

COMPENSATORY OR CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION?: BLING IT ON

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ABSTRACT

Relatively little research has been conducted on compensatory consumption and much of that has concentrated on addictive behavior. There is currently a unique opportunity to study the potential relationship between the two.

With its origins in rap and hip-hop music, excessive gold, diamond and platinum jewelry began with a predominantly black, music-oriented market. Today, although its influence cannot be quantified, it has moved to a predominantly white, middle-class market.

The history and future implications of this phenomenon will be explored. Is this conspicuous consumption or compensatory consumption? Suggestions are made for future study.

INTRODUCTION

“A diamond is forever” is an intentional (and highly successful) marketing strategy. Bling, on the other hand, is an organic trend. The diffusion of an organic trend is always interesting (remember the viral spread of Beanie Babies?) but this phenomenon raises some interesting points regarding cultural significance, conspicuous consumption and compensatory consumption.

While we are unable to quantify the impact of bling (Bates 2006), it is a multimillion dollar trend with both theoretical and practical implications. But some believe that bling is beginning to drop out of fashion (e.g. Braverman, Chabbott 2006). Therefore, there is some urgency to study the trend while it still exists.

The theoretical implications include the continuation to explore and validate consumption meanings behind jewelry (Purinton 2006) and further understanding of conspicuous and compensatory consumption. Relatively little research has been conducted on compensatory consumption and much of that has concentrated on addictive behavior. There is currently a unique opportunity to study the potential connection between the two.

There are also practical marketing implications of this trend. For example, how does one appeal to this segment, especially if they cannot access jewelry such as on Canal St. (retail shopping district in New York City where much of the original bling was purchased). There are many implications for e-retailers since so many customers are on-line.

Which trends should be watched to forecast sales? For example, as rap stars move through the Diffusion of Innovation and move up economically, they can be expected to change their jewelry styles.

Whether and/or when mainstream retailers should pursue the segment is another implication. Bling is a multimillion dollar market that is underserved. There is an opportunity there for some type of retailer.

This article will provide a brief background of hip-hop and bling along with some of its terms and major influencers. Then, potential consumer meanings will be explored, including compensatory consumption and conspicuous consumption. Studies will be suggested for studying the deeper meanings of the bling phenomenon and marketing implications developed.

BACKGROUND

The domain of interest in this paper is jewelry within the hip-hop sub culture. While the music, politics and garb of this subculture will also be discussed, it is the jewelry, or bling, that is stressed.

In 2003, the New Oxford English Dictionary (OED) added bling to its lexicon as, “the shininess of diamonds and other precious stones that rap stars have worn to show of their wealth and fame”. This definition implies conspicuous consumption but is that an oversimplification?

“It is a set of values that encompasses playing hard, looking good and lapping up the finest – the sassy/gaudy style, the Bentley, the Jacuzzi, the Dom Perignon, the fur coat, the first class ticket, the Gucci, the Prada, the Rolex, and so on.” (Duffy 2003) It is considered a shallow and crass celebration of material wealth.

Cash Money Millionaires are credited with inventing the word. It made its debut as a song title by Cash Money in the late 1990s. Some claim it is an onomatopoeia for the sound diamonds “would” make; others claim it is for the sparkle itself.

A few other terms are provided in the Table.

TABLE
HIP HOP TRANSLATIONS

Hip-hop term	English
Grill (grills, grillz)	Temporary or permanent tooth caps using precious metals and sometimes jewels.
Jesus head	Large (often over 3” high) pendant of Jesus’ head.
St. Lazarus	Similar pendant but with St. Lazarus. He is occasionally mistaken for Jesus.
Dookey ropes	Heavy gold ropes.
Dookey	Literally “shit”. Therefore, dookey rope means to hang one’s body with “all kinds of shit”.

While casual observers often date the emergence of bling to the late 1990s and the spread of hip-hop into mainstream, it can be traced to the mid 1980s, much earlier for gold teeth. The look began on the streets, often with drug dealers and gangsters, particularly in the Bronx. It is currently estimated that 75% of all hip-hop music is purchased by white teenagers (Bates 2006).

In response to a question regarding whether some of the styles came from street hustlers:

You’re right, there were all wearing it. All the hustlers. They had the money. They were the ones out there first, setting the tone of the fashion and what was in the street, ‘cause they were in the streets. They had the money before the rappers even thought about getting the money. They were setting the trend. (Cheryl “Salt” James in Oh 2005 p. 31)

One of the first people in music to gain credit for the heavily jeweled look was Slick Rick, an English rapper. He was famous for chains, rings diamond and a gold tooth before American performers wore the look onstage.

Run DMC was probably the first hip-hop group to wear gold rope chains and large medallions. They are credited with taking the look public in the early 1990s.

