A genealogy of the ‘black consumer’ in post-Apartheid South African media: Counterpoints to discourses of citizenship

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Abstract

Although to some extent, like many other countries with colonial histories, South Africa has always been a society shaped by commercial power, in the post-Apartheid era globally inflected genres of commodity culture, consumption and consumerism have gained increasing traction. This paper examines the extent to which South Africa’s political liberation also manifested in a consumerist revolution: the dawning of (at least in principle) democratized consumption opportunities, new paradigms for the consideration of citizenship, a boom in both globalised discourses of consumption and the increasing acknowledgement of local consumption practices. It does so in order to examine the extent to which discourses of consumption have come to shape expressions of economic empowerment, participation in public life, and the relation of consumer to citizen rights in post-Apartheid South Africa. The paper explores these conceptual issues through focusing on the representation of black consumers and consumption in English-language media in South Africa between 1990 and 2000. This first decade of political freedom, which heralded the dawning of South Africa’s democracy is a crucial moment in a genealogy of the mediated ‘black consumer’, a figure that currently manifests in the South African media landscape as conspicuously ‘bling’. The paper will present on the key (preliminary) themes emerging from an analysis of a corpus constructed through archival research, and contextualise these within debates about the tensions between citizenship and consumption in public life today.
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Introduction: South Africa’s consumer revolution?

South Africa has to some extent always been a consumer society. Throughout the colonial era and the apartheid era, its economy was built on the exploitation and trade of gold and other highly desirable commodities, as well as forms of industrial production associated with those natural resources. Throughout the racist regime of Apartheid, white South Africans (the minority of the population) enjoyed access not only to political rights but also to an abundance of all of the trappings of capitalist society – malls, consumer goods, international travel, and extremely comfortable if not luxurious material standards of living. Deprived for centuries of these material markers of a ‘better life’, South Africans comprising the oppressed racial categories remained marginalized bystanders, deprived of both political rights and economic agency. One of the fundamental aims of the revolutionary movement, led by the African National Congress (ANC), alongside political freedoms was the realization of various socio-economic rights such that the ‘better life’ until then jealously guarded by a tyrannical elite could be rolled out to all South Africans.

Despite the socialist underpinnings of the ethic of ‘a better life for all’, expounded in the ANC's Freedom Charter (1955) and later integrated into the first democratic Constitution of South Africa (1996), since the demise of Apartheid, a neo-liberal ethic has become ever more deeply embedded into South African politics and economics. Unsurprisingly, the result of the shift to neo-liberalism in the ANC's policy (and the entrenchment of neo-liberalism in the handover from old to new governments), has been that the vast majority of mainly black South Africans remain enmeshed in webs of poverty and a structural lack of opportunities for economic betterment, eighteen years after the first democratic elections. Despite the social and economic realities of extreme poverty and broad-based economic disempowerment, a narrow elite of black business people and a growing black middle class have succeeded in accessing the material
‘better life’ to which most South Africans aspire but are excluded. A brief glance at South African culture and society as refracted through the media landscape tells a very particular story: a small minority of empowered black consumers (high profile millionaire businessmen like ‘sushi-king’ Kenny Kunene, ‘it-girl’ celebrities such as ‘queen of bling’ Khanyi Mbau, increasingly wealthy politicians, and representatives of a well-off black middle class in a variety of forms of popular culture) are overrepresented at the expense of the large minority of still economically disempowered black citizens.

My current research project, ‘Consumer Culture and the Media in Post-Apartheid South Africa’ asks, what role did the media play in constructing consumption as a form of empowerment in the context of other struggles for political and social recognition in the early days of South Africa’s liberation? In particular, my research focuses on the discursive construction of black consumers, their lifestyles and practices of consumption in English language South African media during the 1990s. This particular empirical focus was selected in order to trace some of the roots of the ‘bling culture’ evident in so much of South Africa’s contemporary media. There is more at stake than simply telling this story. A genealogy of the mediated ‘black consumer’ will also contribute to bigger debates about what empowerment means, and how the rights of citizens and consumers are both related and at odds with one another in South Africa. This in turn can contribute to existing scholarly debate about the global flow of neoliberal and consumer ethics from, to and through societies that share some key characteristics with South Africa (such as Brazil and India): extreme gaps between the rich and poor, histories of colonial exploitation, and contested participation in the globalized economy.

