

A Beauty Supply Ethnography: Understanding the Cultural Divide

This study examines the beauty supply store industry in Detroit to analyze the commonalities of ownership ethnicity, merchandise sold, and locations of stores. Shops marketed to mainly Black women are known as *beauty supply stores*. Traditionally, they are owned by non-Black minorities but located in urban, low-income neighborhoods populated by Black people.¹ This paper will evaluate how this commonality came into existence; as well as the historically tense store clerk-shopper dynamic. The dynamic of non-Black clerks and Black shoppers having quick, distressed interactions has become expected of beauty supply store transactions. The literature review, interviews, and data collection will help clarify these distinct perspectives and the current state of the Black and Asian intercultural relationship. Also, this topic is important to me as a Black woman who wants to invest in owning a beauty supply store one day.

Aside from a couple of classmates of Asian background during my years at a suburban private school and informative books about different cultures, I have little insight on the Asian-American diaspora and even less on the Asian-American perception about Black Americans, outside of the interactions at beauty supplies. Beauty supply interactions are frequent but usually do not last longer than a few minutes.² A study by Jessica Reed notes that in beauty supply stores “[there’s] a desire for a quick and convenient experience and disengagement from an important Black cultural site.”³

This paper evolves from a curiosity to know how Asian American store owners associate with the community in which they work and why there is the assumption to converse very little. Then there is the biased opinion Black Americans hold that Asian American clerks feel superior

because of white approval. This paper questions why Black and Asian Americans interact in a way that both groups undermine the other's intentions or presume so about one another.

There may be limitations in the interview process when getting time to speak with store owners due to the customer-owner conversations being merchandise focused. Also, this part of the study will challenge me to go beyond my comfort zone as presenting the topic to store owners will most likely be uncomfortable at times.

Research Questions

This paper utilizes two research questions to explore this topic: Why is the stereotypical image of a beauty supply store an Asian American shopkeeper selling to inner-city African Americans and how do non-Black beauty supply owners feel about being the prominent business owners of Black hair merchandising stores?

Literature Review

Other Ethnic Groups Selling Black Hair Products

In the mid-twentieth century, the only available businesses for incoming immigrants to invest in were in inner-city Black neighborhoods, and business ownership was the idea of being American. According to the Vice President of the National Federation of Beauty Suppliers, Sam Hwang, "...Korean women actually cut off their hair to sell for the hair industry to grow. As a result, many first-generation Korean immigrants either worked for or opened beauty businesses in the U.S."⁴

Asian immigrants' initial impressions of the African American consumers were formed by White Americans who treated Black Americans as if they were of lower status and problematic to true Americanness. Asian immigrants formed a one-sided understanding of the racial dynamic in America. "Most Korean immigrants came to the United States after the Civil

Rights era, and they were not fully aware of the sufferings and sacrifices Black Americans had to and still have to endure for freedom and equality.”⁵ The Asian perspective on prospering in America unknowingly built on existing systems of racism as they were unaware and less exposed to extremities of the maltreatment Black Americans.

New immigrant citizens had to be satisfied with entrepreneurship opportunities that were present in inner-city areas, as limited businesses opportunities existed in the suburbs. Their unquestioning patriotism and view of Black Americans made them an additional obstacle for the civil rights and social justice movements of the Black community. As one study found, the majority of Asian storeowners of Black beauty supply stores act as proxies to reinforce an arbitrary racial hierarchy.⁶ During the era of open racism in business loans against Black Americans, Asian Americans were able to demand for small businesses.

In a data analysis of Chicago’s small businesses, Korean-Americans owned the highest percentage, including beauty supplies. It found that Korean owners ran labor-intensive shops (laundry and dry cleaning) in suburban areas or retail businesses (clothing and beauty supplies) in inner-city areas.⁷ Incoming immigrants found a reliable way to support themselves financially.