Soon, the fashion was to wear gold chains, “dookey ropes”, then Gucci links, then diamonds, and then platinum. Grills were often part of the look. Bling also popped up in song lyrics (often with lots of jewelry terminology).

Gold teeth or grills have a long history, first in the Gold Coast of Africa, then Jamaica, and then during the 1920s Jazz Age. In the 1970s, Barry White and Isaac Hayes brought the fashion back. Lately, many performers and many not in hip-hop, such as Madonna and Johnny Depp, have been seen sporting grills.

As a sub culture, it is easy to see that rappers wanted a fashion they could call their own. The stage was a way to make a name for oneself and to move up financially. To succeed, one needed to stand out. Clothes, appearance was a way to do it. Jacob Arabo, the most well known jeweler to hip-hop, explains this phenomenon:

“When you are on stage and the light’s hitting you, diamonds all sparkle, and they look fantastic... It’s [sic] all about image. It’s [sic] not just to show off. It’s something that people know you by. Biz Markie told me because of [a ring I made him], he sold 3 million more records.”. (Oh 2005)

This might be interpreted as a way of branding themselves.

Because it’s all about presence. When you look at hip hop artists, whether it’s the clothes that they wear, the sneakers that they wear, the hats that they wear – it’s all about the “wow!” effect. It’s all about getting people to look at you two and three and four times. Even though some of these rappers talk about how they don’t like the attention, they really do love it. And when it comes to clothes, or jewelry, or anything that will get attention, they will use that to their advantage. (Mr. Cee a longtime friend of Big Daddy Kane in Oh 2005, P.44)

One of the impacts on this subculture has been increased jewelry knowledge. Says Beverly Smith of Vibe magazine, “at first a lot of rappers didn’t know about diamonds. They just bought stuff.... But they are becoming more educated, they know about the ‘four Cs. If you speak to rappers that have been in the game for a while, they can talk to you about diamonds.” (Bates 2006)

CONSUMPTION MEANINGS OF BLING

Before discussing the current meanings given for bling, a disclaimer is in order. Each of the texts used were drawn from public sources such as interviews. The informant knew he or she was speaking to a biographer, journalist, or fan and that the remarks would become public. Individual candid interviews with promise of anonymity or observance of private conversations may yield quite disparate results.

One’s material possessions convey a great deal of information about us, including status (Solomon 1983). Those goods considered to be status goods are purchased and consumed publicly for social display.

Many researchers believe that, in a postmodernist society, consumers seek to create and express their personal identity often through fashion (Firat and Venkatesh 1993, Woodruffe-Burton 1998).

Conspicuous consumption

Veblen coined the term to explain behaviors of the newly emergent (in the 19th century) class of *nouveau riche*. Today, conspicuous consumption means spending patterns designed to show status as opposed to utility.

While some (e.g., Chaudhuri and Majumbar 2006, Holt 1998) call for a revised definition of this term to fit current society, many of the comments by performing artists seem to epitomize this concept, both in aspiration and achievement:

And that's exactly why bling is so crucial to hip hop. Because for us, it is all about making that impression... showing off success... even before you have any. When you sign that first deal or record that first record, you get that first bling... Now, of course, I could have congratulated myself by buying some stocks and bonds, but it wouldn't be bling. (Ludacris in Oh, p. ix)

He goes on to describe the changes in his behavior as his career developed. These also fit the concept of conspicuous consumption:

But that's how I've changed over the years. It's funny because the more money I get the less I want to wear that money so the world can see it. Ludacris in Oh, p. ix

Compensatory consumption

Compensatory consumption occurs when one encounters an obstacle to filling one's need and so, consumes goods and/or services, as a substitute. For example, a man denied an opportunity to move up in his career might purchase a big screen TV or might drink or gamble. In each case, the individual attempts to shift the situation from one of non-consumption (getting a promotion) to one of consumption (purchasing something).

Fontes and Fan (2006) found that African Americans allocate more of their budget to apparel and Hispanics to both housing and apparel. They surmised from this that these segments were involved in more compensatory consumption than European or Asian Americans.

Veblen describes conspicuous consumption as a way to emulate those in a higher social class. Compensatory consumption is not an attempt to imitate a higher class but to shift the measurement of status and success from a non-consumption measure to one of consumption (Woodruffe-Burton 1988, Fontes and Fan 2006).

In an interview, author Reggie Ossé (coauthor of *Bling: The Hip-Hop Jewelry Book*) described (in Errico 2006) the popularity of the opulence of the 1980s citing *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, *Dallas*, and *Dynasty* that were completely unattainable. When hip-hop became a viable industry, it also became a way for the performers to attain that lifestyle.

The audience, on the other hand, was still firmly ensconced at their current socio economic level. Jonathan Duffy of the BBC (2003) claims "young music fans are being bombarded with the images of a life they will never attain."

