Chapter 1   Conspicuous vs. Sustainable Consumption in the South: 'Bling' is Black? Deconstructing 'Bling' Culture in South Africa to Foster Behavioural Change Towards Sustainable Livelihoods

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Abstract: One challenge for sustainable consumption in South Africa is the culture of 'bling', which refers to a culture of ostentation and conspicuous consumption as a show of wealth. Culture can be defined as "a relatively small set of shared meanings that explain the behavior, the attitudes, etc. of members of that cultural group (Jordán, 2001). A shared meaning in South African "bling" culture, according to W. Gumede, is that "individual worth is measured on whether one can afford the bling lifestyle. This new lifestyle [is] the new standard of achievement – a sign that one has made it".

This paper assesses 'bling' culture in post-apartheid South Africa, exploring if it is mainly a culture of formerly disadvantaged groups. Enabling (skills, policies, and resources), reinforcing (social feed-back) and predisposing (values, beliefs, knowledge and attitudes) risk factors for 'bling' culture are analyzed. This assessment provides the ground to present protection factors for a transition to a culture of sustainable consumption in South Africa.

1   Introduction

"The 'new' South Africa has essentially been built with 'crooked timber' (…). Only the most blinkered would not agree that the system of apartheid was fundamentally corrupt, whether morally, personally or as a system. (…) The new order [after 1994] (…) inherited a well entrenched value system that placed individual acquisition of wealth at the very centre (…) of our society". Nowadays, "individual worth is measured on whether one can afford the bling lifestyle. This new lifestyle [is] the new standard of achievement – a sign that one has made it" (Gumede, 2011).

From the words of Gumede two questions rise: What was the value system inherited from apartheid? Who is the 'one' that has made it because he/she can afford the 'bling' lifestyle?

The main value of the apartheid system was white supremacy, which denied both individual worth and social status to non-whites, and especially to Black African people. This value was expressed in a set of policies and practices such as racial classification, spatial and educational segregation, inferior or no services, and vetoing of South African citizenship among others (Feinstein, 2005). Whilst white supremacists defined apartheid as 'good neighbourliness', what the system did in fact was to institutionalize an ideology that systematically denied access to human rights to the vast majority of South African population. Paradoxically or not, the elections that gave the victory to the Reunited National Party - the political party that implemented apartheid policies – were celebrated in 1948, the same year the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed "as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations". What apartheid did was the contrary: establish a different standard of achievement for the peoples of South Africa: the highest for Whites and the lowest for Black Africans.

The apartheid system established Whites as the only ones entitled to have power and status. "In South Africa, racial classifications were partly a direct expression of the perceived relationships between orders of 'civilization' vested in modes of dress, deportment, leisure and communal life, and entitlements to social and political standing. Being classified black was tantamount, inter alia, to being deemed unworthy of certain modes of consumption" (Critical Research on Consumer Culture, 2012). Specifically about spatial segregation "under both colonialism and apartheid, living space was allocated on racial grounds, with each group of non-whites being assigned their own areas and Africans in particular being confined to townships with inferior service provision" (Chevalier, 2011).

The value system inherited from apartheid "placed individual acquisition [and ostentation] of wealth at the very centre (…) of [South African] society" (Gumede, 2011) because to have wealth was one of the signs of supremacy that all other racial groups 'created' by the apartheid system (especially Black Africans) could never, should never, reach. In the sea of poverty they lived, 'White' lifestyle was 'bling' lifestyle, and banning Africans from it was another way of domination, and of depriving them from the sense of individual worth and social status. Who is the one that has supposedly inherited this value system and 'made it' because he/she can afford the 'bling' lifestyle, will be addressed in the next sections.

2   'Bling' Culture in post-apartheid South Africa

Some Black Africans from post-apartheid South Africa might have found in 'bling' lifestyle a way to show their wealth and with it to demonstrate they are not any more under the oppression of apartheid. One example of it is businessman Keni Kunene – also called 'King of 'bling'' by the media - who, after being publicly reprimanded by a Black African union leader for throwing lavish parties, answered her in an open letter[1]: "you remind me of what it felt like to live under apartheid. You are telling me, a black man, what I can and

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[1] Times Live (2011). *I'll spend what I like.* Open letter from Kenny Kunene. Retrieved 17 January 2012, from
        http://www.timeslive.co.za/opinion/article733038.ece/Ill-spend-what-I-like

cannot do with my life" (…). You are narrow-minded and still think that it's a sin for black people to drive sports cars or be millionaires at a young age".