**Theorizing Consumer/Citizen Empowerment in South Africa**

In order to theoretically contextualize questions about the mediation of black consumers and consumption in post-Apartheid South Africa, it is necessary to explore (briefly for the purposes of this paper and due to space constraints) scholarship about the shape that ‘citizenship’ takes in the age of consumer culture, theoretical debates about whether consumption is limiting or liberating, and the particularities of the notion of empowerment in the South African context.
Citizenship in the Age of Consumer Culture

In the ‘liberal social imaginary of Western capitalist democracies’ citizens are conceptualized as rights bearing individuals who give a political mandate to the state, and in return to whom the state is responsible (Clarke, et al., 2007: 2). In media theory, citizens are conceived as rational actors who rationally debate matters of common concern and as such participate in the public sphere (Habermas, 1992). Consumers on the other hand are conceptualized as actors in an economic relationship, engaged in the exchange of money for commodities, and motivated by private concerns (Clarke, et al., 2007: 2). In the neoliberal age, defined as it is by commodity and celebrity cultures, consumption and an emphasis on economic rather than political, cultural or social capital, the notion of citizenship has arguably weakened, while the notion of the consumer has gained increasing traction.

This is not to suggest that consumers have no ability to connect with public concerns, but that the shape of that connection has shifted. New kinds of ‘public connection’, such as an interest in shared forms of popular culture, or celebrity fandom, are taking the place of (or at least developing alongside) political actions such as voting, debate and social activism (Couldry et al., 2007). As I have argued elsewhere, the notion of the public in the age of consumer culture is better conceptualized as a space of appearance than a space of collective action and participation (Iqani, 2012; Arendt, 1958). In this framework, the idealized participating citizen morphs into an agonal actor more concerned with individualized visibility and economic transactions and who connects more with media forms than collective social action. This has implications for the ways in which we theorize citizenship in the age of late capitalism and globalised consumerism – a debate too broad and deep to fully explore in this paper, but worth highlighting nevertheless.

One body of literature that explicitly engages with the tensions between the rights of citizens as opposed to those of consumers is work on the role of public services in general, and in the context of media studies specifically, of public service broadcasting (PSB) in democratic societies (e.g., Lunt and Livingstone, 2012). The conflict between
commercial and public interests is explicitly played out in the politics of broadcasting regulation. Increasingly, in public services policy, citizens are discursively constructed as ‘consumers’ of public services who should have access to a certain degree of choice. This could be construed as ideological rhetoric that seeks to shore up practices of privatization and the individualization of social services, and which de-emphasizes collective rights, such as to information.

The shifting conceptualization of citizenship in late modernity has broad-reaching implications for studies concerned with exploring notions of agency and empowerment in relation to certain kinds of public action, be it forms of social and political involvement, or mapping the political implications of consumption in the public realm.

Consumption as Manipulation; Consumption as Empowerment

Consumption is not set apart from questions of power. As I have written about elsewhere (Iqani 2012, 2013), scholarship to do with consumption can be characterized by two broad intellectual traditions. The first, rooted in Marxist and critical theory, considers consumption as evidence of manipulation by the capitalist system. From this perspective, consumers are embedded in unjust and alienating political-economic structures in which their practices of consumption are tied up with exploitative systems of production, and in which consumption itself produces economic and symbolic value from which individuals are not the main beneficiaries (Lee, 1993; Perrotta, 2001; Arvidsson 2005). The second tradition, rooted in some genres of anthropological research as well as most marketing-oriented consumer research, holds that consumption has the potential to facilitate empowerment in terms of both individual and collective identity expression and in terms of materially marking access to pleasures disallowed or regulated by class, race or gender boundaries (McCracken 1990; Miller, 1997, 1998).

In the context of non-western societies with histories of colonialism, there is a great deal of weight to the argument that practices of consumption can be considered empowering to individuals and groups who have been historically and systematically excluded from the economy. As well as this, certain forms of consumption can be
considered political acts in their own right. For example, in South Africa, apartheid laws such as the Group Areas Act controlled not only where black South Africans could live, but also the leisure and retail opportunities to which they had access. In her autobiography, *Part of My Soul Went With Him*, Winnie Mandela (1985) discusses how the act of walking into a store reserved for ‘whites only’ in Brandfort, the scene of her banning order after the 1976 student uprisings in Soweto, was an important act of resistance with significant political consequences for the conscientisation of the black population of that small town.

