

Race, Ethnicity, and Consumption

Race, Ethnicity, and Consumption: A Sociological View looks at the central concerns of consumer culture through the lens of race and ethnicity. Each chapter illustrates the connections between race, ethnicity, and consumption by focusing on a specific theme: identity, crossing cultures, marketing and advertising, neighborhoods, discrimination, and social activism. By exploring issues such as multicultural marketing, cultural appropriation, consumer racial profiling, urban food deserts, and racialized political consumerism, students, scholars, and other curious readers will gain insight on the ways that racial and ethnic boundaries shape, and are shaped by, consumption. This book goes beyond the typical treatments of race and ethnicity in introductory texts on consumption not only by providing a comprehensive overview of the major theories and concepts that sociologists use to make sense of consumption, race, and ethnicity, but also by examining these themes within distinctly contemporary contexts such as digital platforms and activism.

Documenting the complexities and contradictions within consumer culture, *Race, Ethnicity, and Consumption* is an excellent text for sociology courses on consumers and consumption, race and ethnicity, the economy, and inequality. It will also be an informative resource for courses on consumer culture in the broader social sciences, marketing, and the humanities.

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Race, Ethnicity, and Consumption

A Sociological View

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**For my grandmothers Lula Holt Banks and Geneva
Marie McGee**



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Preface

Sociologists have long addressed issues related to race, ethnicity, and consumption. However, research on this topic has been scattered across various subfields. For example, there is a rich research tradition on discrimination in the housing and credit markets. Consumption, race, and ethnicity are also touched on in other sociological scholarship, such as the literatures on assimilation, ethnic entrepreneurship, social movements, and cultural capital. Despite race, ethnicity, and consumption being of concern to sociologists in a range of subfields, it is rare for this scholarship to be considered as a whole. At a time when consumption itself as a subfield has become more institutionalized in the discipline, and there is widespread public interest in issues such as discrimination in the marketplace, culture and the maintenance of ethnoracial minority identities, and corporate boycotts to contest inequality, it is especially important that sociological approaches to race, ethnicity, and consumption are compiled in one volume. *Race, Ethnicity, and Consumption* addresses this need and gives readers an opportunity to identify and examine intersections and linkages that occur across the disparate approaches.

This book provides an overview of the sociological scholarship on race, ethnicity, and consumption by exploring six themes: identity, crossing cultures, marketing and advertising, neighborhoods, discrimination, and social activism. Research in other disciplines that is consistent with sociological approaches to these themes is also occasionally discussed.

Race, Ethnicity, and Consumption is designed to be read either in its entirety or as separate chapters. For readers interested in how sociologists have treated race, ethnicity, and consumption across the discipline, reading each chapter is suggested. For those interested in particular topics, such as identity, discrimination, or social activism, reading the specifically themed chapters, or subsections within chapters, is recommended. In some cases, subjects are treated across chapters. The index can be used to identify these topics.

With respect to terminology, the following words are generally used in reference to major racial and ethnic groups: white, black/African American, Asian/Asian American, Native American/American Indian, Latinx/Latino/Latina/Hispanic. In some cases, specific words are used to reflect common terminology within particular contexts—such as the typical use of the term “Hispanic” in multicultural marketing.

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1 Introduction and Overview

Introduction

In 2008, the tech company Airbnb disrupted the hotel industry when it introduced an online platform that allowed everyday homeowners to rent their homes to travelers. By 2016, the hashtag #AirbnbWhileBlack was trending on Twitter. African American users reported discrimination when they tried to use the service to book accommodations. In some instances, open rentals became mysteriously unavailable after black customers made inquiries. In other situations, black travelers who had successfully rented properties were harassed during their stays. Airbnb responded by launching the #WeAccept campaign featuring a multicultural ad that aired during the Super Bowl. They also hired Eric Holder, the former United States Attorney General, to develop an anti-discrimination policy. Concerns about discrimination gave rise to competitors like Noirbnb, which specializes in offering a “safer experience for travelers of color” (Lebeau 2016; Noirbnb n.d.). Some black travelers considered switching to Noirbnb not only to avoid mistreatment at Airbnb rentals but also to “buy black” and support Noirbnb’s black founders (Figure 1.1).

