Millennial perspectives on social justice and the commitment to buying Black

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Introduction

Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996 (Dimock, 2019), face unique social and economic challenges. Because there is no singular millennial experience, researchers suggest analyzing millennials in different contexts and from multiple perspectives (Council et al., 2020) to gain a complete picture of millennial motivations. Millennials base their purchase decisions on product price, quality, brand image, status, trendiness (McKinsey and Company, 2020) and ethics (Chatzopoulou & de Kiewiet, 2020). The expectation that brands and companies align with their values has also increased millennial willingness to boycott products. In 2018, about one-third of millennials and Generation X participated in at least one company boycott in the U.S. (Ruff, 2019). As a group, millennials are more influenced by their commitments to ethical consumption than product price (Lopez-Fernandez, 2020), and differ in their awareness and engagement with political and social issues (Bucic et al., 2012). Despite generalizations of millennial consumer behavior, most studies do not consider differences across race or gender. Also, few existing studies investigate connections between gender, race, brand loyalty, and corporate social responsibility (Harvey, 2022). To address this research gap, this paper introduces millennial Black women's interpretation of social justice in their generation and their commitment to ethical consumption through purchasing from Black-owned companies and boycotting others.

Theoretical Framework

The influence of social norms on millennial Black women's consumer behavior was interpreted using the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA). TRA aims to predict an individual's behavior based on their attitude and the influence of their subjective norms (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). TRA is regarded as one of the best predictors of consumer behavior (Montaño & Kaspryzyk, 2015) and is also commonly used in studies testing ethical consumption and consumer loyalty (Oh & Yoon, 2014). In this paper, TRA analyzed millennial attitudes toward social justice and how they influenced decisions to boycott companies or purchase from Black entrepreneurs.

Methods

Data in this paper is from a more extensive virtual interview study about millennial Black women's relationship to beauty and their experiences in beauty retail stores. 20 participants were recruited through purposeful random sampling. To qualify for the study, participants had to identify as a millennial Black woman who frequently shopped for beauty products in a physical

space. A section of the interview guide focused on perceptions of social justice and its effect on their commitment to beauty brands. The interview questions were: 1) How do you think millennials view social justice issues in the United States? and 2) Do you think these views impact the brands that you shop with? An interview guide was used to ensure that all interviews followed a similar structure. Each interview was transcribed and coded categorically and then axially (Maxwell, 2013). The axially coded excerpts were compared using codebook definitions to identify significant themes and sub-themes. The resulting themes were interpreted using TRA and are supported by interview excerpts.

Results

Theme 1: Millennials are divided on social justice.

Most millennial Black women perceived their generation as socially and politically active concerning matters of social justice. Millennial activism was identified through public vocality and actions, as many participants measured peer interest in social justice through social media. Yet, many felt that some millennials were concerned while others lacked commitment. Differences in generational outlook were also apparent in their decisions to boycott large corporations or buy products from Black-owned companies.

Theme 2: Boycotting is dependent on commitments to social justice.

In the case of boycotting companies, millennial Black women were motivated by different ethical, social, and political interests. These concerns led them to stop shopping with companies that tested products on animals, lacked inclusive representation, or invested in private prisons. Participants who were aware of controversies but did not boycott companies continued to purchase from the retailers, despite pressure from their peers. Both groups were influenced by the expectation that millennials should use their money to communicate their values. While they recognized this norm as influential, they were not fully convinced that boycotting was impactful enough to change their products.

Theme 3: Buying Black-owned products is dependent on commitments to racial justice.

In contrast, all participants reported an interest in buying products from Black-owned companies. Instead of expressing why they did not purchase from Black-owned brands, they discussed obstacles and concerns but remained committed to supporting Black entrepreneurs. In this case, millennial Black women were more influenced by the social norm that they should be supportive of Black-owned businesses because they also identified as Black. Study participants fell in line with this expectation; many mentioned buying Black-owned products to give back to their community or support people who looked like them. The unifying motive was to purchase from Black-owned brands to showcase their awareness of issues affecting the Black community and their willingness to support Black-owned companies in light of that.

Conclusion

This study supports previous research in explaining why millennial consumers are more likely to unify around racial justice than gender when deciding to boycott companies. Though participants felt that, as a whole, the millennial generation was aware of social justice issues, most thought that the generation was divided in commitment and support. Interpretations of millennial activism were limited to perceptions of others on social media or conversations with other millennials about their responses to current events. These perceptions were evident in their purchasing decisions.

Though most participants were willing to boycott corporations or buy from Black-owned companies, their motivations and obstacles differed. This finding is also supported by previous research, which states that millennials show their commitment to social and political issues through different actions. While some may be active in their community, others provide financial support through consumption or donating to a nonprofit with a social or racial justice mission in solidarity.

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