

Market-centric pathways for racial inclusion: the case of #MyBlackReceipt

ABSTRACT

Racial exclusion is a persistent problem in consumer markets. Based on a qualitative study of the initiative #MyBlackReceipt, we analyze an alternative pathway to challenge the systemic origins of exclusion. We identify six tactics that participants employ to collectively harness market forces and leverage online environments to increase market inclusion.

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INTRODUCTION

Marketing research has established that race continues to play an important role in the functioning of markets (Grier, Thomas, and Johnson 2019) and that markets are racialized at their core (Henderson, Hakstian, and Williams 2016; Poole et al. 2020; Tilley and Shilliam 2018). Questioning historical conceptions of markets as "free" or "fair" (Johnson et al. 2019), extant research has provided ample empirical evidence of ongoing racial discrimination and exclusion in a variety of consumption contexts (Ainscough and Motley 2000; Bennett, Lee-Treweek, and Vandeyar 2015). Many such studies have focused on systemic racial disparities that lead to exclusionary market practices (Bone, Christensen, and Williams 2014; Brumbaugh and Rosa 2009; Crockett, Grier, and Williams 2003). Together, these studies highlight that existing public policy measures have failed to fully alleviate racial disparities and point to the urgency of better understanding pathways for racial inclusion at the intersection of the market and society.

The following empirical investigation contributes to this timely and relevant body of research by studying an underexplored pathway in the battle against racial exclusion. Drawing on our empirical analysis of the initiative #MyBlackReceipt, we describe additional tactics that racial minorities can employ to activate that pathway and challenge systemic inequality in markets.

LITERATURE: IDENTIFYING EXISTING PATHWAYS FOR RACIAL INCLUSION

From our critical review of existing scholarship on marketing and race we identified two different pathways toward fighting market exclusion, defined as "the mechanisms through which certain individuals and communities are barred from the resources and opportunities provided by the market to other citizens" (Saren, Parsons, and Goulding 2019, 2).

In the first pathway, which we labeled *managing stigma*, the market is a space of continuous racial conflict where minorities face discrimination and stigma. Subsequently, affected consumers employ a range of tactics to cope with or mitigate their exclusion and changing themselves to fit to the market, such as 1) dissimulating their racial identity through assimilation and appropriation of the dominant race's consumption codes (Bone et al. 2014; Harris, Henderson and Williams 2005); 2) signaling cultural capital and achieving respectability through status-enhancing consumption (Crockett 2021, 2017; Poole et al. 2020); 3) deliberately avoiding stigmatized consumption goods, services and practices (Crockett 2017; Crockett and Wallendorf 2004) and 4) embracing counternarratives by reinterpreting the dominant stigmatized narrative (Crockett 2017; Milner and Howard 2013). While these tactics may alleviate exclusion for some individual consumers, they do little to change discriminating market mechanisms or address other systemic issues of racial exclusion.

The second pathway, which we labeled *develop positive representation*, sees consumers trying to change markets that render their ethno-racial identity invisible or devalued. Here, the market is seen as an uncivilized space that needs to be moralized and exposed to the principles of racial equality and inclusion. In contrast to *managing stigma*, where individual consumers are the agents and focus of transformation, here, activist consumers and the marketers that respond to them are the key actors promoting transformation at the market level. They reform marketing practices by restraining forces of exclusion and fostering adherence to the principles of racial equality and inclusivity (Mirabito et al. 2016). This pathway includes tactics such as 1) ethno-racial targeting, e.g. offering particular products for the needs of ethnic-minority consumers (Crockett 2021; Lamont and Molnár 2001; Peñaloza 2018); and 2) selling diversity

through multiracial communications and creating value enhancing narratives for ethnic minorities (Crockett 2008; Moorman 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020).

The described pathways entail tactics that impact racial exclusion at the individual and market level. However, by focusing on either improving individual consumers' position in the market or attempting to moralize existing marketing practices, the scope of both pathways confines their impact on the broader objective of achieving market inclusion. In this paper we argue that hashtag initiatives such as #MyBlackReceipt are evidence of a promising third pathway to fight racial exclusion. In contrast to *managing stigma*, where it is up to the individual consumer to achieve change, and in contrast to *developing positive representation*, where racial minorities are offered token inclusion in the market, this approach is a collective effort of various market actors who *leverage within market boundaries* in attempting to redress racial inequalities. Our summary contrasting the two existing pathways and their tactics, which we conceptualized from the literature, with the third pathway emanating from our empirical analysis is presented in the findings section.

RESEARCH CONTEXT: #MYBLACKRECEIPT

We empirically investigated a recent initiative enacted in the United States: #MyBlackReceipt. Aligned with the broader #BuyBlack movement and other racial movements that manifest in the digital space (e.g. #BlackLivesMatter), #MyBlackReceipt was launched in June 2020 by Kezia Williams. Through her company The Black upStart and social media platforms, Williams calls consumers to buy from Black-own businesses, and promotes financial literacy in Black communities. To launch #MyBlackReceipt, Kezia set up a website where consumers, businesses, and investors upload receipts that serve as proof of purchases from or investments made in Black businesses. The original goal was to generate receipts valuing \$5 million in 17 days, which was exceeded considerably. The key logic of the initiative is one that has long been drawn upon by Black activists: to keep the money circulating and build wealth in the Black community.

