EXPLORING COLLECTIVE MEMORIES ASSOCIATED WITH AFRICAN-AMERICAN ADVERTISING MEMORABILIA

The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly

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ABSTRACT: We examine consumers' memories of and meanings associated with stereotypical depictions of African Americans in advertisements and other marketing memorabilia. Although research has discussed the evolution of depictions of African Americans in advertisements over time, there is little academic literature addressing the meanings associated with these images. Our analysis suggests that collecting black memorabilia demonstrates a means of both self and collective recollection, with the meanings of the images/objects differing by individual and social group. These meanings are understood by exploring two secondary themes: the good, the bad, and the ugly but important and black marketing memorabilia as symbols and preservers of the past. Evident in this discussion is that people remember the past in the context of tangible evidence (e.g., promotional items, packaging). People remember the past the way they want and need to remember it, and even images perceived as bad or ugly are important in reconciling with and learning from the past.

Fisk Tires, Armour Star Ham, Gold Dust Washing Powder, Pillsbury's Best, Bull Durham smoking tobacco, Dixie Boy firecrackers, Uncle Tom Bourbon Whiskey, and Coon Chicken Restaurants. This list of brands and companies could continue, but the underlying dimension might be difficult to determine. Perhaps if Aunt Jemima pancake mix and Uncle Ben's rice were added, the category would become obvious: These are brands and companies that used stylized and generally stereotypic depictions of African Americans in promotional items dating from the post–Civil War era until the late 1960s. Research has discussed the derogatory and stereotypic nature of the caricatures and personifications (e.g., Goings 1994; Humphrey and Schuman 1984) and the evolution of depictions of African Americans in advertisements over time (e.g., Goings 1994; Kern-Foxworth 1994). However, little academic literature addresses the memories and meanings associated with these images, which once were mass-produced commercial art but are now highly desired collectibles commanding top dollar on the secondary market. As one collector stated, "Those same faces that once sold tobacco and spices are now selling the empty boxes and cans [of tobacco] for prices far beyond those of the original products" (Heng 1994).

We begin to address this gap by providing insights into consumers' perceptions of collecting these historical marketing artifacts and their reproductions. Whereas there have been explorations of memory and learning from a psychological perspective (cf. Samu, Krishnan, and Smith 1999), we enhance the understanding of memory with a sociological framework, collective memory, that explores how members of social groups retain, alter, or reappropriate public knowledge of history (Halbwachs 1950/1992; Schwartz 1991a, 1997). Collective memory is the way ordinary people conceive the past. It is not a given, but rather a socially constructed notion that reflects present concerns. This sociological perspective is important because it recognizes the significance of context in shaping the cultural meanings of consumer goods. It also helps us describe the meanings associated with stereotypic representations of blacks in advertising and other marketing memorabilia from the past.

Our research questions are as follows: Are there multiple collective memories of these marketing artifacts? What are the meanings associated with these memories? We present and analyze qualitative data collected from informants a priori identified as collectors of any type of material objects or those who had knowledge of, if not experience with, black memorabilia. Prior to discussing the study, we describe the collective memory framework and the promotional images collected as black memorabilia.

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Collective Memory

Collective memory is a rubric used to describe how social group members know the past (e.g., Halbwachs 1950/1992; Schwartz 1991a). It is distinguished from both historical and autobiographic memory. Whereas historic memory is the past stored and interpreted by social institutions and autobiographic memory is the memory of events people have personally experienced, collective memory is a remembering of the past informed by shared experiences and public narratives. That is, collective memory is socially constructed by group members and is their present interpretation of events, persons, and objects from the past. There is not a single collective memory; there can be as many collective memories as groups in society (e.g., family, friends, neighbors, social/civic organizations). The existence of multiple collective memories is a primary reason these memories should be examined and discussed. Through discourse, social group members can begin to understand the meanings members of other social groups associate with the ownership, collection, or display of African-American memorabilia items.

The collective memory framework recognizes that certain events, persons, or objects can be interpreted differently, depending on the perceiver's perspective and whether the perceiver was directly involved. Collective memory informs understanding of the past and present and contributes to future expectations. In addition, present interests, needs, beliefs, and ideals shape views of the past, thus suggesting that group members selectively retain, interpret, and forget information (Schwartz 1991a, 1991b, 1997). Although collective memory was not used as the analytical framework, Belk (1991) recognizes that collective memories may affect the sense of the past that persons associate with material objects.

Researchers have used documents in the popular press and academic literature and the collective memory framework to analyze the evolution of images of persons, groups, and even an icon such as Santa Claus. For example, Schwartz (1997) examines articles in African-American newspapers (published around multiple anniversaries of Abraham Lincoln's birth) to understand how the image of Abraham Lincoln changed from that of a racial separatist (while he was alive) to a "symbol of racial equality" during the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Schwartz (1997) indicates no new information available about Lincoln accounted for this change in collective memory, but rather, celebrations or commemorations of Lincoln's birthday helped add to history images of Lincoln that never existed.

