have any time to half step, and my mom always told me that, "You gotta work twice as hard," obviously... I overdress everywhere I go... Honestly, I don't even care. That's just how I am... but I'm glad that I'm that way because you need to be that way. When I tell my students, "Do not go anywhere looking any kind of way, because it's going to make it worse because you're black." As a black woman, it's just like I have to look nice. I have to be on it because I'm not about to give you a reason to say I'm otherwise (**Karmen, 27, off-camera news reporter and adjunct professor**).

Like, Audrey, Karmen was taught that she must “work twice as hard” in tasks and appearance efforts to fight against stereotypical ideas of blackness and to be fully accepted in society. In Karmen’s experience, the black tax should be paid in all public spaces. Thus, to ensure she is not associated with any negative social stigmas attached to blackness, she makes conscious efforts to overdress in all social settings. Although she does not mind making these efforts, as she enjoys dressing up for all occasions, this practice is one she takes very seriously. The importance she places on these actions is exhibited by her advice to her black students that they too must make conscious efforts to overdress in all situations to avoid negative stereotyping.

While the participants acknowledge that this black tax also applies to the lived experiences of black men, they view the payment of black women as distinctive on various

levels. The women acknowledged the stereotypes of the “urban” black thug and hyper-aggressive criminal, and the extensive efforts that black men undertake to avoid and disprove these stigmas through their appearance. One atmosphere in which the participants suggest that black men face a heavier tax than black women is bars and night clubs. Nicole speaks to this idea in her discussion of racially-motivated entry policies in a popular Dallas bar district:

The whole thing with Kung Fu in Dallas where they didn't let a black man with Converse sneakers on into the establishment because they said they don't let sneakers in. But then they looked on the patio and they pointed ... How many guys? There are five different people who had Converse sneakers on. He's like, "Why don't you let me in?" That happens all the time to specifically black men. I feel like they're more lenient towards women, even though instances still occur with women on other things. Because that even happened to a group of friends of mine in Dallas, we tried to get into a club. We actually had bottle service. It was like they were holding us in line but letting this whole line of people who can have bottle service into the club. That's happened to us.... Even in Austin, stuff like that happens all the time. "Oh, your jeans are too baggy." How do you judge a baggy jeans? It's baggy on him, but what about this other guy? **(Nicole, 27, PhD student).**

The incident involving Kung Fu Saloon cited by Nicole prompted formal complaints and public protests to draw attention to their purported practices of utilizing arbitrary dress codes to restrict entry on the basis of race. Ultimately, Dallas City Hall filed a lawsuit against the establishment, citing discriminatory practices on the basis of race (Gage, 2015). Although the establishment released no formal statement addressing the accusations of race-based dress-codes, the bar reached a settlement in which they paid a fine, underwent a 90-day- probationary period, and issued apology letters to the individual complainants (Gage, 2015; Willy, 2015).

In addition to this popular example, Nicole shares personal instances in which her and other black friends were denied entry to night clubs in Dallas and Austin, Texas. These testaments illustrate the black tax imposed on black parties—particularly black men—when it comes to apparel-related choices in nightlife arenas. More specifically, in each of these cases, black men were denied entry because of the fit and style of their clothing or shoes. Interestingly, this denial persisted even when identical stylistic choices were observed on white patrons granted entry.

Holly expresses similar perceptions concerning the black tax imposed on black men compared to black women in her experiences with nightlife in Austin, Texas:

Here in Austin, I think that men, as far as attire, are expected to dress more clean than women. I think that women can get into certain places in just some shorts and flip-flops and it's fine. Our black men, uh-uh, nope can't do it. You can't have on Jordans. You can't have on cargo shorts in the summertime even though a white boy just came in with them. You have to look a certain way before they are admitting you to different venues. They'll turn you away and say, "Hey, we have the right to deny anybody that we want to," and it's really because you look a certain way. You look too thuggish, maybe? I don't know. You look a little urban today. You can't come inside. Whereas, we have a lot more flexibility just because we're women **(Holly, 27, social worker and Master's student)**

In this passage, Holly more clearly articulates the differing experiences concerning the black tax between black women and black men. While black women can safely deviate from the popular high-heeled/cocktail attire required of many night club venues and opt for flip-flops and shorts, black men are frequently denied entry for casual stylistic choices. In addition to cargo shorts (that do not impede the access of white male patrons), Holly also identifies Nike Air Jordan sneakers as a brand choice that can result in entry denial. Interestingly, Jordan sneakers are a popular shoe brand within urban style genres, and are

often interpreted as an implicit marker of “urban” (i.e., working class) blackness (Miner, 2009). As a result, club bouncers encountering black men in these shoes can associate them with the hyper-aggressive urban black male stereotype that assumes their behavior is “too thuggish” for nightclub entry. The observations of Holly concerning this black tax placed on black men also mirror findings of sociological research that examine racist nightclub dress-code policies concerning apparel that is deemed “black” and “urban” (May & Chaplin, 2008).

With the exception of these nightlife settings, however, the majority of participants suggest that overall, the day-to-day black tax imposed on the fashion choices of black women is higher than for black men. The participants attribute this to the ability of black men to freely adopt a conservative “clean-cut” style (e.g., close haircuts, tailored clothing, minimal facial hair, abstention from tattoos and piercings, etc.) to successfully avoid many of the negative stereotypes associated with black masculinity. Conversely, the stereotypes tied directly to unalterable features of the body of black women provides many of the participants little opportunity to escape negative black female stereotypes. More specifically, the risk of stereotyping remains consistent, despite repeated efforts to adopt conservative fashion choices to avoid such stigmatization. Sasha articulates these differences in the following passage concerning the fashion related choices of black females in the workplace:

I just had a conversation with a friend about ... dress and hair politics of black men and women in the workplace. He was like, “oh, we can't wear dreads and we got to be clean cut and stuff”. I'm like, okay that's fair, but that's a known thing. What's not known is how much I have to cover my ass in work. For real. I have to wear shirts that'll hit my butt ... I have not worn anything that has my butt completely

out.... Fuck some hair politics and like, oh well, you know, natural isn't professional, but like how much I cover my body up at work is a real thing. That is a real thing. Because then you're looking promiscuous and you're looking for attention, or you're looking inappropriate at work. I feel like those are differences between black men and women (**Sasha, 28, program coordinator**).

Here, Sasha acknowledges the pressures black men may face when it comes to fashion in the workplace. Specifically, she references the idea that dreadlocks and other black natural hair styles are frequently stigmatized or prohibited in work place environments, and also mentions the unspoken norm of adopting clean-cut style to successfully navigate professional spaces. However, Sasha, who has a curvy body type, has encountered a cumbersome black tax on her fashion related choices in the work place, as the curvy body type stereotypically associated with black women is historically stigmatized as evidence of their hypersexual nature (Burrell, 1993; Qureshi, 2004). Because of this, she experiences pressure to hide her body—particularly her buttocks—with long shirts, to ensure she is not labeled as promiscuous, or ignorant and/or dismissive of the expected dress-code standards of professional settings. The stigmatization of the buttocks felt by Sasha alludes to the historical use of the buttocks as visual proof of the stereotypical hypersexual nature of black women; an image made increasingly popular by historic practices of featuring Sara Baartman and other black women as carnival attractions in which patrons would pay to gaze upon the buttocks, breasts, and genitalia of these individuals (Qureshi, 2004). This stereotype often served as a victim-blaming tool for rape, as it situated black women as seductive, promiscuous beings, whose nature provoked such attacks (Burrell, 1993).

Because this hypersexual stereotype is tied directly to her natural body type and not her clothing, Sasha indicates that many of her strategic attempts at using clothing to

camouflage her body are often made in vain. Additionally, despite the constant pressure she and other black women experience to dress the body in ways that avoid negative attention or stigmatization, this particular black tax is rarely recognized as legitimate within black communities.

These viewpoints articulated by Sasha are further elaborated by Natasha's opinions of the differing fashion-related black tax delegated to black women versus black men:

The same way I'm going to be perceived as an angry black woman, they're going to be perceived as aggressive, dominant, cocky, and that's intimidating to people. Once again when it comes to dress I don't think they have it as bad. I do think their hair is an issue. If you want to have locks, or whatever that's going to be a problem... Earrings, tattoos, things like that, but I don't think their dress is as big of a factor. It's more of... You need to be smiling, you need to be, oh, yeah, getting in on the jokes with them, you need to be one of them if you want to navigate through that world... Yeah. If you have some sort of curves to you, in my personal opinion...those are emphasized, even if it's not something you've set out to emphasize. It's going to be noticed... (**Natasha, 27, paralegal**).

Here, Natasha recognizes the blackness stereotype of aggressiveness that both black women and men feel pressure to disprove by altering their appearance or style. Like Sasha, she acknowledges the struggles black men may encounter when it comes to hair styles or elective body modifications (i.e., tattoos or piercings), but classifies the majority of black male strategies of stigma avoidance as behavioral alterations. Specifically, black men may feel pressure to assimilate to behaviors associated with white masculinity to disprove negative black male stereotypes and appear to be non-threatening (Collins, 2012; Cooper, 2005). Conversely, the curvy body of the black women is always at risk of attracting attention, even when this attention is unwanted.

This black tax allocated to black women described by Sasha and Natasha is reminiscent of the literature concerning fashion gender double standards. This body of

research has shown that women across racial groups feel pressure to strategically use style to avoid being viewed as less competent than their male counterparts, to avoid being sexually objectified, or to express their willingness to conform to female gender roles (Dellinger, 2002; Raby, 2009). The participants, however, state that the black tax imposed on black women intensifies these pressures beyond those felt by women from other racial groups. Natasha references this idea in the following passage:

My skirts don't need to be as fitted, even though Sally... that sounds like a stereotype, and it is... next to me might have hers tight, she's not going to have a butt nine times out of 10 like I do... If she doesn't have the same curves that I have, and she wears the same outfit it's not going to look the same way. Mine is going to be over sexualized, mine is also deemed as unprofessional in some environments. Same outfit. I'm trying to look professional, I can't help the fact that I got butt... **(Natasha, 27, paralegal).**

In this observation from Natasha, she states that in her experience, an identical outfit can elicit different responses and treatment when worn by her compared to “Sally”, a general name she uses to reference to white woman. Natasha primarily attributes this difference in treatment to the stereotypical idea that black women are curvier than white women. These differences in body type mean that a style choice on a white woman will be deemed professional, while the same outfit on her curvy body will be discounted as inappropriate, or “over sexualized”.

Other respondents, however, argue that even when compared to white women with similar body types, the increased pressures black women face to use apparel-related items in disproving hypersexuality stereotypes is consistent:

Honestly...I seen white girls wearing stuff like that...I feel like these ain't just skinny white girls. I've seen thicker white women wearing the same things and

I'm like “girl, I'd never wear that to work. I'd be every hoochie, hoe, everything under the sun...” (**Sasha, 28, Program Coordinator**).

In Sasha’s experience, she has observed white women with a curvy, or “thick”, body type wearing styles in the workplace that she feels would result in her being labeled as a promiscuous “hoochie” or “hoe”. Although, Sasha does not elaborate on the reactions the white women in question received, she makes it clear that for her, these style choices are an inaccessible option.

Gabby shares a similar experience with clothing in the workplace in the following passage:

It's like this idea that I can't stand up in front of a classroom full of students in a pencil skirt and a top, that's form fitting, because I would be distracting to my students. And I'm like "Wait, if my white colleague would've wear this, no-one would tell her she's distracting". Is it distracting because it's on my body, because I have a big ass and big tits? So, this is a thing I think I'm always hyper aware of, is the ways that my body, being black, and larger, and also curvy, draws attention... where I may be viewed as too hypersexual or something...(Gabby, 29, PhD Student).

Through this hypothetical illustration provided by Gabby, she expresses that due to her body type and blackness, a form fitting outfit choice can be interpreted as inappropriate, “hypersexual”, or “distracting” by her students. Conversely, an outfit with a similar fit worn by a white women would be perfectly acceptable.

Gabby also offers a personal story that explicitly speaks to the black tax imposed on black women that is not encountered by white women:

This one woman I know, who's white, who's a nurse... she's a curvy girl, she's got a big butt ...she and I have talked about curves, and the struggles to find pants, and those kinds of things, but at the end of the day she's white. This isn't just about me being perceived in a classroom setting, it's also ... people approach me...on the

street... Like, my very first day in Durham, I was going to a restaurant with my mother, and I got called a nigger. A nigger slut, actually. 'Cause I had on some little terry cotton shorts, my Reeboks, and a little black tank top. But for me, I'm like I went from zero humidity in Colorado, to hot as fuck North Carolina, in August. Yeah I'm gonna wear shorts and a tank top.

And when they come and tell me, "You look like you'd be a good baby mama", like, what is informing them? It's not just that I'm black. I mean, that's probably part of it, but I'm black and I'm curvy... So wearing something form fitting, next to a white girl who's also wearing something form fitting... she's just good looking, and I'm a good baby mama... **(Gabby, 29, PhD Student).**

In this passage, Gabby articulates that although white women with curvy body types may encounter similar struggles concerning fit when purchasing clothing, their whiteness often exempts them from the hypersexual stigma frequently attached to the bodies of black women. Gabby also provides two experiences in which her attire resulted in explicit racially-charged commentary from others. The first instance references an experience during her first semester as of college when an elderly white man referred to her as a “nigger slut” as she and her mother walked into a local restaurant. The second instance involved comments directed towards her after she and a white female friend were approached by a male on the street. Despite the fact that she and her friend were dressed similarly, the white male called her friend beautiful, while he deemed Gabby a “good baby mama”. These encounters not only speak directly to the black tax placed on black women in terms of fashion and stereotypes, but also exhibits specific stereotypes associated with black femaleness, body type, and apparel. Specifically, use of the racial slur “nigger” in conjunction with the derogatory female term “slut” suggests that both the blackness and femaleness of Gabby’s curvy body deemed her apparel choice of shorts and a tank top as offensive. Additionally, the black female stereotype of single motherhood (i.e. a “baby

mama”) is frequently utilized as evidence to support the hypersexuality of black women (Collins, 2009). Specifically, the belief in “rampant” incidences of single motherhood in black women is used to suggest that the “inability” of black women to control their sexual urges leads to high occurrences of bearing children out of wedlock (Collins, 2009; Fiske, 1996). In this particular instance with Gabby, the hypersexual label attached to her blackness and body type elicited this additional stereotyping of the hypersexual black single mother.

Along with combating the black tax applied to dressing the curvy black female body, the participants reference an existing double standard when following workplace grooming policies and dress-code formality. Leslie speaks to this double standard in the following personal anecdote:

Another white girl ... she would come in...her hair was not brushed, it was oily, she would smell, and no one ever said anything to her. But I felt like in the office at that time the black people always had to put themselves together. But she came in and she looked like this, and she could go see her clients like that, and they didn't say, “hey, don't represent our brand like this, you need to ...” Never said anything to her, and I thought that was really weird (**Leslie, 35, senior business analyst**).

In this particular story, Leslie references a white female co-worker whose personal grooming choices did not align with Leslie’s understandings of the expected grooming standards of their company. Cleanliness was the primary issue, as Leslie mentions a peculiar body odor, and hair that appeared to be unwashed. What struck Leslie as odd about the situation was not her co-workers grooming choices, but the fact that management never addressed her grooming habits, and never offered guidance concerning appearance standards when representing the company. However, unlike this particular white female

co-worker, Leslie and other black employees felt consistent pressure to be purposeful in their grooming practices to appear “put together”.

Additionally, Audrey offers a similar personal anecdote that addresses differing standards of dress-code formality in the workplace:

I think that white women have it a little bit ...well, actually, they have it easier. In some situations more so than others. So, library information science is largely white, overwhelmingly white women. So just seeing some of like the things... how they would dress. Just the things they did. It was spectacle for me. 'Cause it's like ... it would be a problem if I came dressed like that, so... Just the luxury of being able to do that and it'd be okay. I don't know what that is, but I see it (**Audrey, 28, archivist**).

Here, Audrey references the workplace apparel choices of her white female colleagues. Specifically, she discusses her amazement at the casualness in which they approach their fashion and actions. In many cases, their choices were so relaxed she viewed them as a spectacle. Similar to Leslie, Audrey argues that if she adopted the stylistic choices of her white female co-workers as her workplace standard, she would not be well received.

In addition to combating the black tax applied to dressing the curvy black female body, personal grooming practices, and dress-code formality, the participants reference a double standard in regards to societal beauty standards and style related choices. Unlike the previously discussed gender-related black taxes that only involved comparisons between black and white women, this double standard referenced women of all races.

Tiffany's comments shed light on this double standard of beauty:

I think that society wise, we don't necessarily fit into the ideal image of what beauty is. I think that kind of carries over into every aspect. In the regular workplace, in relationships...I think that just with the way we're treated by other people, it's just more work. It's just more work all the time. It's more work to be accepted by other races and it's a lot of work even within our own race...It's a huge thing that really

irks my nerves. Those are things that we have to deal with that I feel like the average any other race woman does not necessarily have to. I feel like a lot of us are still trying to assimilate to fit the mold of what these other women basically look like. Regardless of the different race, they still kind of have the same overall thing going for them...the long, flowing hair. That's a given one; a huge difference. We straighten our hair to fit that. Thinner, different eye colors. We have colored contacts to basically fit into that. These exotic looks. We can get some bundles real quick. I think that's the image of what beauty is. Lighter, long hair, and pretty eyes, thinner for the most part (**Tiffany, 27, social worker and Masters student**).

Tiffany's viewpoints suggest that because of existing societal beauty standards that position black women as less beautiful than women of other racial groups, black women in particular face a double standard concerning their appearance. These beauty standards do not just effect the mentality of black women, but can also impact the ways in which black women are received across social spaces in American culture. The standards of beauty raised by Tiffany are the same historical beauty benchmarks developed during the era of African enslavement, which situated the straight hair, fair skin, thin body type, and light-colored eyes associated with European women as the epitome of female beauty to which all women should aspire (Dyer, 1997; Lester, 2000; Thompson, 2009). In Tiffany's experience, black women must work harder than the average woman across racial groups to be viewed as beautiful, particularly because their natural features (e.g., curly hair texture, skin color, curvy body type, dark brown eyes) most frequently and clearly deviate from the outlined feminine Eurocentric physical features. Because of this many black women feel pressure to participate in consumption practices that alter their appearance to more closely align with Eurocentric features. Tiffany identifies these consumption efforts as professional hair straightening, purchasing and wearing hair extensions, or buying colored contacts.

Interestingly, Tiffany also clarifies that these pressures to conform to Eurocentric beauty standards are not just imposed on black women by non-black communities; the tax is also raised against black women by other black individuals. The following passage from Sasha further explains this occurrence:

I feel like dating. It's always the foreign girl. It's always ... the brothers that used to be down, done drank some water and now they waking up like, oh, why you wearing that makeup? It's just like why we get the rap for it? Because I know a lot of nonblack makeup artists who doing them same tutorials and they face is contoured and art. I see the same thing. The Kardashians. They all wearing makeup... Everybody. I don't know anybody who's not wearing makeup and not wearing weave, but we get such a bad rap. Black women got to do so much extra. It's just so hard for us to feel like we somebody amongst the rest of them (**Sasha, 28, program coordinator**).

Through a conversation concerning the dating experiences and struggles encountered by black women, Sasha maintains that many black men exhibit a preference for “foreign women”, a slang term used within the black community to describe women who are not black American. Along with these preferences, black men are particularly critical of the consumption of beauty products used to alter or enhance physical appearance (i.e., make-up and hair extensions). These criticisms, however, are not doled out to non-black women, who Sasha argues use these products just as frequently. Instead, black women who chose to consume these items are solely stigmatized for not embracing their natural beauty. According to Sasha, the black tax concerning beauty standards placed on black women can have a negative impact on their self-esteem, as these double standards make it hard for black women to feel like they are “somebody” amongst women of other races.

Negating Middle-Class “Bourgieness”

In addition to the black tax, respondents identified a second negative stigma frequently tied to their stylistic choices: accusations of “bourgieness”. Unlike the black tax, participants suggest that this stereotype is most frequently assigned to them by other black individuals. The women defined “bourgieness” as an aloof attitude that involves patronizing black individuals perceived to be working class or poor. Participants cite numerous factors other black individuals use in labeling them as bourgie, including education level, speech patterns and accent, profession and/or occupation, and fashion choices.

The following statements shared by Tiffany speak to the experience of being labeled “bourgie”:

"She talks this way and she acts that way." It's really a pet peeve of mine... What is talking white? That was an issue that I ran into and it was just because I was proper. I dress very clean-like... I think growing up, my dad grew up in the inner city; my mom grew up in the country. So the way that we were raised was like, they got out of their situations, they don't want us to have to grow up without. The way that he showed affection was like: A, my kids are going to look put together. They going to go shopping... they're always going to look nice. I had nicer clothes that cost a little bit more and I think that kind of came off as bourgie.... So because I was a little bit well off and I talked proper, that makes you a little bit less black. Your experience is different, I think is what is believed. **(Tiffany, 27, Social Worker/Masters Student).**

Here, Tiffany lists the factors individuals have used to label her as bourgie. She first cites her use of “standard” (i.e., “proper”) English, which was interpreted as “talking white” by many of her black peers. She also refers to the price-point and styling of her apparel choices, which her black peers used to label her as aloof (i.e., “bourgie”) interpreted as a

symbol that many of her black peers used to label her as *bourgie*. Additionally, Tiffany suggests that being called *bourgie* can be a direct challenge of authentic blackness.