Post-apartheid South Africa has made possible the "emergence of an African middle class. Public discussion of this phenomenon usually hinges on two criteria: access to consumption patterns previously reserved for whites and residential mobility, that is, the number of households that left the townships and segregated areas for the formerly white suburbs. A special term has been invented for members of this new social group, the Black Diamonds" (Chevalier, 2011). The lifestyle of this group "leaves little to be desired when compared with the 'conspicuous consumption" of the nouveaux riches Americans described by Veblen (1899) (…) Black Diamonds are supposed to be mad about shopping (…), flashy clothes, big houses, (…) and the latest style of mobile phones (Chevalier, 2011).

Bling lifestyle in post-apartheid South Africa might then be associated to race issues and specifically to Black Africans. Some other statements of the many that can be found in the media[2], which point towards this hypothesis are:

"(Bling) is the current culture in South Africa and there are a lot of black people with money and they simply are just showing off their success[3]"; "From hosting lavish parties where sushi is served on models' bodies to quaffing rare whiskeys, de display of wealth by South Africa's new black elite is raising eyebrows among the poor majority[4]"; "wedding planning is a personal choice but it also reveals a corruptive cultural influence and vulgar modes of how black people use material things for their presence to be felt[5]".

There are attempts, such as the Living Standard Measure (LSM), to use tools to identify consumption patterns that cut across race, gender or any other variable that categorises people. Claims are, however, that those tools have been "widely adopted as a means of identifying the life-style of a social group whose only common characteristic is the colour of their skin" (Chevalier, 2011). Culture has also been tried: "When it became impossible to abstract completely from race, which after all had been synonymous with class as a marker of individual identity for over a century, it was replaced by the term 'culture', conceived of as a marker of collective belonging. The (…) paradox, however, is that (…) another word for this class [was invented], the Black Diamonds, which (…) [reintroduced] race by the back door" (Chevalier, 2011).

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[2] See section 3.2.1.

[3] Diary of a scribe (2011). *The bling-bling culture, reality or illusion?* Retrieved 17 January 2012 from http://www.hoadadi.com/index.php/categories/350-diary-of-a-scribe-the-bling-bling-culture-reality-or-illusion

[4] Business iafrica.com (2011). *The rise of bling culture.* Retrieved 17 January 2012 from http://business.iafrica.com/features/703662.html

[5] Thought leader (2011). *The rise of bling: What is the artist's role in society?* Retrieved 17 January 2012 from http://www.thoughtleader.co.za/sandilememela/2011/11/03/the-rise-of-bling-what-is-the-artists-role-in-society/

The assumption seems to be that 'bling' culture is a black culture. When Kenny Kunene was publicly reprimanded for his lavish parties, one of his business partners pointed out there had not been moral recriminations to more expensive parties thrown by White people: "If Kunene was merely spitting in the face of the poor with a R700 000 party, then a R12-million one must have been a bomb blast on their heads[6]" he said. Whilst two wrongs do not make a right, this comment signalizes what might be a double moral in the assessment of behavior, and the "persistence of racial stigma and of a behavioral standard based on the white minority" (Chevalier, 2011). This racial stigma comes also from Black Africans such as the African Sun Times' Editor-in-Chief C. Onyeani, who in his controversial book Capitalist Nigger states: "the Black Race, is a consumer race and not a productive race (…). We have become a sheep-like consumer race that depends on other communities for our culture, language, feeding, and clothing. We have become economic slaves in Western society". He affirms "the Black race needs to wake up and stand on its own feet", and the way he suggests to do it is by recognizing and learning "from others what it takes to succeed. We need to adopt the 'devil-may-care' attitude and the 'killer-instinct' and 'whatever-it-takes attitude' of the white Caucasian" (Onyeani, 2007). There are strong prejudices embedded in the statement, both for Blacks and for Whites. In the case of Black Africans, to define them as a dependent consumer race in economic slavery. In the times of deep economic crisis that countries such as Greece or Spain are living, wouldn't it be possible to just slightly - yet extremely meaningfully for the matter at stake - change the sentence and say that both of them are or might become "consumer countries in economic slavery"? Is it then race the variable that makes economic slaves or conspicuous 'bling' consumers? Is bling culture, a black culture in South Africa? Let us explore it in the next section.