The street origins of both hip-hop and bling also hint at compensatory consumption:

Being Black, coming from a background of struggle, all of that has a lot to do with the bling mentality. Our whole culture has it. We always feel like we have to prove something and we have to be real splashy in order to show what we have achieved. That's just the nigga mentality. Even if that's something that's sad to say, it's true. Ludacris in Oh, p. ix

This is seconded by Cheryl “Salt” James (in Oh, p. 31)

For generations Black people were economically disadvantaged. So bling is a way for us to say, “We’re making it too!” It makes you feel good about yourself. Those shackles are platinum now. Those shackles are now diamonds around your wrist. Our music and fashions came from the streets. We did it on our own. And bling emphasizes that.

This is further strengthened by the close association between hip-hop, gangs, and drug dealers. The difference between the drug dealers and the hip-hop performers is sometimes just a point in time. Biggie Smalls and 50 Cent were notorious crack cocaine dealers before becoming recording artists (Coker 2004). “It gets hard on the [deleted] streets,” Tupac once rapped. “I rhyme and do crime cuz either way pays me a little”.

The street origins of the hip-hop sub culture remain in the minds of many of the performers. Said of very large pieces of jewelry (King Kong sh*t):

The big stuff just wins hands down. Even if I could afford strictly platinum and diamonds I would still go with the King Kong shit. It’s the eye catcher, it’s the winner, it’s our culture. I think huge, astonishing jewelry is a big part of ghetto culture.

Is bling compensatory consumption masquerading as conspicuous consumption? What happens when the recording artists become successful? Does their compensatory consumption become conspicuous consumption? There is no current theory of this relationship but at this time is an opportunity to study it.

White teens and hip-hop

There is no doubt that hip-hop is at least as popular with whites as with blacks (Kitwana 2005b) although the record companies do not keep demographic data on purchasers. Whether this is due, in part, to a feeling of rebellion of suburban ideals (Davis 2006), a desire to be black (Davis 2006), or a more progressive social outlook (Kitwana 2005a) is not known. This market has earned the slang title of “wigger” or “wegro” (part white part Negro).

Morgado (2006) performed a semiotic analysis of hip-hop style but not the jewelry. She concentrated on baggy clothing and brand names associated with hip-hop.

The fashion industry will often use “street style” injected into new trends (Polhemus 1994). A style can be picked up and adopted very quickly so that it is in style in the mainstream and in the original subculture at the same time. This may account for some of the appeal to a more mainstream market segment.

MARKETING IMPLICATIONS

There are marketing opportunities within this trend for five reasons. First this appears to be a viable niche market. A jeweler remarked there are “no mainstream jewelry companies speaking to this audience, and it’s an underserved market” (Bates 2006). An underserved segment is the definition of a niche market.

Second, bling can be an impulse buy (Sengul of Baguette World in Bates 2006). This is a different type of purchase than, say, an engagement ring with much consideration and often bringing in one or more other people for their opinions.

Third, there are relatively few retailers. Many of the retailers to take advantage of this trend are on-line jewelers. As the target market is young, these consumers are often on-line.

Fourth, this trend has changed the amount of jewelry knowledge among this sub culture. "Every American male who is under 25 years old is growing up with as much of jewelry culture as women" Haag declares (in Bates 2006).

Fifth and finally, if bling is predominantly compensatory rather than conspicuous consumption, how do marketers structure their communications?

SUGGESTED STUDY

Phenomenological inquiry would be invaluable and yet, highly challenging, if not impossible for an outsider. Posing as a jeweler would be too resource expensive and there are the challenges of age and power distance.

Interviews with jewelers would be preferable. If questions are properly worded, one can gain a great deal of insight although it would capture only the sellers' perspective.

On-line surveys may be appropriate since many customers are buying on-line. This might work well although the sample would be self-selected.

A systematic analysis of these texts drawn from multiple sources would likely go a long way toward revealing cultural beliefs about this jewelry fashion. Content analysis of hip-hop websites might be an option. Again, this is a self-selected sample but one that does not know they are being studied.

In summary, qualitative research would be most appropriate but the window of opportunity appears to be quickly closing.

CONCLUSION

This article has provided a brief background of bling with the goal to understanding its consumer behavior. Bling is a multimillion dollar trend with both theoretical and practical implications but there is some urgency to study the trend while it still exists. One of the most interesting aspects is the opportunity to investigate a potential connection between conspicuous and compensatory consumption. Conspicuous consumption was defined in the 19th century and perhaps is due for revision or augmentation. Compensatory consumption is a little studied behavior, especially outside of addictive activities. Here is an occasion to delve into a current trend much in the news and fashion to gain greater understanding of these concepts.

"I be that player with the ice on me

If it cost less than 20 it don't look right on me ...

Diamonds worn by everybody, that's in my clique

Man, I got the price of a mansion 'round my neck and wrist"

"Bling-Bling" by B.G.

<http://maxpages.com/hotlimpbiz18/bg>

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