To unambiguously consider consumption as evidence of empowerment and agency is problematic, however, as this obliterates the influence that structures of power – such as capitalism – have on the options made available in the system. A dialectical view on the relationship between each set of perspectives is most productive (I make this argument in more detail elsewhere – see Iqani 2012).

*Consumption and Empowerment in South Africa*

In considering the role that consumption plays in South Africa, it is important to note the particular relevance of the term ‘empowerment’. Although broadly utilized in revolutionary rhetoric to signify the end of all forms of oppression, in the post-Apartheid era, the notion of empowerment has become discursively coupled to a certain mode of economic freedom. The neo-liberal bent of the current power structure in South Africa further prioritizes economic empowerment as a form of participation in the free market economy (rather than, say, access to a certain baseline of social welfare and the distribution of shared resources effectively through a taxation and grant system). As such, Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), a government-implemented strategy to redistribute wealth in the new South Africa, has been seen to benefit only a privileged few, while the majority of formerly disadvantaged South African remain deprived.

A small but growing body of scholarship in South Africa has examined the relationship between race and consumption in post-Apartheid, and hints that the rise of conspicuous consumption amongst a black elite is evidence of buying-in to globalised neo-liberalism
and selling-out of socialist values (Posel, 2012). This view is also reflected in certain political writings. Political economist Moeletsi Mbeki argues that the ANC prioritizes consumption over production, that the party has driven a consumer revolution in South African, and that “the African elite is bleeding South Africa dry with over-consumption’ (Mbeki, 2012; Subramany, 2012). Another prolific critic of South African politics, Paul Holden (2012), in a chapter on the rise of the black middle class, implies that conspicuous consumption – such as Kenny Kunene’s infamous ‘sushi party’ of October 2010 is evidence of a type of rampant, self-interested and insatiable greed for material possessions, which is celebrated as a marker of successful economic empowerment. Although such critique is valid to an extent, these critical voices display a wholly cynical view that conspicuous consumption is evidence of having sold out on the values of the revolution. They do not recognize the possibility that consumption for many South Africans is indeed evidence of an ability to participate in the market economy and enjoy access to goods, services and experiences in the public realm that were systematically and maliciously deprived of them by the apartheid regime. A better life does in fact take material form, no matter what ideology underwrites a revolution. Empowerment is especially contested in South Africa when it is performed through acts of consumption. Critical voices quickly claim that driving nice cars, earing fine clothes and eating at nice restaurants is unethical when performed by individuals who claim to represent the interests of the poor. This criticism is not misplaced. But it is one-dimensional, as it entirely ignores the fact that the aspirations of the poor are to be able to fully participate in the consumer economy.

With these theoretical debates sketched out, it is helpful to return to the key research question animating this research: what role did the media play in constructing consumption as a form of empowerment in the context of other struggles for political and social recognition in the early days of South Africa’s liberation? How were black consumers and consumption discursively constructed at that crucial point in history, and what bearing does it have on bigger questions about what empowerment means in consumer societies? The next section outlines the methodological approach employed to seek answers to these questions.
Research approach: A media genealogy of the black consumer, 1990-2000

The research was shaped in response to the observation that in the South African media landscape, ‘black consumers’ are conspicuously present in a particular way, which prioritizes extreme ‘bling culture’ and focuses upon a very wealthy, globalised elite. As such, the empirical object which was the focus of the research was ‘media representations of the black consumer’. Instead of paying attention to the current discursive formations (a project that remains necessary, and which I intend to pick up at a later point in my research trajectory), this project has prioritized tracing some of the recent precursors to this trend. In particular it was necessary to ask, how black consumers appeared in English language media around the time of South Africa’s political liberation – in order to trace some of the counterpoints to discourses of citizenship that were in full force at that time period.