These accusations of “talking white”, acting “*bourgie*”, and being “less black” mentioned by Tiffany speak to literature concerning the motivations and effects of accusations of “acting white” (e.g., speaking Standard English, striving for academic achievement, “putting on airs”, etc.) within black adolescent populations (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 186). Similar to Tiffany’s statements, the literature concludes that these accusations can create dissention within black communities, as *bourgieness* and other behaviors interpreted as “acting white” are perceived as an active choice to be “less black” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). The following testament from Samantha further explicates this discounting of blackness that occurs once one is labeled “*bourgie*”:

They thought we were rich, thought we were less black. The place where I would get my hair braided is in the West End, so right near the AUC... I would hear people like, "Why do you talk like that? Where are you from? What brought you to Atlanta?" "College." "Oh, you got to Spelman?" "No, I go to Georgia Tech." And it would be like an, "Mmm." What does that mean? I think rightly or wrongly, they assumed that we thought we were better...The implied rejection of some shared experience or values that we should have honored by going to a HBCU. **(Samantha, 33, collegiate track coach).**

In this story, Samantha elaborates on what it means to be called *bourgie*, and the conclusions other black individuals can draw from this stigma. Samantha attended Georgia Institute of Technology (i.e., Georgia Tech), a predominantly white, nationally-ranked research institution located in Atlanta, Georgia. Her hair salon, however, was located in the historic West End—a predominantly black, lower-income neighborhood in which the Atlanta University Center (AUC) is located. While at the salon, the black female patrons would question her use of Standard English, and her college choice. When the women

discovered Tiffany selected Georgia Tech over Spelman College and the other Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) that comprised the AUC, Samantha was written off as rich and bourgie. More specifically, Samantha shares that her speech and university choice were often perceived as a purposeful rejection of black culture.

Interestingly, these accusations of bourginess and black cultural rejection impacted Samantha's fashion choices when attending predominantly-black social functions located in the AUC:

The LL Bean backpacks with your stitched initials on the back. Those were everywhere when I got to Tech. The Teva sandals and all that. If I was trying to keep up with my [white] peers, I would have done that. You can't wear that to a day at AUC. That's not what they're wearing at AUC. What I maybe would have worn to a house party at Tech, wouldn't necessarily be what I would wear to a party at the AUC. Not because I'm trying to compete, but I want to fit in... I had two pairs of Jordans and that's usually what I would wear if we were going to the AUC... **(Samantha, 33, Collegiate track Coach).**

Here, Samantha explains the ways she used style to communicate to other black individuals that she identifies (i.e., "fits in") with black culture. For Samantha, this meant rejecting brands and products associated with whiteness (i.e., LL Bean backpacks and Teva sandals) for the Jordan sneakers that communicated her belonging in black culture.

RESPECTABILITY POLITICS OF STYLE

The second theme that emerged from the interviews is the "respectability politics of style", which describes the diverse strategies participants use to navigate and overcome societal double standards imposed by the black tax and the negative stigmas attached to the middle-class bourgie label. This broad theme is divided into three subcategories: appropriateness strategies, code-switching strategies, and policing strategies. Each of these

subcategories speak to strategies of racial uplift defined in black respectability politics literature (Gaines, 1996; Higginbotham, 1994). The subcategory of appropriateness strategies is discussed first.

Appropriateness Strategies

Appropriateness strategies include the actions and strategies participants use to mitigate societal stereotypes and stigmas attached to black middle-class female identities. The term the women repeatedly used to describe these styling techniques and decisions is dressing “appropriately”. While these strategies of appropriateness assumed many different forms, these actions align with the literature on black respectability politics concerning practices of communicating decency, morality, and the ability to assimilate through appearance. Recall from Chapter Two of this dissertation, that these stylistic practices involve maintaining a neat and modest physical appearance through personal grooming maintenance, and selecting “appropriate” fashion choices to distance oneself from the negative stereotypes associated with blackness. (Gaines, 1996; Higginbotham, 1994).

In the following passage, Leslie speaks to some of the appropriateness strategies she uses in her workplace:

Even though I dress comfortably, I still make sure it's presentable. I make sure there ain't no stains on here. Make sure my lines on my pants are creased. Because ... I've always been “the” black girl in the workplace, that one ... black girl. So I make a conscious effort, even though I'm not wearing heels and whatever, but I do make a conscious effort to make sure I look presentable. It does affect me. I make sure I have some cologne on, I smell good, and things like that (**Leslie, 35, senior project manager**).

Although comfort is a key priority in Leslie’s personal style, she takes purposeful steps to ensure that her fashion choices are consistently appropriate, or “presentable”. For her, this

means she consistently monitors her clothing for cleanliness and stains, while also ensuring her pants are ironed along the crease. These appropriateness strategies also extend past her apparel-related choices, as she applies perfumes and other fragrances daily to ensure she maintains a pleasant body odor. These strategies are vital to Leslie, as she stands out as the only black woman in her workplace, and thus aspires to avoid added attention due to negative stereotypes associated with black femininity.

Audrey, who is also frequently the only black woman in the professional spaces she navigates, also shares her strategies of appropriateness in the workplace:

In my job now, when I first started in November, I was dressing how I have been taught is the work-appropriate dress. The culture of my institution is really casual, so for my first several weeks, people would be like, "Oh you're so dressed up. Oh," like, "you look so fancy," but I really wasn't, in my opinion, that dressed up. It was what I would call professional. The clothes I see my mom, my aunties, my cousins, my friends wearing to work... and then on top of it, I was intentional when I first started because... I'm the black girl, and I was a young black girl, so I want to be taken serious. Uh, so there was no way I was going to roll up in jeans. I wanted people to see me and to take me seriously. So now I'm relaxed now, but even so, I still would say I'm a little more careful about what I wear to work than my colleagues are. I feel like if I wore some of the things they wore, people would be like, "Huh?" (**Audrey, 28, archivist**).

Here, Audrey identifies overdressing as the primary appropriateness strategy she uses in her work environment. For Audrey, overdressing was particularly important in her initial days on the job, as she desired to overcome stereotypes associated with her age and race, and to capture the respect of her co-workers. In her case, overdressing included incorporating the professional styling standards and choices she observed from the black women in her social circles (i.e., "mom, aunties, cousins, and friends"). Audrey chose to adopt more professional fashion choices despite the fact that the culture of her workplace

is more casual. Although she eventually relaxed her fashion to more closely match the norms of her job, she still maintains caution concerning style in the workplace, and is still overdressed compared to some of her white co-workers. In Audrey's opinion, these efforts are especially important, as a stylistic double standard exists in which an outfit deemed appropriate on a white co-worker would be elicit a negative response (i.e., "Huh?") if worn by her.

Overdressing is an appropriateness strategy that emerged in the shared experiences of many of the participants. Kameron, for example, provides details concerning overdressing in her description of her office-holiday party photo journal entry pictured in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Overdressing: Kameron's Office Holiday Party Outfit



This was for our work Christmas party. I'd never been, so I didn't really know what to wear. They said that the dress code was business casual, or dressy casual. I don't really know what that means. White people's dressy casual is not mine. It ain't the same. I feel like if I wear something that I would wear to church, then I'm safe. I'd rather be overdressed than underdressed-type deal... When I hear "business

casual,” I think slacks and a top or, not necessarily heels... like I could wear some loafers or something like that ... I feel like dressy for white people is not wearing jeans. I feel like black people ... we have to be above-board to make it to the same level.. I think a lot of it is just, we want to put our best foot forward. The first thing you’re going to see is my skin color, but I need you to see everything else as well, if not ahead of that. Me dressing to the utmost, to the nines, gives me a little bit more, not incentive, but it pushes me ahead a little bit further, whereas a white person might not have to do that. Not might not; does not (**Kameron, 27, civil engineer**).

Here, Kameron speaks to several ideas related to the practice of overdressing. First, she explains that the required business casual/ dressy casual dress-code was unclear to her, as the styles attached to these labels are interpreted differently by black and white audiences. In Kameron’s experience, white individuals interpret these labels more casually, defining business casual as any clothing item more formal than jeans. Conversely, black individuals interpret this dress-code as trousers and a nice top, using church dress codes as a benchmark for appropriateness. For this particular occasion, Kameron utilized these church apparel standards, as she prefers to be overdressed than underdressed. Similar to Rachel, Kameron communicates that overdressing strategies are particularly important for black individuals, as they must overcome the initial negative stereotyping they encounter due to their blackness.

In addition to the appropriateness strategy of overdressing, participants also identified the practice of purchasing and wearing “real clothes” as a strategy of appropriateness. “Real clothes” are broadly defined by participants as apparel-related items reserved for social activities outside of the home. In her discussion of her photo journal entry pictured in Figure 2, Samantha elaborates on the concept of “real clothes”.

Figure 2: Real Clothes: Samantha's Errand's Outfit



The first week of January was exhausting for me. We had traveled for the holiday. It was my daughter's first Christmas and I felt like I was in pajamas the whole time 'cause I was just relaxing. When we got back and I was getting into the swing of things... I didn't want to put on bummy clothes because I felt like I'd been in those clothes for like three weeks straight. I got up and I was like, "I'm gonna put on a real outfit." There's a small heel on those boots. Which I probably should have turned it to the side. They're so comfortable and it was cold out that day and I've had that brown coat since probably the year after I graduated... It's a nice wool coat and I was like, "I can be warm and not look crazy. I don't have to put on workout clothes to be warm." I almost never carry a purse, so because I was going grocery shopping, I was like, "I can carry this cross body" (**Samantha, 33, Collegiate Track Coach**).

Here, Samantha explains her desire to wear the real clothes pictured in Figure 2 after returning home from a family vacation. She viewed this opportunity to coordinate this “real outfit” as a welcomed change from the more relaxed styles she wore when caring for her daughter during the Christmas holiday. Samantha defines this ensemble as a “real outfit”

by situating it as the opposite of the “bummy” clothing she lounged in during the holidays. According to Samantha, “bummy” apparel refers to items like pajamas and workout attire.

Interestingly, participants frequently define real clothes through detailed explanations of what items are not considered real clothing. Consider the following testament from Holly:

I have a ton of free t-shirts. T-shirts from college, t-shirts from work... I have all these t-shirts... that I don't really like leaving the house in. I barely even work out in t-shirts. For the most part I'll just sleep in t-shirts. The same thing with anything that's not really fitted, like sweatshirts I own, but I usually just wear them around the house... I think with shoes, real shoes are something with a real sole. I talked about Old Navy flip-flops before. To me, those were appropriate only when you're going to the beach... Yeah, not real clothes is mostly just a free t-shirt that you got from somewhere or cheap flip-flops, or oversized sweatshirts or something. **(Holly, MBA Student)**

Here, Holly explicates the idea of real clothes through examples of items that are “not real clothes”. For here, items these items are free promotional t-shirts, baggy clothing, sweatshirts, and flip-flops. In Holly’s opinion, with the exception of wearing flip-flops to the beach, it is inappropriate to wear these listed apparel items outside of the home.

This idea of restricting certain clothing to the home is Lindsey’s discussion of her least favorite outfit from her photo journal pictured in Figure 3:

Figure 3: Not Real “Bummy” Clothes: Lindsey’s Least Favorite Outfit



That was my least favorite because I did not mean to wear that out the house. I went to get a pedicure, but my pedicure took a lot longer than I thought it would so I had to wear it to my dentist's office and I was like "Y'all, I really meant to put on real clothes but I didn't have time to change clothes." So I think that's why that one's my least favorite. When I go places I try to have on real clothes. Especially my dentist office. I mean, there's nothing wrong with this outfit. This outfit's still respectable. But I still look a little bit of a bum walking around in some flip flops in December. **(Lindsey, 31, HR professional).**

Lindsey’s description of her least favorite outfit provides a more detailed understanding of the appropriateness strategy of wearing real clothes. In addition to insisting that with the exception of quick errands, apparel items that are not real clothes should not be worn out of the house, she also further defines real clothes through her discussion of what they are not. Like Holly, she specifically references the pictured flip-flops by expressing that they made her look like a “bum”.

The appropriateness strategy of wearing real clothes is not restricted to avoiding the “bummy” items described by Holly and Lindsey. In fact, some participants label items that deviate from their usual standards of dress as items that are not real clothes. Consider Karmen’s discussion of the least favorite photo journal entry pictured in Figure 4:

Figure 4

Variations of “Not Real Clothes”: Karmen’s least Favorite Outfit



I woke up late and I wasn't feeling well, so I didn't want to take the time out to actually put real clothes on. I mean, obviously, I wore slacks. It's a deep navy, so it's not the same exact color navy, but it went. So I just wore a long sleeve sweater and navy pants and it was already a navy fleece vest and I feel like it was acceptable to dress down when I have the station's paraphernalia on...I wear dresses a lot. Dressing down is wearing slacks, to me. Like, my days that I dress down, I wear slacks and a nice blouse, but I've never worn jeans to work, and they wear jeans all the time... Even HT, I wear dresses every day (**Karmen, 27, off-camera news reporter/adjunct professor**).

Here, Karmen suggests that the boundary between real clothes and bummy clothes is not strictly defined by restricting some apparel related items to the home. For Karmen, any

outfits coordinated without adhering to one's typical styling efforts and standards are not considered real clothes. Because Karmen defines real clothes as dresses, blouses or sweaters paired with pants (i.e. "navy slacks") is not a "real" outfit. It is also important to note that similar to other participants, the professional clothing standards upheld by Karmen are more formal than her white employees, who commonly wear jeans to work.

A third strategy of appropriateness that emerged from the participant interviews is the strategy of covering the body. This appropriateness strategy is used specifically to avoid or overcome the hypersexual stereotypes attached to black femaleness. The following styling techniques described by Morgan shed light on the motivation behind covering the body:

If I do wear fitted jeans, I wear a looser type of shirt. Maybe a blazer. I don't like the way, well I do have some tight and tight, but usually I'm looser, tight. Looser top, usually...because I like to hide. To work, I don't want people looking at my butt, so I cover up my butt by having a longer shirt on. Maybe not looser, but longer. To church, the same thing (**Morgan, 32, teacher**).

Here, Morgan identifies the buttocks as the primary body part she strategically camouflages with apparel. This strategy involves wearing tailored jeans or pants with loose-fitting tops (i.e., "looser, tight"). For Morgan, this stylistic choice is more effective at covering the body than pairing a form fitting top with form fitting pants (i.e., "tight and tight"). This technique is especially important to Morgan, as she believes these efforts ensure that she maintains an air of professionalism and modesty in the workplace and at church, while also deflecting any negative attention or hypersexual stereotyping that may occur because of her "butt".

In a discussion of a favorite outfit from her photo journal depicted in Figure 5, Morgan elaborates on her body-covering strategy of “loose, tight”:

Figure 5: “Loose, Tight”: Morgan’s Body Covering Strategy



I wanted to wear my hat with those shoes...That shirt, I had just wanted a plaid shirt. I had been wanting one so that I could wear it around my waist, and so I decided to just get a white long sleeve shirt because it was chilly, and then I could just wear the shirt around my waist, and still be comfortable, and cute. I mean the shirt was just an accessory...I guess my little myth about the tight, tight is not true then girl. I think that's just for work. I didn't wear this to work. I didn't wear this to work, but to my defense, that shirt was covering my butt...and this shirt was also long. Maybe that's what I mean by tight and loose. I don't like short shirts with tight pants. I like the shirt to come at least to the middle of my booty. Yeah, to the middle of my booty (**Morgan, 32, Teacher**).

In this description, Morgan provides two key insights concerning her loose, tight technique of covering the body. First, she clarifies that her stylistic criteria for a “loose top” also encompasses form fitting tops that are long (i.e., “hit the middle of my booty”). Here, the

length of the top is more important than the fit, as short tops insufficiently cover her buttocks. Additionally, the “loose, tight” rule is not a requirement outside of professional settings. However, despite this ability to bend the “loose, tight” rule outside of work, “in her defense”, the shirt Morgan tied around her waist as an accessory also functioned to camouflage her “butt”.

In addition to Morgan’s experiences and techniques, Sasha also sheds light on the importance of camouflaging the buttocks through strategies of covering the body:

I went to a Christmas party and I wore this red [dress]... The Christmas party was right after work. I got home... put on a dress and I went to the Christmas party. You can see people looking at your butt. That's a real thing. I took my sweater and I tied it around my waist. My manager, who's a black lady, was like “Sasha, why you got that sweater tied around your waist?” The sweater didn't match nothing I had on... I said, “This a black woman to a black woman,” I was like “I didn't know my butt was gonna look this big.” She was like, “you can't hide it” or something like that. I felt like I shouldn't have worn that to that Christmas party around those people (**Sasha, 28, School Program Coordinator**).

Here, Sasha reflects on an instance in which she failed to sufficiently cover her buttocks, and the mental discomfort this oversight produced. In this case, she returned home after work to quickly change into a red dress for her office Christmas party. The dress she selected, however, accentuated her buttocks in a way that made her uncomfortable. These feelings of discomfort were primarily due to her belief that that her white co-workers stereotyped her negatively because of the prominence of her buttocks. The perceived stares of these white individuals prompted Sasha to tie a miss-matched sweater around her waist.

Interestingly, in the conversation concerning her photo journal entry depicted in Figure 6, Sasha later shares that the dress she wore to the holiday office party is one she actually really likes:

Figure 6: Sasha's Red Dress



This is actually the dress that I wore to the Christmas party that I told you my butt looked too big. I wore this one to work. I put on a couple pounds. I just felt like this dress ... Because of the inside and it's red, it really gives you a slender kind of coke bottle effect. I did wear a sweater with this dress. The sweater isn't captured...It's beige...you can wear it with whatever. I wore this over the dress. It really covered up my outfit, but I felt more comfortable with that sweater on. I really like this dress. It's still like very chic casual...My body just turn things out sometimes (**Sasha, 28, school program coordinator**).

This description of her outfit pictured in Figure 6 reveals several features of this dress Sasha likes. In addition to being casual but chic, the red and black color-blocking provides a slimming “coke bottle” effect. Despite her love of the dress, however, she believes her body type, particularly her buttocks, unintentionally hypersexualizes (i.e., “turns out”) the outfit. To avoid the discomfort and potential stereotyping she encountered at the holiday party, she strategically paired the dress with a long sweater that sufficiently covered her buttocks.

Code-switching Strategies

The subcategory of code-switching strategies refers to the actions participants use to conform to the dominant racial make-up of a social space. Like appropriateness strategies, these techniques are often used to disprove stereotypes associated with black middle-class female identities. Code-switching strategies, however, differ from strategies of appropriateness in two primary ways. First, instead of simply disproving stereotypes, these actions use fashion to indicate they can assimilate to their racial surroundings. Second, these strategies are not just used in spaces in which the participants are the racial minority; they are also applied in predominantly black spaces.

While academic literature commonly uses the term code switching to describe the acts of moving between two or more languages and/or grammatical structures frequently observed in multilingual speakers (Auer, 2013; Heller, 1988), the participants' use of the phrase more closely aligns with Shorter-Gooden (2003) concept of "shifting", or Stayman and Desphande's (1989) concept of situational ethnicity. More specifically, both terms refer to inconspicuous or overt alterations of behavior or appearance used as a coping strategy when cultural identities are threatened by bigotry, discrimination, or stereotyping.

Consider the following broad definition of code-switch strategies provided by Audrey:

Code switching...being able to be effective or successful in both spaces that are predominantly not black, or ones I would consider like home. And then also being able to successfully navigate home...largely black situations... I know how to code switch. I know how to play the game...I credit some of it to my training in anthropology, but then also some of the leadership development programs I've been a part of in helping me be able to identify the system. It's having grown up in largely white spaces. Living in the largely white communities, I feel comfortable being

competent and bold in those spaces, and asking what I want and trying to work the system in my favor... (**Audrey, 28, archivist**).

In her discussion of code switching, Audrey communicates that practice refers to actions and behaviors necessary in successfully navigating predominantly white and predominantly black spaces (i.e. “home”). Because of her anthropological training, participation in leadership programs, and her experiences living in predominantly white neighborhoods, Audrey feels especially skilled in the art of code-switching. Because of this exposure, Audrey is not only able to assimilate into different racial spaces, but can also comfortably voice her needs and desires.

Nicole further explicates this strategy of code switching in the following passage:

I guess when I'm around other people, not that I have to play a part, but I have to be more careful of the stuff that I say and how I say things to make sure that it's not interpreted the wrong way or doesn't come across wrong. I think that translates into professional settings ... Regardless of color, you act a certain way in certain situations, but I feel like more so when you're not around other black people. I feel like I have to code switch: "Okay. This is how we're going to act. This is what we're going to say." I guess it's just matching what other people do, how other people talk and act. Not that you're changing what you believe or how you use situations, but... it's just communication stuff... if you don't code switch, people have a tendency to stereotype you and put you in boxes that you don't want to be in... (**Nicole, 29, PhD Student**).

Here, Nicole provides specific details concerning the strategies she uses to code-switch. While effective code switching does not require a complete alteration of personality or beliefs, it does involve modifying or filtering the content and delivery of speech to fit the racial make-up of a social space. Most commonly, these modifications are done to match the norms and expectations of the racial majority of the current environment. While she acknowledges that individuals across race use code switching strategies, it is particularly

vital for black individuals in predominantly white spaces. Failure to code switch in these predominantly white environments can result in negative stereotyping and treatment.