This example highlights several key issues related to race, ethnicity, and consumption, such as discrimination in the marketplace, multicultural marketing, and racialized political consumerism. *Race, Ethnicity, and Consumption* explores these themes as well as other central concerns in the study of race, ethnicity, and consumption from a sociological perspective. Before delving into the intersections of race, ethnicity, and consumption, it will be helpful to review how sociologists have thought about these, as well as related concepts, independently. First, an overview of consumption is provided, followed by an overview of race and ethnicity.

Consumption

Consumption refers to the “selection, purchase, use, maintenance, repair and disposal of any product or service” (Campbell 1995, 100). Consumption takes place within a range of different contexts of exchange. For example, individuals may acquire goods through **gift giving**, in which



Figure 1.1 Airbnb's #WeAccept campaign.

norms of reciprocity, rather than an explicit agreement, obligate them to give to others in return (Mauss [1925] 1966). Individuals who give an item to a friend or family member to celebrate events such as a *quinceañera*—a Latinx coming-of-age tradition to celebrate a girl's 15th birthday—or who give a donation to a nonprofit such as an Asian American or Native American cultural institution are engaging in gift giving. **Barter**, or the trade of goods and services, is another type of exchange. For example, if neighbors trade homemade food with one another, such as kimchi and fry bread, they are bartering. Although gift giving and bartering exist in contemporary societies, much of the consumption in places like the United States involves consumers paying sellers money for goods and services.

The high level of attention and resources spent on consumption in places like the United States and Great Britain has led them to be characterized as **consumer societies** (Baudrillard [1970] 1998). In consumer societies, **consumerism**, or “the belief that personal well-being and happiness depend largely on one’s level of personal consumption,” is widespread (Wright and Rogers 2015). For example, the historian Lizabeth Cohen (2003) argues that in the postwar period the United States became a **consumers’ republic**, where there was a heightened focus on mass consumption as a vehicle for creating prosperity, equality, and freedom.

Along with **consumers**, who purchase, receive, and use products and services, other central actors involved in systems of exchange include producers and intermediaries. **Producers** make goods and provide services. **Intermediaries** link producers and consumers. One type of intermediary is the **surrogate consumer**, who acts “as an agent retained by a consumer to guide, direct, and/or transact marketplace activities” (Solomon 1986, 208). Surrogate consumers may be involved in the physical aspects of consumption, such as conducting transactions on behalf of consumers in the marketplace. This is a role played by actors such as stockbrokers, who purchase stocks for clients, and interior designers, who purchase decorative items for clients. Along with being involved in the physical transfer of goods, surrogate consumers are sometimes also involved in shaping meanings and values around consumption. For example, interior designers who select furniture for homeowners, wardrobe consultants who purchase clothing for clients, and art consultants who purchase paintings for collectors signal what items are in style.

Another term used to describe actors involved in the meaning-making aspects of consumption is **cultural intermediaries**. **Cultural intermediaries** “construct value by mediating how goods (or services, practices, people) are perceived and engaged with by others” (Maguire and Matthews 2014, 2). For example, marketers who develop promotional strategies for products and journalists who review the latest movies and art exhibitions play important roles in constructing and communicating the value of goods and services (Khaire 2017; McCracken 1986, 74–77).

Finally, in the online world of consumption, prosumers are especially important agents. **Prosumers** act as both producers and consumers of goods and services. For example, users on online sites like BlackPlanet create content that other users consume, as well as peruse content that other users produce (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010).