On genealogy

Informed by Foucault’s theories on discourse, knowledge and power (Foucault 1969, 1970, 1980) and situated broadly as a media / cultural genealogy (such as those constructed by Gill, 2003; Orgad, 2009), the empirical approach designed for this study aimed to locate a variety of historical media content (where the period of analysis was 1990-2000) that could serve as ‘jigsaw pieces’ through which a broader picture could be constructed of the ways in which black consumers and consumption were represented during the 1990s. The aim of genealogical work is to disturb “formerly secure foundations of knowledge and understanding” and to cultivate "skepticism towards that which is taken for granted, assumed to be 'given' or natural within contemporary social existence” (Hook, 2005: 7). Any genealogy is by definition incomplete, partial and shaped by the subjectivity, politics and approach of the researcher and the availability of historical material. Genealogies do not seek to construct absolute accounts of how discourses took shape, but to trace key moments in the emergence of discourses and to situate those within historical and political context. Media genealogies focus specifically on historical media material and do not include other discursive resources, such as policy documents, oral history, educational materials and so on. As such, genealogical work focusing on media is necessarily fragmented – but this should not necessarily be
considered as a weakness. The media are a key site in which discourses take shape and are make public (arguably, more public than any of the other sources of knowledge and power). By giving an account of the ways in which a certain discourse took shape in the media at a certain time in history, appropriate attention is paid to an extremely powerful site of discursive practice. The 1990s is positioned as a crucial focus because this period represents the first decade of political freedom (the ANC was unbanned and Nelson Mandela released from political imprisonment in February 1990). The focus on the 1990s does not aim to suggest that black consumers were ‘born’ (discursively or sociologically) in that decade or to ignore long and complex cultural histories of the relationship between race and consumption in South Africa. By constructing a more detailed picture of how black consumers and consumption were mediated in that time, an important contribution is made to a more comprehensive genealogy.

**Data Collection**

With these methodological anchoring concepts in place, the data collection that took place for this project was at once exploratory and strategic. The data collection approach, while attempting to be as comprehensive as possible, was undergirded by an awareness that it would be impossible to create a complete representation of the topic at hand. On the one hand, I wanted to find out how much material was available, on the other, limited resources of time and funding required a strategic approach that located the most appropriate material. The inherent ‘incompleteness’ of any genealogy is compounded when archives are themselves incomplete or not-digitized – as is the case with most of the media libraries that exist in South Africa.

The search for relevant historical media material took three approaches – each of which was a strategic response to archive accessibility and organization. Firstly, with respect to the extensive newspaper microfilm collections held by the South African National Library, the approach was to ‘randomly’ select months and years across the range of newspaper titles such that, roughly one complete year’s worth of newspaper coverage featuring consecutive months from each year of the decade was covered, and to scan through the ‘sample’ of microfilms looking for any coverage broadly to do with the topic of ‘black consumers and consumption’. Secondly, digital keyword searches were
performed in digitized archives. A list of possible keywords was developed and used to search the database for relevant material. The online digital database of media clippings, *SA Media*, which was established and is hosted by the University of the Free State, contains material from almost all South African newspapers in English and Afrikaans. Unfortunately, *SA Media* does not allow for a free text search of all articles in the database. Instead, each article uploaded into the system has a number of keywords labeled by the database personnel, and the search function can only access those pre-assigned terms. In other words, the search results are dependent on the researcher correctly identifying or working out which key words were already noted and prioritized by the database. The *Sunday Times* digital archive which is accessible (at a fee) at AVUSA head offices does support free text searches – which makes the task of finding relevant material easier, but this database is of course limited to only one newspaper title. Thirdly, in other media archives controlled by media corporations and to which access was limited, we were forced to have our searches mediated by the librarians and archivists of those institutions. Nevertheless, they did assist us to locate a number of relevant newspaper articles, magazine features, and pieces of television coverage. Table 1 summarizes the media archives accessed to date:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Archive Name</th>
<th>Collection Type</th>
<th>Access Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>SA Media</em></td>
<td>Online news clipping database across all media titles.</td>
<td>Digital keyword search through university subscription</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>SA National Library</em></td>
<td>Microfilm collection across all newspaper titles.</td>
<td>Manual scanning of microfilm, free access to libraries in Pretoria and Cape Town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sunday Times</em></td>
<td>Digital archive of all entire newspaper back catalogue.</td>
<td>Paid access to archive at AVUSA head offices, free text search.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>M-Net</em></td>
<td>Video and digital archive of all material produced by / broadcast on MNet.</td>
<td>Through institutional librarian, with specific requests for viewings and transcription / purchase of copies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>SABC TV</em></td>
<td>Video library of most material produced by SABC television.</td>
<td>Through institutional archivist, with specific requests for viewing and purchase of copies.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To date, approximately 850 media texts have been gathered. The vast majority of this corpus is comprised of newspapers articles: 810 pieces dated between 1 January 1990 and 31 December 2000 from 25 English language newspapers (weekly and daily, regional and national) as well as a number of magazine articles and television shows, from a variety of other sources. As this research is still in progress, it is very likely that more relevant texts will be sourced and added to the corpus. A focus will be placed on other genres of media and popular culture moving forward. It is necessary to note that despite the very large number of texts collected, for the purposes of the current research question, these will be analyzed thematically and qualitatively rather than quantitatively (although this will not be ruled out as a possibility for future work with the corpus at a later stage).