3   Risk Factors for 'Bling' Culture in South Africa

Culture is a polysemic term that can be defined as "a relatively small set of shared meanings" (Jordán, 2001) which explain factors such as values, beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, policies, resources, social feed-back and social activities existing in a particular group of people or community. In order to explore 'bling' culture in South Africa, the factors above have been grouped in three categories based on the PRECEDE model for health program planning (Green and Kreuter, 2005):

- Enabling factors: characteristics of the environment, policies, resources, skills or lack thereof.

- Reinforcing factors: social rewards or punishments anticipating or following a behavior.

- Predisposing factors: characteristics of a population that motivate behavior, such as values, beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge.

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[6] Business iafrica.com (2011). *The rise of bling culture.* Retrieved 17 January 2012 from
        http://business.iafrica.com/features/703662.html

This section will analyze enabling, reinforcing and predisposing risk factors for bling culture in South Africa. This analysis is the first part of a broader study that intends to contribute to give an answer to the question formulated at the end of the previous section: Is it a shared meaning in South Africa that bling culture is a black culture? The analysis has been conducted using secondary sources of information. These sources have been used with the aim of improving the understanding of the problem, generating hypothesis and possible lines of research for a second phase of the study, when primary data will be collected.

3.1   Enabling Factors for Bling Culture in South Africa

3.1.1   Black Economic Empowerment Policy (BEE)

"Bling culture has infected the political, administration and business culture (…). [It] encourages corruption [and] dishonesty" (Gumede, 2011).

South Africa ranked 64 out of 183 countries on Transparency International's 2011 Corruption Perception Index, which measures the perceived level of public-sector corruption in 183 countries and territories, and where 0 means it exists a perception of being highly corrupt and 10 of having low levels of corruption. (Transparency International, 2012):

Table 1: Corruption Perception Index Results in South Africa, 2002-2011

2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
4.8	4.4	4.6	4.5	4.6	5.1	4.9	4.7	4.5	4.1

According to those results, since 2008 the perceived level of corruption in the country is increasing. One of the policies that it has been claimed contributes to it is Black Economic Empowerment (BEE). BEE was defined as "an integrated and coherent socio-economic process (…) aimed at redressing the imbalances of the past (…) [and] ensuring broader and meaningful participation in the economy by black people to achieve sustainable development and prosperity" (Black Economic Empowerment Commission, 2001). The criticisms that it has received contradict, however, this aim. One of these criticisms is that BEE has contributed to the creation of popularly called 'tender-preneurs", business people mainly identified as Black Africans that have got rich by using political influences in order to secure government tenders and contracts through corrupted processes. Political leaders and public servants are also pointed out as profiteers in those processes. (Gumede, 2011; Bloom, 2010). This is probably the most popular vision of tender-preneurship, yet not the only one: there are other queries that indicate a number of Black Africans are "used and dumped" by other racial groups, mainly Whites, who have used them in tender processes in order to fulfil BEE requirements, and offered them few or any or its benefits (Bloom, 2010). Lastly, claims are also made about Black Africans that decide not to create their own companies as it results easier and more lucrative for them to lend their names to firms – again, mainly White - that need them to fulfil BEE requirements (Bloom, 2010). More research about all those claims is

necessary, yet they offer first hints to make the hypothesis that BEE has also highly benefited White people.

The end perception of the BEE policy is that corruption processes have affected its possibilities to contribute to alleviate poverty and foster sustainable development and prosperity amongst the majority of South Africans. It is also claimed that "the success of the liberation struggle was not to be measured on how many billionaires we have produced, but rather how the poverty experienced by the majority was addressed", to point out that bling lifestyle is at the core of a corrupted enrichment approach, and that "only riding ourselves from this destructive bling culture can put our country back on track", (Gumede, 2011). All those claims might have to be addressed to all racial groups in the country, and not mainly to Black Africans.

