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## Re-imagining the marketplace: addressing race in academic marketing research

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### ABSTRACT

Race is a marketplace icon. How so? By holding true to an icon's defining characteristics: high visibility, divisiveness, and uncritical devotion. In this brief musing, we describe how despite its centrality to market activities, race is uncritically addressed in academic marketing research. We next introduce the Race in the Marketplace (RIM) Research Network, a newly-formed interdisciplinary collective of scholars and scholar-activists that seek to break race of its iconic standing and bring greater equity to markets by disseminating critical, collaborative, and transdisciplinary race-based market research that supports liberatory public policies and community actions. We close with a call to join our effort to reimagine the marketplace through the critical examination of what has been a perpetually overlooked icon in marketing academia.

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No, race does not exist. And yet it does. Not in the way that people think; but it remains the most tangible, real and brutal of realities. Colette Guillaumin (1995, 107)

### Race, the overlooked icon

In consumption and markets activities, the tangibility, reality and brutality of racial dynamics are almost impossible to miss. From the shooting of John Crawford III in a US Wal-Mart store for holding a pellet rifle to Europe's recurring debates over "Islamic consumption practices" to the extensive evidence showing bias in advertising, financial, health and housing markets across the world, both research and practice reveal that race plays a key ideological role in the functioning of consumption markets worldwide (Nopper 2011; Feagin and Bennefield 2014; Zerofsky 2016; Thomas *Forthcoming*). How so? By subsuming the intricacies of humanness within a hierarchical system of personal and commercial worth that is read and understood through perceived physical and cultural traits. Indeed, race is a market icon.

How race is constructed depends on context. For example, in the US its conceptual boundaries range from biological to cultural characterizations, while in France the very existence of race is widely debated. Regardless of conceptualization, racial dynamics render particular bodies and cultural practices more or less relevant. In some instances, bodies are literally nonexistent. Joy Buolamwini, a black graduate researcher at the MIT Media Lab, learned this through experience. While working on a facial recognition project, she was not recognized by the social robot technology and had to don a white mask in order to be recognized (Tucker 2017). Software created by a

non-racially diverse development team utilized facial recognition inputs that privileged white faces over all others. Given the significant impact software algorithms have on consumption outcomes in various marketplaces – everything from creditworthiness and related assessments of loan default or recidivism risk, insurability, college admissions, surveillance, arrest, bail, and probation/parole probabilities – the incomplete consideration of racial variation is highly problematic. More generally, the race/facial recognition challenge reflects a key characterization of race as a marketplace icon – that it is both highly relevant yet also seemingly disregarded at the same time.

In this brief musing, we contribute to the section on marketplace icons and posit how, in consumption research and practice, race holds true to an icon's defining characteristics, high visibility, divisiveness, and uncritical devotion. We begin by highlighting a myriad of ways race still looms large within the physical and virtual rooms of marketplaces (including the academy), yet tends to be overlooked and under-theorized by consumption researchers. This is followed by an introduction to Race in the Marketplace (RIM) Research Network. The RIM Network is a newly formed interdisciplinary collective of scholars and scholar-activists that seek to break race of its iconic standing and bring greater equity to markets by disseminating critical, collaborative, and transdisciplinary race-based market research that supports liberatory public policies and community actions. We close with a call to join our effort to reimagine the marketplace through the critical examination of what has been a perpetually overlooked icon in marketing academia.

### Race a marketplace icon?

At a basic level, an icon is a sign in which the focal object or idea reflects or shares properties with another focal object or idea which serves as its content (Sonesson 2008, 48). In his thought-provoking piece within the *Marketplace Icon* series devoted to *Therapy*, Gopaldas (2016) cogently defines marketplace icons as “brands, products, or services that are historically significant for their cultural meanings.” He goes on to state that “marketplace icons transcend everyday consumption to become more than just another brand, product, or service” (Gopaldas 2016, 264). Undoubtedly brands, products, and services are the tactile and experiential lifeblood of markets. However, the cultural meaning of these elements and the very functioning of markets would be incomprehensible without ideological underpinnings. As such, we advance a broader frame of reference from which marketplace icons emerge – one that incorporates the socially constructed and systemically practiced intellections that undergird modern markets. We contend that beyond the seemingly obvious capitalistic and neo-liberal ideologies of many marketplace luminaries presented in the *Marketplace Icon* series, further totalizing marketplace ideologies must be acknowledged. Looking at logics associated with *Denim* (Miller 2015), *Champagne* (Rokka 2017), *Football* (McDonagh 2017), *Curry* (Varman 2017), *Rock and Roll* (Drummond 2017), and *Tattoos* (Patterson Forthcoming) lead in some fashion to imperialist white-supremacist patriarchy capitalism (hooks 2004). That is to say, iconic brands, products, and services can only rise to such stature in the accompaniment of iconic ideology. This broader conceptualization of marketplace icons is in keeping with Holt's (2006) seminal work related to brand icons, in which he highlights the importance of racial and commercial ideology in the iconic brand status of Jack Daniels. Here, we attempt to unmask *Race* and its overlooked marketplace iconicity.