Data Analysis

The corpus of texts collected will be treated in two analytical stages: firstly, a thematic analysis highlighting key topics present and, secondly, deep discourse analyses of smaller sub-corpora of texts from each of the thematic strands. Because this paper reports on research that is still currently in progress, only the first stage of analysis has taken place. The scope of this conference paper does not allow for a detailed explication of the second phase of analysis – which will be reported on in future publications emanating from this work. At this stage, the task is to sketch out the key themes emerging from the corpus of texts collected thus far, and to summarize in a preliminary and open-ended fashion the shape media representations of black consumers and consumption took in English language media during the 1990s. This will be the basis for further detailed discursive and semiotic interpretation, with reference to carefully selected sub-corpora of texts, of each theme.

Preliminary themes of the mediation of black consumption and consumers in the 1990s

Prefaced by a disclaimer that this research project is still very much a work in progress, several key analytical themes have emerged, which will form the basis for deeper interpretation in future writings. Three of these are introduced here in order to provide
a preliminary picture of key aspects to the mediation of black consumers and consumption during the time period of the study. Illustrative examples selected from the corpus of texts are included in the discussion of each theme.

Spaza shops, shebeens and hawking: Black consumption at the margins

One strand of media representation about black consumption in the 1990s are articles that cover the types of black consumption activity with which white South Africa was most comfortable and familiar. These include stereotypical depictions of black life and culture as firmly entrenched within the lower echelons of socio-economic life and within the boundaries of apartheid geography. In the white South African imaginary during Apartheid, black South Africans did not drive cars, shop in malls or buy drinks in suburban nightclubs and bars – they used cheap public transport (minibus taxis), purchased their daily goods at backyard ‘spaza’ shops in their townships or from hawkers on city streets, and consumed their beer in township ‘shebeens’.

For example, in an article titled ‘Spaza shops outsell the ‘big three’ SA retailers’ in the Business section of the EP Herald (25 February 1998), the percentage of market share enjoyed by township spaza shops is documented. It reports that spaza turnover is around ‘R78-billion’, and that the five biggest selling commodities from township microretailers were: food, soft drinks, cigarettes, alcohol and fuel. Another article headlined ‘Cape Africans spend more at spaza shops’ in the Sowetan (14 July 1998), reports on the spending patterns of different racial groups, noting that higher percentages of purchases from informal traders, hawkers, shebeens and spaza shops were evident in black and ‘coloured’ populations. Although presented in a factual, reportage style, these reports create a particular picture of black consumption as something that was largely external to the formal consumer economy. Instead, black consumption was firmly located within spatial and economic zones that remained marginalized and impoverished, and which did not explicitly and directly challenge the existing white monopoly on malls, boutiques, and fancy bars and restaurants.
The ‘newsworthiness’ of the black middle class

A second thematic strand evident in the corpus of texts is the presence of news articles and opinion pieces reporting on the so-called ‘rise’ of the black middle class. As though there were no well-off black South Africans in the country prior to the release of Nelson Mandela in February 1990, the media reported enthusiastically on ‘newsworthy’ topics on the theme of a rising black middle class. For example: the ‘novel’ phenomenon of black South African women joining aerobics classes (‘Aerobics instructors in pound seats as black women shed kilos’, Daily Dispatch, 27 November 1997); black South Africans purchasing air tickets to travel to other countries on business or pleasure (‘Increase in black South Africans traveling overseas’ Cape Times 24 July 1995); and even blacks with the means giving charitable support towards poverty stricken white people (‘Blacks come to the aid of poor whites’ Daily Dispatch, 17 June 1992). Without denying the fact that the majority of black South Africans were (and still are) on average much poorer than white South Africans, the media discourse about the black middle class, especially in the early 1990s, seems to take for granted the notion that it was previously absent, and currently impotent. In an opinion piece titled, ‘Wanted: Adequate black middle class’ (EP Herald, 27 August 1992), Wallace Neil-Boss says, “Neglected, stunted and inert, the black middle class, such as it is, had lain fallow and sterile for far too long”. Considered at best ineffectual and at worst absent by the white imagination, the activities of a black middle class were treated with some surprise by the English-language press in South Africa particularly prior to the 1994 democratic elections.

