

Double Consciousness of Black Millennial Consumers: Their Experiences in the Retail Space

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For decades, Black consumers experienced racial discrimination in the marketplace (Anderson, 2015; Feagin, 1991). Although desegregation legislation allowed Black people to occupy spaces previously occupied only by white people, an overwhelming presence of “white only” areas and segregated distinctions reinforced the normalcy of areas where Black people were absent, not expected or accepted, garnering the colloquial reference “the white space” (Anderson, 2015). Francis and Robertson (2021) have described the pressures they feel to explain their freedom to equal treatment in retail spaces and find themselves adopting “strategies” to avoid exposure to these pressures. The racialized environment is central in the critical frameworks: Black critical theory (BlackCrit; Dumas & ross, 2016) and Du Bois’ double consciousness (Du Bois, 1903), and both challenge structural racism, elaborate identity construction, and the transformation of racialized groups (Dillette, 2021). Although BlackCrit and double consciousness are not thought to be dominant paradigms in social science research, they provide a necessary lens that supports the dissemination of Black consumers experiences in constructed retail spaces.

Emerging as powerful consumers, Black consumers have increased buying power with an expected increase to \$1.54 trillion in 2022 (Cavill, 2019), and Black millennials account for a significant portion of the buying power (Zaczekiewicz, 2019). Cavill (2019) identified authenticity, connection, and the brands’ awareness of social and cultural issues as factors that influence Black consumers’ engagement with brands. Although recent social justice movement Black Lives Matter has led brands to respond to social issues through marketing and brand messages, there is still concern that these efforts are not being translated into practice due to inconsistency between marketing messages and authentic social engagement (Vredenburg et al, 2018). Although marketing messages are a source of concern when perceiving brands’ sincerity to social and cultural issues, Black consumers perceptions toward retailing practices should also be analyzed to understand the impact on their shopping and decision-making experiences.

Thus, the present study explores the perceptions of retail spaces by Black millennial consumers (BMC) and whether these perceptions impact their construction of self, and their consumer-related decisions. The study objectives were guided by the following research purposes: a) to explore how Black millennial consumers perceive retail spaces, (b) to explore if retail spaces influence Black millennial consumer self-consciousness, (c) to understand what factors in retail spaces influence Black millennial consumer self-consciousness, and (d) to understand how retail space perceptions impact Black millennial consumer’s decision making in store. To achieve the study’s purposes, an inductive qualitative approach was employed. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 individuals who identified as Black and millennial.

Our analyses indicated the existence of the double-consciousness while shopping in apparel retail spaces. Participants commonly expressed the impact of external and internal conflicts on their consumption decision making. Based on careful review of transcripts and a hermeneutic circling, three themes emerged: a) race and surveillance strategies, b) atmospheric cues, and c) (against) worldview perception. In the race and surveillance strategies theme, participants described they felt that being Black explained why they were blatantly surveilled in apparel retail spaces. Blatant methods of surveillance resulted in the Black consumers feeling unwelcomed and uncomfortable, credited to instances of racial bias. In the atmospheric cues theme, participants described the presence of external variables that impacted their experiences and perceptions in retail spaces, such as “whiter” areas, presence of "exclusionary" symbols, and effects of de facto segregation, resulting in feelings of being unsafe, unwelcomed, being highly surveilled or detained. In the (against) worldview perception theme, participants felt they were perceived as suspicious, someone who would steal while shopping, or unable to shop, negatively impacting their shopping behaviors and purchasing intentions and resulting strategies to reconcile the worldview perceptions. Although the emergent themes revealed the harmful experiences of Black millennial consumers in the retail space, the data suggested shopping in predominantly Black areas and in stores with predominantly Black staff created communal and positive experiences. Also, when faced with challenges, the data suggest that Black consumers have the ability to build a critical consciousness where they recognize racial perceptions, affirm their right to equal treatment, and use the internalized conflict to their advantage while navigating the retail space.

Findings of the present study addresses important contributions. First, this research gave a voice to a marginalized community’s constructed position in today’s apparel retail environment. Black millennial consumers experience instances that leave them feeling further marginalized, unaccepted, and mistreated. The retail industry could begin to implement strategic policy changes including, diversity training and active monitoring to educate employees on the awareness of potential implicit or explicit biases that may impact customer experiences. Second, the findings not only add to the existing literature on racial issues in the retail space, but also the Black and millennial consumer literature. Currently, literature on racial and marketplace discrimination explores the disparate consumer experiences of Black consumers, but there is little exploration of how these experiences impact their self-construction which, ultimately, impact how they position themselves in the retail space and their decision to shop or boycott. Finally, our findings present the need to implement diversity, equity, and inclusion curriculum in fashion programs. Future research could examine the relationship between coping strategies, perceived racial discrimination, and mental health as suggested by Sellers and Shelton (2003). Also, our findings offer an opportunity for future studies to examine how other identity-related factors, such as body image impact shopping behaviors and purchase intentions.

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