3.1.2   *Poverty*

"We suggest that those with high human capital have a recognizable ability (professional titles, degree certificates, etc.) and relatively little need to signal success, whereas those without certified accomplishments, such as the poor and the 'newly rich' have a relatively stronger motivation to impress via conspicuous consumption" (Moav & Neeman, 2012).

Previously to the above conclusion, the authors illustrate their suggestion by quoting Case et al (2008) to say: "households in South Africa spend on average the equivalent of a year's income for an adult's funeral that is financed, in many cases, by borrowing" (Moav & Neeman, 2012). The title of the article from Moav and Neeman's is "Saving Rates and Poverty: The Role of Conspicuous Consumption and Human Capital", and given the highest rate of poverty in South Africa is amongst Black Africans, an inference could be made that bling is not only black in South Africa, but also poor and uneducated. Yet, the "households in South Africa" mentioned by Moav and Neeman were in fact "11.000 households in the Umkhanyakude District in Northern KwaZulu-Natal (…) a township and a rural area administered by a tribal authority" (Case et al, 2008). The "many cases" borrowing money were "a quarter of all funerals" (Case et al, 2008). The reasons why Moav and Neeman seem to generalize 11.000 households of one District of one Province of South Africa to the whole country, and 25% of funerals to "many cases" has not been found. However, it gives a misleading perspective of South Africa and about its potential conspicuous consumers. The assertions that people with an academic certification have little need to 'bling', and that 'newly rich' do not have certified accomplishments also bring doubts about their accuracy.

There are however other studies that have researched the relation between poverty and conspicuous consumption in Asian countries, to conclude that "conspicuous consumption belongs to not only reach consumers but also poor and low middle income people" (Vijayakumar & Brezinova, 2012; Linssen, Kempen & Kraaykamp, 2011). The study of if and how it applies to South Africa is of relevance. However, results will have to take into consideration that in a country where the vast majority of its population and of poor people are Black Africans, any relation between poverty, Black Africans and conspicuous consumption would be a matter of demographics, not of race.

3.2   Reinforcing Factors for Bling Culture in South Africa

3.2.1   Media

A first exploration of 3 newspapers published in South Africa has been made for the purpose of this article, in order to find out what was the content of their articles when the word 'bling' was used. The last 40[7] articles of each newspaper, from May 26th 2012 backwards, were analysed. The 3 newspapers analysed are[8]: The Star (addressed to Black and White population), City Press (addressed mainly to Black population) and Mail & Guardian (not information found about race of readers). The results obtained are:

- City Press: 15 associate bling to corruption of Black African politicians; 11 refer to conspicuous consumption or luxurious activities developed by Black Africans; 6 associate bling either to alleged or court sentenced criminal offenses committed by Black Africans; 6 associate 'bling' to foreigners; 2 refers to South African lifestyle without any association to race.

- Mail & Guardian: 15 associate bling to corruption of Black African politicians; 7 refer to conspicuous consumption or luxurious activities developed by Black Africans; 2 associate bling either to alleged or to court sentenced criminal offenses committed by Black Africans; 5 refer to South African lifestyle without any association to race; 11 associate 'bling' to foreigners.

- The Star: 16 associate bling either to alleged or to court sentenced criminal offenses committed by Black Africans; 9 associate bling corruption of Black African politicians; 1 associates bling with Black African culture; 11 associate bling with foreign celebrities and politicians; 2 refer to South African lifestyle without any association to race.

The results in percentages are as follows:

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[7] This is a random number considered high enough to make possible that diverse contents were associated with the word 'bling'.

[8] The first criteria to choose the newspapers to be analysed was higher number of readers, different target readers (Black Africans, Whites and Black and Whites together) and having an on-line version. This option was disregarded due to the lack of results obtained when the search was conducted in some of the newspapers. The hypothesis for this lack of results is the existence of technical problems in the engines, not the inexistence of published articles about the topic. The newspapers chosen are the closest found to the criteria specified that have produced results to the search conducted.