Race and Ethnicity

A **racial group** refers to “a group of human beings socially defined on the basis of physical characteristics” such as skin color, hair texture, and facial features (Cornell and Hartmann [1998] 2007, 25). **Racism** is an ideology legitimating the inferior treatment of a racial group based on their purported inherent or cultural inferiority (Clair and Denis 2015; Wilson 1999). More recent scholarship on racial inequality considers how racism has changed in form over time. For example, Lawrence D. Bobo, James R. Kluegel, and Ryan A. Smith (1997) outline a shift from Jim Crow racism to *laissez-faire* racism over the course of the late 20th century in the United States. Whereas **Jim Crow racism** rests on an ideology of biological inferiority, **laissez-faire racism** is rooted in an ideology of cultural deficits. Likewise, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues that contemporary racism commonly takes on a particular form—color-blind racism.

Bonilla-Silva defines **color-blind racism** as an “ideology, which . . . explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics” ([2003] 2010, 2).

While race is a social construction that refers to group differences based on physical traits, an **ethnic group** is a collectivity having real or assumed shared ancestry, history, and culture (Cornell and Hartmann [1998] 2007, 19). **Ethnocentrism** refers to “a belief in the normality and superiority of one’s own people and their ways of doing things” (Cornell and Hartmann [1998] 2007, 32). Comparing ethnocentrism and racism, Stephen E. Cornell and Douglas Hartmann ([1998] 2007) explain that the former is more often focused inward and less malignant.

Though racial and ethnic groups are distinct, they are sometimes collectively referred to as **ethnoracial** groups. This umbrella term can be useful because both ethnic and racial minorities share some similarities, such as often being **stigmatized**, or “assigned low status,” and being **discriminated** against, or receiving unfair treatment (Lamont et al. 2016, 6–7). Race and ethnicity also share other similarities, such as the common presumption that they are natural categories though they are **socially constructed** (Cornell and Hartmann [1998] 2007). It is also the case that ethnic groups, as well as other types of groups such as religious groups, can become racial groups through racialization (Feagin and Cobas 2016, 15; Silverstein 2005). **Racialization** refers to “processes through which any diacritic of social personhood—including class, ethnicity, generation, kinship/affinity, and positions within fields of power—comes to be essentialized, naturalized, and/or biologized” (Silverstein 2005, 364). Muslims constitute a religious group that is sometimes referred to as having been racialized (Silverstein 2005).

Social and symbolic boundaries are fundamental to racial and ethnic divisions. **Symbolic boundaries** refer to “conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space,” while **social boundaries** refer to “objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities” (Molnár and Lamont 2002, 168–169). Symbolic boundaries associated with race and ethnicity, such as beliefs about who is an in-group member, and ideas about the morality and intelligence of various groups, contribute to social boundaries, such as racial and ethnic segregation and wealth inequality.

Paying attention to other social categories is also important for understanding how **racial and ethnic boundaries** are manifested in social life. Racial and ethnic groups are internally differentiated by categories such as gender, class, sexuality, age, and ability. These internal divisions within racial and ethnic groups mean that symbolic and social boundaries can differ among people who share the same race and ethnicity. For example, working-class women within an ethnoracial minority group may be treated differently than upper-class women in the same group as well

as identify in varying ways. **Intersectional** analyses of group boundaries analyze how “overlapping systems of subordination,” such as racism, classism, and sexism, shape people’s lives (Crenshaw 1991, 1265).

The Links between Race, Ethnicity, and Consumption

The Race, Ethnicity, and Consumption Framework (see Figure 1.2) calls attention to the linkages between consumption and ethnoracial boundaries. Race and ethnicity, as well as consumption, are fundamental dimensions of social life (Johnson et al. 2019). They are also mutually reinforcing. Consumption, along with practices related to consumption such as the marketing of goods and services, influences symbolic and social boundaries associated with race and ethnicity, as well as other social identities. In turn, racial and ethnic and other social group boundaries—symbolic and social—shape consumption and those practices related to consumption. Let’s imagine four scenarios that illustrate these dynamics.