Code-switching strategies also extend past behavior to include explicit fashion and stylistic choices. Consider the following testament from Erica:

I was always in classes with just white people. It would make me feel some type of way. Like, do I need to go get Sperry's? I remember... I literally went to San Marcos and bought these \$70 pair of Sperry's because all the whites were wearing Sperry's. I got the tan Sperry's, never mind I didn't really know what the social context of it was; not until later. They're boat shoes. You wear them on a boat, and I'd never even been on a boat, let alone was planning to go on a boat, to sail. That's what they wore. I would literally wear Sperry's with UT basketball shorts and a basketball T-shirt. I'd have a bandanna on my head and I've got some Sperry's. I just thought that I was smart. "Well, I've got these Sperry's on, so...these are real Sperry's. You can't counterfeit these Sperry's" (**Erica, 28, VA Fellow**).

Here, Erica reflects on her freshman year of college, the first time in her life where many of her social spaces (i.e., "classes") were predominantly white. Being the racial minority was a significant adjustment for her, as her perceived difference from her classmates elicited feelings of discomfort, making her "feel some type of way". To assuage these feelings, she pursued code-switching strategies to communicate her ability to assimilate to the behaviors of her peers. Specifically, Erica noticed that many of her white classmates wore Sperry Topsiders, a brand of deck shoes designed for traversing the slippery surface of a boat deck. In her efforts to code switch, she made a 45-minute trip to an outlet mall for the sole purpose of buying these "Sperry's". Though she acknowledges she had no intentions of sailing, purchasing and wearing these Sperry's was vitally important, as the brand functioned as a strategic sign that communicated that she, indeed, belonged there (i.e., "you can't counterfeit these Sperry's"). In fact, this specific code switching strategy

was so important to her, she wore the shoes with everything, including t-shirts and basketball shorts.

As Erica has grown more accustomed to navigating predominantly white spaces, her fashion code switching strategies are not as explicit or specific as those depicted in her Sperry example. She elaborates on her current code switching methods in the following discussion of her photo journal entry pictured in Figure 7:

Figure 7: Code-switching Strategies for White Spaces: Erica's Junior League Outfit

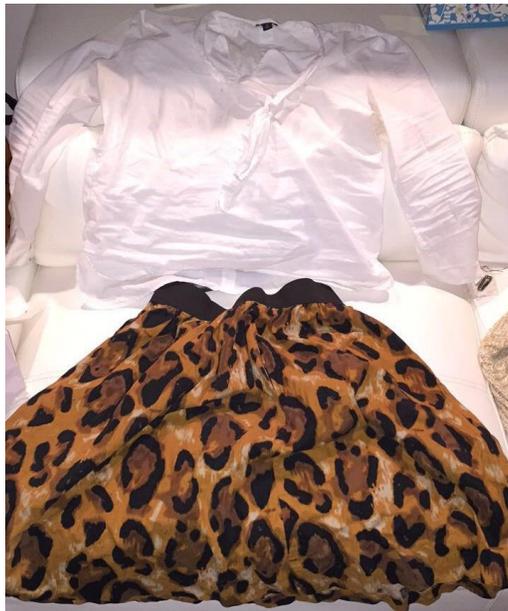


I'm starting to get more into dresses. I got this at Ross, too. I think it was like six bucks but it looks something out of Banana Republic... These heels are BCBG and they're flesh toned... but they're so comfortable...I wore this to a mixer for junior league actually. I kind of felt like I blended in without having to do too much. I think I was the only black person there... it's simple and I think it's more leaning towards what I feel like I learned from white people... **(Erica, 28, VA Fellow)**.

Although Erica does reference brands in this example of her current code switching strategies (i.e., Banana Republic and BCBG), the key strategy she employs here is styling. Instead of significantly altering her style or making expensive purchases (i.e., “doing too much”), she has adopted subtle styling strategies observed from white peers, which include making simple stylistic choices. By using these code-switching strategies, she was able to feel like she fit in at the Junior League event in which she was in the racial minority.

While Erica’s experiences speak to adopting stylistic choices of white individuals as a code switching strategy, these practices can also include strategically styling the body to simultaneously communicate sameness while also negating negative stereotypes attached to black femaleness. Consider the description of Sasha’s Town Hall meeting outfit in the featured in the photo journal entry pictured in Figure 8:

Figure 8: Community and Stereotype Negation: Sasha’s Town Hall Meeting Outfit



I just gave a parent town hall. I wore this big, ole fluffy skirt and a turtleneck. I was still stylish and I wore a nice pointy heel. I wanted to look very feminine and innocent... I wanted to look sharp and presentable and I wanted to look innocent. I wanted to look like, “oh, cutesy little girl “... I didn't want to look grown up. I didn't want to look womanly... a huge portion of the meeting was their first talk to me about their discontent with the program, so I really wanted them to take it easy on me. I feel like that's a day where I really tried to dress to please them. I feel like I looked girly... I looked less aggressive. That whole black woman thing, especially when you in charge...I wanted to look like I would never hurt you. I would never curse you out. I would never be like this to you. I wanted to look ... less black. I think it worked because they were very nice and kind... I didn't want to look like a strong black woman. I didn't want to look like a boss... You know what I'm saying? A boss would have made them feel like, “there's this black girl taking control.” I wanted to feel like it was a community. It was us working together type shit, not like I'm here to take control...I think it worked, because they were very nice and kind. (Sasha, 28, program coordinator).

Through this description of her photo journal entry, Sasha explains the strategic code switching process behind dressing her body for hosting the parent town hall meeting.

Instead of explicitly using styling techniques or apparel items observed from other white individuals, she used her perception of the definitions tied to common professional apparel items, and considered how these definitions could be altered by her blackness.

For example, Sasha avoided wearing a suit to the Town Meeting. While research suggests that a woman in a suit can communicate power or authority (Kimle & Damhorst, 1997), in Sasha's experience, this meaning can be amplified to the point of negative evaluation when worn by black women, particularly because the common “strong black woman” stereotype. Because of this potential outcome, Sasha wore a circle (i.e., fluffy) skirt and a high-neck blouse. Her explicit motivation behind this strategy was to appear “less black” and to negate the negative stereotypes associated with black women. Specifically instead of conforming to the hyperaggressive “black lady” stereotype (i.e., “taking control” or

“cursing you out”), she wanted to appear non-threatening, approachable and community oriented. In Sasha’s opinion, her efforts worked, as the Town Hall meeting was successful, and the parents treated her well.

Interestingly, these code switching strategies extend past professional settings to include social functions. Holly speaks to this idea in the following passage:

As I started to be the minority more often, I've realized you can do certain things to lighten the mood or make it...easier to get along with everybody else that you're around in that situation. For me, I think that's why my style changed a little bit when I was in Beaumont. I started dressing more comfortably...started wearing things that were more similar to the things people around me were wearing... At Georgia Tech, you join clubs, you get club t-shirts...I wore club t-shirts to class all the time. But I still felt like, you'd go to dinner, you get dressed up, you put on real clothes. But when I was at Beaumont, people would just wear their college fraternity t-shirt to dinner or if somebody's having a party at their apartment. Nobody really got dressed up. Everybody just wore khaki shorts or camo shorts and just whatever kind of ratty t-shirt. I thought that that was very interesting...that's another reason why I started dressing in more athletic wear while I was there (**Holly, 29, MBA student**).

Here, Holly shares how the stylistic code switching strategies she utilized while living in Beaumont, Texas allowed her to transition into social spaces where she was the racial minority. In this case, she observed that unlike the fashion expectations of dressing up (i.e., putting on “real clothes”) to attend dinners or parties in her social circles at Georgia Tech, the unspoken dress code for activities in Beaumont were more casual. The standard apparel items were comprised of (“ratty”) t-shirts, cargo shorts, and khakis. In attempts to fit in to her environment that was not only more casual, but also predominantly white, she incorporate more athletic apparel into her wardrobe. Using these strategies helped Holly assimilate into these spaces, and made her peers more “comfortable” with her presence.

This idea of dressing more casually in social situations that are predominantly white were also discussed by Lindsey in the following passage:

Well what's odd...what's really funny is when I'm going to be in a situation with white people I will like dress down a little bit...It's not even like, "Oh, I need to make you feel comfortable." I think it is, to fit in.... I'm like...So I'm wearing jeans and like a t-shirt (**Lindsey, 31, HR professional**).

Like Holly, Lindsey also discloses that she uses the code-switching strategy of dressing more casually when socializing in spaces in which she is the racial minority. Unlike Holly, however, these strategies are not employed solely to make her white peers comfortable. Instead, she suggests that many of the activities in which her white friends engage (i.e., visiting a beer brewery) call for more casual attire than what she would typically wear on an outing with her black friends.

Fashion code switching strategies are not only used to communicate the ability to assimilate into predominantly white spaces. They are also used to affirm belonging in predominantly black spaces. Consider, for example, the following statements from Samantha:

If we were going to the AUC, I would wear some skinny jeans or some shorts, usually pretty tight, pretty short, shorts... I was definitely like, "I gotta get some heels"...And maybe a halter top, which I never would have worn into a house party on Tech's campus. It was just way more laid back, I guess. I would have been fine wearing flip flops and a sundress. That's an actual real life thing (**Samantha, 33, collegiate track coach**).

Here, Samantha explains the differences between her fashion choices for a predominantly white (i.e., Georgia Tech) social event, compared to a predominantly black social event (i.e., the AUC). While a "laid-back" sundress and flip-flops was the standard for the Georgia Tech parties, the fashion expectation for an AUC party was more formal. To

assimilate to this standard, Samantha wore either skinny jeans, short-shorts, and purchased high-heeled shoes.

Like Samantha, the following testament from Nicole also speaks to the practice of dressing more formally when entering into black spaces:

I'm in the pharmacy building. There's nobody ... ain't nobody else to impress...I'd rather just grab my tee and my shorts, and come to campus, and do what I got to do... When I first started the program and I had class I'm like, "Jester area. Oh, I'm going to Jester area soon. I need to think about what I'm about to wear, make sure everything is together, because I'm not going to be in the pharmacy building today" (Nicole, 29, PhD student).

Here, Nicole speaks to the mental process behind her daily outfit selections. When going to campus to work in UT's Pharmacy building, she dresses quickly and primarily for comfort. She compares this logic to her fashion choices when going to the "Jester area".

The Jester Center she references houses the Malcolm X Lounge, an on-campus communal space frequented by predominantly black students. Because of the higher chance that she may run into other black individuals when in this area of campus, she consciously took more time to coordinate her outfits and to ensure "everything was together."

Policing Strategies

The final sub-category of policing strategies refers to the efforts put forth by participants to ensure social perceptions of black women are positive. These efforts range in degrees of action; some are hypothetical evaluations made in passing, while others involve verbal interventions. Like the previously discussed subcategories, these policing strategies align with black respectability politics literature. Specifically, the racial uplift

efforts defined by these politics require both individual and collective action to reform society's negative stereotypical perceptions of black women (Higgenbotham, 1994).

The policing strategies observed in the participants fall in one of two categories. In the first, the participants make instant mental evaluations of the fashion choices of other black women, and speculate as to the negative attention these choices draw to the individual, or black women as a collective group. In the second, the participants offer verbal advice to other black women in attempts to reverse any negative stereotyping or treatment they encounter due to their appearance.

An example of this first category of policing is seen in the following testament from Natasha:

This girl I used to be really good friends with, now she would swear up and down she was professional, boy. She had the long nails with the different color tips every time, the glitter, the jewels. I said, "do her. That's completely fine." It's not the look that I want to take into the legal field, because I don't feel like I'll be taken seriously, but she would do that. She would wear the tighter skirt. She had a very rotund butt, and she would like to put emphasis on that. She also just had a mouth like a sailor, and she was a little bit loud, and she would make it known who she would fight and all this and that. She was one of those people, but I also sat back and watched as she dealt with problem, after problem, after problem, you know? She quickly got that reputation. The good thing about her was she was smart enough to know some lines not to cross. Or to find some legal ways to stay working, but I just didn't want to ever be perceived like she was, if that makes sense.

No shade to her, but perception is everything... people are going to be more intimidated by a bold personality, and they would automatically deem her as being confrontational, even if she wasn't trying to be. They say she'd bring problems. They're not going to call her ghetto, because that's now the bad thing. You can't call people that as much as they used to. They would say she was a shit starter, for lack of a better way to say it. That would quickly get her to be the one written up, or her the one to be deemed as the angry black woman, or whatever...[she] learned the hard way that you don't want that cast upon you, because you can't shake it once you get it. You already walk in with two strikes, you know, so it's just going to make things harder for you (**Natasha, 27, paralegal**).

Here, Natasha describes the stylistic choices of an old friend, and speculates to how these choices impacted her reception by and treatment from others. First, Natasha explains that although her friend described herself as professional, her style communicated otherwise. Specifically, Natasha identifies her friend's bright-colored French manicures with rhinestone accents, and her choice to accentuate her curves (i.e., "rotund butt") with form fitting clothing. In Natasha's opinion, her inappropriate dress reinforced her stereotypical behaviors. Specifically, her affinity for profanity, volume of speech, and her candidness concerning personal conflicts were actions that aligned with the negative hyper-aggressive stereotypes of black women, while her stylistics choices provided visual confirmation for these stereotypical evaluations. Natasha suggests that because of her friend's actions and appearance she garnered a negative reputation within the workplace, which led to conflict and disciplinary issues. Through this example, Natasha expresses the importance of perception, especially in the case of black women. Since black women have "two strikes" against them (i.e., blackness and femaleness), they must be careful in moderating not only their behavior, but their appearance and apparel, a lesson that her friend "learned the hard way".

Not only are these policing strategies used in situations in which black women are entering predominantly white spaces like the workplace, they are also use within black spaces. In the experiences of the participants, these strategies are most frequently used when entering black middle-class spaces. The following experience shared by Gabby speaks to policing strategies within this context.

I believe one of my friends...I remember she called this girl ghetto plastic...hood booger, stuff like that... she had the intellectual capacity to be at Duke. And I don't think any of us even denied that she probably would go on to make something of herself. But they still were judging her on the kind of clothes that...she wore...she would wear...sneaker heel shoes with her Jersey dress, to a AKA interest event...she wore this to a AKA interest event. It wasn't just the Jersey dress with the high, side ponytail with the big earrings, and the sneaker heel shoes. But she wore it, to the interest event. So, that was really what was so appalling about it **(Gabby, 29, PhD Student)**.

Here, Gabby shares an experience from her undergraduate studies in which a classmate of hers had a difficult time assimilating to the socio-economic class climate of Duke's black population. Specifically, she was ostracized and teased because her stylistic choices (i.e., basketball jersey dresses, high-heeled sneakers, large hoop earrings, high, side ponytails), included fashions that black upper-middle-class students associated with black working-class populations (i.e., "ghetto plastic" and "hood booger"). The real faux-paus made by Gabby's classmate was her decision to wear this particular outfit to an Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) interest meeting. Because members of AKA, the first black American Greek sorority, are historically stigmatized as elitist, "stuck-up", and bourgeois (Whaley, 2010), Shantel suggests that the stereotypical black-working class outfit worn by her classmate directly resulted in her rejection by the sorority's members.

As mentioned previously, policing strategies are not restricted to passing speculations concerning how a black woman's style may influence her treatment. It also includes acts of offering stylistic advice or guidance in efforts to positively alter how black women are regarded. Consider the following workplace experience shared by Holly:

I have somebody that I'm training. She follows me around all the time. Our personalities, just uh-uh. They're not meshing at all. There've been a couple of times where I want to talk to her about it, but I'm trying to tame what I would say regularly in conversation because it's a professional setting and I want to make sure it's

addressed properly...She's a slacker...She's real slack. Her work ethic is different. She's older. She's black. That's the thing. She's black! I don't understand...I deal with a lot of attorneys and therapists and other case workers. Your name's all you got. If she's going around being messy ... I don't need that reflecting on me because I still have to stay here and work whether she decides to be here afterwards or not. I think that as black women, you kind of got to ... I like to set a standard. That's it.

...Can we talk about how she showed up for one of my court hearings in jeans?... as a professional you're representing somebody and this is your job, you should not present in front of the judge in some freaking jeans. It was a tough day for her. They made her take off her badge... “You can sit in the stands, but you can't be on the bench and you need to take your badge off.” It's just inappropriate. It's a reflection of the entire department and that's not right. You look real slack (**Tiffany, 27, social worker/ Master's student**).

In this particular passage, Tiffany discusses a new employee who is shadowing her to gain familiarity with the office. She not only has difficulty getting along with this co-worker, but Tiffany also observes that she struggles with maintaining appropriate professional behavior and style. Interestingly, Tiffany expresses disbelief at her co-worker's lack of professional conduct and appearance. Specifically, she cites the fact that this individual is not only a mature adult, but is also a black woman, whose lived experience as such should have taught her the consequences of being black and failing to uphold professional standards. In addition to chastising her gossiping habits (i.e., “being messy”), Tiffany also shares a recent story in which the co-worker was reprimanded for wearing jeans to a court session. Because of her co-workers' stylistic choices and conduct, Tiffany is carefully crafting a professional one-on-one intervention to discuss these observations, and to hopefully improve the perception her co-worker communicates to other employees.

Like Tiffany, Lindsey has also encountered black women in the workplace in which she has desired to offer advice concerning professional apparel choices. Consider her following story about the observed stylistic choices of a black female intern:

It really stood out to other black employees... [we] were talking to each other about it, because we're like, "We want her to get an internship offer. We need to deal with your outfits...your outfit needs to be together..." It was pants too tight...wearing a really fitted maxi dress...like, "that's a sexy maxi dress...that's your weekend dress." I think the nice part of it was that people really wanted to give her the advice...it wasn't like, "Oh, we're just gonna talk about her behind her back." It was giving her feedback because we want her to be better, you know? Someone tried to give her the feedback, she wasn't receptive. So she... asked her manager and asked other people if they thought her outfit was inappropriate, and they were like, "No, it's fine." Sometimes we wonder was it just that people didn't want to broach that topic (**Lindsey, 31, HR professional**).

In this particular instance, the intern in question was well liked by others in the office, and had no reports of unprofessional conduct. Her wardrobe choices, however, were deemed inappropriate, particularly by Lindsey and other black employees. Specifically, the interns form fitting dresses and pants led Lindsey and her co-works to fear that the company many not extend her a full time employment offer because her appearance communicated a lack of serious about the position and the company. Lindsey emphasizes that these discussions are not merely gossip: they were genuine discussions of concern, and meant to draft strategies to help the intern improve her appearance and increase the chances of receiving a job offer (i.e., "we want her to be better" and "we want her to get an internship offer"). While a co-worker did eventually breech the topic with the intern, the advice was not well received, as direct discussions initiated by the intern with her manager and other white employees negated the advice of Lindsey and other black employees.

What is particularly interesting about Lindsey's story is that the stylistic choices of the black female intern were only raised and discussed amongst other black employees. While this could be attributed to the desire of employees from other racial groups to avoid insensitivity that can be deemed as discriminatory, this could also be due to the hyper

awareness of black individuals concerning the role appearance plays in either supporting or negating negative black stereotypes (Higgenbotham, 1994). This awareness is elaborated further in the following passage from Morgan:

I am a little bit harder on black people. I am. Because I just expect them to do better, and because they're representing the whole, pretty much; the masses. I am a little bit more critical than I would be on somebody that wasn't black. When I taught summer school this summer, there was this lady, and I was just like, "really?" ...She was black... she looked like she just rolled out of bed. She just didn't care. Her pants never really fit her properly... then, the types of shoes that she may wear. They just looked more like house shoes as opposed to shoes that you would wear to work. Summer school is a little bit more lax, like you can dress down, and by dress down, they mean you could wear jeans and a school shirt every day. Still, I still feel like you're representing, not only the school, but you're also representing us, and so I just felt like a little bit more effort could have been put in **(Morgan, 32, teacher)**.

Here, Morgan clarifies that she is, in fact, more critical (i.e., "harder") when evaluating the appearance of other black individuals. She articulates the reasons for this harsher criticism through the example of a black female summer school co-worker. In Morgan's opinion, this black young woman did not dress appropriately for her job. While she did not classify this woman's style as revealing, or provocative, she labeled her stylistic choices (i.e., ill-fitting pants, house shoes, and a "just rolled out of bed" look) as "sloppy", which she believed communicated personal laziness. According to Morgan, not only did this sloppy attire reflect badly on her black female co-worker, who should desire to positively represent the school, it also reflected badly on all black females, as it reinforced the stereotypes of laziness frequently associated with black women

WITHIN-GROUP DIFFERENCES

The third theme that emerged from the interview data is within group differences. This theme refers to the observed nationality or class background differences that uniquely impacted the participants past or current fashion-related consumption behaviors. This theme is comprised of two subcategories. The first is “Nigerian vs. Black American Roots”, which illustrates the fashion perspectives of second-generation participants with Nigerian immigrant parents, and their unique experiences navigating black American cultural spaces and knowledge. The second is “Transition into the Black Middle Class”, which includes the lived experiences and fashion perspectives of participants who were raised in poor or working-class households, and transitioned to middle-class status in their adult lives. The “Nigerian vs. Black American Roots” subcategory is discussed first.

Nigerian vs. Black American Roots

This first subcategory of within-group difference describes the experiences of the two participants who belong their families’ first generation born and raised in the United States. The parents of these participants were born in Nigeria, and immigrated to the United States to attend college. Because their parents did not arrive in the U.S. until adulthood, they retained many aspects of Nigerian culture in their daily lives, including language structures and accent. In turn, these cultural nuances were passed to down to the participants.