The Chicago study referred to the arrival of other entrepreneurial immigrants replacing the Korean spaces as owners of beauty supply stores, “Those who have recently started their own businesses in this area and have gradually taken over Korean businesses, however, are not African American residents in the Chicago southside communities, but members of other new immigrant groups—Indians, Pakistanis, and Arabs.”⁸ An article in *McClatchy-Tribune Business News* supports this trend, describing an area in Detroit where Yemeni-American entrepreneurs opened a number of beauty supply stores.⁹ A takeaway from these studies is that some systemic disadvantages and obstacles prevented Black Americans from business

ownership. Still, business ownership limitations are an obstacle for Black Americans; it can be inferred from the lack of ownership in beauty supplies stores where Black Americans are the primary consumer.

The Intense Shopping Experience

Most Black women are introduced to beauty supply stores at a young age, then over-time notice the reinforced dynamic of mistrust between shopkeeper and customer. The space is usually designed so that store workers are on high platforms and there are reflective mirrors around the aisles to aid watching customers. “The continued reinforcement of the feeling of being watched, suspected of wrongdoing, and assumptions of criminality directed at them affects their psyche.”¹⁰ Beauty supply stores populate low-income Black neighborhoods where customers are not economically advantaged enough to take a financial risk and open a business. A main frustration for African Americans is that immigrants are gaining financial stability from Black American retail.

Previous studies have examined the conflictual sociolinguistic relationship between the two groups. Some consider the start of the Black-Korean tension was the murder of Latesha Harlins, which resulted in boycotts against Asian-owned businesses. Harlins was a fifteen-year-old Black American who experienced an altercation with a Korean store merchant over assumed theft of a juice then the merchant shot and killed Harlin. The situation added to the racial tension of the Rodney King trials, the traumatic era of the “war on drugs,” and the LA/Sa-I-Gu riots of 1992 that pinned the two communities against one another. Law enforcement guarded white neighborhoods but did not interject to protect Asian-owned businesses, they were “abandoned by the White system.”¹¹ Following the riots was an unspoken agreement of mistrust between store owners and shoppers of beauty supplies.

There is a need to create a shopping atmosphere where Black shoppers feel more comfortable. As an in-depth analysis stated, “Interviews with participants also revealed that the African- American customers and Korean shopkeepers had certain negative stereotypes and attitudes toward each other, which may have influenced the nature of the relationship.”¹² Also, there is a need to appreciate each other's cultural obstacles of two groups who are known for being diligent workers and doing anything to provide for their families. The intense shopping experience is ongoing and accepted by both groups instead of growing, learning and helping each other.

Overcoming The Struggle To Ownership

Business First interviewed Brett Bright, an African American beauty supply store owner from Louisville, Kentucky who is a fourth generation business owner. His father was a pharmacist and owned a pharmacy. The businesses were well-known in the Louisville community until they were bought-out in the late 1980s. The interview covered Brett reviving the family name and reopening a beauty supply.¹³ Brett’s business journey was unique from other Black entrepreneurs as his background had generations of business ownership. However, this is an example of how Black Americans have successfully become beauty supply owners.

Brett Bright provided advice to upcoming owners that there is a lot of work behind the scenes, such as him traveling to secure selling to hundreds of hair salons. Also, his family was the financial support, helping hands and emotional support that allowed the business to be a reality. Moreover, Brett wants to pass on the store, “he hopes to see Bright's Beauty Supply continue with his son Alex, four, and daughter Whitney, ten, and future generations.”¹⁴ The obstacles, sacrifices, and barriers, also called *struggles*, are very different from incoming

overseas groups because of the social structures that historically prevented and discouraged financial development towards the Black community.

Likewise, family collaboration seems to be the common theme in opening up a small-business. A study on Korean businesses in Detroit found that the Korean population of the city owns half of the clothing stores and most of the beauty supplies. The method of the first generation of immigrants was to be “united to survive.” Most use a community “loans and savings pool” instead of going to a financial institution for a loan. These are called *gyes* and they use an honor system when withdrawing.¹⁵ Whereas most African Americans may feel the pressure to present themselves to the standards of middle-class America, incoming immigrants are understood to be non-materialistic in a Western sense and less considered “ghetto” for not straining themselves financially for social acceptance. These social expectations create a space making it easier for immigrants to form community loans for moderate growth of small businesses.