Unlike other marketplace icons (e.g. football, champagne, the mobile phone, blue jeans) that are largely celebrated as such, race acts as a silent or understated marketplace luminary. The idea of “race” includes the socially constructed belief that individuals can be hierarchically divided into discrete and exclusive groups based on perceived physical and cultural traits (Golash-Boza 2016). And as scholars have noted, systems of differentiation bestow both privilege and oppression highlighting the importance of power (Frankenberg 1993). From this perspective, race serves as a “cultural taxonomy of biophysical symbols representing relative social power” (Lele 2012, 145). While the exact moment of the inception of race remains highly debated (see Robinson 1983; Mills 1997; Schaub 2015), some argue that it can be partially traced back to one of the first truly globalized marketplaces:

the transatlantic slave trade (Smedley and Smedley 2012). They contend that, although the selling and buying of people existed already, the transatlantic slave trade was legitimized on the backs of racial hierarchy. Similar to modern-day market practices, the product (enslaved Africans) was priced, promoted and distributed within a global network utilizing innovative marketing strategies and tactics (Lovejoy and Hogendorn 1979; Rawley and Behrendt 2005). Beyond this claim, a broad cross-section of scholarship has noted the essential role of race in the conception and maturation of prominent modern global markets. The banking, textiles, and soft commodities markets are deeply rooted in racially charged colonial and imperialist practices (e.g. Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson 2005; Baptist 2014; Lee 2015).

Both research and practice reveal that race is a key site of hierarchy upon which global marketplaces rest (Bonsu 2009; Wilson and Liu 2010; Johnson, Thomas, and Grier 2017). Racial dynamics remain central to contemporary (supposedly) post-colonial marketplace practices worldwide, such as target marketing, advertising and marketing communications, (reverse) redlining, service delivery and consumer profiling. Furthermore, race is heavily commodified and used as a marketing tool by practitioners (Crockett 2008). Importantly, race is also more than just one's skin color as research demonstrates how specific identities outside of what is commonly discussed as race, including particular ethnic and social groups (e.g. Hispanic/Latin, African-Americans, immigrants) and religious groups (e.g. Muslims) are often "racialized" (Silverstein 2005; Golash-Boza 2006; Galonnier 2015). Like a strong iconic brand, race thus plays an ideological role in the consumer marketplace (Holt 2006).

### **Race in the marketing canon**

Gopaldas (2016) notes that icons are frequently polarizing, a characterization which fits with how race both attracts and repels attention. In spite of, or perhaps because of its iconic status, there is limited research within the marketing canon which focuses on the role of race, or even specific racial groups (see Burton 2009a). For example, a recent review of the marketing literature across key marketing journals since their inception, found only 27 studies that focused on African-Americans (Pittman 2017) – the largest racial minority group in the US (U.S. Census Bureau 2016). These recent findings parallel those of prior reviews of marketing literature which similarly demonstrate a lack of consumption research with a racial or ethnic focus (Williams 1995; Grier and Kumanyika 2008; Williams, Lee, and Henderson 2008; DeBerry-Spence et al. 2013; Adeigbe et al. 2015; Davis *Forthcoming*). Generally, academic research in marketing lacks scholarship which addresses the diversity of groups, topics and domains which relate to race. And much of the race-related research that does exist do not explicitly discuss of issues of power (i.e. hierarchy and social justice).

Within marketing, race is viewed primarily as a segmentation variable that highlights the role of group-level influences. For example, in the US and South Africa, early research on race arose out of an economic approach focused on the social viability of including black consumers in advertising and marketing efforts, given the prevailing social hierarchy (e.g. Bauer, Cunningham, and Wortzel 1965; Orpen 1975). Accordingly, early studies on the "Negro Market" focused on the notion of "white backlash" and attempted to assuage managerial fears that integrating "negroes" into target markets and marketing communication held social and economic risks (see Cagley and Cardozo 1970; Guest 1970; Stafford, Birdwell, and VanTassel 1970). This research was soon followed by similar studies that focused on other historically marginalized groups (e.g. Pruden and Longman 1972; Cohen 1992). Once market viability was widely accepted, researchers turned their attention to examining the ways in which racial groups differ in respect to consumer-related beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (e.g. Solomon, Bush, and Hair 1976). Basically, race became an essentialized factor of consumer behavior – a generalizable indicator of how non-white communities engage with the marketplace (e.g. Latinx consumers prefer word-of-mouth marketing and exhibit high levels of brand loyalty, African-Americans are more apt to purchase brand names and consume conspicuously).