In a marketing context, Okleshen, Baker, and Mittelstaedt (2001) explore the shaping of the collective memory of Santa Claus. The authors examine articles in the popular and academic press to provide a chronological account of how the physical characteristics of the American Santa formed. Although many authors and the Coca-Cola Company attribute the creation of this collective image to Coca-Cola, Okleshen, Baker, and Mittelstaedt (2001) find that Coca-Cola was just one of many inputs into the construction of Santa's image. More important, their analysis suggests advertising can contribute to the development of collective memory.

We examine advertising images and collective memory from a different perspective. We are interested in the current collective memories, and the meanings of these memories, associated with a genre of advertising memorabilia (e.g., Uncle Ben rice boxes, Black Boy coffee cans).

Collecting Black Memorabilia

Collections, defined by Belk (1995, p. 67) as "things removed from ordinary use and perceived as part of a set of non-identical objects or experiences," are capable of telling a story because of the magical qualities of the individual pieces in the collection (Belk 1995; Belk et al. 1991). This magic resides in the object's associations with other times, places, and people (Belk 1991; Belk et al. 1991). In addition, an object in a collection may possess contemplation value because observers can reflect on and judge its meaning (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995). Or, as Rheims (1961, p. 211) notes, "The object bears witness: its possession is an introduction to history."

One genre of collectibles is black memorabilia (also referred to as black collectibles and black Americana). Black collectible objects are from the American past and can tell a story about the meanings ascribed to African Americans by the producers, users, and, perhaps, collectors of these objects. Black memorabilia items were made by, refer to, or contain images of African Americans. Examples include slave documents and restraints, toys, political and entertainment ephemera, Jim Crow–era signs (e.g., "White Only," "Colored Only"), and marketing materials, such as trade cards, promotional items, and packaging (Goings 1994). There is evidence of people collecting some forms of black memorabilia since the 1830s (Wesley 1990). However, our focus is on contemporary collectors' perceptions of stereotypic depictions of blacks in advertisements and other marketing materials. The items of interest were primarily disseminated from the 1860s until the 1960s but also include reproductions of such objects.

After the Civil War and with the development of color lithography, manufacturers and advertisers used images of blacks to sell a plethora of goods and services. Blacks were prominently featured in posters, on product labels, and as trademarks and product symbols for such diverse items as soaps, liquor, coffee, and motor oil. Scholars disagree about the motivations for the early use of black images in the marketplace. Some suggest the images were simply used as a marketing technique to gain attention and amuse potential

(white) buyers. Others contend an additional objective was to "prove" African Americans were not only different, but also inferior to whites and "objects worthy of torment and torture" (Goings 1994, p.14). However, there is almost universal agreement that the vast majority of the early depictions of blacks in U.S. advertisements was visually unattractive, often beastly, and revealed something about the dominant culture's perceptions of and prejudices against African Americans (Goings 1994; Lemons 1977). The characters were portrayed as comedic, with big red mouths, oversized ears, hands, and feet, bulging eyes, and sloping foreheads (to indicate limited intelligence [Lemons 1977]); as docile servants, maids, and cooks; and wearing tattered clothing. The speech patterns were as stereotypic as the depicted physical characteristics; "de," "dem," and "dat" ("the," "them," and "that," respectively) were regularly included in advertising copy. The author Toni Morrison (1974, p. 16) notes the effects of these portrayals:

> Nothing mollified the constant assault of seeing oneself in ugly caricature. The "coon" cards, trading cards, advertisements and music sheet covers that depicted us if not close to [beastly], then just a chromosome away, still mortify and enrage.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, during and following the civil rights movement, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People sponsored an effort to remove these stereotypic images from the public domain (Morrison 1974). Affluent African Americans purchased and destroyed many of the artifacts, and the remainder were collected and/or hidden in the back offices of antique and second-hand shops. It seems that the sentiment was "out of sight, out of mind," and if these degrading images were no longer visible, then they would no longer be a part of autobiographical, historical, or collective memories. Morrison (1974, p.16) characterizes these actions and ideas as "early hysteria" that represents a denial of "our own [black] history." It appears the "early hysteria" has abated, because collectors, many of whom are African Americans, have amassed significant collections of historical artifacts that include both beautiful and beastly depictions of blacks.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, we seek to extend our knowledge of both collective memory and the meanings of historical items by addressing the following research questions: Are there multiple collective memories of particular advertising artifacts? What are the meanings associated with these memories? To address these questions, we conducted depth interviews with collectors (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; McCracken 1988; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). We examine the thoughts of many information users (collectors) to determine their views of black memorabilia. This approach is slightly different from previous collective memory studies that examined the perceptions of various information producers (authors) to chronicle evolving memories of particular images or events. The focus on information users is appropriate because "collective memory can only be imagined and accessed through its manifestation in individuals" (Kansteiner 2002, p. 185).

