

Gender and the South African beauty industry, through the eyes of a young, black marketer.

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1.

I would like to start off by posing the following question... "What is gender?" According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations¹ gender are the relations between men and women both from a perceptual and a material understanding. They go on to highlight that gender is not determined biologically, instead it is determined by the characteristics that both women and men have, and these are constructed socially. The misconception in the past, it would seem, is that we have often misunderstood gender dynamics to be the upliftment of women over men or as a type of feminism some might say. In my opinion, based on my understanding on the above definition of gender, gender is the empire from which other subsidiaries such as masculinity, femininity and sexuality are derived.

There were two fundamental chapters in my upbringing that have epitomised gender for me. The first one being the fact that I went to an all-boys' school. The second one being the rights of passage to becoming a man that I went through, by going to an initiation school, as my ethnic profile is Xhosa and this is a big part of the Xhosa culture. The interesting thing about both these experiences is they both had and still have a big emphasis on what it means to be a man, this mainly focused on how one should and shouldn't act as a man and a lot of this always had strong hints of ethos. This included being encouraged to take pride in being a man and doing certain things to always appear of good nature, gentlemanly and manly (masculine). In both these experiences these included things such as respect, upholding the name of the school or clan, being a bread winner and being the head of the house and a leader. On top of this, the Xhosa culture included things such as being able to use the learnings you learned through story telling in the initiation school, back in society. In my experience if someone did not comply with what was deemed to be manly, their ethos was considered compromised and sometimes they were viewed as being the complete opposite of what a man is, that of being womanly or feminine. These characteristics epitomise the stereotypical understanding of what it means to be a man or a woman. Men are understood to be aggressive and competitive (masculine) and women are understood to be passive, cooperative and expressive (feminine) as explained by Stets and Burke.²

¹ <http://www.fao.org/docrep/007/y5608e/y5608e01.htm>

² Jan. E. Stets & Peter J. Burke, "Femininity/Masculinity", in *Encyclopedia of Sociology* 2nd ed., eds. Edgar F. Borgatta and Rhonda JV Montgomery (New York: Macmillan, 2000): 997-1005.

2.

The above chapter highlights my upbringing and my exposure to gender dynamics through the years, this crafted the way I understood or was meant to understand what it means to be a man or to be masculine and what it means to be feminine. Currently I am a young black male working as a marketer in the beauty industry in South Africa. This is obviously regarded as feminine as beauty has female connotations such as expression, emotion and nurturing. The question I'm often asked because of my profession is "Why are you in your current profession? That profession is best suited for women". The general impression is that my job is reserved for women or men who are either feminine in nature or who are homosexual by sexual orientation (in the case of men). Since I am in this profession the question I pose to myself, which is sometimes an inner conflict is, "Does my profession make me less of a man?" This question I will answer at the end of this paper after I have unpacked the challenges I have faced so far in this industry, as these challenges bring a lot of perspective to this question.

What I have discovered about the South African beauty industry so far as a young black man is that the difficulties in this industry transcend gender and sexual orientation. In fact the difficulties in this industry more often than not stem from the fact that one is judged at face value based on sex, gender, race or background. In terms of sex, as mentioned before in this paper, beauty is understood to be something that is best understood and embodied by women. This is the reason why the industry is dominated by women. In fact unlike what I had experienced in the past in terms of gender where men were the aggressors and held the power in society, in the beauty industry women hold the power. They are perceived to understand beauty because they grew up with an interest in beauty thereby keeping themselves beautiful, unlike men who are stereotypically believed to have grown up with an interest in cars and sport. However there are two rhetorical arguments I have always posed on the matter and they both take the form of *logos* in the inductive form through the logical nature of the arguments. My first argument is that as men and women we have different talents. Men are naturally better than women in some things and vice versa. So although women may have a good understanding of beauty, one may find that men are better at putting things into perspective. For example in my experience in this industry I have often found my colleagues who are women and are feminine have the best ideas in terms of innovation of beauty and what it means to be beautiful, but the idea does not always take into account the long terms affects of its implementation. Questions such as "How is it going to work?", "Who will implement it?", "When?", "How?" and "Why?" are often asked by men. So at the end of the day the innovations for beauty may often be initiated by women, but sometimes men play the critical role of putting the ideas into perspective in order to make them work. This is what Eckes³ refers

³ George Eckes, *Six Sigma Team Dynamics. The elusive key to project success* (USA: Wiley, 2003): 2.

to as team dynamics (the ability to take the contributions from different members of a team in order to make that team more productive). Secondly, since women are perceived to epitomise beauty and looking beautiful, the question that needs to be asked is "Who do they want to look beautiful for?" More often than not, the answer to this question will be "Men!" Since this is the case, I would say that the opinion of men in terms of what they regard to be beautiful where women are concerned, should be regarded as critical to those working in this industry. Based on these two arguments alone, I believe that men should be given recognition in terms of the value that they add to the beauty industry. Currently men are believed to add value only where a beauty product is being created for men specifically. The double standard here however is that women's opinions of male products are always held in high regard, as there is a higher percentage of women who buy beauty products for their spouses as opposed to men buying these products for their spouses.