Achieving this goal poses challenges. A prominent threat is racist backlash, responsible for the demise of previous historic efforts to build Black wealth like Black Wall Street, a powerful and prosperous African-American community of the 1920s in Tulsa, Oklahoma (Fain, 2017). Thus, consumers and Black business owners may be reluctant to engage in #MyBlackReceipt fearing backlash or stigmatization. Moreover, some Black entrepreneurs and businesses may also have limited financial know-how, business acumen, and resources, and therefore be less competitive than others in attracting consumers.

METHODOLOGY

We conducted an empirical qualitative study of the #MyBlackReceipt initiative taking a non-participant approach by collecting archival data publicly available on traditional media and social media (Fischer and Parmentier 2010). We engaged in Thematic Analysis (Gibbs 2018; Miles, Huberman and Saldaña 2018) to guide our analytical process.

Data Collection We collected media articles from mainstream media outlets as well as blogs and independent publishers, and archival data from social media platforms. We searched for the hashtag #MyBlackReceipt on Factiva for media articles, complementing results with a Google search for the News feature using the same keyword. For social media, we used the applications 4K Stogram (Instagram) and Tweet Deck (Twitter) and the embedded search mechanisms on Facebook and YouTube, all searching for the same hashtag (#MyBlackReceipt). We collected all textual and visual information publicly available on social media pages. Additionally, we collected information on the official website for the initiative (MyBlackReceipt.com). Data was collected between August and November 2020 and

covered the period from the first announcement of the initiative, June 1st, to October 31st, 2020. In total, our data set consists of 16,900 Instagram posts, 2,100 Facebook posts, 45 single-spaced pages of Tweets, 125 pages in PDF of website content, 25 media articles, 12 YouTube videos.

Data Analysis We conducted thematic analysis (Gibbs 2018) of the textual dataset including illustrated messages, transcripts and comments for YouTube videos; posts and comments on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Starting with a subset of our data, we identified the main themes related to how the market was mobilized to fight racism, which were: goals, strategies, tactics and outcomes. We then coded and classified them further into different types. By iterating between our data and the literature we eventually focused our analysis on the tactics employed by the initiatives of #MyBlackReceipt in search for theoretically meaning patterns (Locke, Feldman, and Golden-Biddle 2020). During this iterative process authors independently classified excerpts, analyzed data exemplars, and utilized different types of data for triangulation purposes (Spiggle 1994). We engaged in negative case analysis, debated discrepancies until we agreed on descriptors that best represented the patterns in our data. As a result, the identified six tactics offer a grounded theoretical understanding of the phenomenon.

FINDINGS: LEVERAGING WITHIN MARKET BOUNDARIES

In contrast to the two pathways and related tactics synthesized by our literature review, the #MyBlackReceipt initiative is a collective, concerted and strategic effort that leverages various market actors, practices, and resources to fight racial exclusion. In line with #MyBlackReceipt's previously described goal and overall strategy, the initiative creates a highly participative market space *within* the existing market. To activate this market space, members of the initiative employ six tactics: *educate*, *facilitate*, *embolden*, *partner*, *normalize*, and *champion*. Each of the tactics mobilizes a particular set of actors, resources and practices. We briefly describe each of these tactics below. Illustrative examples from our dataset are shown in the data table in the Appendix. The following figure outlines and contrasts the three pathways including their goals, level of action, as well as the involved market actors and their tactics.

Educate is a tactic that aims at teaching and advancing business skills as well as expanding Black business owners, entrepreneurs and consumers' understanding of market processes and the importance of keeping the money in the Black community. It is expected that, if Black business owners develop better financial and business acumen, they will thrive, create employment for Black people, and serve customers better. When educating, #MyBlackReceipt leaders leverage market resources and marketing tactics, e.g. free samples of educational resources.

Despite their general willingness to support the overall cause, consumers reported that researching and locating Black-owned shops in their vicinity was challenging. Additionally, it was oftentimes difficult to identify which branches of large businesses (e.g. McDonalds or 7eleven) are Black-owned. The tactic *Facilitate* addresses these difficulties and assists consumers in locating Black-owned businesses either through using the searchable directory on the myBlackreceipt.com website or via the hashtag #MyBlackReceipt. Similarly, Black business owners can publicize and list their products, facilitating access to consumers. By sharing recommendations, lists and directories via social media and employing a wide range of buy-Black-related Hashtags beyond #MyBlackReceipt, this tactic expands the reach of Black-owned businesses and exposes Black consumers to a wider selection of brand, products and services.