The three coauthors and 141 student collaborators interviewed 144 people over a two-year period (cf. Spiggle 1994). Informants were identified in multiple ways. For example, some were personal contacts of the interviewers, others were visitors to antique shops, and a few were identified through the Internet. Informants were qualified if they identified themselves as both collectors and persons knowledgeable about black memorabilia, which we defined as "collectible objects and images that immortalize African-American history, including positive and negative depictions of African Americans." Examples of black memorabilia provided in the qualification stage included marketing items, such as Cream of Wheat's early trademark; art and literature; historical artifacts, such as military collectibles; and entertainment memorabilia. We focus on advertising- and marketing-related stimuli because they were most frequently discussed, appeared to include the most blatantly stereotypic depictions, and elicited the most visceral responses from participants.

Interviewers were trained to use a standardized interview protocol (e.g., What do you know about black memorabilia? Where did you learn about black memorabilia? How do you feel about these items? Have you ever purchased any of these artifacts?). They were also trained on probing techniques to determine individual meanings and perceptions and on the appropriate depth of transcribed discussions. Most interviews were conducted in the informants' residences or offices and audiotaped, but a few (less than 5%) were conducted over the telephone with extensive note taking or through instant messaging. The length of the interviews varied greatly, depending on the informant's familiarity with the items, but the average interview lasted approximately 40 minutes. Informants provided basic demographic data, as well as contact information for subsequent verification of interview accuracy.

Two Asian Americans were interviewed, almost half of the informants (73) were African Americans, and the remainder (69) were white. The informants ranged in age from late teens to mid-seventies. The number of men and women interviewed was roughly equal. Occupations varied and included college professors, students, antique store owners and clerks, a retired newspaper editor, a production specialist, marketing representatives, public relations specialists, homemakers, a merchandise manager for Goodwill, and design consultants.

Interpretations of the emergent themes were derived directly from the interview transcripts and interviewer notes/written papers using the collective memory framework. Two

of the authors independently developed themes. Although the labels differed, there was definite overlap in interpretations, which provides confidence in the "story" the data tell. Although there was a significant range in participants' ages, there were no discernable differences in perceptions and meanings by age. However, there were unmistakable differences in memories between blacks and whites and often among blacks and whites.

Multiple Collective Memories and Meanings

Our analysis suggests that collecting, or not collecting, black memorabilia represents a means of both collective and self-recollection, in which the meanings of the images/objects differ by individual and social group. Two primary themes help illuminate this conceptualization: the good, the bad, and the ugly but important and black memorabilia as symbols and preservers of the past. The former reflects the emotional meanings or visceral feelings associated with the items, whereas the latter indicates the documentary knowledge evoked by black memorabilia (cf. Belk 1991). These themes are not meant to be mutually exclusive.

Interwoven throughout each of these themes is the construct of consumer ambivalence (Otnes, Lowrey, and Shrum 1997). This ambivalence includes internal (psychological) and external (sociological and cultural) dimensions (Otnes, Lowrey, and Shrum 1997), the most obvious and instructive of which are the subcultural ambivalence differences between blacks and whites. Black informants were more willing to discuss their mixed emotions about these objects and often focused on the objects' social relevance. In contrast, many white informants displayed mixed emotions and had not thought about (or did not talk about) the social relevance of the artifacts.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly but Important

Collective memories result from an interaction among memory makers, cultural traditions that frame peoples' understanding of the past, and consumers who use or transform the meanings of these artifacts to fulfill their own needs (Kansteiner 2002). Therefore, collective memories about black memorabilia involve the early American producers of the items, evolving American culture and subcultures, and individual consumers who collect the items. Collective memories about black memorabilia are both social and fluid; persons actively and constructively create their own meanings for these objects (e.g., Holt 1997).

This set of themes detected in the data suggests that informants assign valenced affective and emotional associations to the images and memories of those images, because the items could not be completely understood using only cognitive associations. These affective meanings were "good" (positive), "bad"

(negative), and "ugly but important" (a juxtaposition of the two, seemingly opposing views of the good and the bad).

The Good. Positive views of black memorabilia differed by ethnicity. Black participants expressed general positive feelings, self- and group esteem, personal enjoyment of the collection, and pride in and respect for ancestors. Some black women wanted additional collectibles to make them feel more comfortable at home, because positive black memorabilia generated positive thoughts about family and served as a positive extension of the self (Belk 1988):

> [What attracted me to Aunt Jemima was] what she stood for. She worked all day catering to the master and taking [care] of his children, then went home at night to make a man feel like a man, and take care of her own family. She was the backbone of two families. [black female, early 40s]

Blacks also drew strength from this evidence from the past. Just as the possessions moved by Mormons provided evidence of an extraordinary heritage (Belk 1992), black memorabilia helped the black respondents remember the challenges their forebearers were able to overcome:

> It reminds [me] of the struggle that took place and the hope that existed in the midst of a challenging situation. [I] use it as a motivator and a source for hope and empowerment. [black female, early 20s]