Similar observations can be made with regards to gender in this industry. Those who are feminine, whether they are male or female are regarded to be more in line with the women's way of understanding beauty and their opinions within this industry will be held almost in the same light as those of women. However, those who are more masculine resemble men and their understanding of beauty and therefore their opinions, although they may be valid, are often only found to be convincing after these opinions or ideas have been justified and proven to be worthwhile. These types of battles are common in this industry and many believe that these are the only type of battles one would face being a young black male marketing beauty products. However, as mentioned before in this paper, there are other battles that one faces almost on a daily bases, the biggest one in my opinion being race.

Siegel and Swanson⁴ define race as a group where persons inside the group and outside the group decided to single out physical characteristics (based on fact or perception) to form an identity for that particular group, in most cases people are grouped according to the colour of their skins, as the colour of their skins is their identity that could separate them from other groups. Unlike in most cases, for the purposes of this paper, my mention of race is not negative. My reasoning for this is that in my experience racial tensions in the South African beauty industry are not imposed with malicious intent or prejudice, but rather imposed as a result of not understanding the other race (according to Siegel and Swanson, not understanding the other group). Through working in this industry what has become very clear is the segregation within beauty in South Africa, in terms of product offer. In a nutshell, there are products that target white consumers and there are products that target black consumers. At the end of the day the logic is that white marketers should target white consumers and black marketers should

⁴ Jacob S. Siegel and David A. Sawnsen, *The methods and material of Demography* (USA: Academic Press, 2004): 6.

target black consumers, because presumably each of them can relate very well with that consumer (based on race). Surprisingly the opinions of black marketers on how to target black consumers are challenged from time to time, in the same way that the opinions of men in similar situations are challenged as mentioned earlier in this paper. What is most interesting about this is that these challenges often come from white marketers who wouldn't necessarily have the insight into the lives of black consumers that black marketers would have. Here I would like to make an argument through the use of *pathos*. As a black individual who has fortunately been greatly exposed to African and Western culture (through my upbringing), I can say that black people and white people are for the most part very different. Black people in South Africa are emotional beings and this could stem from the harsh conditions that were forced upon them during the apartheid era. As a result of this, I believe the best way to communicate with black people is by striking an emotional chord. For example, use words that have meaning to them and for them alone because this gives them a sense of ownership and entitlement. It's not good enough to take the Western approach of using a black model to communicate to black people but with the communication in English, when this happens black consumers as the audience feel that they have been compromised. These are the types of insights that black marketers will have almost instinctively.

White people (Western culture) on the other hand are very logical in their approach; everything is calculated and done by the book. More often than not if it's not done by the book or it doesn't look a certain way, it will be challenged. This is very interesting; especially since a lot of Westernised corporate employees (not just in the beauty industry) pride themselves in "thinking out of the box", "taking the initiative" and being "spontaneous". If you ask me, I believe that a lot of these corporate employees use this as a type of "window dressing" to uphold their ethos by appearing to be open minded and non-discriminatory, which is not always true. In the beauty industry this misleads black marketers into thinking that they have *carte blanche* in their approaches to beauty, which is not always true either.

I believe there are three reasons why the approaches of black marketers to beauty are often challenged. The first reason is that black marketer's approaches to beauty often look different to the Western ideology of beauty. This intertwines with my second reason, that being the fact that beauty as we know it today is a Western ideal and white people or marketers believe that they know it best. The third reason in my opinion also stems from an educational point of view. It's only in recent times that we see young, black, educated individuals, in the past only white people had the education, so what we often find in the beauty industry today is that the ideas of black marketers are sometimes challenged and researched thoroughly because there is an element of doubt with regard to the underlying thought process of these ideas.

From the above you can see the racial struggles for a black marketer within the beauty industry in South Africa, but what is interesting to note is

that these racial struggles are not necessarily comprised of malicious intent or prejudice but rather from a lack of understanding of the “other” and from being unable to relate to the “other”.

In my opinion we often under-estimate the power of one being able to relate to one another in any industry. In the case of the beauty industry, where as stated before, most of the marketers and their superiors happen to be white females and males, I have noticed that one’s ability to relate to these people is crucial. For example, being black and male there are certain traits that are instilled within you from a young age and some of these as mentioned previously you learn as you grow older (in my case, my rights of passage into manhood). These include things such as respect your elders, shaking an elder’s or your superior’s hand with one hand supporting the other hand as a sign of respect, not calling your elders or superiors by their first name, being polite, being humble and speaking only when you have something valuable to say. In the corporate world or in my case the beauty industry, I have had to learn to leave these outside of my working environment every day. This is a constant battle, as I have to always remind myself during the course of the day that I’m operating in a different space where the definition of things such as respect and other behaviours are totally different. As a result of such battles and inner conflicts, I have noticed that black individuals in this industry take a lot longer to progress than white individuals. This once again is basically due to the lack of understanding of the “other” (of the black individual about the white individual). Below we explore this in more detail.