Although these women were born in the United States, their inheritance of Nigerian cultural habits frequently functioned as a marker of difference that impacted participants’

interactions with black Americans, especially during childhood. Consider the following testament from Nicole:

We were talking about being Nigerian. I think culturally sometimes it was hard for me to identify with other black students, like in class and stuff, just because it's just culturally different. My sister says I didn't, but I look back on videos and I think I have an African accent when I was younger. Like when I first started school because I was learning English from my parents. I have an older sister. She was born here, but she went back to Nigeria until she was eight before she came back. Then my sister is six years older than me, so by the time she came here I was two. I learned English from my parents and from her because she had an accent too.

I feel like I thought I had an accent. Not that anybody made fun of me, but I feel like I would say certain words and people will be like, "What are you talking about?" I'm Nigerian, so instead of pants," they say "trousers". People will be like, "What?" That's what they say. Or like "trunk," they would say "boot," because they're British words. Growing up, I knew there was a difference. I was different somehow. I think it wasn't until I became older that I started integrating more into black culture... **(Nicole, 29, PhD student).**

Here, Nicole describes how her Nigerian background impacted her interactions with black Americans. Because these groups are so "culturally different", as a child she experienced difficulty identifying with black American culture. Specifically, Nicole explains the impact of learning English from her Nigerian parents and sister. Although she was never teased for having an accent, her perception of the way she spoke elicited feelings of self-consciousness. Additionally, because of her family's use of British English, she referred to common objects with words unfamiliar to American English speakers (i.e., "boot" instead of "trunk"), which her black American peers interpreted as bizarre.

Like Nicole, the Nigerian cultural behaviors inherited by Leslie also impacted her early interactions with black Americans. Leslie further explains these experiences in the following passage:

African-American's could kinda tell something was different about me immediately ... in high school... I could never really identify with... African-American's from the U.S... and having my parents [say], you can have black friends, but you're not supposed to be dressing like them, talking like them, that's what they said... that kinda hindered me into making a lot of black friends because ... I could never really identify with them, or blend in ... **(Leslie, 35, senior project manager).**

Here, Leslie provides a more complex understanding of how cultural practices and lessons communicated by Nigerian parents influence interactions with black American peers. In addition to general cultural nuances which were “immediately” interpreted as different from other black Americans, her parents also emphasized the importance of maintaining a distance from behaviors linked to black American culture. While her parents never advised her to avoid friendships with black Americans, she was instructed to not only avoid the use of black American vernacular, but also avoid adopting black American fashions and styles. Because she was instructed to avoid these symbols that can communicate the ability and willingness to assimilate, she could never fully “identify with” black Americans, “or blend in.”

In Leslie’s family, the importance of avoiding fashions stereotypically associated with black Americans was a common topic of discussion. According to Leslie, the primary notion behind this advice was to avoid being labeled with the negative stereotypes associated with black American populations. This was particularly important for Leslie and her sisters, as assuming the fashions of black American women, whom her parents called “akata” women, simultaneously assumes the corresponding stereotypical hypersexual identities. Leslie further explicates this idea in the following passage:

If you're over-exposing yourself ... or if they felt like you were mimicking them too much ... or you dressed a certain way, did your hair a certain way... they're

like, “no, you're not an akata person, you're Nigerian, why are you doing that?” You were losing your culture, and that had social repercussions ... they didn't want you to identify with them. That's what they said, “we're not them, we can't identify with them... you're a Nigerian American, you're not African or American-American, you're Nigerian, you're roots are back home. So you can't identify with them and do the things they do.” I guess 'cause they saw that as a negative...they're like, “no, you don't wanna do that, you don't wanna become an akata person and not have any things for yourself...”

...all the other [black] girls, you know, not violated dress code, but they were kinda dancing on the fine line of dress code. And guys would look at them and she was like, “no, guys not supposed to be looking at you. Too young.” “That's how akata people dress, don't do that”...saying “you're not gonna dress like an akata girl”—a loose girl... in a Nigerian community you have to keep your reputation, can't be loose...when I was trying to dress sexy and things like that, my mom did say, “when you get married, you can start doing that for your husband...” **(Leslie, 35, senior project manager).**

In this passage, Leslie provides further insights into what it means to dress like a black American (i.e., “akata”) woman, and the social repercussions of adopting such styles. Leslie explains that dressing like a black American woman was synonymous with wearing revealing or form-fitting styles. In her parents’ opinion, these fashion choices had two primary negative effects. First, they communicated a purposeful rejection of Nigerian culture (i.e., her “roots back home”) that went beyond a desire to abandon these cultural practices and behaviors. Specifically, it was interpreted as embracing the stereotypical lack of motivation to achieve social and economic success associated with black Americans. These standpoints not only align with literature on the perceived stereotypes of black Americans held by black immigrant populations (e.g., laziness and disorganization) (Kasinitz, 1992; Waters, 1994), but they also utilize the same fashions or styles non-black individuals use to stereotypically evaluate black Americans.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, dressing like a black American woman (or “akata” woman) can also be interpreted as embracing the hypersexual (i.e., “loose”) stereotype of black femininity. For Leslie’s parents, it was vitally important that she avoid akata fashions and strictly adhere to the dress codes imposed by her school. If she failed to do so, her fashion would attract the unwanted sexualized attention of her male peers, which could damage her reputation within her local Nigerian community (i.e., “guys not supposed to be looking at you”). This attention was to be avoided, as maintaining a “good” reputation was of the utmost importance. In fact, it was only socially acceptable for Leslie to assume these styles for her future husband’s pleasure.

Transition into the Black Middle-Class

This second sub-category of within group difference refers to the differing fashion experiences and perspectives of the four participants who were raised in poor or working-class households and transitioned to middle-class status in their adult lives. For these women, growing up with comparatively fewer resources influenced their relationship with fashion-related consumption and identity in ways not observed in participants raised in middle-class households.

One of the primary experiences that illustrates the impact of differing access to resources is the participants’ childhood experiences with school uniforms. First, consider the following experience shared by Holly, a participant raised in a middle-class home:

I really liked in high school, getting to see everybody's style emerge more... When I was in elementary school...we wore uniforms...middle school was the first time that everybody else was just wearing regular clothes...high school is when people really started getting into their own thing. People started to have a job or save money and be able to buy their own stuff. So you know, you have your little growth

spurt, and you can now wear the adult sized clothes and shop in that section... I was always like a small, scrawny kind growing up, so in high school... I remember having a butt and being able to wear cute jeans, and different stuff like that... I think back to the first day of school. You get a new outfit, you get a new pair of shoes ... keeping up with the current style was very much a thing **(Holly, 29, MBA student)**.

Here, Holly describes her transition from an elementary school that required uniforms, to the free-dress environments of middle and high school. Holly reflects fondly on these transitions, and remembers the enjoyment she felt watching the styles of her peers evolve. “Back-to-school” shopping was a big part of this process, and she recalls the excitement she felt when her body developed and she transitioned to the “cute”, “adult” styles that accentuated her new figure.

Holly’s experiences however, stand in stark contrast to the participants raised in poor or working class households. Consider the following school uniform experiences shared by Erica and Samantha:

We really didn't have the resources. I honestly can't remember a time we ever really went school shopping. There were uniforms....I remembered when I transitioned into that ... We went to the Levi store and we would get one shirt ... One of the white collar shirts that we would hand wash. And two bottoms. We would have to hand wash them every day...I was happy to move from a public school, where you got new clothes, because we wouldn't really have new clothes, or our shoes would be torn up, or something like that. It was a very real thing to be socially bullied like that for that reason. I was so happy when we went to uniforms because it made everybody look the same... It took the pressure off needing to feel like you had to wear certain things... I felt less like I didn't belong. **(Erica, 28, VA fellow)**.

It wasn't a bad childhood, but there were definitely things that would have been better if we had more money... We didn't go back to school shopping. We got things throughout the summer that we were gonna need. I remember going to Burlington Coat Factory in June to buy a winter coat because they would be 80% off. Which again, it hadn't hit me that that's why I was being treated differently. When you're in it, it's not just like, "I need better clothes"... we wore uniforms at my high school

my last two years, and that was great. I just had to buy five pairs of khakis, two khaki skirts, four pairs of khaki shorts and I was set for the year... (**Samantha, 33, collegiate track coach**).

Unlike Holly, Erica and Samantha began their student careers in schools with a free dress code before transitioning uniforms. While Holly enjoyed the liberties afforded by free dress-codes, specifically the ability to express one's personal style, these liberties functioned as a burden for Erica and Samantha. Specifically, the lack of disposable household income prevented Erica and Samantha from participating in the back-to-school shopping rituals enjoyed by Holly. This inability to purchase these new clothes socially impacted these women. Erica reflects on being bullied for her lack of clothes and the condition of her shoes, while Samantha recalls being treated differently because she was only able to purchase necessities during off season sales. Because of this treatment, Erica and Samantha were happy to transition to school uniforms. Not only did these dress codes eliminate pressures to purchase a vast amount of apparel items, they also equalized their schools' social atmospheres and made it easier to belong.

A second experience that uniquely impacted these participants' perceptions and experiences with fashion-related consumption is their first encounter with the consumption habits of members of the black middle-class. The participants raised in poor or working class define their emotions during these initial encounters as shock and disbelief. At times, the women also viewed these consumption practices as obstacles barring their access to black middle-class social circles. Consider Sasha's reflection on her initial encounter that occurred after transferring high schools:

It was just ... not a good school. Hood kids, drug dealers, ditching school... I hated this school... so then I left [and]... I went to one of the best schools in Chicago. That also altered my course because now I'm hanging with bourgie Southside, suburban kids... These girls have MAC lip gloss and I was just like "what?! Y'all wearing MAC lip gloss?!"... I just thought they was so rich because they was getting MAC lip gloss. They would wear Timberlands and Rocawear, that was a big thing. Charlotte Russe was a big thing too... Girl, I thought they was so rich... That's when I started seeing levels of class... I wouldn't hang out with them. Literally, that was my defense mechanism. Because I felt like if I hung out with them, if they saw my house ... that would expose me. In a school setting, you can just fake it till you make it. I may got a couple brand name items or whatever. When you hang out with them, that means that you don't got the lunch money that they have. They were going to the mall and shopping. ... I felt like that would expose that I wasn't one of them. Clearly, I don't have ... the luxury things... **(Sasha, 28, program coordinator).**

Here, Sasha explains her decision to transfer high schools during her sophomore year. This transition involved moving from an institution located in a predominantly poor and working class (i.e., "hood") neighborhood on the west side of her city, to one of the city's best schools, located in a black middle-class ("bourgie") neighborhood in the city's southern suburbs. In her transition to this new high school, she is astounded by the consumption habits of her new classmates, which makes her hyperaware of class differences within black populations for the first time. She cites their possession of urban apparel brand names like Timberland boots and Rocawear apparel, and recalls their ability to shop in mall retail stores like Charlotte Russe. However, Sasha expresses the most shock at their ownership of MAC lip glosses, as this brand includes products developed for professional cosmetologists, and are often double or triple the cost of comparable drugstore products.

Sasha's observations not only introduced her to the existence of socio-economic class differences within black populations; but they also introduced feelings of alienation and inadequacy. More specifically, she was in constant fear that her fashion-related possessions and shopping habits would expose her outsider status in black middle-class circles. To prevent this exposure, she avoided off-campus friendships and social activities, particularly those involving home visits and spending.

Gabby divulges similar experiences concerning her first encounter with the spending habits of black middle-class individuals. For instance, she offers the following example from her first year of college:

I could sense that the kinds of stuff I already owned didn't really fit... 'cause girls were wearing those Juicy Velour sweat outfits... and I didn't own anything like that, and I couldn't afford to buy it...Clothes were always a big thing. Every girl had monogrammed bags. And everyone had pearls, and everybody had fucking Ugg boots... I remember the things that I tried to do after my freshman year, to try to emulate stylistically, some of the things... I remember going to the store. They had ... I don't want to call 'em knock-off clothes, they were just similar style to the Ugg boots, but not \$300.They were 75, 80 bucks. Which, I could save up the money from my summer job and buy... it was my way of being able to emulate the look, but less expensive... **(Gabby, 29, PhD student).**

In this experience shared by Gabby, she recalls the point in when she realized the apparel related items she owned did not align with those of her black upper middle-class classmates. While their apparel-related norms included \$450 Juicy Couture track suits, monogrammed tote bags, real pearl necklaces, and \$300 Ugg boots; Gabby did not own, nor could she afford anything comparable. Instead she elicited strategies to emulate these styles within her spending constraints. Specifically, she obtained summer employment to

save for a pair of \$75-80 boots similar in style to the popular \$300 Uggs worn by her black middle-class peers.

At times, the participants also experienced anxiety when encountering and navigating these new fashion-related spending habits. This anxiety was often linked to perceived lack of resources needed to be officially accepted into these black-middle class spaces. Consider a second story offered by Gabby:

I definitely felt really self-conscious a lot. Mostly for me it was clothing. And also just the ways that they would spend money. Which was often on clothes. Like, often we'd go to the mall, and I'd just be following them around from store to store, where they could go and buy things and I can't buy anything 'cause I don't have expendable [income] like that...I was often sending money home to my mom. But, I feel like so much of the anxiety I had revolved around clothes and what we looked like... Like one time I literally broke out crying in the mall, because my friend was going in all these expensive ass stores. I called my boyfriend crying, "I don't know how everyone can spend this ..." I was literally having a crisis. **(Gabby)**

Here, Gabby provides further details concerning the feelings of anxiety she experienced when transitioning into black upper middle-class spaces, and observing their fashion related consumption habits. She articulates that it was not simply the clothing these individuals owned, but their spending habits that contributed to her anxious feelings. Her participation in these shopping outings was not just limited by her parents' lack of disposable income; she also had the added responsibility of monetarily contributing to her mother and siblings finances back home. In one particular instance, this anxiety induced tears, as she called her boyfriend to voice her disbelief, frustrations, and inability to keep up with her peers.

While these observed fashion-related spending habits played role in the discomfort experienced by participants in their first encounters with black middle-class individuals, a

large part of this anxiety was attributed to the value these new social circles placed on assuming and properly styling black-middle class fashions. The following testament from Erica further explains this idea:

I really did not develop anxiety until college... You have more of a pressure to...catch up and look like them, to be on their pace, to be accepted in that way. That's my whole fashion transition. It really was everything. I think that was what brought on and made the anxiety so much worse...

I knew that people judged people based on their clothes... because they do that even in the poor communities... [but] you could still fit in the groups. They would just joke on you, versus you could really be not let into a social group. In college, you learn that's a real gate key. If you don't look a certain way or dress a certain way, it tells socioeconomic status. People won't even talk to you versus when I grew up younger, you would just get ranked on, but you're still in the same poor community. They would still deal with you (**Erica, 28, VA fellow**).

Here, Erica recalls the anxiety she experienced during her transition to college. She attributes these feelings to social pressures to emulate the fashions of her new black middle-class peers. While spending abilities and practices did play a role in this discomfort, the primary impetus for her anxiety was the possibility of complete social rejection resulting from collective evaluations of one's style. While Erica understood that individuals across socioeconomic class used appearance to pass judgment, she previously identified the worst-case outcome as teasing (i.e., "joke on you" or "get ranked on"). In her new college environment, however, failure to effectively adopt these fashions could result in complete social ostracism.

The discussion of Erica's fashion-related anxieties are also related to the third experience uniquely impacting these participants' perceptions and experiences with fashion-related consumption: encountering a steep learning curve concerning black-middle

class fashion rules. The participants describe this as the emotional process of mastering the dos-and-don'ts of fashion appropriateness seemingly innate in their black middle-class peers. Erica, for example, describes the guidance instilled in her black middle-class peers during childhood that was absent from her experiences:

Growing up with a mom who was very basic. She didn't have a lot to take care of herself... other people's family, they taught those things to their children. How to pick the right bras...and all that stuff. They were there to help...I don't have those role models to look up to. I was grasping and... getting really, really, frustrated ...my first time dealing with people in [the] black middle-class. I had the unique double of having to feel like I had to fit into the black community and that white community (**Erica, 28, VA fellow**).

Here, Erica explains two primary methods her peers used to acquire knowledge of black middle-class fashion dos-and-don'ts (i.e., “how to pick the right bras”). While at times this advice was verbal, these lessons were also learned through the examples set by her peers’ mothers, female family members, or other role models. Because Erica’s peers were exposed to these lessons and examples early and consistently, they seemingly mastered these techniques by college. Conversely, these fashion role models were absent from Erica’s childhood, as her mother and other family members did not have the financial means to adhere to these fashion-related practices. Because of this, Erica found herself playing a game of catch up her first year of college, frantically emulating the fashions of her peers in attempts to assimilate to black middle-class social spaces. Erica points out that this experience was unique from these peers, as she not only bore the burden of assimilating to white spaces, but also encountered pressure to meet black middle-class standards and expectations.

Details concerning the fashion rules mentioned by Erica become more apparent when comparing her experiences with those of participants raised in middle-class households. For example, consider the following story shared by Morgan:

I just remember wearing this pencil skirt to school...since I ran track, I practiced in the morning time. I would shower at school...and my mom...she wouldn't see what I had on until she picked me up after school. I remember one incident where she was like, "You should not have worn those panties with that." I was like, "Well, what should I have worn?" She just told me about the thickness of the lining, that I don't want to see it when I look in the mirror. If I'm wearing something that's see through that I need to wear colors that match my skin color. Just that kind of stuff. If I'm wearing a white shirt, you don't need to wear a white bra. **(Morgan, 32, teacher).**

This learning experience shared by Morgan illustrates the role her mother played in instilling fashion dos-and-don'ts in her stylistic tool box. In this case, she wore a pencil skirt to school in which the lines of her underwear were visible. When her mother observed this perceived fashion faux-pas, she advised Morgan on the appropriate underwear styles to wear with the skirt, emphasizing the rule that the lines of undergarments should never be visible. This guidance mirrored many similar lessons from Morgan's mother, including selecting underwear colors that match skin color, and avoiding white bras when wearing white shirts.

Morgan's learning experiences, however, stand in stark contrast to Erica's. Consider her story concerning undergarments and appropriateness:

I think it was fifth grade, it was elementary school...I was running for PE or something and a coach made a comment that it was time for me to get a bra...it was a female coach...Because you know, I was jiggling and stuff like that... So I went home to my mom, she couldn't afford a bra. So I remember having to steal my little cousin's bra who was—it was too small anyway. And I got caught and it was this whole thing. My mom was so embarrassed, I publicly got a whooping for it. It's

like a public embarrassment from that. It was in front of everybody, and you could feel the pity from all the other people (**Erica, 28, VA fellow**).

Here, Erica reflects on a childhood experience concerning bras. Specifically, a female Physical Education teacher took notice of her maturing figure, and advised her to consider purchasing a bra. Erica then presented this suggestion to her mother. Unlike Morgan's mother, who advised her on undergarment purchases and ensured she owned the necessary items to maintain an appropriate appearance, Erica's mother expressed that she could not afford to purchase a bra. Because of this, Erica chose to take one of her cousin's too-small bras. When Erica was discovered, she was disciplined by her mother in front of other family members. Because of her and her mother's mutual embarrassment from the incident, they never explicitly discussed rules of appropriateness concerning the proper pairing of undergarments with apparel items.

These differing experiences encountered by the participants raised in working-class or poor households not only influenced past experiences with fashion consumption and stylings; they also impact their current views and behaviors. The following testament from Samantha speaks to this occurrence:

It definitely made me realize the value of things. Probably until college...in my mind, if it was clean and it still fit, I'm not buying a new one...I think all that goes back to just the relationship that I had with fashion early on. Take what you can get and we'll worry about how it looks later... I still look at things in terms of function first... I don't enjoy shopping for shopping sake...So I just buy stuff, take it home, try it on, and then return whatever doesn't fit. Which is not less work. I am just more comfortable doing that. I think all of that is just how I grew up. I got a lot of hand me downs so it didn't matter if they fit. It's what we had (**Samantha, 33, collegiate track coach**).

Here, Samantha explains how the impact of the fashion consumption habits of her childhood working-class household influences her current apparel-related purchase behaviors. Although her disposable income has dramatically increased, she does not prioritize or enjoy the act of apparel-related shopping. In her opinion, if the item is clean, and still fits her body, she sees no need to purchase a new item. This current view point aligns with the primary fashion rule in her childhood home: “take what you can get and worry about how it looks later.” Due to this approach to fashion, her current purchase behaviors typically include making a purchase, taking it home, and making an exchange if it doesn’t fit.

Interestingly, this behavior emerged in the following discussion of the favorite outfit from her photo journal pictured in Figure 9:

Figure 9: Samantha’s Consumption Strategy: Purchase First, Fit Second



I bought that dress as TJ Maxx. It was one of the occasions where I didn't want to try something on. I bought it and was like, "I hope it fits because I like it and it's

the last one so I won't be able to exchange it if this doesn't work." It fit okay but I tried it on right after I had my daughter so I had a little belly still. I was like, "I'm never gonna be able to wear this. You look crazy." I was like, "I need to get some Spanx. I need to start working out"... I put it back in my closet and on this day I was like, "I'm gonna try it on again." I put it on and I was like, "You just shouldn't have put it on before. The dress looks fine..." (Samantha, 33, collegiate track coach).