Similarly, others discussed their pride in and respect for ancestors as a driving force for collecting. Collecting is a way to pay homage to persons of the past and to the history that black memorabilia symbolizes (Belk 1991). Some informants talked about collecting to expose children to their culture to develop a sense of kinship, familiarity, and pride in them. As Belk (1992, p. 353) suggests, these items are used to "invoke the spirits of the ancestors to protect their descendants." Other collectors referred to black memorabilia as a celebration:

> If you look at a piece of memorabilia and it ticks you off, and give[s] you a negative feeling, turn it around and make something positive out of it. If it makes you smile or laugh, celebrate it and share it. [black female, late 50s]

Collecting black memorabilia also brought fun and fantasy to many of the white participants. Many collected "just for the heck of it," always in search of something to collect (Belk 1995). They collected either for their personal enjoyment or for others to appreciate:

> Okay, it was an Aunt Jemima [clock]. It had a picture of her right on the face of the clock. It was red, it had Aunt Jemima written on it, and it was electric, it didn't have the batteries. It was very popular. It was something you could hang in your kitchen, and people wouldn't mind because that was kind of a tribute to the, or most the people who bought them, felt

that it was a tribute to the black America[n]. And of course Aunt Jemima could no longer produce the pictures … I think it would be wonderful thing to have a clock in your kitchen that says Aunt Jemima on it, I think that would be a great thing. [white female, mid 70s]

I have some coffee … let's see, what is that … it's in my kitchen and it has black people on it. But for the most part … and I have some Aunt Jemima things … I do remember [what motivated my purchase] … I just found it very attractive and at the time, it was something that I knew was selling. [white female, late 60s]

Black and white collectors alike view their collections, and the individual items in them, as "sacred" (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). However, the reason the collection is "sacred" differs between blacks and white informants. The black informants' collections provide them with a connection to their families, as is often the case with collections (e.g., Belk et al. 1991). In addition, black collectors consider their collections as connections to all African Americans (Belk 1992). In contrast, the white informants' motivations for collecting are representative of the personal and subjective slant of most collectors (Belk 1995; Belk et al. 1991).

The Bad. Many black informants expressed very strong views about "negative" black memorabilia. In some cases, anger was expressed about stereotypic depictions of blacks and caricatures in advertising artifacts:

> One thing that I would never buy is anything that resembles Aunt Jemima or Uncle Tom…. I don't like memorabilia that shows all Black people the same color. You would have to be sightless to think that. I like memorabilia that represents Black folks in various shades of brown and caramel. I refuse to consider purchasing anything slightly reflecting Sambo, Aunt Jemima, or Uncle Tom. Those items evoke anger in me not just negative feelings. [black female, late 40s]

The general sentiment was a desire not to have the perceived negativity of an artifact transferred to themselves, their home, or their family; that is, they did not want these possessions as extensions of themselves (Belk 1988). Just as family photo albums are selective repositories of personal histories and do not include reminders of painful events (Belk 1991), several informants indicated that their collections would not include such objects because they were reminders of horrible occurrences or appalling depictions:

> [I know] a few people who [don't] want 'Mammy' items in their home because of the negativity they represented. The same thing goes for advertising memorabilia or any other type of collectible shedding a less than favorable light on black history. [black female, early 70s]

Some suggested that mental bondage has affected blacks and their psyche, and it can be traced to not only slavery, but also these pieces of memorabilia:

[I don't] want to collect items that depict negative stereotypes of African Americans…. It reminds [me] too much of the struggle that African Americans had gone through. These reminders give [me] a hard feeling. [black female, late 40s]

Using a literal definition of "memorabilia," some collectors do not consider negative items memorabilia because these pieces represent something they do not want to remember. These informants claim to remember the past just fine without the presence of such physical manifestations. Still others believe negative memorabilia is distasteful, primarily because it was used to ridicule blacks:

> It is unfortunate that we African Americans encompass a large percentage of the United States, and lack knowledge of our heritage. This is due to the abundance of brainwashing and negative depiction[s] of African Americans by Caucasians. By purchasing certain black memorabilia, it displays negative stereotypical depictions in which we have embraced. [For instance,] Aunt Jemima and memorabilia with black faces painted. [I find] the Aunt Jemima memorabilia to be offensive, largely due to the fact that these characters were used to mimic African Americans. [black female, mid 20s]

According to some informants, preserving these items is providing them with an undeserved sacred status and perhaps reminding the informants of a part of history they would rather forget (LaBranche 1971). One black woman said she did not understand how people could purchase products depicting Aunt Jemima as a happy slave or why anyone would buy these types of caricatures:

> Depictions are false and [we] don't have to buy into white concepts; feelings depend on the item itself and being comfortable. Examples of offensive items include: Aunt Jemima, Uncle Tom's Cabin, and Black Jockey. [black female, mid 40s]

The preceding passage is indicative of role conflict (Otnes, Lowrey, and Shrum 1997). Consistent with this informant, others asked "Why would any self-respecting black person own black memorabilia—why would they want to have that negativity around them?" These similar responses support the idea that members of subgroups are likely to agree on some aspects of public meanings of objects (Richins 1994). However, when these views of Aunt Jemima as offensive are contrasted with perceptions of black informants who embrace Aunt Jemima, it is obvious there are also differences among blacks on the meaning of the images.

