

Uncovering History: An Examination of the Impact of the Ebony Fashion Fair and Ebony Magazine

Although the Black consumer market has been targeted heavily in the past three decades, much of the history of Blacks as consumers has not been shared. Exploring the history of minority consumer groups can reveal events and individuals which were significant in the development of the minority consumer group. This study explored the impact of the Ebony Fashion Fair and Ebony magazine on Black consumers.

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Introduction

Although the Black consumer market has been targeted extensively in the past 30 years, Black consumers functioned in a predominantly White marketplace for a much longer period of time (Gray, 1997). The important contributions made by the Ebony Fashion Fair and Ebony magazine to the Black consumer community are explored in this study. John H. Johnson, the founder of Ebony and the Ebony Fashion Fair, overcame many obstacles in his journey from a small town in Arkansas to Chicago where he built multimillion-dollar publishing, cosmetic, and insurance companies. He influenced the U. S. marketplace in the areas of publishing, advertising and marketing, fashion, and cosmetics. The reactions of Black consumers to the Ebony Fashion Fair and Ebony magazine were explored in this study.

Study Process

Students interested in the study of the history of the consumer movement can benefit from research that puts the methods used by cultural historians at the center of the research. This research becomes particularly useful when trying to focus on minority groups, part of the consumer culture historically dominated by a White majority.

While there is an issue over the idea that there is a distinct historical-comparative research method, most of the historical-comparative research can be organized along three dimensions (Neuman, 1994). These three dimensions are: a time element, be it in the past, over a period of time, or in the present; the type of data, qualitative, quantitative or some combination of the two; and the studied social group, a single people or many peoples.

The sources for historical-comparative research or minority cultures may be limited in traditional written sources. The technique of oral history uses information gained from unstructured interviews with people about events in the past. The approach is viewed as particularly valuable for nonelite minority groups often underrepresented in the printed records (Neuman, 1994). In this study, the standard steps used in a historical research project were followed.

The first step was to conceptualize the object of inquiry. This interest was focused on the Ebony Fashion Fair and its impact on Black consumers, particularly women. Today the annual Ebony Fashion Fair, which began in 1958, has become a year-round business that travels to about two hundred cities in the United States, and in Jamaica, the Bahamas, London, and Canada. These shows produce more than 300,000 subscriptions for Ebony and Jet magazines. The influence of these shows on the Black community and the world of fashion has been significant. The initial interest in the fashion fair was expanded to include Ebony magazine as respondents recalled reactions to both the fashion fair and the magazine. The second step was to locate evidence about the fair, from primary sources, in this case individuals who had actually experienced the Ebony Fashion Fair and Ebony magazine, and published material on the Ebony Fashion Fair and Ebony. Those interviewed included early models in the Ebony Fashion Fair, early members for the organizations that sponsored the event, and Ebony Fair audience participants. Each of the interviews began with some standard questions. One important aspect of oral history as a research technique, is that the interview must be sufficiently open-ended to allow the respondent to share information that the interviewer might not have contemplated. The interviewer must be astute in recognizing such information, following through as leads open, and incorporating

the findings into the results. All interviews were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed. Because different viewpoints and perceptions were investigated, it was necessary for the interviewer to subsequently evaluate the quality of the evidence. Written information on the Ebony Fashion Fair and Ebony was of assistance in making the quality evaluations of the taped interviews.

In examining historical documents and writing about Black consumers, it is necessary to grapple with the correct terminology for the group. At various times in American history Black people have been known as "colored people," "people of color," "Negroes," "Afro-Americans," "Aframericans," "black Anglo-Saxons," "black Americans," and by a number of other appellations (Hughes, 1983). While dictionary definitions of the terms colored, Negro, black, African-American exist, different terms have been favored at different times in history. In the 1930s and 1940s the term was colored people, then in the 1950s and 1960s, Negro people was the favored term. During the 1970s and 1980s Black people was the chosen nomenclature and during the 1990s the favored terms have been African-American or Black.