I believe that the beauty industry in terms of its environment and ideals, is best suited for white individuals. My reasoning for this is that they are able to relate and identify with this environment. For example, the beauty industry is surrounded by key words such as beauty, glamour, class, style and the ability for one to be visible. Since white people are more likely to be able to relate to this type of environment, they fit in, “look the part” and progress in the industry (because it is perceived that they are knowledgeable where beauty is concerned). On the other hand you find that some of the black marketers, depending on their upbringing are the total opposite. They struggle to fit in, don’t “look the part”, therefore they are deemed to be less knowledgeable where beauty is concerned and as a result it takes them slightly longer to progress in the industry. I’ve had a situation where one of my colleagues changed her perception of me after she found out what school I went to (a recognised white boys’ school). All of a sudden she had a more positive opinion of me, I believe that this was due to the fact that she could now relate to me in some way, as I now “looked the part” and she perceived me to be more knowledgeable in my profession, even though I was the same person and I had the same knowledge that I always had. She gave me a source of power that I didn’t earn through the scope of my work. This happens a lot in this industry and it is a pity that, in these cases most of the time it is the black marketers who get the short-end of the stick.

3.

So far in this paper I have highlighted the difficulties I have faced in the beauty industry. By now you should be able to deduce that by fitting a certain profile or “looking the part” (possibly based on sex, gender or race), you increase your chances of success in this industry. This reminds me of other industries or institutions in South Africa. One that comes to mind is the South African army and the lack of recognised women in this institution. At this point I would like to reflect on my work on war and peacekeeping arguments made by the army. In this paper it was clear that the South African army has been struggling in terms of their recruitment. Between 2008 and 2009 the army was struggling because a lot of their soldiers were old and they needed 3000 new recruits, however, there seemed to be a reluctance to recruit women for the army. The Chief of the South African army made arguments in support of the army’s recruitment procedures, by stating that the army would recruit the best people possible, this included people who did not just see the army as an employment opportunity. Those reading this statement made by the Chief got the sense that he was taking a responsible and logical stance. However I would argue that his argument is strategically delivered in order to protect the ethos of the South African army and his own ethos as the Chief of the army. I’m sure we can all deduce why there is a lack of women in the army. This is because the army is understood to be an institution that serves as the protectors of the nation, to be part of this institution means staring danger in the face at times and this is perceived to be best suited for men because they are masculine in nature, this is similar to the way that beauty is perceived to be best suited for women because they are emotional and nurturers by nature.

Similar observations to those made of the army can be made of the institutions of Science in South Africa. According to www.news24.com,⁵ the government has been trying to encourage young women in South Africa to study Science as far back as 2005, where the Minister of Education Naledi Pandor made the argument that 41 percent of permanent academic staff members in Universities and Technicons were made up of females. Pandor emphasised that this figure marked “glass ceiling” inequalities because even though women made up to 50 percent of the staff at lecturer level and below, only 17 percent of professors were females.

The above argument from the Minister is a strong one as it is substantially backed up by statistics and figures. My problem with her argument is that nothing much has changed five years down the line, which leads me to believe that she (like other Ministers) use the platform that they have in the media to make public statements about critical issues, thereby appearing to take a matter seriously and in doing so protecting their ethos as

⁵ <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/We-need-women-in-science-20050118>

well as that of their departments. For me, it is clear that the reason why there is very little change is because Science has always been an industry that has been dominated by white males, because in Western ideals men were the “brains” and the bread winners while women looked after the home. In other words, similar to my experiences in the beauty industry, women do not fit the profile of this industry and therefore their chances of being successful are less than those who do fit this profile.

Conclusion

This paper has taken you through the difficulties I have faced as a black marketer in the South African beauty industry which is clearly dominated by white females. In this paper I have highlighted my background which has had an emphasis on what it means to be a man and the power that a man is supposed to have while I was growing up, this clearly had a rippling effect on the challenges and my understanding of my new working environment, as most of the beliefs in my new working environment contradicted those I have grown up with. The question I had posed to myself earlier in this paper was “Am I less of a man because I work as a young, black, marketer in the beauty industry in South Africa?” My answer is that even though I have had to conform to the new order of things because I work in an industry that requires one to be feminine instead of masculine at times and an industry where women are more powerful than men in most cases, this doesn’t make me any less of a man. As I have mentioned in this paper, this is because I am still able to uphold my manhood in this industry in the ways that matter the most. These include being able to rise above all the difficulties of this beauty industry, to take all the opportunities it has given me and to be able to earn a living from it and to provide for my family. Growing up both at school and in the Xhosa culture one’s ability to overcome times of difficulty and the ability to provide for one’s loved ones was always and will probably always be viewed as masculine and manly. This is what I proudly tell those who question my manhood because of my profession. Having said that, I would advise women in similar situations, such as women in Science and the military to take the same approach, because I believe their ability to persevere in male dominated industries such as these is a true reflection of the strong women that they are.