Others described, in detail, the negative stereotypical promotional material they have seen and how it makes them feel:

> Well, I am [familiar with black memorabilia]. It's a sad thing … I find black memorabilia around a lot. It is very expensive and to me, the sadness is that it's so expensive and exploiting black people…. Usually, they are portrayed as dumb and stupid. You know, the language is black talk that is from way,

way back, that's very Southern, and there's always a white man or woman in the background asking a question, and the black person on the front of the card or poster is saying something so stupid. And to me, how sad that would be for children who are going around with maybe other collectors, black children and white children, if they happen to see that. I don't think it's funny and all. I think it's sad. [white female, mid 50s]

Seeing these items leaves this viewer feeling vulnerable and wanting to protect others. This quote also illustrates a notable difference among white informants: Some white informants consider and discuss the social relevance of these images and ponder their impact on society. According to Otnes, Lowrey, and Shrum (1997, p.86), "when retailers treat as mundane events what consumers considered to be sacred, the net emotional outcome for the shopping experience is consumer ambivalence." The consumers believe the commodification of these items is wrong (Belk 1991). In addition, it is hard for them to reconcile the commercialization of these artifacts with their associated sacred (albeit negative) meanings.

The Ugly but Important. Juxtaposed between the good and the bad is the ugly but important. Many respondents suggested that good derives from bad and that they are intertwined. Multiple psychological and sociocultural factors influence the viewers' affective reactions to these artifacts and how the viewer and/or society copes with them. These competing and contradictory factors appear to be manifested in consumer ambivalence (Otnes, Lowrey, and Shrum 1997).

Many informants suggested black memorabilia represents the struggle of blacks and whites in the United States, and though they might find stereotypic images offensive, they believe this part of the past should not be forgotten, lest it be repeated:

[These things are] a part of our history, although negative in some cases, [and they] document a period in the life of African Americans that was not always positive in our depictions in advertisements, a time when the First Amendment was used negatively. I believe that history should not be ignored because it could repeat itself. Black memorabilia like the Confederate flag should not be on display everywhere. But having it displayed to document an era is acceptable. [black female, early 50s]

Not only is this quote representative of what others expressed, it is also consistent with the interplay between psychological and sociological ambivalence (Otnes, Lowrey, and Shrum (1997). That is, informants reported strong emotional reactions to black memorabilia (e.g., feeling angry when seeing an Aunt Jemima advertisement because she represents oppression and makes them feel bad about themselves). However, these same informants viewed the same advertisement

in the social context and perceived it as part of black history. It then took on a more positive, or global, meaning and helped them cope with negative affect.

The stereotypic depictions, such as those found in older print advertising, suggest how blacks were perceived by the dominant culture. Collectors noted that they were not celebrating those perceptions, but rather recognizing and acknowledging their existence. They believed negative black memorabilia can serve as a reminder of how things were and push them to strive and excel (Belk 1992). As one respondent said,

A framed sign that says, "No Negroes" [is] a negative image. A sign that says, "No Negroes" perpetuates pressures that blacks had to deal with in the past. However, a picture of a black person drinking at a water fountain labeled "No Negroes" would be positive. The image represents the actions blacks took to overcome the barriers. [black female, early 20s]

This juxtaposition between the good and the bad also appeared as tension between some collectors (mostly white) and their perception of the views that others (mostly black) hold of them:

I have a black friend at work and I'd ask her about that … if she knew anything about it and why they would feel that way and … She said she would never have one in her house and I said do you look at me as … being racist because I don't think of myself as [such]. I just think they should be proud of it because they're all the workers and they are famous for this. It made them popular with the slave owners. Every slave owner wanted a good worker, … they looked for the best ones, so I think it should be something they should be proud of. [white female, late 40s]

This response is consistent with the findings of Otnes, Ruth, and Milbourne (1994) that external pressures induce ambivalence. It also expresses concern about the public meaning of a prized item (Richins 1994) and a desire to protect the self (Belk 1988). Some informants were hesitant to purchase black advertising memorabilia, worried about the meanings others might ascribe to it. One informant said that, though she would want to own particular items of black memorabilia, she did not buy them because "you can't put it out." Others believed they should dispose of certain items because they were not sure how others in their social network would react. This ambivalence was also evident in owners of black memorabilia who did not display it. In other words, they would place it in some back room, where visitors would be less likely to see it.