Overall, the focus was on linking phenotypic and cultural traits to consumer behavior in a decontextualized fashion, investigating ahistorical depoliticized accounts of interpersonal acts of marketplace discrimination within the broader context of culture or ethnicity, or using race as an apolitical segmentation variable to highlight business opportunities. Rather than positioning race as a socio-politically constructed phenomenon that impacts and is impacted by marketplace practices, discussions of race in the marketplace are often subsumed into broader domains of class, ethnicity and/or multiculturalism, limiting our knowledge of how markets normalize, reify, and (re)produce systemic and institutionalized racism. As a result, we and other marketing scholars have typically overlooked market-based racism as well as the racist operation of power within spaces of commerce. However, in line with Schroeder's (2003, 1) conceptualization of gender, race needs to be analysed as much more than a demographic, personality, or "individual differences"; it is a key "cognitive construct, cultural category and political concept" that intersects with the entire realm of consumption activities.

Accordingly, a smaller stream of literature has viewed race as a barrier and constraint to consumption. This research stream was active in the late 1960s to early 1970s, coinciding with civil rights activity in broader society (e.g. Haines, Simon, and Alexis 1971; Pruden and Longman 1972). More recent works echo these early studies (e.g. Crockett, Grier, and Williams 2003; Hu, Whittler, and Tian 2013; Motley and Perry 2013; Thomas 2013; Bone, Christensen, and Williams 2014; Bennett, Hill, and Daddario 2015; Olivotti 2016; Borgerson and Schroeder *Forthcoming*; Crockett 2017; Henderson, Hakstian, and Williams 2017). Like most of the work we have cited, these studies add to our understanding of race in the marketplace. However, we believe a fuller acceptance and consideration of race in the field might expand the way we approach race-related topics in marketing. For example, with a few notable outliers, such as Steinfield and Scott (2013), Wilson (2012), Borgerson and Schroeder (2002), and Grier and Deshpandé (2001), extant research on race in the marketplace focuses almost exclusively on the continental US (and more specifically on African-Americans), and so very little is known on the co-constitutive relationship between race and markets outside the US ethos. Further, the default position of most race-related marketplace research is to center the investigation on consumers of color and under-theorize the experience of white consumers (Burton 2009b; Peñaloza and Barnhart 2011 serve as marketing exceptions to this form of framing). As Frankenberg (1993, 1) notes "whiteness" refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually "unmarked and unnamed." As a result, the "privileged experience" of white consumers stands as the "normal one" against which non-whites' experience is evaluated. This scenario, in which the behaviors and experiences of white consumers are used as a benchmark from which the marketplace experiences of non-whites is measured and understood is all too common (and often expected or demanded by reviewers) in race-related marketplace research. In such instances, non-white communities are clustered into monolithic categories, while the oft privileged positionalities of white consumers are naturalized and normalized (Johnson, Thomas, and Grier 2017).

### **Race: an uncritical devotion?**

In other fields of study, race is often researched using a critical approach. While broad in definition and practice, a critical approach typically takes on the characteristics of analyzing how power relations function in a given social dynamic, and seeking to actively alleviate social inequities by promoting liberatory practices (Murray and Ozanne 1991). The lack of a critical approach to race and the marketplace, and the relatively limited research canon may be explained by multiple intersecting reasons. Here we highlight three important contributors: (1) the State is seen as the historical "enemy" and the marketplace as a potential "ally," (2) race is a "risky subject" within the "academic marketplace," and (3) the dominant epistemological framing of race within the marketing and consumer research, including a traditional preference for a class-based approach to marketplace inequalities.

(1) First, the lack of a critical approach to race and the marketplace may be partially explained by the fact that the State (i.e. national government) has historically been considered as the primary site

of racial oppression (Omi and Winant 2015; Golash-Boza 2016) and so some scholars have constructed the marketplace as a possible space for liberatory emancipation (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). While this latter argument has still to be fully demonstrated, research does show how the neo-liberal turn of national governments worldwide has not lead to racial betterment. In the US, the privatization and marketization of traditional social services such as healthcare, schooling, and correctional facilities (i.e. prisons) have only succeeded in reinforcing racial inequities (see Petrella and Begley 2013; Brown 2015; Katel 2016).

