"Shopping While Being Nonwhite": Looking through the Lens of Critical Race Theory

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Shopping is oftentimes considered as entertainment for consumers (Moss, 2007). Shopping also brings happiness to consumers as they have money and time, and access to transpiration and stores as well as they can be exposed to novelty experience while shopping. Goldsmith (2016) found that one's intrinsic happiness motivates people to engage in social shopping and to look for the new and noble in the marketplace. Unfortunately, not all shopping experiences turn out positive and pleasant. While there are many factors attributed to consumers' unpleasant or unhappy shopping experience, racial minority consumers often have negative experience with casual, covert, or subtle discriminations while interacting with sales associates or other customers in the marketplace (Bennett et al., 2015; Kohan, 2021). However, scholarly work on discrimination directed at racial minority consumers in the marketplace has not been done widely in marketing or consumer behavior studies (Davis, 2018). In particular, no previous research has been found in the field of fashion consumer behavior concerning subtle racism, microaggressions, discrimination, biased treatment, or racial profiling certain consumers experience in various retailing settings.

Race is a socially constructed concept grouping humans based on shared physical or social qualities into categories ("Race", 2021). Race is one of the demographic variables included in most empirical studies in the field of marketing and consumer behavior. Research findings or results are often interpreted and generalized based on the statistical significance of various racial groups included. In most consumer behavior studies conducted in Western countries, unless a specific racial consumer group is the focus of the research, researchers report and discuss their findings based on the data derived mostly from white consumers who comprise most research participants. Poole et al. (2020) asserted that race needs to be analyzed in marketing research as a substantial construct that intersects with all aspects of consumption behavior in the framework of Critical Race Theory rather than a segmentation variable of which role is to identify the discrepancies among different races or racialized consumer groups. Grier et al. (2019) also pointed out that there is a general lack of race-related research, missing diversity among non-white consumer groups, and the absence of a critical and intersectional perspective on race-related topics in academic marketing research. On the contrary, racial issues with the growing momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement and the Stop Asian Hate movement have become very significant and visible in the fashion industry (Magnusdottir, 2020). Major retailers and fashion companies have shown their supports for anti-racism by offering diversity trainings to their employees and by implementing inclusive business practices and marketing operations (Chitrakorn, 2020). To respond to the changing needs of the fashion industry, more scholarly effort in fashion consumer behavior studies is called for to understand consumer experiences through the lens of racial minorities or non-white consumer groups. Although race or racism is not an easy subject to be dealt with by any scholars regardless of their academic disciplines with the notions that race is hard to define and theories of race and racism are

underdeveloped, Golash-Boza (2016) pulled sociological theories of race and racism into one theoretical framework consisting of racial ideologies and racial structures on which empirical studies can be based to understand how race and racism manifests in the various aspects of the contemporary society, especially in the US. Bonilla-Silva (2015) contends that the new system of racism ("new racism") has emerged in the post-Civil Rights era which can be characterized with the covert and subtle nature of racial discourse and practices in part due to the noticeable activism and movements by Blacks, Chicanos, American Indians, and other minority groups demanding changes. Critical Race Theory recognizes the generalized racism embedded in our psyches, culture, system, and institutions and manifested in every aspect of our daily lives (Delgado & Stefancic, 2011); therefore, scholars in marketing need to focus on racial minority consumers' discriminatory experience through the lens of a Critical Race Theory perspective and provide action-oriented steps for systemic transformation in marking education, practices, and ideologies (Poole et al. 2020).

A handful of researchers in sociology, psychology, and laws studied how racial minority consumers experience discrimination in various retail settings (Ainscough & Motley, 2000; Bayless & Wang, 2011; Bennett et al., 2015; Friend & Thompson, 2003; Gabbidon, 2003; Pittman, 2020; Schreer et al., 2009). After interviewing a total of 55 middle-class (non-poor) African American or Black respondents on their perceived discrimination as consumers in retail settings, Pittman (2020) found that Black shoppers often experience racial discrimination such as negative racial stereotypes, unfair treatment, and inferior service in a wide range of retail establishments and product types and concluded that a shopper's race can have impact on the overall quality of consumption experience. While racial discrimination can be found in every retail setting, high-end apparel or jewelry stores are often mentioned by African American shoppers where they frequently felt being ignored and receiving inferior service or experienced racial profiling (Bayless & Wang, 2011; Pittman, 2020). Whereas most previous research focused on Black consumers' racial discrimination in the marketplace, Bennett et al. (2015) measured the perceived racial discrimination in the marketplace and concluded that non-Black minority consumers also perceive that they experience more discrimination than their majority counterparts in the marketplace while African American respondents reported higher levels of direct forms of discrimination or confrontation than other minority consumers.

With Critical Race Theory as a framework, further research is needed to understand racial discriminations experienced by racial minority consumers in the marketplace especially related to apparel consumption. While observing positive changes as a response to anti-racism taking place in the fashion industry, I must ask the following research questions: Are racial discriminations experienced by various racial minority groups analogous to what Black consumers experience, termed as "Shopping while black"? Why does racial discrimination still exist in the salesfloor while most brands and retailers have been promoting diversity and equity in their marketing and had already removed racial prejudice or discrimination policies and procedures in their system? What would be the impact of discriminatory experience on the psychological or mental health of the recipients? Finally, what should scholars and educators in the textile and apparel fields do to promote anti-racist practices in the marketplace?