Still others were concerned with the ethnicity of the owners or potential owners:

I then [purchased] a postcard … some time ago. The postcard was a little boy with bulging eyes and painted black skin. His lips were bright red and all of his teeth were gapped. The card was from, I believe 1923. It was very difficult to read the postmark. What made this card so "interesting" if you will,

was that on the back there was a handwritten note from a child to his "Auntie." The card read, "Dear Auntie, How would you like to be the 'nigger' on the front of this card?" … I bought the card because it was like buying a piece of history, however, I must admit that when I talk about that card or look at it, I get very angry. I feel as if I have a right to buy that postcard, but someone of another ethnicity would not. [black female, mid 30s]

As this respondent's ambivalence illustrates, the desire to experience mixed emotions drives some blacks to purchase black memorabilia even when it may cause pain (Otnes, Lowrey, and Shrum 1997). As these combined quotes illustrate, black memorabilia represents the good and the bad, the painful and the positive. Negative items reflect a time in American history when it was acceptable to promote and disseminate black stereotypes.

Black Memorabilia as Symbols and Preservers of the Past

Cultural Symbols of the Past. Collective memories do not exist in the public consciousness but in material aspects of individuals' lives (Terdiman 1993). To the informants, black memorabilia items symbolize American historical culture as it was and is. This physical evidence authenticates the past, represents life as it was really lived, and provides a sense of the past (Belk 1991). However, not all of the aspects of the public meanings are consistent across informants (Richins 1994). Multiple and different cultural associations are embedded in fictional characters. For example,

> Like the pictures of a black person eating a watermelon. Some people take that negatively. I'd think it shows more realism; that's more how they were back then. [white female, early 40s].

> For example, if you see a mammy anything, a cookie jar or shaker, you can be sure that the mammy has a scarf on her head, and that is exactly as you would have seen them. It's a true depiction of what a black woman would have worn at that time … and we know why. Hair is very difficult to manage so they hid it behind the scarf. If you see anything with black women you will see that scarf. [white female, mid 40s]

> [Mammy or Sambo] didn't reflect black life but [it] was an image that white American[s] had of blacks. They're the ones who made these artifacts, whether it is in books or the black mammy on the pancake box. It wasn't anything created by blacks or whatever term we were back then. But it is an image [of] how white society viewed us, so that is why there is a negative stereotype to it. I look at it more as a historical incident. [black female, mid 30s]

These women appear to agree black memorabilia provides an indication of the collective American past; however, their collective memories of what that past really was differ. The white informants seem to believe the depictions of blacks provide veridical evidence and are valid representations of the historical past (Belk 1991). In contrast, the black informant appears to draw on experiential knowledge and suggests the images reflect how whites perceived blacks (Belk 1991). These items are used mnemonically by both blacks and whites "to create, store, and retrieve a sense of the past that is instrumental in managing their identities" (Belk 1991, p. 14). Perhaps these different collective memories about the past are linked to differing source(s) of realities.

Consumers construct their realities from the most readily available information (e.g., O'Guinn and Shrum 1997). In addition, social construction theory suggests meanings of images and symbols are shaped and reinforced through socialization and participation in shared activities (Richins 1994). When the interaction between blacks and whites was limited, the dominant sources of information about blacks for whites could have been advertisements and literature, which are likely to have affected whites' construction of reality (e.g., "that really is how blacks were back then"). Blacks, who had ongoing personal interactions with other blacks, would use these actual interactions in their constructions of reality. Therefore, black participants tend to identify with the representations in the marketing memorabilia and infuse the items with historical and cultural meanings. The sense of self of black informants appears to be extended temporally to items that connect them to the past (Belk 1991). The black informants believe black memorabilia represents the struggle of all black families, and at the same time, they use the objects to make a connection to their biological ancestors. For example, one black woman said she saw "the faces of my ancestors reflected in these items." As the American pioneers used heirlooms to preserve their connection to the past, this informant used these items as "magical lamps" to cue memories of her ancestors (Belk 1992).

Perhaps because they are not aware of a direct familial or ancestral link to blacks, the collective memories of white participants tend to be detached, even when referring to the same advertising stimuli as black participants:

> Before I started collecting, I didn't know the whole story behind [Aunt Jemima]. I just thought it was an advertisement for the black cook in a family; how she must've been a very good cook to be so famous and to have a.… Some sort of famous statue or antique made after her. I just thought it was because she was a good cook.… I didn't [know the relationship to the Aunt Jemima advertising spokescharacter] when I first started. [white female, late 40s]

Some accounts of advertising memorabilia by whites were even more distant and tepid:

> At the time they were made, yeah, but now it's just a part of history. We have this one old ad in one of our bathrooms, it's for old licorice, and it has a little black baby naked on the beach and an alligator is trying to bite it; we mostly just get that stuff for decorations though [white male, early 20s].

Both blacks and whites interpreted black memorabilia with mixed emotions, such as fascination and revulsion (i.e., ambivalence), perhaps indicative of the sacred status of these objects (e.g., Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). Black informants were more willing to discuss their mixed emotions about these objects, often focusing on their social relevance and historical significance. However, many white informants, though they displayed mixed emotions about the artifacts, either had not thought about or did not discuss the social relevance of these times. Perhaps the perceptual differences by ethnicity are a result of conflicting cultural values (e.g., Hajda 1968; Otnes, Lowrey, and Shrum 1997), in which blacks want to reconcile and remember the past and whites want to reconcile but forget (or at least reframe) the past.