(2) As the marketization of higher education continues to balloon, marketing academia as of yet has not found much “value” in the critical study of race. “Race” as a word and concept makes many (marketplace) scholars feel uncomfortable. Oftentimes, code words such as identity, diversity, multiculturalism, and derivatives thereof are used which obscure and placate issues of power, oppression, and privilege associated with race. Ignoring or concealing race within related topics is often presented as the only prudent approach to conducting race-related research (especially to young and/or non-white scholars). For example, the three of us were advised by multiple senior faculty “don’t study race, as a black person you will be typecast” and “wait until after tenure for that risky topic,” a story co-signed by PhD students who contact us for advice on how best to pursue such topics and the politics that come with it. What is lacking here is the explicit acknowledgement that the study of race, although implicit, has been a dominant feature of extant marketplace research (see Burton 2009a). And while white scholars may not be penalized for repeatedly (but invisibly) studying their own racial groups, “me-search” (as it has been recently dubbed) can be a risky venture for young scholars of color (Collins 1986).

Academic conferences are no different. They tend to be overwhelmingly constructed as white spaces implicitly reproducing dominant ideologies and discourses. There is often fewer than a handful of papers related to race and many presenters never even mention the race of their research participants. Marketing academics, who typically relish in pontificating on any topic, often become silent when race becomes the focal presentation topic. All too often we have observed at conferences that “quiet space” immediately following a presentation on or questions about race, as if no one knows what to say. We have also experienced and observed where presentations on race elicit questions about gender, social class or anything but race. Within the academic marketplace, we’ve seen race chilled, muted or totally ignored despite its centrality to a research domain. And many marketing scholars who work on race discuss second guessing themselves regarding just “how far to go” in making the reality of race evident so as not to have a paper rejected. These dynamics related to race in doctoral training, mentorship and the publication process are an important influence on the type, nature and quantity of race-related research which exists in marketing.

Race is also frequently absent in the classroom. While the daily news is filled with race-related marketplace tensions, including on college campuses, these realities are often not integrated into marketing curricula. For example, the overwhelming majority of influential Harvard Business School cases, used in marketing classrooms worldwide, feature white protagonists that are positioned as the “typical” executive (Fernandes 2017). And research has found that students perceive that business management course materials lack diversity and do not offer critical perspectives (Godwyn 2015). The lack of engagement with race may also underlie empirical research findings which demonstrate that business students are less culturally competent compared to students from other academic disciplines (Poole and Garrett-Walker 2016). The inclusion of racial perspectives in the marketing curriculum is an issue of social responsibility given the increasing number of students from diverse racial categories (Burton 2005). At the same time that race is seemingly invisible in the academic arena, there are calls for increased relevance, particularly as companies increasingly engage race as part of their marketing strategies (Blackwell et al. 2017). For example, organizations like The PhD Project are working to address this issue by increasing underrepresented racial minority faculty across business disciplines.

(3) The third reason for the lack of research and critical orientation is the limited way in which race is conceptualized in marketing and consumer research. As opposed to an overarching



ideological construct, race was frequently viewed as a variable to be controlled for, manipulated or compared with other demographic factors. This perspective has shifted, perhaps due to the qualitative turn in consumer research, along with the influence of scholarly work outside of marketing.

In addition, for decades when race was brought up into a scholarly discussion on marketplace inequalities, the first answer was “It’s about class, not race [anymore].” More recently, this counter-argument has been replaced by injunction to “intersectionalize.” Despite the importance of such arguments, they tend to ignore the fact that icons often overshadow supporting characters. Think Steve Jobs vs. Steve Wozniak or Bob Marley vs. the Wailers. Empirical evidence demonstrates that in some cases, race eclipses interrelated social structures like gender, class, and sexuality. For instance, research in the US has found fast food establishments to be overrepresented in black communities even when controlling for income (Kwate 2008). This realization also holds true when examining income levels. Wages are lower for Black American consumers regardless of gender identity, income level, or sexual orientation when measured against comparable white consumers (see Matthew and Reeves 2017). We do not intend to suggest that racial analysis can or should be made in absence of an intersectional lens – intersectionality provides the required perspective for excavating the often subtle yet meaningful shifts in how race is understood and experienced. For instance, a considerably higher percentage of African-American women are identified as obese than African-American men (An 2014). Rather, we simply highlight the pervasiveness of race as an important social determinant of overall marketplace well-being.