Table 2: Content Associated to the Word 'Bling' in 40 Articles of Three Newspapers Published in South Africa

Newspaper	'Bling' associated to Black Africans	'Bling' associated to foreigners	'Bling' associated with South African lifestyle with no mention to race
City Press	80%	15%	5%
Mail & Guardian	60%	27,5%	12.5%
The Star	66%	29%	5%

The results obtained show that 75% of all the articles analysed have associated the word 'bling' with Black Africans, and a 7.5% to South African lifestyle without mentioning a particular race. Is this because there are no White South Africans that are conspicuous consumers, or is it because there is a bias in the information published? The hypothesis the authors made is the last one, and the proposal is that more research has to be conducted in order to refute or accept this hypothesis.

3.2.2   Social Status

"Conspicuous consumption (…) is used to demonstrate one's status and to signal a higher position in interpersonal exchanges" (Kaus, 2010).

As stated in the previous section, South African media seem to relate 'bling' with 'black'. The articles published either describe or criticize conspicuous consumption behaviors within wealthy Black Africans, such as throwing lavish parties or weddings, buying expensive clothes, cars or properties. A study published in 2010 and aimed at assessing differences in spending on visible consumption across social groups in South Africa concluded that "Coloured and Blacks spend between 30 to 50% more on a basket of visible consumption goods and services than comparable Whites" (Kaus, 2010). No further analysis of these results could lead to corroborate that indeed 'bling' culture is black culture in the Rainbow Nation. However, what the study states is that "among White south Africans, visible consumption appears to be a less viable sign of their economic position (…). This finding (…) most probably it is signalling (…) that different groups may develop different ways to express their relative position within society". That is: Perhaps White population spend less in the visible consumption goods researched – defined as "consumption items that are readily observable in anonymous interactions, and that are portable across those interactions" (Kaus, 2010) – simply because they spend more in other consumption items.

Kaus' study also concludes that "having a more favourable position in the own reference group (…) may explain higher visible spending of Black and Coloureds households". Who is the own reference group of Black and Coloureds? Based on surveys such as the one conducted by the Institute of Justice and Reconciliation, "which shows that about 50% of respondents never socialise with individuals from different groups", the same author concludes that "Black (Coloured, Whites) compare themselves to other Black (Coloured, Whites)" (Kaus, 2010). Another research investigated if "conspicuous consumption of

affluent black South Africans is associated with prior experiences of relative deprivation, [and] revealed that relative deprivation played a role initially in 'catch up' consumption to the more privileged (White) consumers (…). This resulted in a spike of conspicuous consumption that normalized somewhat as they continued to 'keep up' with their (black) peers" (Chipp, Kleyn & Manzi, 2011). Both researches then conclude that 'bling' lifestyle amongst Blacks is not only or mainly due to a desire to emulate Whites, but to "keeping up with the Zungu" (a common Zulu name in South Africa), as it is the case in many societies where race is not at stake. These results point out that, in one hand, it might be relevant to investigate more about conspicuous consumption of White population in South Africa, and on the other to conduct research where race would not be a main variable. One example of such research could be to investigate what is the influence of modern capitalist and postmodern social structures across racial groups (Chaudhuri and Majumbari, 2006) in order to build 'bling' consumption patterns. Moreover, perhaps it would be relevant to find research perspectives aimed reducing potential racial stigma in bling consumption patterns in South Africa.

3.3　　　Predisposing Factors for Bling Culture in South Africa

After the analysis conducted, the hypothesis considered is that there is a belief in South Africa and about South Africa whereby 'bling culture' is 'black culture'.