Personal Symbols of the Past. Many participants voiced personal memories associated with black memorabilia. Because these memories are autobiographical, they help the informants understand their personal histories (e.g., Baumgartner 1992). Their autobiographical memories are both nostalgic and painful, as these comments illustrate:

> I don't classify [depictions of children eating watermelon] as a negative piece of artwork. It represents more than what a white man's perception of it may be.… It represents two things. 1) Those hot summer days my brother … and I would eat a piece [of] watermelon my father bought off the watermelon truck. [That] use[d] to be the sweetest watermelon on earth. We would sit on the front porch and my mother would say "Now you know when ya'll finish you better wash the porch before all those bugs come" and we'd say, "yes ma'am." See all those people I just mentioned are deceased. That figurine helps me keep memories alive. 2) That figurine allows me to get another understanding of how black people survived. Watermelon was sometimes their only form of survival in the heat, picking cotton. [black female, early 50s]

> I grew up in part of my life in South Carolina so I had to look black memorabilia and racist advertisements in the face given that it was all around me. Like on the side of Route 15 north to south the Bull Durham tobacco ads, which depicted African Americans with exaggerated lips, exaggerated buttocks, tattered and torn clothes, very dark skin, "pickaninny" hair. And they were always shown as being shiftless, lazy, fishing, making physical sexual contact, and if there were words, they were speaking in black dialect "broken English" or "Ebonics" as they call it now. Even our children were the butt of those negative ads; for example, they would make postcards showing little naked black babies and underneath it would say "alligator bait." [black female, early 50s]

One black woman said these artifacts reminded her of the personal history of her great-great-great grandparents as slaves and of her great-great grandparents as sharecroppers, but she also noted the importance of preserving depictions of historical events such as slavery, the civil rights movement, and black church leadership. The items helped this partici-

pant maintain a connection to her family and "remain anchored in the world rather than become freefloating and cut off from our lineage" (Belk 1992, p. 352). Similarly, other black informants attributed broad, cultural significance to the meanings of the objects and representations, even while talking about personal memories of promotional images:

> Aunt Jemima, anything with Aunt Jemima. She's how we see a lot of women in our family. She looks like she would be the glue to hold any family together. I have a very close family and as blacks we keep … extended family practices throughout our culture. [black female, late 50s]

White informants who recounted autobiographic memories about black memorabilia did so in a more personally reflective rather than socially relevant manner. These meanings are private and idiosyncratic and reside in the object as a reminder of personal history (Richins 1994):

> Like Aunt Jemima syrup dispensers that I remember on the kitchen table as a child. I would love to have that today, not because of its black connotation, but because of [the] brand name and how it brings me back. [It's the] same [for] Uncle Ben's rice, too. [white male, late 60s]

> I remember the various books, *Little Black Sambo*, which my mother used to read to me, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. I remember them always using words like, 'the boy," and "mammy," and the blacks in those stories being cooks or something like that. Cream of Wheat had a trademark of blacks. The salt and pepper shakers had great big eyes that my mother referred to as "banjo eyes," and a lot of times they were eating big slices of watermelon. [white female, late 60s]

Nostalgic associations differ somewhat for blacks and whites. For the black informants, the memories are bittersweet because they represent not only the life they now lead, but also the struggle their ancestors endured (Belk 1992). The memories are also bittersweet for the white informants, but their link was to a personal past (e.g., wishing Mom could read a story to them again). Some of the white informants even remarked on their ambivalence toward heirloom items (cf. Priester and Petty 2001). They had to wrestle with their love for the person who gave them the advertisement, a desire to be dutiful, and the need to serve as the steward of the sacred item (Belk 1991) against their understanding that some people might be offended by the object. This wrestling represents conflicting private (subjective meaning to the owner) and public (meanings ascribed by others) meanings (Richins 1994). In addition, perhaps part of the ambivalence felt by the elders gets passed to their heirs, along with the item (Price, Arnould, and Curasi 2000).

Preservers of the Past. Informants generally viewed black memorabilia as a means of representing culture and history and providing documentation of ideas and events from the Ameri-

can past. That is, black memorabilia, similar to other possessions (e.g., souvenirs, attachment objects, objects with strong indexicality), prove that some event has occurred (Baker, Kleine, and Bowen, in press; Belk 1991; Grayson and Shulman 2000). Although the remembrances of the past varied, the items helped provide linkages to personal and communal pasts (Belk 1991). Because of this association with history and the attendant educational value, many informants want to preserve the artifacts:

> I look at it this way, items from our past need to be saved or collected so there is a record of our past. [white female, late 60s]
>
> Some might find [the items] negative, but they are educational. It all depends on how a person perceives it. [black female, early 50s]

For these collectors, preservation occurs when the physical evidence and its meanings are transferred from one generation to the next. Whereas the older consumers examined by Price, Arnould, and Curasi (2000) used their collections to transfer symbolic immortality or familial legacies, the collectors in this study want the objects to pass "the torch" of what it means to be American and/or African American. One black informant saw black memorabilia as a means of "schooling" African Americans on black history, rather than leaving this aspect of their education to others.