Here, Samantha provides a specific example that illustrates how her childhood experiences with clothing impact her current apparel-related consumption habits. Specifically, she purchased the pictured dress without trying it on first. Because it was the last size, she could not exchange it after discovering she did not like the fit. Interestingly, instead of making a return and purchasing another item, she decided to keep the dress. In this particular case, the decision to keep the item worked in her favor, as the dress now fits to her liking.

#BLACKGIRLMAGIC

The fourth and final theme that emerged across the interviews is “#BlackGirlMagic.” This term, which originated as a social media trend popularized by CaShawn Thompson to celebrate the beauty, resilience, and power of black women (Wilson, 2016), fittingly describes the fashion styling and consumption strategies the participants use to celebrate, express, and support aspects of their intersecting identities. Unlike the fashion-related viewpoints, strategies, and experiences discussed previously, practices falling into the current category are used despite the stereotypes, expectations, and appropriateness constraints placed on their access to free expression through style. This theme is divided into two subcategories. The first is “refusal to fully assimilate”, which

refers to the daily strategies and styles participants use to maintain aspects of their intersecting identity in social spaces with high pressure to assimilate (e.g., professional events). The second is “Inventiveness through Instagram”, which includes the ways participants use this SNS to inform stylistic expression related to their intersecting identities, and support the stylistic efforts of other black women. The first subcategory will be discussed next.

Refusal to Fully Assimilate

The refusal to fully assimilate describes the participants’ collective sentiment that although they undergo consistent efforts to disprove stereotypes and exhibit their ability to assimilate, they are unwilling to fully relinquish styles that communicate black female cultural pride. Specifically, in situations where communicating one’s assimilation abilities is important (e.g., the workplace), it is also important that they are able to maintain renditions of these cultural fashions. The following statement from Lindsey speaks to this idea:

I've matured more to where I don't always have the time to make white people feel comfortable... like earlier in my life, especially in my career, I definitely thought about that more... now, sometimes I don't feel like it... **(Lindsey, 31, HR professional).**

Here, Leslie shares that when initiating her professional career path, she was highly cognizant of how her stylistic choices impacted white individuals in the workplace. Specifically, she attempted to blend in as much as possible (i.e., “make white people comfortable”), often at the expense of her personal stylistic preferences. Although communicating the ability to assimilate is still important to her, some of her personal

preferences now take precedence, regardless of how it may impact some of her white co-workers (i.e., now, sometimes I don't feel like it").

To understand what styles participants' link to black female identity, it is useful to compare these viewpoints to the fashions the women link to mainstream female fashions.

Tiffany speaks in detail about these differences in the following passage:

I see just a dress, real plain, real simple, maybe sleeveless, with her little matching cardigan. I see an expensive purse.... Let her have a Louis Vuitton purse. Why not?... That's like a standard Austin white girl purse... I see blue, maybe like an A-line or one of those shift dresses... I don't see a lot of bright colors. I think blues. I think black... To me, society views that clean cut look is that polished white girl with the long hair... **(Tiffany, 27, Master's student/social worker).**

Here, Tiffany provides a generalized idea of the stylistic norms of female mainstream fashion. In addition to expensive, high-end brands (i.e., Louis Vuitton), she associates mainstream, "clean-cut" fashion with A-line cuts, shift dresses, and standard professional business colors like blue and black. Interestingly, Tiffany also uses Eurocentric standards of physical beauty to describe this style (i.e., "white girl with long hair").

Conversely, Tiffany describes styles associated with black female cultural identities in the following passage:

The other side of that, I feel, is the curly hair, the big hair, the bright colors, just different shapes. This having more fun with, what you're wearing... I really like natural hair. I like big hair. Even if it's permed. I just like volume. I think it stands out. It kind of goes against what we're used to seeing... I like seeing big hair and texture... I think your hair is a huge accessory, just in general. That can change the whole outfit. You can just have a simple dress on. If a black girl came in with that same little Louis bag and a simple dress and cardigan and she had her curly fro out or whatever, her Mohawk or updo, it's a whole other look **(Tiffany, 27, Master's student/social worker).**

Unlike the blues and blacks, and standards cuts she associates with mainstream, “clean-cut” fashions, Tiffany associates black cultural styles with bright colors, textured fabrics, and unique cuts. She also articulates that black cultural styles include having more “fun” coordinating an outfit. Additionally, she emphasizes the role hair plays in altering the dynamic of the outfit. Specifically, she describes how the voluminous and intricate styles associated with black female hair types and textures can completely change the dynamic of the “clean-cut” outfit she associates with mainstream (i.e., white) fashions.

The personal experiences shared by the participants further illustrate the importance of hair and color in expressing their intersecting cultural identities. Consider the following experience shared by Lindsey:

I got the HR internship at Bank of America and... I remember being on one of our floors working...most people that I saw looked uptight, very button up, suit and ties. I'm working on the floor and this black woman comes in, and...she's wearing this very fashionable outfit... she wasn't in a suit, she was just in her normal work clothes. She had her hair out... it was a twist out. I think she had a skirt on and a big necklace... Like it just was—that's a normal day for her. That's what she wore into the office. I was like, "Okay, this is the place I can work. Like, I can be me and work here and ...she was one of the reasons why I came back, because I felt like it was a place where I was accepted for me...because at that point, I had been growing out my hair for a while, but I felt like at Bank of America that I would have to tie it up. Like, I like to twist it up a lot, but keep it twisted, keep it pinned up because the big Afro was going to scare people. But I kind of got that confirmation that it was cool to rock my hair out like that. So, I came to work for the bank after my internship. And then I've been here at the bank for 3 1/2 years now (**Lindsey, 31, HR professional**).

Lindsey's story provides further details concerning how the importance of preserving aspects of black cultural identity through style within the workplace. Prior to this internship experience, Lindsey was accustomed to navigating professional spaces in which traditional

professional attire (i.e., “uptight, very button up, suit and ties”) was the standard. As a result of these experiences, she assumed that not only should she stick to blues and blacks, but she should also keep her natural hair pinned as close to her scalp as possible. This perspective changed when she encountered a current black female employee. Not only was this woman wearing a fashionable outfit that communicated identification with aspects of black cultural identity, but her hair was also styled in a “twist-out”, a popular voluminous hair style for the curly and naturally-textured hair of black women. In fact, it was this observed freedom to maintain aspects of black cultural style that inspired Lindsey to pursue fully time employment, as she interpreted the environment as one in which she could “be herself”.

While these participants desire the freedom to maintain stylistic aspects of black cultural identity within the workplace, they also describe mastering the ability to subtly incorporate these stylistic aspects into the standard fashions expectations of their workplace. Tiffany speaks to this technique in the following passage:

...knowing that [style]'s not necessarily going to be received well in the workplace depending on [the] environment that you're working in or the different situation that you're going into...Being aware of that and...either deciding I'm going to adjust and assimilate or I'm going to incorporate a little bit of it into a middle ground where you're able to express yourself, but still be accepted...I think it's just taking a little bit of everything and mixing it together. That's the way it can be okay in the workplace. You can't do too much. You just got to spice it up here and there kind of modestly and that's how you make it by **(Tiffany, 27, Master's student/social worker)**.

Here, Tiffany further explicates the strategic acts used when incorporating black female cultural styles into workplace fashions. First, this process involves reaching an awareness

of the way these styles can be perceived by non-black coworkers, and the negative impact these perceptions can have on one's personal experiences. Once this realization is achieved, these women must strike the appropriate balance between their cultural styles and the norms of the workplace. Tiffany stresses that these strategies do not include a complete disregard for workplace dress codes (i.e., doing "too much"). Instead, one incorporates a few "modest" stylistic cultural adaptations to "make it by".

Lindsey provides a specific example of how these strategies play out in the participants' daily lives:

...with work I'll think, "Okay, I get one thing that gets to be big and extra. I'm gonna either wear color pants or I get my big hair today." I'm not gonna do it to white people where I'm doing it all at one time. They might just be in shock. You get one thing... I'm not gonna go to work with a pair of yellow pants on and a yellow pin and a big Afro because they just might be like, "Who are you?" (**Lindsey, 31, HR professional**).

Here, Lindsey clarifies the practice of finding the balance between cultural styles and mainstream workplace fashions. For her, this includes incorporating one black female cultural style into the outfit. Specifically, this addition must be limited to one style (i.e., "color pants or big hair"), as the incorporation of multiple culturally relevant styles may elicit unwanted negative attention and treatment from white co-workers (i.e., "Who are you?").

This practice of incorporating one black female cultural style also emerged in the participants' photo journals. Consider the following discussion of a favorite journal entry from Sasha pictured in Figure 10:

Figure 10: Incorporating Cultural Style in the Workplace: Sasha's Favorite Work Outfit



That's a white button down shirt and it's a gray cami and then it's red pants...I just love red pants. I don't wear them often... It's just the crisp white and the red pants, I still feel very edgy. The gray underneath was just a nice little contrast. I just felt very...work edgy. I like to do fun stuff and not just black and white, black and blue kind of stuff... they loved the red pants... Half my staff hood as hell anyway... They like... “Okay, girl! Okay, boo! I see you!” (**Sasha, 28, program coordinator**).

In this discussion of her favorite work outfit, Erica speaks to the act of inconspicuously incorporating a single black female cultural style into workplace ensembles. In this particular case, the one item was red pants. Like Lindsey and Tiffany, she likes to have “fun” with work attire by deviating from the more traditional blacks and blues. These red pants allow her to maintain aspects of her typical edgy style in a work- appropriate presentation (i.e., “work edgy”). Interestingly, this subtle incorporation of black cultural style was recognized by many of her black working-class (i.e., “hood”) female employees,

as they offered Sasha verbal affirmations and phrases of approval (i.e., “Okay, girl! Okay, boo! I see you!”).

The participants’ purposeful incorporation of black female culturally relevant styles extend past the work place to social environments. While styling choices in this context are not as cautious (e.g., one cultural style per an outfit), the importance of color is still apparent. Consider the following discussion concerning Audrey’s favorite photo journal entry pictured in Figure 11:

Figure 11: Black Cultural Style in Social Environments: Audrey’s Favorite Outfit



If I know I'm gonna be in a crowd with a lot of black creative people, I'll wear something African print... 'cause I know I'll get some attention from that, like, "Oh, yeah. That's cute."... if I wore an African print skirt to work, people might be like, "Oh." "That's nice." Whereas, if I walk into a room of friends or black colleagues. They be like, "Oh, yes!" So, there are just different appreciation levels... I don't wear them that often, and then that night, I got a lot of compliments of them... I like wearing those pants, so I was excited to wear them...So I was

doing black things, looking black, feeling black ...the print...and it's the cut too. So it's like a dropped crotch, so it gives you an African vibe (**Audrey, 28, archivist**).

Here, Audrey explains the thought process behind selecting this favorite outfit. Specifically, she was attending a black art event, and anticipated the majority of attendees to be black. Because she was entering a predominantly black space, she selected the brightly-colored “African-print” pants, as she knew they would be received well. Audrey compares the warm reception these pants receive in black spaces (i.e., “Oh yes!”), to the indifferent response from non-black individuals (i.e., “Oh.” and “That’s nice), noting that in some cases, it’s not an issue of appropriateness, but an issue of appreciation. Interestingly, she also express how she felt wearing this black female cultural style, calling the experience “exciting”, as she was “doing black things,” “looking black,” and “feeling black”.

Inventiveness through Instagram

This second subcategory of “#BlackGirlMagic” is “Inventiveness through Instagram”, which includes the ways participants use this SNS to inform stylistic expressions of their intersecting identities. This category of activities contains several specific motivations. The first motivations highlighted by participants includes using Instagram as a resource to locate culturally relevant style and retail outlets. Nicole speaks to this motivation in the following passage:

What was the magazine called? For some reason, I got a free subscription...so I started reading *Lucky*. It was actually kind of white because I think it was more catered to white people. Fashion is fashion, but I feel like in a sense... certain things are for white [people]. Whenever they talk about beauty and stuff like that, it was like, "I can't use this stuff. This is not for me." Now, I can just go on my

Instagram feed and scroll down...looking at what people posted for today or go to somebody's blog or whatever...It makes things so much easier... I follow some people that are not black, but the majority of people that I follow as far as beauty bloggers are black. I think for style, all the style bloggers that I follow are black...I'd go on other people's pages, but as far as my Instagram, it's mostly black bloggers. **(Nicole, 29, PhD student).**

Nicole first describes the process she used to find style-related inspiration or information prior to the creation of Instagram. This process included browsing mainstream fashion magazines (i.e., *Lucky*) for new fashion-related trends and ideas. This process, however, was not always productive, as some of the items—particularly beauty products—did not cater to her needs (i.e., “I can't use this stuff. This is not for me.”). The availability of culturally relevant items on Instagram, however, has altered this process. More specifically, since Nicole has located and “followed” black Instagram beauty and fashion bloggers. She simply logs on, and peruses her feed for daily fashion-related images. If she identifies an item, product or, look, she admires, she can also visit the external blogs that are hyperlinked in the information section of the blogger’s profile.

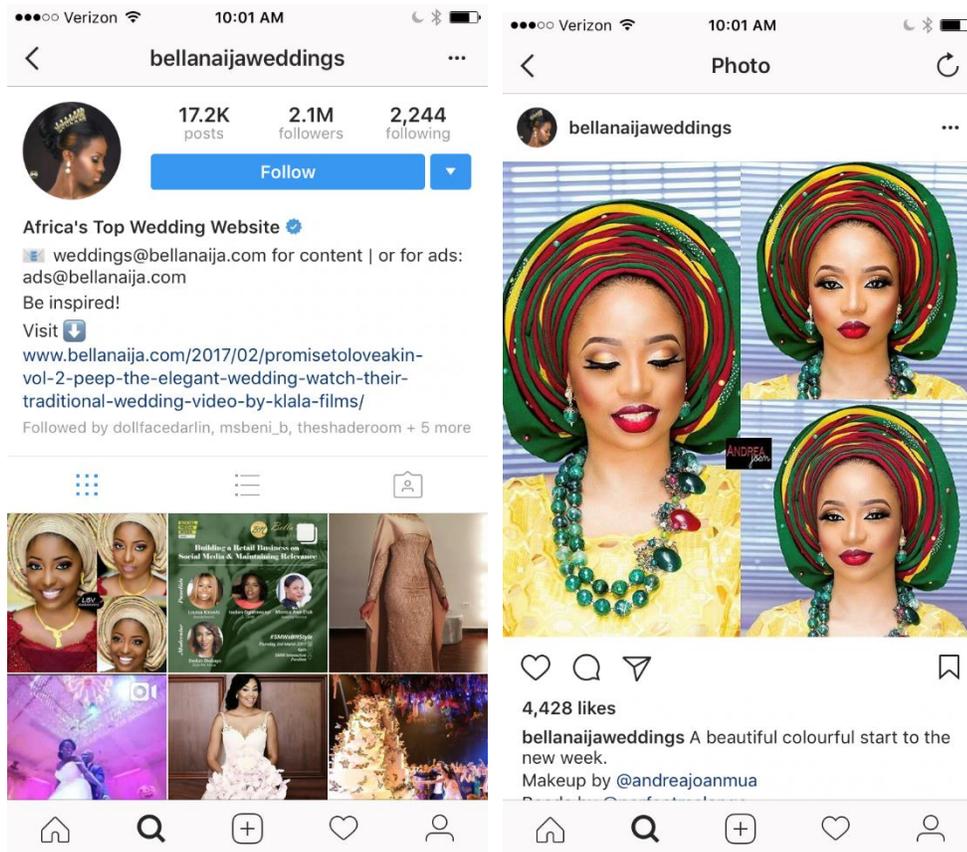
Like Nicole, Leslie also expresses the ease in finding culturally relevant fashion inspirations and retail outlets via Instagram. Consider her following comments concerning @bellanaijaweddings:

There's something called Bellanaija.com... I followed that too to get inspiration for dresses from Nigeria, like my Nigerian outfits and things like that. Even more of the cultural ones where I did my head ties ... I [also] followed them to get ideas for jewelry... **(Leslie, 35, senior project manager).**

Here, Leslie mentions her use of @bellanaijaweddings, an Instagram account created and run by the creators of bellanajia.com (Figure 12). While the term “naija” is a self-

identification label used to exhibit Nigerian cultural pride (Labaran, 2010), the account is also self-proclaimed as “Africa’s Top Wedding Website” The account’s daily posts include a wide range of fashion-related information, including images of featured brides, bridal and bridesmaid dress examples, and items from vendors specializing in African-inspired wedding attire and accessories. When planning her recent Nigerian wedding ceremony, Leslie heavily relied on @bellanaijaweddings as a stylistic resource. Specifically, the account provided inspiration for dresses, jewelry, and culturally-relevant head wraps.

Figure 12: @bellanaijaweddings Instagram Account



In addition to finding ethnically relevant styles, the participants also use Instagram to overcome polarizing experiences related to fashion-related consumption and more specific aspects of their identity intersections. An example of this is seen in Gabby's comparison of her apparel-related shopping experiences before the existence of Instagram:

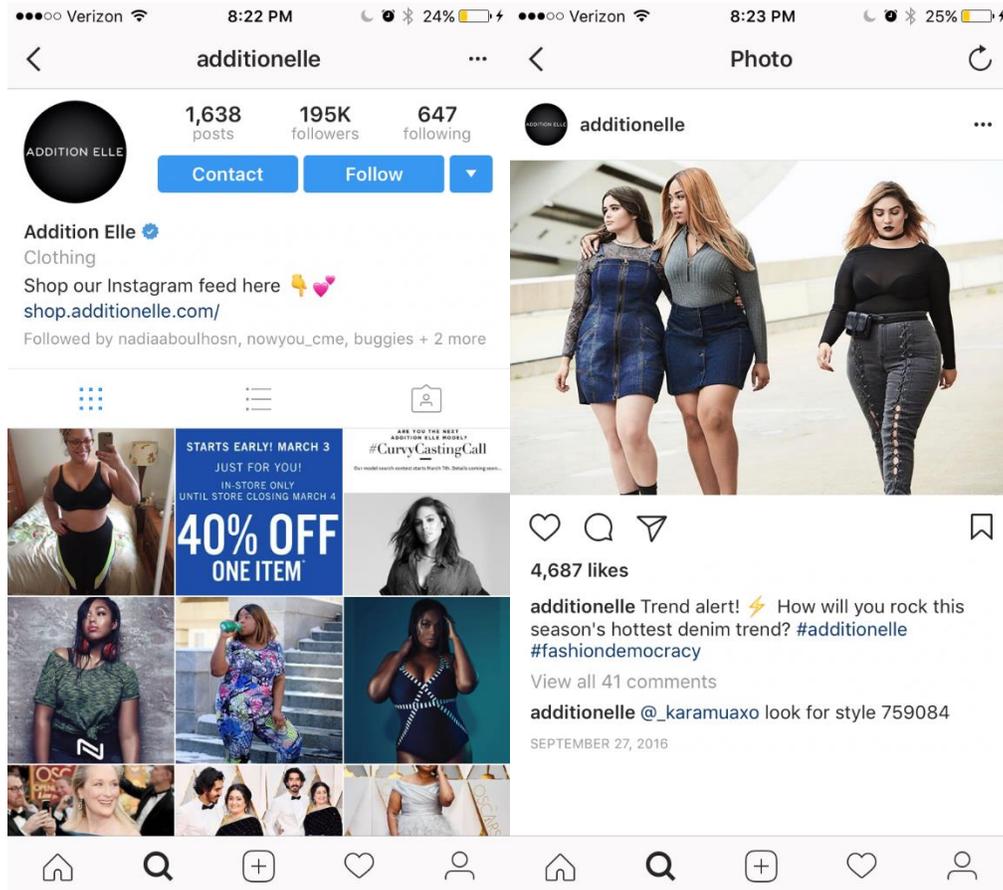
I just would go to stores and try stuff on and be sad...I didn't like going in stores like Lane Bryant, or any of the brick and mortar stores that were geared towards plus size. 'Cause most the stuff was ugly... this was at a time when most places didn't have extended sizes. Definitely not in store, and most of them not online. And so ... all the girls who were considered plus size ... it was like a fight over who would get the one extra-large that got sent to the store **(Gabby, 29, PhD student)**.

Prior to Instagram, Gabby's apparel related shopping experiences were often stressful and demoralizing. Not only did many outlets fail to carry her size in-store and online, but many items in her size were unappealing (i.e., "ugly"). This lack of desired styles often lead to feelings of sadness in the fitting room, or "fights" over a single item, as the styles she desired were unattainable do to the short range of sizes. These past experiences however, vary sharply from Gabby's current use of Instagram for fashion-related consumption purposes:

There's a lot that's changed even in just the last five, six years for me, because more plus size retailers exist... there's a lot of plus sized retailers that I follow on Instagram, like @additionelle...Just because they have different campaigns that they're running... a lot of the fashion plus sized bloggers, I follow their blogs, and I follow them on Instagram ... so like there's multiple ways for me to see outfits that they're wearing, and often they put a link to like the store... Bloggers and some of these other models are also doing collaborations... so I always like to be on the lookout for that. Who's doing collaboration work with certain stores or certain retailers, certain designers...so like when Christian Siriano did his collaboration line with Lane Bryant, and the girl who plays Taystee on *Orange Is The New Black* was his inspiration for the line. Some of their pieces are fabulous...stuff like that. I find out a lot about this stuff because of Instagram. **(Gabby, 29, PhD student)**.