Media, but also research conducted about conspicuous consumption and race, might feed the belief and dangerously turn it into knowledge, or worse, into an assumption, a 'shared meaning' within South African society. To what level this is already the case needs certainly further research. There are however voices, like the one of Professor Piet Naudé, offering an alternative discourse that, even it does not address conspicuous consumption directly, it touches on to it and into the myths associated to race in South Africa. The author calls to dispel three myths: Whites lost political power after the dismantlement of the apartheid regime; corruption is mainly a post-apartheid phenomenon linked to a new Black African elite; Black Africans are more violent than Whites. "The problem with myths" – he states "is that they make us selective to see only that evidence that supports the falsehood in the first place[9]" (Naudé, 2012). Myths can shape world views, yet are also associated to half-truths and as such are susceptible to be questioned. Cultural assumptions and shared meanings are more difficult to contest, as they are often not disputed, and accepted as truths without the need of proof. Whether the association of 'bling' with black is a myth, or is becoming an assumption, is a topic to be further researched, as it has been stated. For many reasons, one of them being that blaming 'bling' in only one part of South African society might not be helpful in shifting conspicuous consumption behaviors in the country into more sustainable ones.

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[9] Business Live (2012). *Racism, more fiction that fact*. Retrieved May 28th 2012 from
　　http://www.businesslive.co.za/experts/2012/05/21/racism---more-fiction-than-fact?mode=all

4   Protection Factors for 'Bling' Culture in South Africa: Fostering Behavioural Change Towards Sustainable Livelihoods

The transition to a culture of sustainable consumption in South Africa shall analyze what is the present culture of conspicuous consumption in the country. The exploration made in this article leads to the hypothesis that one of the shared meanings of nowadays South Africa is that 'bling' – that is, a culture of ostentation and conspicuous consumption as a show of wealth is mainly related to Black South Africans. To confirm or refute this hypothesis would be in itself a predisposing protection factor for conspicuous consumption, as it would lay a non-prejudicial or stereotyped basis of the phenomenon. Some potential questions which can lead to research about the subject and that have been pointed out in this article are:

- Is South African media mainly associating 'bling' to Black South Africans? What is the rationale for the associations South African media makes with 'bling'?

- Are there prejudices and stereotypes associated to conspicuous consumption in South Africa? If yes, which ones? What is their rationale?

- What is the relation between 'bling' and Black Economic Empowerment corruption practices in South Africa? How and to what extend White population has used and benefited from these practices?

- People with academic certification in South Africa have less conspicuous consumption behaviours than people without them?

- Is there a relation between conspicuous consumption and poverty in South Africa? If yes, what is it?

- In which ways White population in South Africa express their relative position in society? Can any of these ways be qualified as conspicuous consumption?

- What influence modern capitalist and postmodern social structures have in shaping conspicuous consumption patterns in South Africa?

The Human Development Report 2011 states: "Our inability to promote the common interest in sustainable development is often a product of the relative neglect of economic and social justice within and amongst nations" (Human Development Report, 2011). Reducing stereotypes and prejudices associated to conspicuous consumption in South Africa could be a contribution, even if tiny, to social justice in the country and, with it, perhaps also a step to have all racial groups working to shift from conspicuous towards more sustainable consumption behaviours. The aim is not to blame any racial group, but to help everybody to accept responsibility and, from there, to develop a common interest in the cause of sustainable consumption. Moving towards togetherness, as the opposite of what apartheid was and separateness still is amongst racial groups, is key in order to move towards sustainable livelihoods in South Africa. To make it possible, the way potential stereotypes and prejudices about conspicuous consumption are reduced – the way research on the

previous and other questions is undertaken and its results communicated - is key; it is to be done in ways that foster the "expansion of people's freedom to live long, healthy and creative lives; to advance other goals they have reason to value; and to engage actively in shaping development equitably and sustainably on a shared planet" (Human Development Report, 2010). How to operationalize this goal is no doubt another wide area of research.

5   Overall conclusion

Steve Biko, an anti-apartheid activist, wrote: "We have set out on a quest for true humanity, and somewhere on the distant horizon we can see the glittering prize. Let us march forth with courage and determination, drawing strength from our common plight and our brotherhood. In time we shall be in a position to bestow upon South Africa the greatest gift possible – a more human face" (Stubbs, 2004). This, which was said to Black Africans, could be in time the goal for all South Africans. One of the steps towards it could be to investigate if and how there is stereotype and prejudice associating 'bling' culture to Black African culture and to do it in a way which could hopefully show that, more than White or Black, 'bling' most probably has a human face. And we are all human.

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