Fast forward to the end of the decade: a veritable explosion of media discourse about the ‘black middle class’ – its rise, its rights, its responsibilities – takes the place of the mild surprise evidenced by having noticed its existence in the first place at the beginning of the decade. At this time we see the emergence of the term ‘buppies’ (shorthand for ‘black yuppies’) who are making the most of their apparently newfound economic means. In an article titled ‘The meteoric rise of SA’s black middle class’ by Ferial Haffajee in the Mail & Guardian (1-8 April 1999), she writes: ”Riding on the coat-tails of this corporate flurry [the rise in black business ownership as a result of government BEE policies], in luxurious sedans and with attitudes that exude confidence and ownership, has been the black middle class.” The article goes on to describe the
shopping habits of these ‘buppies’ in one of Johannesburg’s glitziest malls, Sandton City: unsubtle, confident, and willing to shell out the cash. A sales assistant in a fancy boutique is reported as describing her black customers: “They’ve got bucks, they’ve got cars. There’s no umming and ahning. They want quality and there’s no schlepping.”

Underlying both of these moments in the media representation of the black middle class is a certain degree of incredulity that there has emerged a demand for commodities and consumption spaces previously denied to black markets. This could be interpreted as cynical and racist – a discomfort with the ‘sudden’ entry of black consumers into the ‘white’ market, an unwillingness to share. On the other hand, there is arguably an element of pride in these accounts. The ‘meteoric’ rise of the black middle class is, on the face of it, a phenomenon that is greeted as evidence of the nation’s ability to distribute economic resources in a post-apartheid era – to some extent at least. As well as this, there is a sense of class politics replacing race politics in the arenas of consumption. Instead of denying the rights to consume on the basis of skin colour (a fiction all too well constructed into a social truth in South Africa), the new marker of inclusion/exclusion is the ability to consume. It doesn’t matter who you are, if you can afford to spend R3,000 on ‘faux fur jackets and diamanté-encrusted shoes’ (from the previously cited article by Ferial Haffajee) from a boutique in Sandton City – you qualify as middle class.

Accusations of Luxury

A third thematic strand in media coverage about black consumers and consumption during the 1990s is the emergence of a discursive linking between a taste for luxury goods and lifestyles to a lack of public accountability, corruption or a disregard of the poor. Interestingly, these accusations of luxury are typically aimed at high profile black individuals such as businessmen and politicians (and rarely against high profile white individuals). This theme becomes particularly apparent in media coverage early after the first democratic elections; as the white media first exercise their ‘watchdog’ role on a new, untested black government. Underlying certain reports was the implication that the new political elite were enriching itself at the expense of the people – a stereotype evident in western media coverage about Africa in general (Brookes, 1995). For
example, an article syndicated from the Foreign Service and published in the *Weekend Argus* (3-4 August 1996) reports that in Lagos, Nigeria, “Leaders live in luxury but ragged kids learn begging culture”. Throughout this strand of the media discourse on black consumption in South Africa is this underlying worry – that once political power in South Africa is in the hands of the black majority, the country will become ‘just like every other country in Africa’ – riddled with corruption due to the ‘natural’ oligarchic tendencies of the black elite, which are manifested in lavish spending and the hollowing out of a sense of responsibility to those in need.

One key figure during the 1990s was ANC MP and struggle icon, Winnie Mandela. Embroiled in a variety of controversies which I do not have space to detail here, Madikizela-Mandela received a lot of media attention for her ‘lavish tastes’ – such as her alleged ownership of a ‘mansion’ in Soweto, her taste in expensive, extravagant clothing, her penchant for sumptuous parties, and her ‘lust’ for diamonds. These are consistently positioned by the media in opposition to her claims to represent the poor. Allegations of hopping on the ‘gravy train’ and using political office in order to achieve quick self-enrichment were leveled at many new black MPs. One of the first ANC MPs to be convicted of fraud was Tony Yengeni – famous for his enjoyment of fine Italian suits and for driving a BMW (in some townships, ‘Yengeni’ is still slang for a luxury 4x4 car – the type he preferred).