Here, Gabby shares three ways in which the introduction of Instagram has positively altered her fashion-related shopping experiences. First, not only has the number of available trendy plus-sized retailers and apparel lines increased, but these companies also have a presence on Instagram. Gabby has located and followed several of these retailers, including @additionelle (see Figure 13), which not only provide fashion inspiration, but also offer the featured looks for sale in a range of sizes assessable to Gabby.

Figure 13: Gabby’s Favorite Plus-Size Fashion Instagram Account: @additionelle



Second, Gabby discusses her use of Instagram to learn about fashion collaborations with celebrities, designers, and plus-size retailers or fashion lines. Specifically, she give the example of designer Christian Siriano’s popular collaboration with Lane Bryant (see Figure 14). Siriano, the winner and fan-favorite of the fourth season of *Project Runway* (an American Reality television program in which contestant compete for a chance to design a fashion collection for New York Fashion Week, win investment money to launch a clothing line), collaborated with the retailer with the goal of developing pieces that challenge the rules of plus-size fashion (Cheng, 2016). Additionally, Siriano, selected Danielle Brooks, the curvy actress who plays Taystee on the popular Netflix series *Orange is the new Black*, to be the face of the new line.

Figure 14: Celebrity/Fashion Plus-Size Collaborations on Instagram: @csiriano for @lanebryant

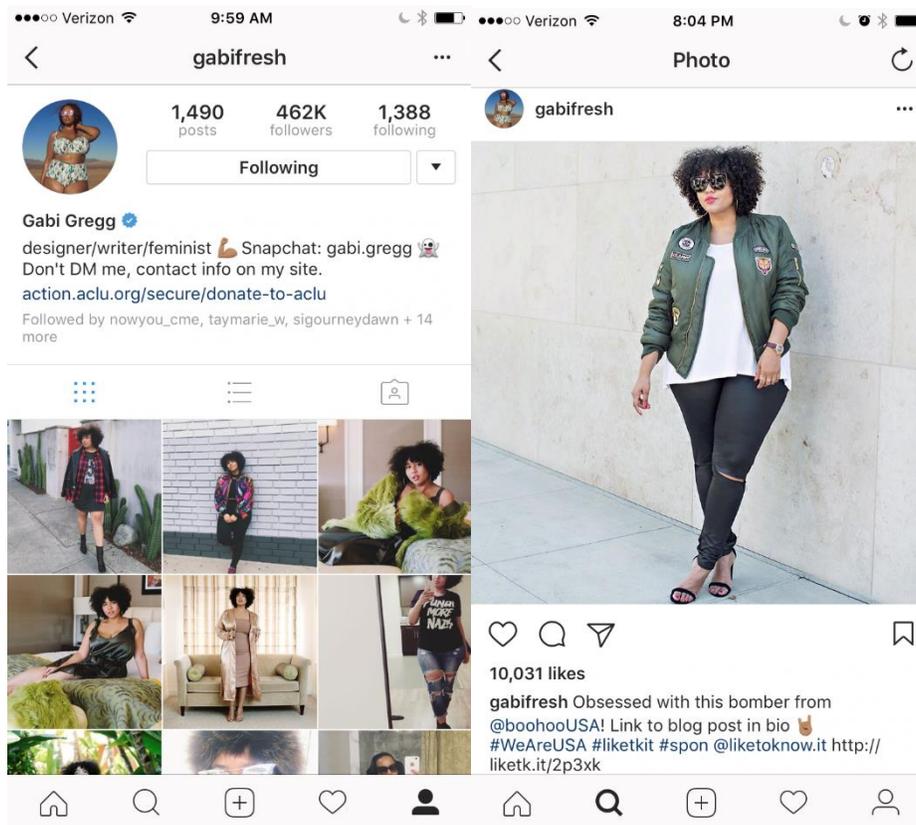


Third, in addition to following plus-sized retailers, Gabby also mentions following plus-size fashion bloggers for fashion inspiration. Interestingly, her favorite bloggers are strategically selected based on perceived alignment with aspects of her complex intersectional identities:

I follow GabiFresh... 'Cause she's a mixed girl who has big curly hair, who's a big girl like me, and generally our bodies are similar shapes, so things—the way that they look on her, I can generally gauge that that's probably how it'll look on me, which is nice... **(Gabby, 29, PhD student).**

Here, Gabby shares information on @GabiFresh (see Figure 15), a fashion blogger who specializes in trendy styles for women size 14 up, and emphasizes the rejection of the mainstream fashion message, “dress for your body type” (GabiFresh, 2014). GabiFresh is a favorite of Gabby’s for several reasons beyond her stylistic choices. Specifically, she aligns herself with this blogger on several levels of her intersecting identities, including femaleness (i.e., “girl”), a black multi-racial background (i.e., “mixed”), hair type (i.e., “big curly hair”), and body type (i.e., “a big girl like me”). Because she identifies so closely with aspects of her identity and physical appearance, she uses @GabiFresh as model to determine how an item outfit will fit her.

Figure 15: @GabiFresh Instagram Account

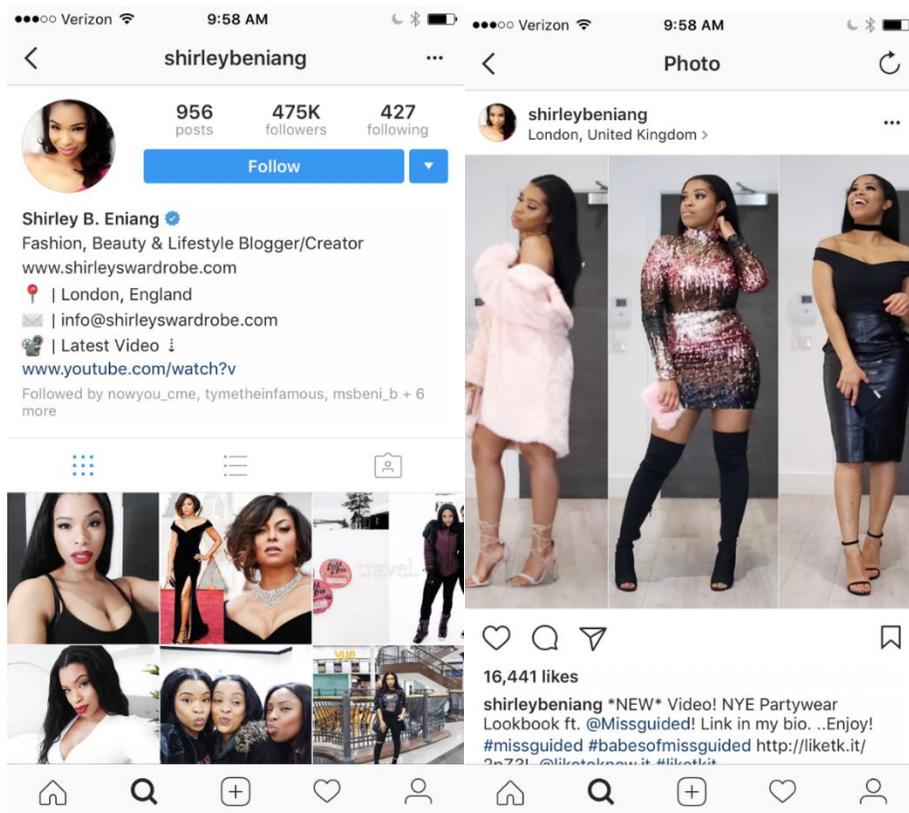


This use of Instagram to discover bloggers with a similar intersectional identity and similar body type is also seen in other participants. Consider Kameron’s discussion of her favorite fashion blogger:

@shirleybeniang...She does a lot of classic kind of pieces that you could use for different outfits. She’s kind of simple, but she be slaying. It might not be a super expensive dress, but she’ll have some bad shoes...., and her make-up’s always done, which is nice. She’s kind of short stature, curvy girl, so our body styles are similar... Sometimes, she’ll buy stuff that I may not necessarily buy... but if I buy something that’s fit similarly, I can use whatever size that she got to kind of tailor it, to see if I can find something my size. That’s helpful (**Kameron, 28, civil engineer**).

Like Gabby, Kameron has a body type that is not frequently represented in mainstream fashion outlets or apparel models (i.e., short and curvy). Because of this, it can be difficult for her to gauge how items may look before making a purchase. Due to this difficulty, she has identified and followed individuals like @shirleybeniang (see Figure 16), a black British fashion blogger. Not only does Kameron admire her fashion (i.e., “she be slaying”), but she also identifies with her body type (i.e., “short and curvy”). Similar to Gabby, because of these similarities, Kameron can better speculate how the clothing or brands recommended by @shirleybeniang will fit her body if purchased.

Figure 16: @shirleybeniang Instagram Account



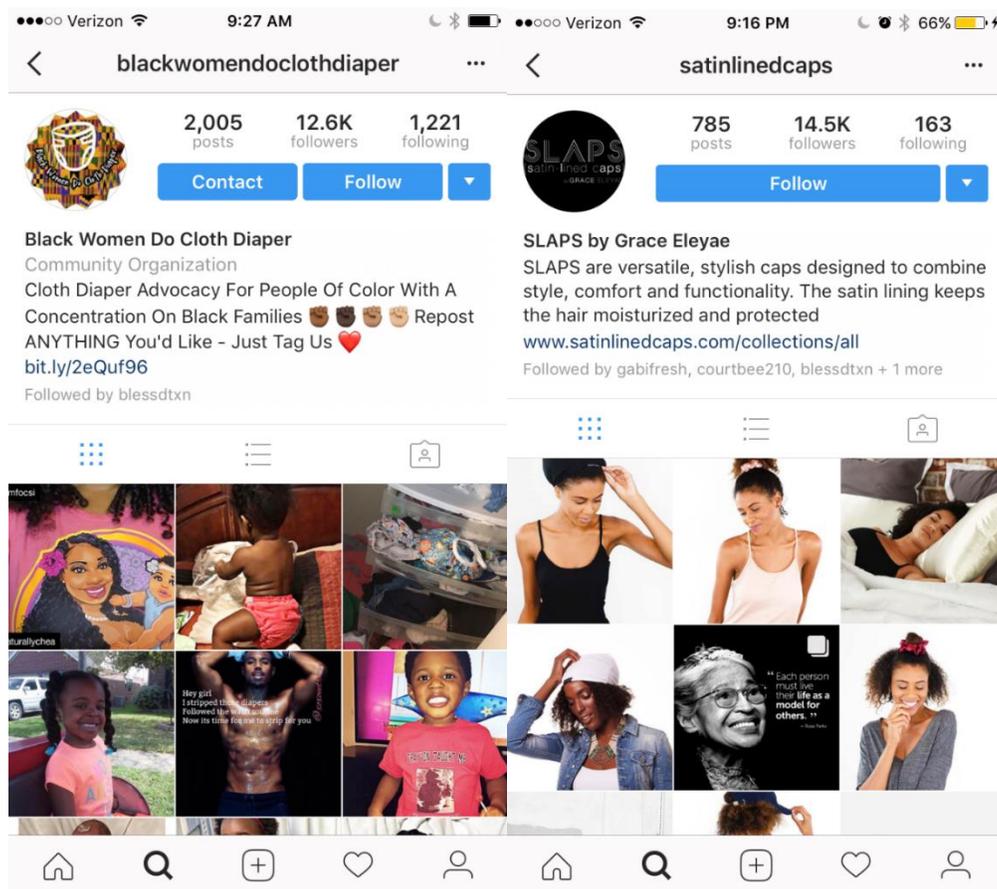
In addition to accommodating variations in black female body types, Instagram is also used by participants to accommodate specific stylistic desires attributed to other variations in identity and physical features. Consider the following excerpt from Samantha:

I don't follow any fashion blogs, but if they post on a wide variety of things and they happen to say something about, "I got some shoes and they're really comfortable," or "These were a great deal." "These lasted forever." Then that carries a little more weight because I don't feel like they're selling something... There's an Instagram account I follow called Black Women, Cloth Diaper. As in, I used cloth diapers. But there are a lot of things that she posts about that are up my ally... And she recommend satin lined caps. ... They are wonderful... I love it... a friend of mine recommended it, but our hair is not very similar. I was like, "Hmmm, we're not the same." But the woman who runs the Black Women, Cloth Diaper group, her hair is more like mine. And when she posts pictures, I was like, if she recommends it, that carried a little more weight, even though I've never met her. I feel like we are at the same end of the spectrum in some things. Your hair looks like mine and you think it's a good product; I'm gonna give it a try. So I bought one and I did like it. I like it a lot... **(Samantha)**

Unlike the previously discussed participants, Samantha does not consider herself a “fashionista”, and does not follow any bloggers whose content is solely fashion related. She does, however, value and trust the fashion-related advice offered by the lifestyle bloggers she closely identifies with. In this example, she identifies @blackwomendoclothdiaper (see Figure 17), an Instagram account for an organization that promotes “cloth diaper advocacy for people of color with a concentration on black families”. While the account’s content concerning cloth diaper benefits, availability, and purchase information was Samantha’s primary motivation behind following this account, a product recommendation made by the account’s moderator prompted a recent apparel-related purchase. Specifically, the moderator recommended a satin-lined beanie designed to protect natural black hair, and prevent strand breakage in the dry winter months.

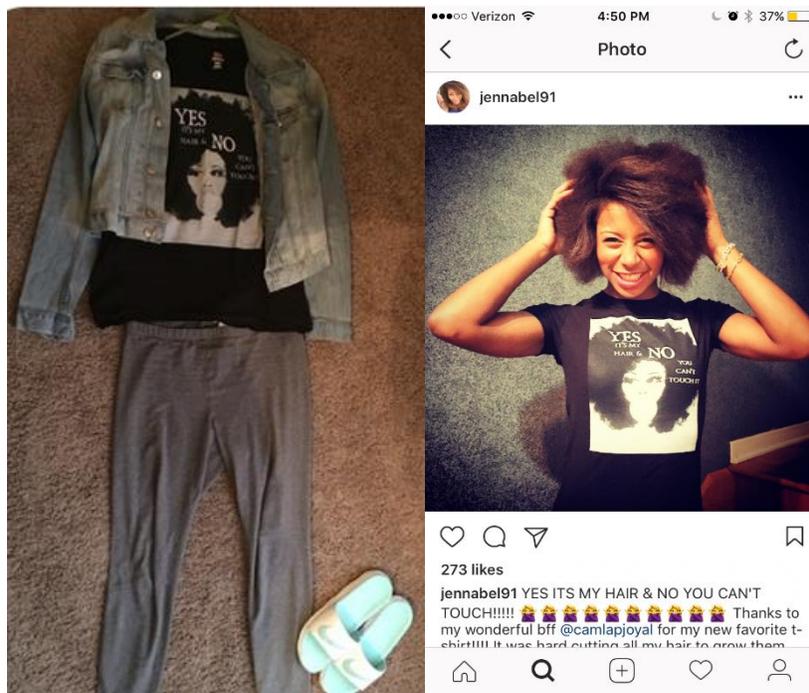
Interestingly, although a black female friend recommended this very product to Samantha, she decided against the purchase, citing their differences in hair texture and concluding that she may not experience the product benefits observed by her friend. However, despite the fact that she has never met the moderator of @blackwomendoclothdiaper, Samantha's perceived similarities between herself and the account owner (i.e., hair texture), gave more credibility to the Instagram recommendation, and served as the motivation for this purchase.

Figure 17: @blackwomendoclothdiaper and @satinlinedcaps Instagram Accounts



In addition to using Instagram to locate apparel styles that accommodate more nuanced differences and desires related to their intersectional identities (e.g., body type and hair texture), participants use this SNS to locate apparel related items that represent explicit political viewpoints related to their personal beliefs. Consider the following excerpt from the conversation concerning a favorite t-shirt of Natasha’s from her photo journal pictured in Figure 18:

Figure 18: Instagram, Explicit Political Fashion Statements, and Style: Natasha’s Curl Hair T-shirt



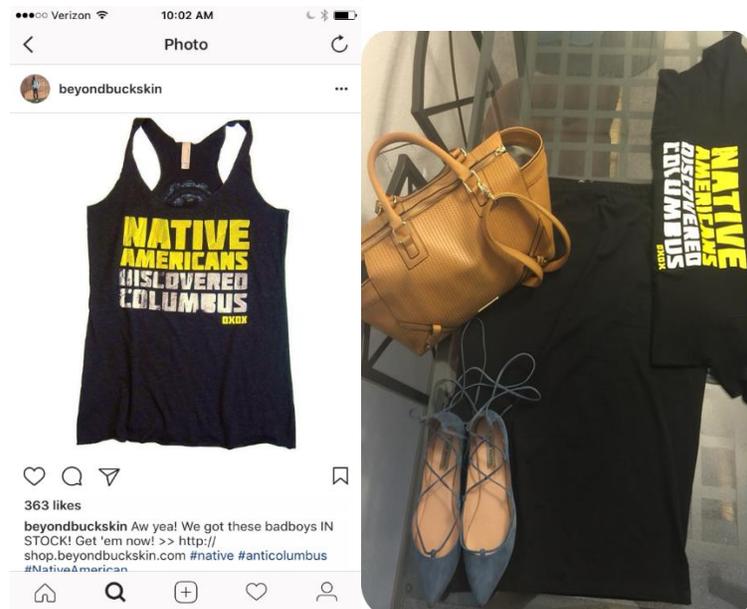
I’m a curly hair advocate. ... This one is about the natural hair. “Yes it's my hair, no you can't touch it.” I always thought it was cute... I bought it off a website, and it was off one of the Instagram pages that I follow... like a natural curly or something, like one of those (Natasha, 27, paralegal).

Here, Natasha explains her advocacy for curly hair. This choice by Natasha and other black woman to wear their hair is in its natural state (i.e., abstention from hair relaxers or

straighteners) is often driven by political motivations—specifically the rejection of Eurocentric beauty standards (e.g., straight hair)—and serves as an act of “self-definition and liberation” (White, 2005, p. 295). While browsing her Instagram feed, Natasha came across this t-shirt in a post uploaded by an account that celebrates the beauty and diversity of black natural hair textures and styles. After encountering the post, she proceeded to the hyperlinked website and made the purchase.

Similarly, Gabby has also initiated fashion-related purchases through Instagram that explicitly communicate her political beliefs and alignments. Consider the following excerpt from the conversation concerning Gabby’s photo journal entry pictured in Figure 19:

Figure 19: Instagram, Explicit Political Statements, and Style: Gabby’s Appropriation T-Shirt



The screen print, the one that says "Native Americans Discovered Columbus"...So there's this blog called Beyond Buckskin that talks about appropriation of Native American culture...it also highlights Native American clothing designers. They

have a store... and so I liked that shirt. I've worn it to a conference before. I feel very political when I wear it (**Gabby, 29, PhD student**).

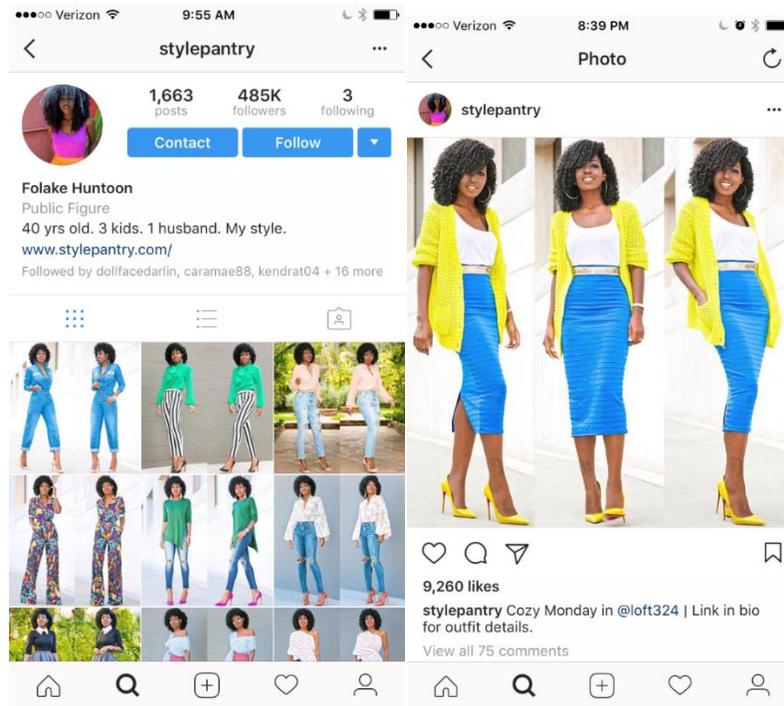
Here, Gabby explains the process and motivation behind purchasing the t-shirt depicted in her photo journal. In this example, she follows @beyondbucks skin, an account that offers information concerning the appropriation (i.e., the adoption of styles, practices, identities etc. of marginalized cultures without attributing credit to the populations who developed them) of various Native American cultures. Although Gabby identifies as black, her broader identity as a woman of color (i.e., non-white women), prompts feelings of community that motivate her to recognize and support the causes of marginalized individuals across racial groups. Because of these motivations, Gabby to purchase the shirt, as it not only aligns with her personal political views (i.e., discontentment with Eurocentric appropriation of a marginalized cultures), but also monetarily supports the efforts of Native American designers. Like Natasha, Gabby also wears her t-shirt to explicitly communicate this political stance, as she has worn this t-shirt to academic conferences specifically to make a political statement.

The final use of Instagram to supporting aspects of their intersectional identity observed in the participants includes supporting black female bloggers or fashion-related small business owners. This support does not always involve making purchases. Instead, it includes admiring, appreciating, and promoting the fashion efforts of other black females.