- Maria Lopez is a later-generation Mexican American woman who lives in a predominately Latinx neighborhood with a large population of Mexican immigrants. She is making a traditional Mexican meal to celebrate her daughter’s upcoming tenth birthday. To purchase the ingredients, Maria drives a few miles from her home to a local store. As she walks down the aisles filled with staples to make traditional Mexican cuisine, she finds just what she is looking for: masa and corn husks to make tamales. Maria also discovers some Mexican candy that she used to buy during visits with relatives in Mexico.
- Ted Zhang is 19 and just finished his sophomore year of college. When his grandparents first emigrated from China, they lived in the Chinatown district of his city. Ted, however, was raised in the suburbs in a predominately white neighborhood. Since entering college, he has become more and more curious about his Chinese roots. To learn more about his background, Ted enrolled in a heritage program for Chinese Americans. As part of the program, he will research his family’s genealogy and take classes on Chinese American history.

Race, Ethnicity, and Consumption Framework

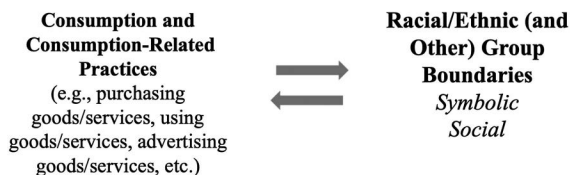


Figure 1.2 Race, Ethnicity, and Consumption Framework.

6 Introduction and Overview

The program also includes a trip to China, where Ted will visit the ancestral village of his grandfather in Guangdong Province and attend special banquets and festivals.

- Susan Johnson is 60 years old and recently received a commercial genetic ancestry test kit from her wife Pearl for their ten-year anniversary. While Susan sees herself as white, Pearl identifies as Native American, from the Navajo Nation. Susan and Pearl's home is decorated with Native American art not only to pay homage to Pearl's ancestry but also because Susan has collected Native American ceramics since she finished graduate school. When Susan received her test results, she learned that along with European ancestry, she also has Native American ancestry—10 percent. Susan readily accepts the test results because she has long felt a connection to Native Americans. Moving forward, she identifies as white and Native American.
- Kwame Jones is an African American executive in his late 40s. He recently moved to take on a new position at his company's headquarters. In his old city, Kwame was on the board of the local African American museum. When he finds out that the black museum in his new town is holding their annual fundraising gala in a few weeks, he purchases a ticket. When he arrives at the evening soirée, Kwame spots a couple of classmates from his college days at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). Before the evening is over, Kwame has met some "brothers" who are members of the national black fraternity that he pledged in college. He has also exchanged numbers with black executives who work at his company and other businesses in the area.

These scenarios illustrate the dynamic interplay between racial and ethnic boundaries and consumption. For example, in some stories an ethnoracial identity leads to consumption that in turn reinforces an ethnoracial identity. Although multiple aspects of the relationship between race, ethnicity, and consumption are present in each scenario, and more than just racial and ethnic boundaries are at play, it is useful to highlight one dimension of the Race, Ethnicity, and Consumption Framework in each story.

The first story illustrates how *racial and ethnic social boundaries shape consumption*. Living in a neighborhood with a large proportion of Mexican immigrants, Maria has ready access to food staples to make traditional Mexican dishes with her family. In order to cater to Mexican immigrants, locally owned stores, along with commercial chains, carry food items from Mexico. In his research on assimilation in two California communities with significant populations of Mexican immigrants, Tomas Jiménez explains this dynamic. "Although the immigrant-owned markets and commercial supermarkets stock these items primarily to meet the culinary demands of Mexican immigrants, Mexican Americans also purchase these products in order to make traditional Mexican dishes," Jiménez writes (2009, 122–123). For Maria, neighborhood segregation (*racial and ethnic*

social boundary) influences the food staples that she has access to purchase and the dishes that she ultimately prepares (*consumption*).