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that marketing materials with stereotypic depictions of African Americans have played a major role in the framing and understanding of American culture. Many participants talked about personal experiences with or feelings about these marketing artifacts and how these materials helped either remind them of the past or form their expectations for the future.

Our results suggest there are multiple collective memories and meanings of these advertising artifacts. In particular, we find distinct differences between the collective memories of blacks and whites. In many cases, people (often black, but some white) identify black memorabilia with the struggles and perseverance of blacks in the United States. Many of the African-American informants repeated a shared understanding of these advertising artifacts as illustrative of the African-American past. An object has meaning, either positive or negative, because it has a cultural and/or historic context and symbolizes something about African-American experiences in the United States. The stories brought to mind for these participants involved slavery, enforced servitude, survival, and a communal "family" of blacks.

In contrast, the data suggest the white informants are, in general, much more likely to use personal reflection, rather than social relevance, when assigning meaning to these objects. That is, many whites viewed Aunt Jemima as Grandma's cookie jar rather than assigning the cultural meanings and collective memories often attributed to Aunt Jemima by blacks (e.g., represents the backbone of the family). Therefore, it appears these advertising materials occupy status in popular culture for various reasons.

The collective memory paradigm indicates that ideas, meanings, and memories result from repetition of information. For example, memories of childhood are generally not autobiographic recollections but reflect the stories family members have repeated over the years (Halbwachs 1950/1992). We posit blacks and whites have had exposure to different stories about Aunt Jemima, which has resulted in a divergence in their collective memories of this advertising icon. For example, the stories blacks might have heard about Aunt Jemima probably included references to her as symbolic of family and/or servitude, whereas the experiences of whites might have centered on Grandma owning an Aunt Jemima cookie jar. Perhaps the perceptual differences by ethnicity noted from our informants are a result of conflicting cultural values (e.g., Hajda 1968; Otnes, Lowrey, and Shrum 1997), with blacks wanting to reconcile and remember the past and whites wanting to reconcile but forget (or at least reframe) the past.

Multiple meanings are reflected in the affective theme of the good, the bad, and the ugly but important. The participants frequently framed items in a positive or a negative light and sometimes a combination of the good and the bad. Any one object can have both positive and negative associations and, thus, multiple meanings. Again, collective memory (i.e., a person's interpretation of the past based on experiences with others and concerns for the present) appears to inform the meanings imputed the items.

A few limitations to this study should be noted. Our informants represent a convenience sample, and our method does not enable us to generalize to the population at large. Moreover, we have only investigated perceptions of information users (collectors), not those of information producers (authors in the popular press). However, we are interested in examining how information producers have influenced the collective memories of black memorabilia. Documents in the popular press could be content analyzed to understand the evolution of these collective memories (e.g., Okleshen, Baker, and Mittelstaedt 2001; Schwartz 1991a).

Exploring how different types of black memorabilia might elicit qualitatively different sources of understandings of U.S. history and culture also seems relevant. For example, are there differences in understandings provided by the promotional materials associated with slave trading and the literature written by enslaved people? That is, black slaves were possessions, and the related advertising documents (e.g., slave sale

announcements) were an integral part of the selling and distribution of human beings. At the same time, a few enslaved people wrote autobiographies. Therefore, do the meanings of slave marketing materials (negative, inhumane actions) differ from those associated with slave narratives (positive, intellectual pursuits) because the former involve the buying and selling of people? Furthermore, because many informants indicated they had found black collectibles sold or produced outside the United States, it would be interesting to conduct a cross-cultural study on the meanings of black memorabilia in other countries. Finally, additional explorations of collective memory in other advertising and marketing contexts are warranted (cf. Okleshen, Baker, and Mittelstaedt 2001). One possibility is to compare and contrast the collective memories of other ethnic groups for advertising and cultural artifacts that depict members of their ethnic group (e.g., Native Americans, Chinese Americans).

People remember the past within the context of the tangible evidence; as such, black memorabilia is physically linked to American history. Consistent with the collective memory framework, our data suggest the "story" told differs depending on the members of the social group queried. A discourse on black memorabilia is important because multiple collective memories are evident; meanings differed between black and white informants, but also among black and white informants, though perhaps to a lesser extent. When members of a social group project the memories and meanings associated with black memorabilia onto others, they might make faulty attributions about intentions in collecting or owning these items. Remembering and forgetting is social (Kansteiner 2002). People remember the past the way they want and need to remember it, and they remember it through the material artifacts of society. The way they want and need to remember the past can be (and is) influenced by social discourse.

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