Morgan speaks to this idea briefly, but succinctly:

I follow Style Pantry... I don't recreate her stuff at all, but I think that it's just so cute. She's just a Black woman that's just... "doing it."(**Morgan, 32, teacher**)

Figure 20: Support and Admiration of Black Female Fashion Bloggers: @stylepantry Instagram Account



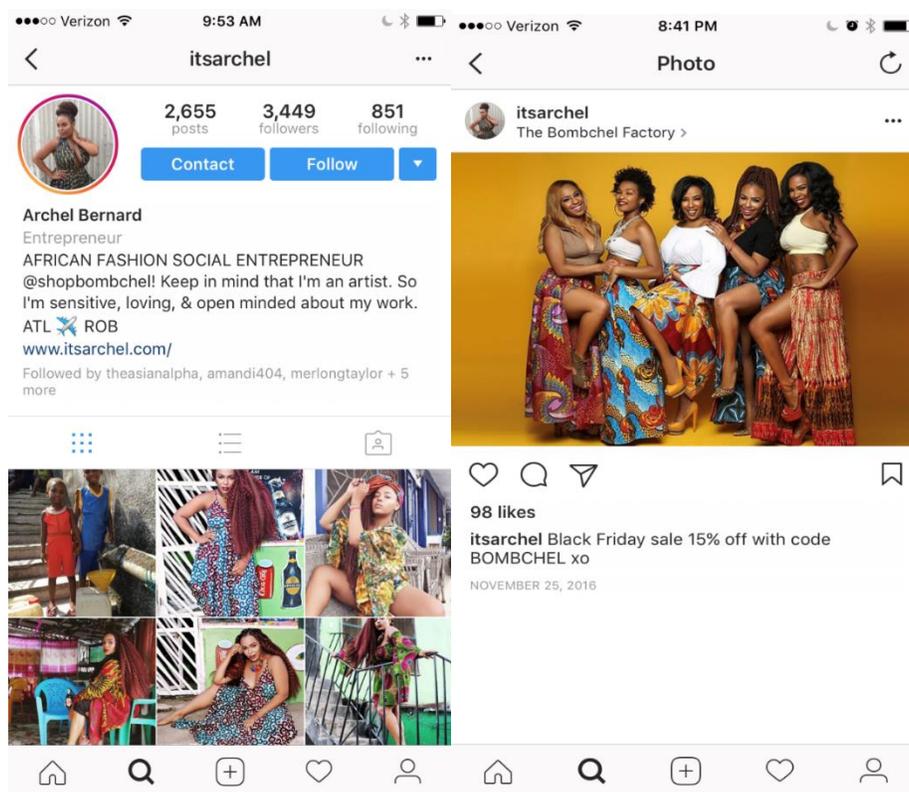
In this statement, Morgan expressed her admiration for @stylepantry (See Figure 20). Although she does not make efforts to recreate the styles uploaded to this account, she does appreciate the bloggers fashion sense (i.e., “it’s just so cute!”) and her success in building a substantial following of 485 thousand followers (i.e., “She’s just a black woman that’s just ‘doing it’”). Because of these factors, Morgan shows her support of this bloggers efforts by subscribing to her content.

In addition to exhibiting admiration and appreciation for the efforts of these black female fashion accounts, the participants also display support by referring these bloggers or small-business owners to others. Consider the following testament from Morgan:

One of my good friends has her own fashion business that she started when we were in college... Whenever she posts something, I’m like, "Oh, I should scroll through

her website." And I have sent her Instagram page to other people. She's Liberian, and her clothes are made in Liberia. She moved back to Liberia after school. One of the things that she really markets with her business is the fact that she's helping Liberian women to learn skills and make money. And it's all African prints, right? So if anybody ever tells me that they're looking for something that's an African print, or socially conscious, then I recommend it to them. I don't know if I've actually converted anyone to buy anything, but I've definitely put people on to her and her business.... **(Holly, 29, MBA student).**

Figure 21: Support and Recommendation of Black Female Fashion Small Business Owners: @itsArchel Instagram Account



Here, Holly provides information on the fashion-related small business Instagram account of a college friend, @itsArchel (see Figure 21). This business not only specializes in apparel items with various traditional African prints, but also promotes the economic self-

advancement of Liberian women. Because of these characteristics and efforts, Holly has not only made past purchases, but she follows the account, and recommends the account to friends with an interest in African-print apparel and in businesses with a socially-conscious mission.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter presented the four principal themes that emerged from the participant's photo journals and follow-up in-depth interviews. The first discussed theme is cultural double standards and appearance, which provides understandings concerning the impact of the race, class, and gender identity intersections on the participant's perceived stylistic freedoms. Specifically, the data describes the "black tax" (i.e., the double standards imposed on black women that are not encountered in the lived experiences of black men or white women), and middle-class "bourgeoisness" (i.e., the use of clothing to refute the black middle-class stereotypes of an active rejection of black culture and communities). The relevant findings comprising both of these double standards designate these stereotypes and resulting behaviors as two prominent cultural parameters that constrain the participants' abilities to freely express themselves through clothing.

Second is the theme of "the respectability politics of fashion", which describes the stylistic strategies participants use to communicate desired messages, identities, and abilities within the two parameters of cultural fashion double standards outlined in the first theme. This second theme includes three subcategories of strategies, including appropriateness (i.e., the actions and strategies participants use to mitigate societal stereotypes and stigmas attached to black middle-class female identities), of code-

switching strategies (i.e. the actions participants use to conform to the perceived fashions of the dominant racial make-up of a social space), and policing strategies refers to the monitoring of the fashion efforts of other black women to ensure the social perceptions of black women are positive.

The third theme presented in this chapter is “within group difference”, which explicates how the different class and nationality origins observed in the participants impact their perceptions of and relationship with fashion-related consumption. This theme is comprised of two observed differences, the impact of Nigerian vs. black American roots, and the transition from poor or working-class beginnings, to middle-class status.

The fourth and final theme is “#BlackGirlMagic”, which describes the ways the participants use apparel-related products to celebrate their identities and cultural group pride. These practices include two subcategories: the refusal to fully assimilate (i.e., the unwillingness to fully relinquish styles that communicate black female cultural pride), and inventiveness through Instagram (i.e., they ways in that the participants use this SNS to as a tool for overcoming consumption barriers encountered in traditional fashion-related informational retail spaces, and a tool for identity celebration).

As referenced throughout this chapter’s discussion of these findings, each of the four themes are rooted in the complex intersectional identity of black middle-class females. Chapter 5 will expand on these complexities, as well as outline a proposed model that explicates these observed relationships between intersectional identities and apparel-related consumption.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The primary goal of this dissertation was to glean a more complex understanding of black middle-class females' use of apparel related consumption for identity expression, and to gain insights concerning the role of SNSs in this process. As outlined in the previous chapter, the analysis of the photo journals and in-depth interviews revealed four primary themes that further these understandings: (1) cultural double-standards and appearance, (2) the respectability politics of fashion, (3) within-group differences, and (4) #BlackGirlMagic.

While the current study does not claim to explicate all consumer occurrences of identity expression through apparel-related consumption, this dissertation does further theoretical understandings of consumer identity projects (i.e., a consumer's use of marketplace materials—such as apparel-related products and Instagram content—to construct and communicate a diverse, coherent identity) and sociohistorical patterning of consumption (i.e., the institutional and social structures—such as race, class, and gender—that impact consumption) First, the four emergent themes of this study illustrate the importance of an intersectional approach in identity-related studies of black consumer populations. Second, the four themes collectively provide insights into how and why the intersectional identity convergences of black middle-class women impact product use (e.g., fashion styling strategies), purchases (e.g., apparel-related purchases), and information searches (e.g., following fashion bloggers on Instagram) across a diverse range of situations (e.g., predominantly white and professional, or predominantly black and informal).

The subsequent discussion in this chapter will explicate these two theoretical contributions. Evidence supporting the value of intersectional frameworks in studies of black consumers will be outlined first by extrapolating the four thematic findings to the broader theoretical understandings of black middle-class female intersectional identity introduced in Chapter 2. Second, the observed impacts of these identity convergences on apparel-related consumption practices will be addressed through a proposed extension of Stayman and Deshpande's (1989) model of situational ethnicity and consumer behavior. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of these contributions, the limitations of this dissertation, and suggestions for future research.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO EXISTING THEORY

The Importance of an Intersectional Approach to Consumption Studies

Chapter 4 presented the four principal themes that emerged from the participants' photo journals and follow-up in-depth interviews. As referenced throughout the previous chapter's discussion, each of the themes are rooted in the complex intersectional identity of black middle-class female consumers. In the case of the first theme—cultural double standards and appearance—the data provides understandings concerning the impact of race, class, and gender identity intersections on the participant's perceived stylistic freedoms. Specifically, the data describes the “black tax” and “middle-class ‘bourgieness’”—two cultural parameters that constrain the participants' abilities to freely express themselves through clothing. A second look at “The Complexities of Black Middle-Class Female Consumer Identity” outlined in Chapter 2 reveals a connection

between its discussion of the racial and gendered peripheral group position of black females and these two cultural fashion-related parameters.

Recall the discussion of the unidimensional categories historically used to describe the experiences (i.e. race and gender). Specifically, the coexisting marginalized race and gender identities of black women (i.e., blackness and femaleness) intersect to create a cultural dynamic in which black women exist as an “outsider within” each of these groups; shouldering the marginalized cultural definitions of each category, while simultaneously restricted from many of the available privileges of these broader group identities (i.e., maleness and whiteness respectively) (Collins, 2009; Dyer, 1997; Fiske, 1996; hooks, 2000). The restrictions resulting from this outsider-within status are apparent throughout the participants’ discussions of the “black tax”—the burden black middle-class females encounter to disprove black female stereotypes through fashion. In these discussions, the women clarify that their experiences with this black tax are unique compared to the double-standards encountered by their black male and white female counterparts. For example, though black males do encounter pressure to disprove hyperaggressive stereotypes (particularly in nightclubs or bars), the participants suggest that disproving these stereotypes primarily involve the adoption of a basic clean-cut appearance (e.g., a tailored suit and tie, close-cropped hair cuts, abstention from tattoos and piercings), or alterations of behavior (i.e., the adoption of behaviors associated with white masculinity). Conversely, the participants not only recount pressure to disprove hyperaggressive stereotypes attached to blackness, but also report pressure to overcome the sexual objectification and additional stigmatization resulting from stereotypes of hypersexuality specific to black females.

Recall from the previous chapter, that the participants' suggest that these physical markers of hypersexuality are often linked to their natural, unaltered body, specifically a curvaceous shape. Because of this, black women can assume the same clean-cut stylistic strategies as black men, but their curves—hidden or accentuated—are always at risk of sexual objectification and attracting unwanted attention.

Additionally, though white women experience a gender double-standard that pressures them to adopt fashions to communicate mental competence and deflect instances of sexual objectification, the participants suggest that the black tax incorporates racial undertones that intensifies these pressures for black women. Specifically, the participants cite the blackness stereotypes of laziness and hypersexuality that pressure black women to adopt higher standards concerning modesty (e.g., knee-length skirts), personal grooming practices, and dress-code formality (e.g., adopting business professional dress when business casual is required)—especially in the workplace. The results outlined in the previous chapter also speak to the detrimental impact society's Eurocentric (i.e. white) standards of beauty have on black women, specifically the increased pressure black women encounter to adopt consumption practices that will alter their appearance to conform to these standards (e.g., professional hair straightening, purchasing and wearing hair extensions, or buying colored contacts).

These unique combined gendered and racial experiences of the black female participants that emerged in their discussions of the black tax not only serve as evidence of their peripheral position in their racial and gendered cultural groups, but also provides further evidence that unidimensional categories alone are insufficient in capturing the true

complexities of their identities and apparel-related consumption habits. Instead, an intersectional approach is needed to acknowledge the unique lived experiences of black women. The discussion of black feminism outlined in Chapter 2, for example, provides valuable insights in understanding the participants' unique lived experiences, and the influence of these experiences on their apparel-related consumption habits. For example, the “Jezebel” stereotype referenced in black feminist literature (Collins, 2009; West 1995) speaks to the unique hypersexuality stereotype repeatedly referenced by the participants. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the characteristic that makes this Jezebel persona unique is its historic use in justifying the rape of black females. Specifically the innate sexual nature of the “Jezebel” is so hypnotizing and unavoidable, that any and all sexual advances—consensual or not—are expected and warranted. This perception stands in stark contrast to that of white women, who are historically situated and epitome of feminine virginal innocence (Dyer, 1997). Additionally, this perception also differs from the hypersexual “Mandingo” stereotype of black men, whose historical use is most closely linked to white male efforts of shielding white women from their alleged sexual prowess (Dyer, 1997; Jackson, 1994).

In regards to the fashion double-standard of “middle-class ‘bourgieness’”, recall Chapter 2’s discussion of “black respectability politics”, which illustrates the historic perception of middle-class black populations as “race traitors.” Specifically, black working-class or poor individuals often criticized members of the black middle-class as being so preoccupied with assimilation and self-advancement efforts, they lost sight of black racial uplift goals (Collins, 2009; Collins, 2012; Molnar & Lamont, 2002). The

participants exhibit experience with these perceptions in their discussions of bourgeoisness (i.e., the use of clothing to refute the black middle-class stereotypes of actively rejecting black culture and communities), and share the fashion-related strategies they use to overcome this stereotype. Most notably, these strategies involved rejecting brands they associated with whiteness (i.e., LL Bean and Teva), and adopting brands they associated with black culture (i.e., Jordan athletic shoes) when attending predominantly black social events. According to the participants, the primary goal of this strategy is to communicate to other black individuals that they not only embrace their black identity, but are also capable of successfully navigating black social spaces.

These unique social class experiences of the black female participants that emerged in their discussions of middle class bourgeoisness further supports the importance of an intersectional approach in capturing the complexities of the lived experiences of black women. Specifically, these experiences illustrate the usefulness of combining multiple theoretical insights that speak to the multifaceted identities of black female consumers. In this case, incorporating literature on black respectability politics adds an important layer of understanding regarding race and social class identity to the fashion-consumption habits of black middle-class female consumers.

The usefulness of this addition becomes more apparent in the data comprising the second theme of “the respectability politics of fashion”, which provides understandings concerning the stylistic strategies the participants use to communicate desired characteristics within the cultural fashion double-standards parameters outlined above (i.e., the black tax and middle-class bourgeoisness). The participants describe appropriateness,

code-switching, and policing—three strategies used to express desirable aspects of their identity while simultaneously refuting stereotypes associated with black middle-class femaleness. An additional look at the theoretical discussion of the complex identities of black middle-class female consumers provided in Chapter 2 reveals a connection between these three strategies and the intersecting race, class, and gender experiences of the participants. Specifically, recall the discussion of the three desired outcomes of “black respectability politics”: (1) obtaining cultural status and authority in the U.S., (2) assimilation into American society, and (3) securing universal recognition of the humanity of black populations in the U.S. (Gaines, 1996; Higginbotham, 1994). The common themes connecting these desired outcomes are decency and morality, which black middle-class individuals strategically express through maintaining a modest appearance, and selecting “appropriate” fashion choices to distance themselves from the negative stereotypes associated with blackness. (Gaines, 1996; Higginbotham, 1994).

These appearance maintenance practices surface throughout the participants’ discussions of the three strategies highlighted within the “respectability politics of fashion” theme. For example, the women cite overdressing (i.e., exceeding the required dress code for social events) and purchasing and wearing “real clothes” (i.e., items that fit properly, and that are made from higher quality materials) as key strategies for communicating appropriateness. These actions are used as a visual signifier of two of the aforementioned principles of respectability politics: expressions of their cultural status and authority, and a visual negation of blackness stereotypes that compromise their perceived humanity. Specifically, the participants admit to using these stylistic strategies to communicate their

qualifications, abilities, and work ethic in the workplace, while simultaneously refuting black stereotypes of laziness, ignorance, and inferior racial status.

An additional behavior divulged by participants that is used to strategically communicate appropriateness is the act of strategically covering the body—particularly the buttocks—with long tops or sweaters, looser-fitting clothing, etc. According to the participants, this strategy is used specifically to disprove hypersexuality stereotypes associated with black femaleness (e.g., “Jezebel”), and avoid the negative treatment that accompanies such stigmatization. This practice speaks specifically to the apparel-related experiences of black middle-class women within respectability politics. Specifically, the fashions of black women historically undergo increased surveillance in the realm of respectability politics, as these women were constantly advised to dress modestly to divert the sexual advances of white and black males (Higginbotham, 1994, p. 201).

Politics of black respectability are also apparent in the participants’ discussions of “code-switching” strategies, specifically the desired outcome of assimilation. The participants define code-switching as the actions they take to conform to the perceived behaviors, expectations, and fashions of the dominant racial group within a social space. Specifically, their disclosed experiences reveal the adoption of the stylistic choices previously observed in white individuals (e.g., simplicity of colors and in accessorizing) to fit into predominantly white spaces. Additionally, at least one participant attests to using clothing to appear “less-black”, in the hope of communicating sameness and community with her white counterparts, while also negating negative stereotypes attached to black femaleness. Specifically, one participant expressed a desire to negate the black female

stereotype of the “Black Lady”—the overly-independent, controlling, and professionally successful black middle-class woman—highlighted in Chapter 2’s discussion of black feminism. The participant feared that a business suit may incorrectly communicate a stereotypical desire to seize control, so she selected a mid-length circle skirt and blouse to express her desire to work as a team.

Policing strategies, the final tactic within the respectability politics of fashion category, is also closely linked to the theoretical discussion of black respectability politics outlined in Chapter 2. Specifically, the experiences disclosed by the participants reveal the monitoring of the fashion efforts of other black women to ensure the social perceptions of black women are positive. This monitoring assumed several different methods, including mental evaluations of the fashion choices of other black women, and speculation concerning how others interpret these fashion choices. At times these methods included interventions or “coaching” for other black women concerning the potential perceptions of current stylistic choices (e.g. form fitting clothing, jeans in the workplace), and recommendations on how to avoid these negative evaluations. These mental evaluations and interventions speak to the unique historic communal responsibilities that black women encounter to uplift the position and perception of the entire black race. Specifically, the politics of black respectability require the individual and collective action of black women to strategically teach and apply the appearance-related strategies deemed necessary in reforming society’s negative stereotypical perceptions of black populations (Higgenbotham, 1994).

In the case of the third theme—within group difference—the participants provide understandings concerning how the different class and nationality origins observed in the participants impact their perceptions of and relationship with fashion-related consumption. The experiences shared by the participants’ reveal two key differences: the impact of “Nigerian vs. black American roots”, and the “transition into the black middle class”.

The inadequacies of unidimensional identity measurements for explorations of black-middle class female consumer groups becomes increasingly apparent within this third theme. First, consider the impact of Nigerian vs. black American roots. Unidimensional conceptualizations of race not only ignore the impact that co-existing identities (i.e., gender or social class) may have on the lived experiences of black consumers; but they also assume that the black experience is uniform within this cultural group. The testaments of the women from Nigerian backgrounds, however, suggest otherwise. Recall from the previous chapter that at some point in their lives, these women experienced difficulty identifying with black American culture. In fact, an alignment with black American culture was often discouraged by parental figures. This discouragement extended to fashion, as assuming the styles of black Americans—or “akata” populations—was not only interpreted as a rejection of Nigerian culture, but also communicated voluntary affiliation with the laziness and hypersexual stereotypes associated with black American populations.

The second within-group difference of “transition into the black middle class” illustrates the diversity of experiences that exist within the black middle-class cultural group. Specifically, the experiences of the participants who underwent this transition reveal

a transitional learning curve that is absent from the testaments of the other women. For example, the women who underwent this transition recall their initial encounters with the fashion-related consumption habits and styling strategies of their black middle-class peers. Specifically, these participants' describe the initial surprise and discomfort they experienced after witnessing the frequency of their middle-class peers' apparel-related shopping, as well as the amount these individuals would expend on a single purchase. In some cases, these women experienced anxiety related to these practices, most notably a fear of ridicule or ostracism for the failure or refusal to adopt these same consumption patterns. These feelings of anxiety were rooted in the belief that they would be "discovered" and stripped of their new social class status; an emotion not present in the other participants, as their middle-class origins appeared to provide a sense of stability in their social-class identity.

The theoretical discussion of respectability politics in Chapter 2 mirrors these participant's experiences of encountering and assuming the consumption norms and expectations associated with black middle class identity. Specifically, the adoption of the "correct" standards and actions of appropriateness were historically necessary in transcending class boundaries and joining the middle-class fight against black stereotypes (Higgenbotham, 1994).

The fourth and final theme outlined in the previous chapter—*#BlackGirlMagic*—sheds light on the ways the participants use apparel-related products to celebrate their identities and express cultural group pride. Specifically, they describe their refusal to fully assimilate into mainstream American cultural through fashion, and the ways in which they

use SNSs, specifically Instagram, as a source for identifying fashions and supporting and celebrating the fashion efforts of other black women. Recall the discussion of black respectability politics from Chapter 2, specifically the desire to maintain aspects of black cultural identity within assimilation efforts. This desire was especially present in the participants' refusal to assimilate fully in the workplace. Specifically, while these women seek to disprove stereotypes associated with black female identity by meeting and maintaining standards of appropriateness, they actively incorporate styles into their outfits that express black –female cultural pride (e.g., including colors outside of the traditional professional palettes, and natural black hairstyles).