The second scenario shows how *racial and ethnic symbolic boundaries shape consumption*. Ted identifies as Chinese American, but he would like to forge a deeper connection with his heritage. To do so, he signs up for a Chinese heritage program that includes among other activities a trip to China. Research on **homeland tourism** documents how individuals embark on trips to their ancestral lands in search of ethnic roots (Garrido 2011; Huang, Haller, and Ramshaw 2013; Louie 2004; Powers 2011). For example, in her research on racial and cultural politics, Vivian Louie documents how Chinese American youth participate in heritage programs where they travel to their ancestral villages in China (2004). For Ted, curiosity about his ethnic identity (*racial and ethnic symbolic boundary*) leads him to register for a program in which he will learn about his lineage through travel and other activities (*consumption*).

The third narrative demonstrates how *consumption shapes racial and ethnic symbolic boundaries*. Before Susan takes a genetic ancestry test, she sees herself as white. However, after taking the test, she begins to consider herself as white and Native American. In research on the implications of genetic ancestry testing, Wendy Roth and her collaborators find that test results, in concert with social factors such as identity aspirations, influence how people think about their identity. Those who have a high private regard for an identity revealed in a genetic test are more likely to incorporate the new identity into their understandings of self (Roth and Ivemark 2018). Prior to taking the commercial genetic ancestry test (*consumption*), Susan identified as white but felt culturally and socially connected to Native Americans. Feeling an affinity with Native Americans prior to taking the test, Susan eagerly accepts the test results and shifts her identity to white and Native American (*racial and ethnic symbolic boundary*).

The fourth scenario illustrates how *consumption shapes racial and ethnic social boundaries*. When Kwame arrives in his new city, he purchases a ticket for a fundraising gala at a black museum. While he is at the event, Kwame rekindles relationships with African Americans he met in college and forms new ties with other African Americans, such as black managers at his new job. Research on cultural capital and race shows how philanthropy at African American museums contributes to cohesion among upper-middle-class and upper-class blacks (Banks 2019a). While philanthropy at majority cultural institutions is typically dominated by elite whites, elite blacks often take on a central philanthropic role at black cultural organizations (Banks 2017, 2019b). At African American museum events, such as fundraising galas, black patrons deepen and establish ties with one another. Kwame's social embeddedness in his new city's black community (*racial and ethnic social boundary*) is facilitated by attending a black museum fundraising event (*consumption*).

Overview of Chapters

Each chapter in this text illustrates the linkages between race, ethnicity, and consumption by focusing on a specific theme: identity, crossing cultures, marketing and advertising, neighborhoods, discrimination, and social activism. Chapter 2 focuses on how consumption is connected to social membership. It examines subjects such as commercial genetic ancestry testing, cultural capital, conspicuous consumption, and assimilation. Chapter 3 turns to consumption across racial and ethnic boundaries. It explores topics such as cross-cultural consumption as a status signal, cultural appropriation, and cultural appreciation. Chapter 4 delves into how racial and ethnic boundaries are produced through marketing and advertising. It examines themes such as multicultural marketing and racial and ethnic portrayals in advertisements. Chapter 5 considers race, ethnicity, and consumption within the context of neighborhoods. Topics such as desertification, retail redlining, gentrification, and ethnic neighborhoods as sites of leisure and consumption are explored. Chapter 6 looks at discrimination against consumers by sellers and intermediaries, as well as discrimination against sellers by consumers. Discrimination at various sites of consumption is examined, including housing and credit markets, retail stores, nightclubs, and online platforms. Topics such as online harassment and algorithmic bias are also explored. Chapter 7 reviews how race, ethnicity, and consumption are linked to social activism. It examines topics such as boycotts and sit-ins to protest consumer discrimination, the commodification of activism for racial and ethnic justice, and how cultural products give rise to, and are created through, social movements for racial and ethnic equality.

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