The moralistic sense that black leaders should “keep in touch with their people” by eschewing lavish lifestyles is well illustrated in a letter to the editor of the *Cape Argus* on 28 June 1994 (only a couple of months after the election of the first black government). Michael Nichollas from Greenpoint, Cape Town, recounts watching the budget speech in parliament on television, and seeing “members of parliament leaving in their luxury cars”. The letter writer considers this an “ominous beginning” to the new government’s proposed Reconstruction and Development Plan, meant to benefit all South Africans. He argues, “Far better would it be if these public figures could eschew the ostentatious trappings of office and set an example to those whom they purport to represent, by utilizing more modest means of transport. Better still, let them catch a minibus taxi as thousands of ordinary people do daily”. This sense of concern at the ‘ostentatious tastes’ of black politicians becomes a running theme in media coverage of alleged fraud
Conclusion: Counterpoints to discourses of citizenship

To what extent do each of these forms of consumption equate to a notion of empowerment? The first theme, in which black consumption is ‘safely’ represented as remaining within the limited boundaries prescribed by the apartheid state, suggests black consumption was still regulated through the limitation of access to sites of consumption other than the spaza shop, hawker and shebeen. From this perspective, black consumption is ‘trapped’ within the remnants of the racist political-economy of Apartheid, and there is little opportunity for other forms of consumption in other spaces, or for social inclusion and transcending socio-economic class structures through consumption. Nevertheless, the purchasing power of the masses is recognized as significant, and the market share claimed by informal retailers and shoppers bears recognition.

The second theme, in which black consumption is represented as having broken out of the township ghetto and into the glittering passageways of suburban malls, pioneered by a newly powerful middle class, suggests that the ability to consume is an important marker of economic inclusion and freedom. The so-called ‘rise’ of the black middle class as reported in the media stands as evidence for the success of the South African bloodless revolution, which not only placed political power in black hands, but also ushered in the recognition of a less racialized distribution of economic power.

The third theme, in which black consumption is represented as something excessive and immoral, suggest that the expensive tastes of the political elite is a key reason why the masses are sold out and abandoned. From this perspective, a penchant for luxury and conspicuous consumption – especially by political figures – is represented by the media as immoral and unethical. However, this yardstick for ethical action is applied unfairly – only against high profile black individuals and hardly at all against white. This themes is also significant in consumption becomes explicitly a political question when politicians are accused of corruption, and their consumption tastes and lifestyles are put under the
microscope in a bid to present evidence for wrongdoing and to undermine their claims of representing the poor and deprived.

Each of these narratives, constructed in media representations, functions as a site on which empowerment is tested out, and contested. A key debate in South Africa throughout the first decade of the post-Apartheid era – and persisting today – is the extent to which economic empowerment is broad-based, or enjoyed only by an elite few. We can see the seeds of this debate in media content to do with black consumption in the 1990s. The argument that I make here is that consumption is a form of public engagement – which although not always explicitly linked to politics, is shaped by political questions. The ways in which consumption is made public (such as through media representation) are directly linked to explicit discussions about empowerment in post-Apartheid South Africa.

The key tension that arises in considering the ways in which black consumption was discursively constructed concerns whether consumption can be conceptualized as a form of social and economic inclusion, and as such, as a right which all citizens should be allowed to exercise equally. This requires theoretical and empirical explorations of whether consumption is something to which only a select few have access, and as such, is evidence of having betrayed the rights of the masses and in fact deepening social and economic exclusion. In developing this analysis further, there is a clear necessity to further theorize the consumer in relation to the citizen. In Western societies, the citizen conceptualized largely in contradiction to the consumer. In non-Western, developing, post-authoritarian societies such as South Africa, with histories of exclusion and oppression, strong arguments can be made about the right to access consumption as just as important to people’s everyday lives as the political rights to participate in governance. This paper concludes with these open questions – which will be taken up in future work on this topic, and which can be the basis for further scholarly exchange between scholars in the global south working on consumption.

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References


**Author Biography:**

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