Additionally, the participants' use of Instagram discussed within the “innovation through Instagram” subcategory speaks to this idea of maintaining and expressing aspects of black cultural pride. While the majority of the uses shared by the participants are not rooted in black respectability politics specifically, they do shed light on the importance the women place on supporting fashion-related displays of black cultural identities on this SNSs. For example, participants subscribe—or “follow”--black female fashion bloggers as an act of support for their fashion efforts.

The participants' uses of Instagram also exhibit the importance of acknowledging multiple intersection of identity in studies of fashion-related consumption practices. Specifically, the participants indicate Instagram is a tool for successfully locating apparel-related products that satisfy additional aspects of their identity beyond race, gender, and social class. For example, some participants follow accounts for fashion inspiration or apparel-related purchase information related to their body type (e.g., black, female, and

plus size; or black, female, short, and curvy), or lifestyle (e.g., black mothers who use cloth diapers). Similarly, others use Instagram to locate apparel related items that more explicitly represent other features of their identity or cultural-political viewpoints (e.g., t-shirts with black political hair messages, or tank tops supporting Native American culture).

An Extension of the Model of Situational Ethnicity and Consumer Behavior

As discussed throughout the previous section, the themes uncovered in this dissertation reveal that an intersectional approach is key in uncovering important insights concerning fashion-related consumption, information seeking, and identity expression. In the case of the black-middle-class female consumers in this dissertation, the recognition of the intersections of race, gender, and social-class reveal a unique cultural experience that differs from their black male and white female counterparts. Additionally, differing lived experiences within these cultural categories (e.g., Nigerian American vs. black American, and transitioning from the working class to the middle-class) reveal unique perspectives that add further complexity to these apparel-related consumption practices.

One common element across the four themes that has yet to be fully addressed is the impact of situational factors (e.g., social environments and surroundings) on the relationship between black middle-class female intersectional identity and apparel-related consumption behaviors. This relationship is described through a proposed expansion of Stayman and Deshpande's (1989) model of situational ethnicity and consumption (MoSECB).

Prior to the development of this model, studies exploring the relationship between ethnicity and consumption conceptualized ethnic identity as a fixed identification that

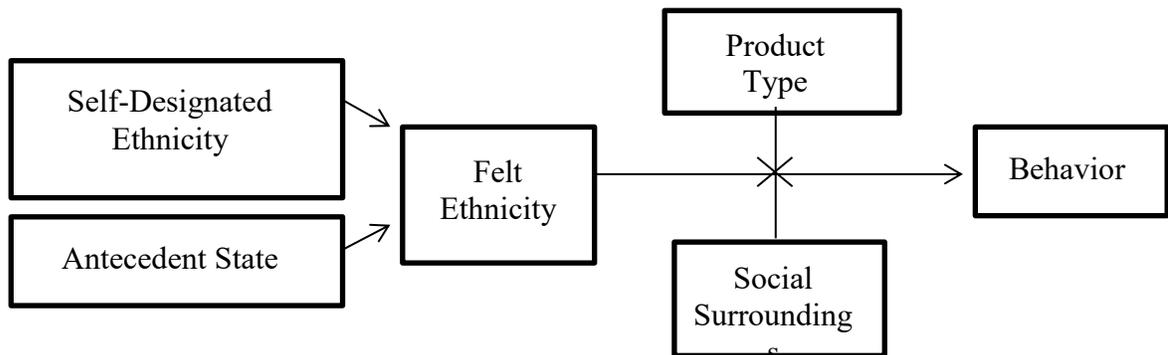
remained uniform across all members of an ethnic cultural group (see Deshpande, Hoyer, & Donthu, 1986; Faber, O'Guinn, and McCarty, 1987; Hirschman, 1981; Saegert, Hoover, & Hilger, 1985; Wallendorf & Reilly, 1983). Stayman and Deshpande (1989), however, propose that ethnic identity is situational—a flexible aspect of a consumer's self-concept, whose prominence and expression can be altered by changes in a consumer's social situations. Though this situational approach to ethnicity was previously referenced in social science literature (see Cohen, 1978; McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujita, 1978; Yancey, Eriksen, and Juliani, 1976), Stayman and Deshpande's (1989) MoSECB was first in explicitly applying the concept to consumption-related research.

The MoSECB (see Figure 22) combines concepts from social science and consumption research to add complexity to understandings of the relationship between ethnic identity, social surroundings, and consumption behaviors. Specifically, it utilizes Cohen's (1978) subjective definition of ethnicity, which incorporates the ethnic group in which a consumer identifies (i.e., self-designated ethnicity), with how strongly she identifies with that group at a given time (i.e., felt ethnicity). Additionally, the model incorporates three of Belk's (1974) objective dimensions of situations in consumption behavior: (1) social surroundings (i.e., the presence of others and their perceived character traits), (2) task definition (i.e., the product type or form of information search), and (3) antecedent states (i.e., the momentary moods or conditions immediately preceding the consumption behavior, that are elicited by exposure to a message, event, interaction, etc.). While Belk's (1978) work recognizes the importance of task definition—specifically product type—as a situational factor that impacts consumption behavior, Stayman and

Deshpande (1989) also incorporated the role of antecedent states and social surroundings in their situational ethnicity model.

In its entirety, the MoSECB proposes that an individual's self-designated ethnicity and her antecedent state influence the strength of the consumer's felt ethnicity, which, in turn, impacts their consumption behavior. Additionally, the situational dimensions of social surroundings and product type have a combined moderating effect on the relationship between felt ethnicity and consumption behavior.

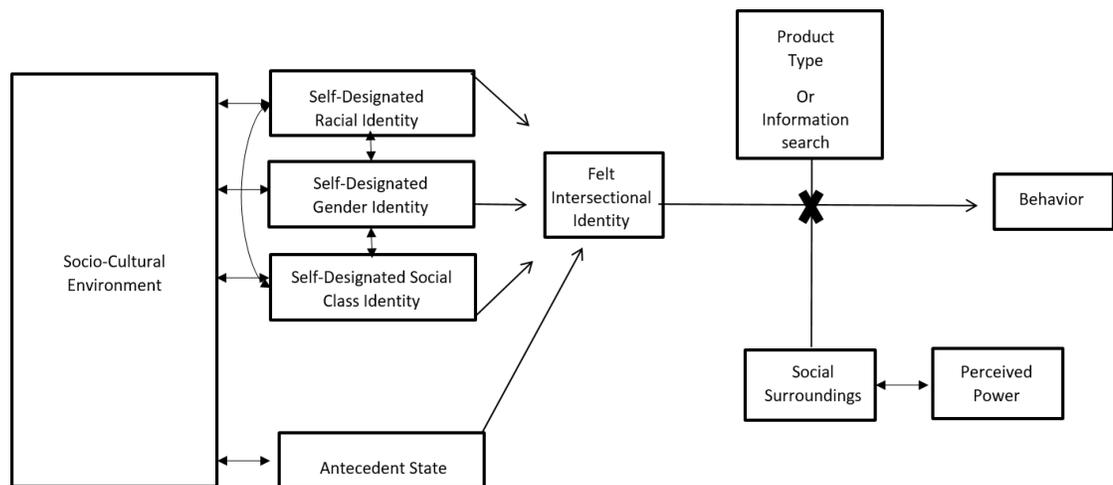
Figure 22: Model of Situational Ethnicity and Consumer Behavior



Empirical tests in Asian American and Latino/a consumer populations suggest that the MoSECB offers a more complex understanding of the relationship between ethnicity and consumption behaviors than static measures of ethnic identity (Stayman & Deshpande, 1987; Zmud & Arce, 1992). While this model has not yet been applied to studies of black consumers, past research (Lamont & Molnar, 2001; Miller & Kemp, 2006; Sexton, 1972) as well as the findings of this dissertation suggest that black racial identities also have a fluctuating nature that is influenced by situational factors, which impacts subsequent consumption behaviors.

While the MoSECB offers useful theoretical insights in understanding the roles situational factors play in the relationship between identity and clothing consumption observed in this study, the model does not account for all of the concepts and behaviors gleaned from this dissertation study’s findings. Thus, an extension of this model is proposed that offers a more comprehensive understanding of this process in the context of black female intersectional identity (see Figure 23). These expansions and additions are explicated further below.

Figure 23: Proposed MoSECB Extension



This proposed extension makes four primary contributions to the original MoSECB and broader CCT theory. First, it adds intersectional complexity to the concept and role of ethnic identity by incorporating the consumer identities of gender and social class. These additions are important, as the fashion-related experiences shared by the participants in this study are influenced by a convergence—or intersection—of these identities. Additionally, this added complexity addresses Stayman and Deshpande (1987)

suggestion that future research consider the role of other trait variables within the context of the original MoSECB.

Second, the proposed model extension accounts for the impact of the consumers' socio-cultural environment on the relationship between situational identity and consumption behavior. The testimonials shared by the participants suggest that their past and current interactions and experiences in various cultural spaces within American society (e.g., the workplace, school, social events, etc.) have not only impacted their perceptions of what it means to be a black middle-class women, but also exposes them to a set of behavioral norms and activities for expressing and negotiating these identities. In turn, these acquired perceptions and behaviors are applied in future interactions and navigations within American society. Similarly, interactions within the socio-cultural environment can also dictate the consumer's antecedent state (i.e., the consumer mind set immediately preceding the consumption behavior). These dual relationships are depicted by the two-directional arrows between socio-cultural environment and self-designated identity and socio-cultural environment and antecedent state. Stayman and Deshpande (1987) also allude to this inclusion of the socio-cultural environment in future explorations of the MoSECB. Specifically, they argue that ethnic groups possess varying cultural perspectives that can impact the relationship between felt ethnicity and consumption.

Third, this proposed extension expands task definition to include information search. Though this concept is not explicitly included in the original MoSECB, Stayman and Deshpande (1987) identify information search as a situational task relevant to the

model. This addition reflects the role that fashion related searches on SNSs like Instagram play in the expression of identity through apparel related consumption. As seen in the experiences shared by the participants, their intersectional identity impacts their search of and interactions with apparel-related information on these platforms.

Specifically, the women use the platform to locate fashion bloggers and apparel related information that align with aspects of their black middle-class female identity. Recall from Chapter 4 that in numerous cases, these information searches lead to purchases.

Fourth, this model expands the situational component of social surroundings to include the concept of perceived power. This addition refers to the perceived level of power a consumer possesses in effectively expressing her desired identity within her social situation or surroundings. As seen in the accounts shared by the participants, this perceived power is often informed by the social dynamics of the space and perceived characteristics of the people within the setting. For example, when the participants enter the predominantly white workplace, the women perceive their power to communicate desired identities beyond stereotypes to be limited. As a result, in these social situations, many of their apparel-related product decisions are used to counteract these stereotypes. Conversely, their information searches on SNSs like Instagram provide an environment in which they can selectively interact with individuals who they perceive to be like them, thus their searches are less related to combating stereotypes, and more geared towards locating information that celebrates diverse aspects of their intersectional identity.

Additionally, Stayman and Deshpande (1987) suggest that perceived power should be

considered in future explorations of the MoSECB, as power can influence the visibility of a consumer's product choice or information search.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study also provide three useful insights for marketing and advertising practitioners. First, this study sheds light on relevant information concerning black middle-class female consumers' motivations behind their apparel preferences, uses, and purchases. Specifically, these women are hyperaware of the negative stereotypes associated with black female populations—particularly laziness, hyperaggressiveness, and hypersexuality—and consistently make efforts to disprove these stigmas. Because of this, marketing or advertising efforts should avoid messages or imagery that evokes these stereotypes. Failure to do so can result in negative message evaluation or product and brand avoidance. These outcomes should especially be avoided, as black women have the highest apparel-related expenditures across all racial groups (Intel, 2013), and black middle-class women specifically are experiencing rapidly increasing buying power (Burrell Communications Group, 2012). Although these black female consumers strategically utilize apparel to conform in predominantly white spaces, they make explicit efforts to maintain aspects of black female cultural styles into their daily outfit selections. Based on these insights, marketers and advertisers should consider incorporating these culturally relevant styles in messaging targeted towards black female middle-class consumers (e.g., bright colors, unique cuts and patterns, statement jewelry, natural hair styles, etc.). These efforts could be particularly effective in reaching black female audiences, as research suggests that message appeals to consumers' cultural identities are evaluated positively by

the targeted audience (Aaker, Brumbaugh, & Grier, 2004; Forehand, Deshpande, Reed, 2001; Grier & Deshpande, 2001). Additionally, the inclusion of these black cultural styles may also experience success within audiences outside of the black middle-class female market, as black cultural styles have a significant impact on popular fashion trends (Condry, 2006; hooks, 2012; Kitwana, 2002).

Second, the findings of this study offer valuable insights concerning black middle-class female consumers and social media marketing strategies. Specifically, the findings of this study reveal that SNSs—particularly Instagram—play an integral role in their search for fashion-related information, and their purchases of apparel-related products. These search and purchase behaviors are due to convenience, ease-of-use, perceived identity alignment with fashion bloggers, and the failure of more traditional marketing, advertising, and media channels (e.g., magazine editorials and magazine ads) to offer relevant fashion-related information. These insights also support previous research findings that identify black women ages 18-34 as not only the most frequent users of Instagram, but also as consumers who commonly use Instagram to consume fashion content related to the needs and wants overlooked by mainstream fashion industries (Intel, 2014). Based on this information, marketing and advertising professionals in the fashion industry looking to reach black middle-class consumers should consider investing in promotional efforts on Instagram. Identifying fashion bloggers with high reach and influence among black female middle-class populations for sponsorship or promotional efforts could garner positive and profitable results for brand exposure and product trials.

Third, the findings of this study offer valuable information concerning marketing and advertising segmentation strategies. Specifically, the results show that one-dimensional, demographic-based segmentation practices can overlook valuable consumer insights that inform apparel-related consumption practices. While industry consumer profiling practices do frequently expand consumer profiles to include relevant psychographic information (Clow & Baack, 2016), a useful starting point for these psychographic identifications could begin with examinations of intersectional identity. For example, the intersectional identities accounted for in this study revealed similar apparel-related experiences and desires from middle-class black females despite their diverse range of geographic locations (e.g., the south, the northeast, and the west coast). Because of this, applying intersectional segmentation strategies could be particularly useful in planning and developing national advertising or marketing campaigns.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although this dissertation offers valuable theoretical contributions and practical insights, there are limitations to address. First, while this study provides support for the use of intersectional approaches in consumption related studies, this study is not representative of all aspects of intersectional identity. Specifically, the intersectional context and related behaviors of black middle-class females cannot be directly applicable across all marginalized intersecting consumer identities and behaviors. Rather than paint a broad generalizable picture of consumption practices, qualitative consumer investigations like the current study are designed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the “whys” and “hows” of these behaviors (McCracken, Marshall, 1996). Thus, more research

is needed before one can define, predict, or explain a broader impact of intersectional consumer identities on fashion consumption behaviors. A potential initial step in this direction is to examine the impact of a different identity intersection. For example, as referenced periodically throughout this dissertation, black middle-class men encounter cultural stigmas unique to their race and gendered identities that impact their relationship with clothing (e.g., racial-motivated night-club dress codes that disproportionately impact black men). There are also unique stigmas specifically attached to the middle-class identity of black males that may influence their apparel-related consumption—most notably the perceived emasculation of middle-class black men compared to those in the working-class (Collins, 2012). Thus, explorations of these identity intersections would further broader theoretical understandings of intersectional identity and fashion consumption.

An additional avenue for future research should explore the impact of four or more marginalized identity intersections on apparel-related consumption. For example, black feminist scholars suggest that lesbian identities add an additional layer of complexity to the lived experiences of black women (Collins, 2009; Lorde, 2017). Because these marginalized identities differ from the privileged heterosexual identities of the participants in this study, the inclusion of this lived experience may impact observations of fashion consumption habits in increasingly unique ways. For example, research suggests that lesbian women strategically use apparel-related consumption practices to negotiate identity before and after coming out of the closet (Huston, 2010). Thus, future research exploring this additional intersectional experience would contribute to the understanding of intersectional consumer identity garnered from this dissertation.

Additionally, while the proposed extension of the MoSECB explains the relationships between intersectional identity, situational factors, and fashion-related consumption behaviors observed in this study, this extension does not claim to be a predictive model of intersectional identity and product intentions or behavior. Instead, the presented extensions serve as an initial step in understanding the role intersectional identities can play in consumption related behavior. Future research should apply these proposed extensions in laboratory-controlled studies to assess the validity and reliability of its claims. There are numerous starting points for these proposed examinations, including a controlled experiment of the intersectional identities observed in this study, an examination of a different intersectional identity convergence, or an exploration of a product type or information search outside the realm of fashion

There are also limitations related to the participant sample used in this study. As a result of the snowball-sampling methods utilized to recruit participants, the ages of respondents are primarily clustered between 27 and 35. While age was not a primary topic of analysis in this dissertation, the lack of participants under 27 could omit variances in fashion related consumption tied to age differences. For example, the differences in education, income, and marital status between millennials born between 1979 and 1989, and those born between 1990 and 1996 (see Zogby, 2014), may impact consumption behaviors in notable ways. Thus, future examinations of black middle-class female consumers may benefit from purposeful sampling efforts that result in a participant pool more representative of this age cohort.

Lastly, while the Photovoice methods used in this study are beneficial in democratizing the research processes and providing conversational pieces around which the interviews occurred, they are not without limitations. Social desirability bias—or the tendency of research participants to give socially desirable responses instead of responses that more accurately reflect of their true feelings or behaviors (Grim, 2015)—may have impacted the data. It is possible that the participants altered their typical stylistic practices because of their enrollment in this research project. Additionally, because the participants maintained autonomy over the maintenance of their photo diaries, images pertinent to this dissertations topic could be omitted from this study’s data set because they were never shared with the researcher. Thus, future research should explore methodological techniques that account for and overcome these potential biases.

Appendix

Potential Interview Themes and Probing Questions

1. Background Information and Ice breaker
 - a. Please state your name and age.
 - b. What's your approximate clothing size and shoe size? You can give a range of sizes if that makes you more comfortable.
 - c. What is the highest level of education you've completed?
 - d. Is there a particular pseudonym you'd like me to use if I reference your responses in the final paper?
 - e. Where are you from originally?
 - f. Can you tell me a little bit about your life growing up?

2. Photovoice
 - a. Of all the photos you took, which three are your favorites? (Discuss favorites one at a time)
 - i. What is it about this picture that you like?
 - ii. Can you tell me a little bit about the social setting you selected this ensemble for?
 - iii. Can you tell me a little bit about the process used to select and assemble this outfit?
 - iv. Can you tell me a little bit about your experience wearing this outfit?
 - 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 dislike?
 - ii. Can you tell me a little bit about the social setting you selected this ensemble for?
 - iii. Can you tell me a little bit about the process used to select and assemble this outfit?
 - iv. Can you tell me a little bit about your experience wearing this outfit?
 - c. *If photos remain that the interviewer would like to explore:* Can you tell me about this picture?
 - i. Can you tell me a little bit about the social setting you selected this ensemble for?
 - ii. Can you tell me a little bit about the process used to select and assemble this outfit?

- iii. Can you tell me a little bit about your experience wearing this outfit?
 - 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.
- 3. Potential Theme/ Probe Questions: Personal Style/Taste
 - a. Can you tell me a little bit about your favorite clothing item or outfit?
 - b. Can you tell me a little bit about your least favorite clothing item or outfit?
 - c. Can you tell me about a time in which your apparel selection was especially important in representing your identity relative to your race, gender, or class?
 - d. Can you tell me about a time in which your apparel selection was especially important in conforming to a social setting due to your race, gender and/or class?
- 4. Potential Theme/ Probe Questions: Race Identity/Cultural classification
 - a. Can you tell me about a time you felt pride concerning your racial identity?
 - b. Can you tell me about a time you felt discontentment concerning your racial identity?
 - c. Can you tell me about a time you felt others' perceptions of your race were stigmatized?
 - d. Can you tell me about a time you felt others' perceptions of your race were embraced?
- 5. Potential Theme/ Probe Questions: Gender Identity/Cultural classification
 - a. Can you tell me about a time you felt pride concerning your gender identity?
 - b. Can you tell me about a time you felt discontentment concerning your gender identity?
 - c. Can you tell me about a time you felt others' perceptions of your gender were stigmatized?
 - d. Can you tell me about a time you felt others' perceptions of your gender were embraced?
- 6. Potential Theme/ Probe Questions: Middle Class Identity/Cultural Classification
 - a. Can you tell me about a time you felt pride concerning your class identity?
 - b. Can you tell me about a time you felt discontentment concerning your class identity?

- c. Can you tell me about a time you felt others' perceptions of your class were stigmatized by black individuals?
 - d. Can you tell me about a time you felt others' perceptions of your class were stigmatized by non-black individuals?
 - e. Can you tell me about a time you felt others' perceptions of your class were embraced black individuals?
 - f. Can you tell me about a time you felt others' perceptions of your class were embraced non-black individuals?
7. Potential Theme/ Probe Questions: Intersectionality and Identity Negotiation
- a. Can you tell me about a time when your interactions with others were influenced because of your race, gender, and class?
 - b. Can you tell me about a time when you felt pressure from others to choose which was more "important" between your race, gender, and class?
 - c. Can you tell me about a time when you felt encouragement from others to equally embrace your race, gender, and class?

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