Five themes emerged from the results of the data gathering. The first is that both the Ebony Fashion Fair and Ebony provided positive images to encourage and inspire the Black race and show that it was possible for Blacks to reach their full potential. Black models in the fashion fair did not need to be light skinned as ebony complexioned women were shown as vibrantly beautiful in bright colors. For the darker-skinned women viewing the fashion fair the use of dark-skinned models was a validation of their own self-esteem. The use of Black models wearing designer fashions gave Black women a new view of themselves and their potential. The professionalism and detail of the fashion fair set new standards in Black communities.

A second theme is that Ebony Fashion Fair increased opportunities for Black models, designers, photographers, and entertainers. In the 1940s Ebony magazine convinced mainstream U.S. manufacturers to use Blacks in their advertisements in the magazine. In the 1950s Eunice Johnson recruited Black models for the traveling fashion fair. As the fashion show expanded the number of cities it regularly toured, doors were opened for Blacks in the fields of fashion, photography, and marketing. This allowed Blacks to join the mainstream of American businesses in a way that had not been possible before.

A third theme is the substantial impact that the Ebony Fashion Fair had on Black charities and organizations. The first Ebony Fashion Fair was the result of a request for assistance by the wife of the president of Dillard University, in New Orleans, Louisiana. Mrs. Albert Dent was trying to organize a charity fashion show for a New Orleans hospital. That first show and all subsequent Ebony Fashion Fairs helped local Black organizations generate thousands of dollars for charity and scholarship. Following an approval to sponsor the show, the local sponsor sets a ticket price that covers expenses, the cost of an Ebony or Jet subscription, and the charitable contribution. Sponsors of the Fashion Fair have included local Urban Leagues; the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); the United Negro College Fund (UNCF); Black sororities, including Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA), Delta Sigma Theta, and Zeta Beta; and national women's social and civic organizations like the Girl Friends, Inc., The Links, Inc., and Jack and Jill, Inc. (Angelou, 1995).

A fourth theme is that Ebony magazine provided opportunities for the display of Blacks' interests beyond fashion. Blacks' interests in politics, business, entertainment, and social events were featured. These opportunities served to educate and enlighten Blacks at times when their interests in these areas were underrepresented in the White culture.

The final theme was the impact that both Ebony and the Ebony Fashion Fair had on the White consumer culture. The success of both changed how corporations and individual White consumers viewed Blacks as consumers.

Several respondents reflected on the impact of attendance at the Fashion Fair on their White guests, both their attitude and their enjoyment. Both the success of Ebony and the Ebony Fashion Fair demonstrated that diversity and inclusion could be of benefit to all concerned.

Implications

The technique of oral history is particularly appropriate for investigating the history of consumer activity and events in minority populations. The past activities and events in the lives of minority consumer groups are largely unexplored and those which might have exerted significant influence on minority consumers have remained unidentified. The revealing of the consumer past of minority populations can deepen our understanding of the history of the consumer movement and increase our understanding of the interrelationships among different consumer groups.

Researchers can use the method of oral history to explore older adults' recollections and thoughts about consumer events as they experienced them. Even grappling with something so seemingly simple as the correct terminology for members of the minority has learning potential. The sharing of the recollections of members of minority consumer cultures can result in increased awareness of the complexity of the consumer role for minorities. Consumer education could include discussions on the unknown contributions of minorities to the predominant consumer culture or key minority individuals who impacted their cultures and brought those cultures into the mainstream consumer culture.

Historian William Loren Katz noted that "Afro-Americans have been treated by writers of history as invisible. Their contributions were denied or handed to others." Katz believed "omission, not distortion is the far more serious culprit in hiding the story" (Katz, 1986). Consumer researchers have the opportunity to explore the contributions of members of minority races to the mainstream culture.

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Endnotes

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