Given the worldwide relevance of race and racism amidst calls for social impact and relevance in business school research and teaching, ignoring race and racism is something that academic marketing can ill afford to do. As practical marketplace challenges related to race repeatedly surface in markets worldwide, focused attention is required to address the specific ways in which existing racial hierarchies hinder just and equitable marketplaces. However, there is presently no coordinating entity or space wherein scholars across disciplines who examine the role of race in the marketplace can meet, share and learn.

### **Enter the RIM Research Network**

As the three of us discussed our individual experiences at different marketing conferences three things became distinctly clear: (1) there is a general lack of race-related research done by academic marketing researchers; (2) when race is broached the focus is typically placed solely on non-white populations; and (3) race-related market research rarely takes on a critical and intersectional perspective. These realizations birthed a vision – the Race in the Marketplace (RIM) Research Network. Although we witnessed a dearth of critical race-related work among researchers in marketing, we observed interesting and innovative work focused on race was far more frequent in agnate fields. Researchers in public health, history, human geography, sociology, psychology, economics, politics, cultural/media studies, and public policy often make race a central construct, conceptualize race using intersectionality and components of critical theory, and consider how race impacts the functioning of diverse markets (e.g. commercial, health, education, financial, etc.). For example, a stream of research has emerged in public health and communications which examines the negative impact of food marketing on racial minorities (e.g. Grier and Kumanyika 2008; Kwate 2008; Gilmore and Jordan 2012; Adeigbe et al. 2015). And scholars in anthropology, sociology, information systems and history have examined issues related to mundane consumption with an eye toward race (e.g. Banks 2010; Krige 2010; Harrison 2013; Matlon 2016; Rhue and Clark 2016; Summers 2016; Jamerison 2017; Schor 2017). Rather than reinvent the preverbal wheel, with RIM we seek to build upon the cross-disciplinary canon of work that already exists.

In our vision, RIM integrates learnings from across diverse research domains by serving as a space where interdisciplinary researchers focused on race-related marketplace topics can develop and disseminate transdisciplinary research. This network will enable scholars and practitioners, whose work encompasses race in marketplaces, to meet, integrate existing research and practices across domains

and disciplines, employ potential synergies and develop cooperative strategies for designing work that can inform and guide practical marketplace interventions that consider individual and systemic barriers to marketplace equity. Through a multifaceted approach, the RIM Research Network will examine the ways in which markets normalize, reify, and (re)produce systemic and institutionalized racism. Despite all the important research across disciplines on race and related topics (e.g. diversity, multiculturalism) there is not a cohesive critical perspective which foregrounds the reality of power, privilege and oppression, that questions existing marketing strategies and links them to an overall framework that can promote inclusive, fair and just marketplaces. The RIM Network will bring such a critical emphasis into the understanding of marketplaces. Overall, we aim to build on existing research to innovate a new approach to the understanding of race in the marketplace.

The inaugural RIM Research Forum held in Spring 2017 was an initial step in developing a global research network of scholars that work in unison to identify and address race-based market inequities. The RIM Forum engaged the expertise and commitment of scholars from around the world who investigate these issues across disciplinary fields and scholarly domains, bringing together 50 scholars from diverse fields. Through an iterative process of sharing and deep listening, participants engaged in structured dialogue to integrate and extend our understanding of the role of race (and important intersecting socio-political constructs – for example, class, gender, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality) in marketplaces. The results of this inaugural meeting are being synthesized into a long-term strategic plan for designing, executing, and disseminating transformational work related to race and markets.

## **Reimagining the future: please join us, all are welcome**

We believe in the possibility of transforming the way race is viewed as a research topic. By unraveling its iconic status, we can identify and begin to address current gaps in marketing and consumer research. A good start would include the field acknowledging the societal significance of race, highlighting the socio-political construction of race and engaging with the realities of racism and social stratification in key institutional processes (e.g. training, funding, research and publication) and settings (e.g. conferences and classrooms). Increased critically oriented research on race can contribute to transformative research efforts on both micro and macro levels. For example, as Ibrahim (2016) notes in his analysis of the dominant marketing discourses from the 1950s to the 1970s, there was once acknowledgement among market researchers that they were in a unique position to influence race relationships and had a social responsibility to advocate for consumers and structural changes. In addition, as scholars, we can bring this engagement to our collaborations and communities. Given the dearth of race-focused research, a host of potential research questions exist to help acknowledge and address race in the marketplace. As we process and synthesize the results of the inaugural conference we will soon provide a future research agenda that is critical, multimethod, and intersectional. Undoubtedly, it will take a village to bring the vision of RIM into reality. We invite you to join us in critically and creatively re-imagining research on race in the marketplace (find out more at [rimnetwork.net](http://rimnetwork.net)).

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