Figure 1: Market-centric pathways for racial inclusion

	Managing stigma	Developing positive representation	Leveraging within market boundaries
Level of action	Individuals cope with racial exclusion in the market by changing their themselves to fit with the dominant cultural codes.	Marketers aim to better represent racial minorities in the market by responding to moral appeals of activist groups calling for more inclusive marketing practices.	Racial minority groups challenge systemic inequality by leveraging within-market boundaries to create a highly participative space within the existing the market.
Goals	To be included in the market by adjusting to dominant cultural codes and norms.	To suppress forces of exclusion in the market.	To fight against systemic racial exclusion by leveraging market mechanisms.
Tactics employed	Avoidance, Dissimulation, Signaling, Embracing counternarratives	Ethnic targeting, Selling diversity	Educate, Facilitate, Embolden, Partner, Champion, Normalize
Actors mobilized	Individual racialized consumer	Marketers Consumer activists	Consumers, Business owners, Social movement and activist groups
Actors benefitting	Individual minority consumers	Minority consumer groups	Minority communities including consumers <u>and</u> businesses

Through the tactic of *Embolden*, leaders and supporters of #MyBlackReceipt encourage consumers to identify as “unapologetically Black” and openly support Black

businesses. They do so through emboldening messages and calls for action that appeal to positive (e.g. pride, hope) or negative (e.g. anger) emotions. At the same time, businesses are encouraged to publicize their Black ownership (e.g. Yelp offered window tags). This tactic aims to strengthen Black confidence resulting in more participative, empowered and engaged market actors, such as consumers who can fully enact their boycotting consumption power (Shaw, Newholm, and Dickinson 2006).

The tactic of *Partner* refers to establishing connections with non-marginalized, non-Black allies to increase the initiative's presence, reach and impact. In so doing #MyBlackReceipt leverages the powerful influence of prominent market actors (e.g. celebrities, brands, sponsors, data platforms). This tactic legitimizes Black consumers and business owners, creates connections to the mainstream market and activates consideration for the needs and preferences of the Black community. This is in contrast to pathway two (developing positive representation of the Black consumer) because here, Black-owned businesses are empowered by their "marketer partner" to participate on their own terms.

Another tactic of the initiative that serves the goal of keeping the money in the Black community is to *Champion* committed market actors, who are identified based on their shared views (Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Weijo, Martin, and Arnould 2018). Drawing on the prevalent consumer ethics to "vote with your purchase" (Shaw, Newholm, and Dickinson 2006), here #MyBlackReceipt calls on Black consumers to commit their financial resources to exclusively support Black businesses. Similarly, Black entrepreneurs are called to develop businesses that serve the Black community, and celebrated when they do so. At the same time, oppressors of the Black community and inauthentic Black-owned businesses are named and consumers asked to withdraw their support. The tactic is operationalized through the "receipt counter" featured on the initiative's website, showcasing the collective catalysis (Kozinets, Ferreira, and Chimenti 2021) that the initiative has organized.

Finally, *Normalize* seeks to turn "buying Black" from a one-off protest into an internalized long-lasting practice. Discursive motivation occurs by associating the buying Black rationale with other known selective patronage initiatives, e.g. buying local; consuming in a more sustainable way (Hinrichs and Allen 2008). Such associations are impactful as they convey the message that societal change is possible.

The six tactics we identified by empirically studying the initiative #MyBlackReceipt were simultaneously implemented by its leaders and supporters. While the tactics in itself are complementary and some of them may be present in other forms of market activism, the hashtag aggregates them to achieve broader reach, visibility and impact (Johnson et al. 2019), creating a distinct pathway to pursue market inclusion. The tactics target a variety of Black consumers and entrepreneurs' positions in the market. While some need encouragement to support the cause or education about the advantages of keeping dollars within the Black community, others may only need their choice facilitated.

DISCUSSION

Our paper contributes to consumer research on marketing and race by: 1) synthesizing and critically reviewing previous work on mitigating racial exclusion at the individual consumer and market level and its limitations in terms of creating sustainable change; and 2) arguing for a promising complementary, multi-actor collective pathway that leverages market forces.

The newly identified pathway of *leveraging within market* boundaries offers an opportunity to pair the agency of racialized actors with market tools to help the intersectional issue of economic inequality that contribute to some aspects of racial exclusion in markets. Here, racialized Black consumers can funnel their resources toward building a sustainable future and in so doing move away from reactive toward creative tactics to combat racial

exclusion. Unlike pathways one and two, this will benefit not only Black consumers, but also Black entrepreneurs and businesses, therefore creating wealth for the entire community.

When compared to the pathway of managing stigma, the new pathway recruits previously oppressive market actors to be allies in helping to combat exclusion. When compared to the pathway of developing positive representation, the new pathway offers ethnic minority actors the opportunity to develop marketing practices that prevent instrumental woke-washing and inadequate adaptations of their culture and ethos.

Our findings can serve to develop market-based guidelines for promoting inclusion and are relevant for policy makers, social institutions, consumers and consumer movements as well as marketers and businesses. As #MyBlackReceipt is a fairly recent initiative, a longitudinal investigation would complement our research to evaluate whether the initiative's short-term impact can be turned into long-lasting sustainable change. Future research may also explore differences between historical Black enclaving efforts that failed, such as Black Wall Street, and hashtag initiatives like #MyBlackReceipt.

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