A news article in the *Michigan Chronicle* detailed the opening of Detroit’s first Black-owned beauty supply in 2005.¹⁶ Today the city’s only Black-owned beauty supply is an online-only shop. Hundreds of physical stores of beauty supplies are open in Detroit but owned by other ethnicities. The best resolution to these circumstances is that more Black Americans who are financially capable become owners of beauty supply stores. Future studies could inquire why more affluent African Americans do not invest and open beauty supplies or detail the social benefits of being an owner of a beauty supply store.

Healing Intercultural Relations

In the article *Demystifying Americanness: The Model Minority Myth and the Black-Korean Relationship*, Yi and Hoston described how Asian Americans get stereotyped as the

model minority.¹⁷ During an interview with Van Jones, Lisa Ling, an Asian American, expresses the deep socio-economic division within the AAPI community that is relevant but not mentioned during these conversations. They discussed debunking the term model minority because the situation is more complex. Although it was a sign of special treatment to Asian immigrants to insult African Americans, Asian immigrants received backlash for being compliant. Van Jones, an African American, termed the treatment from White Americans as “a wink and a nod” that separated Asian groups from other minorities. They reference Rev. Jackson visiting Detroit in the 1990s to speak on racism against Vincent Chin. Ling's parents housed traveling African Americans when racial segregation was legal. These are just a few of the lesser-known interactions of unity between the Black and Asian communities.¹⁸

The uplifting of Asian groups at the expense of the Black community has been used for political purposes, too. During the Civil Rights Era, a white *New York Times* journalist, William Peterson, poked at Black activists with an article on the exceptional attitude of Japanese immigrants, “He attributes the success of Japanese Americans to their willingness and eagerness to internalize the dominant norms and culture in the United States.”¹⁹ Unfortunately, this illusion of the hierarchy of Americanness has become ingrained in the two communities, especially in the inner-city small business atmosphere.

More recently, the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, reintroduced the cultural division when many of the St. Louis businesses that were vandalized, looted, and burned were owned by Asian Americans. A lawyer defending the small business owners stated, “One could [ask] that if this had been a Walmart, a Starbucks...would they have done more to make sure this didn’t happen? I believe that absolutely factored into the equation. Their rights may have been placed on a lower priority for the people in charge of protecting them.”²⁰

On the other hand, Asian political groups supported the anger from the Black community “Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, National Asian Pacific American Women’s Forum, South Asian Americans Leading Together, and National Korean American Service & Education Consortium (NAKASEC) together blamed the grand jury for their decision not to indict Wilson.”²¹ There is still much healing needed between the Black and Korean communities.

In *Achieving Friendly Interactions: A Study of Service Encounters between Korean Shopkeepers and African-American Customers*, Hye-Kyung Ryoo focuses on the overlooked positive moments at beauty supplies. The author emphasizes not belittling the complications but notes, “there surely are positive aspects of communication where African Americans and Koreans are able to go about their businesses in the store without negative and problematic interactional outcomes. This positive nature has largely been understated in the studies of the African American-Korean relations.”²² Although there is tension and mistrust between the two groups, there are jokes, positive conversations, and exceptions to the more observed division. As well, the observational study found that clerks and customers “were able to overcome communication difficulties when they occurred.”²³ Several customers and shop owners often show empathy, compliment, and have brief friendly conversations “without disclosing much personal information.”²⁴ There are instances of neighborliness, so there is space for growth and understanding in these spaces, and healing from past incidents is possible.

Methods

This study began by reviewing past literature of similar research followed by observations of Detroit beauty supplies to note significant features, including interviews with store clerks and owners about their opinion and experiences. Initially, the study was intended to include customer interviews in the store but that was omitted due to time restraints. Clerks

responded to questions about their backgrounds, career goals, and why they chose to work in the beauty supply business. For the majority, who did not want to disclose much information, any information they shared about their job was recorded. An attempt was made to diversify the data by studying stores from distinct areas in Detroit, such as the westside, eastside, downtown, southwest, and the Hamtramck area. In the six locations visited, two stores were on the east side, two were downtown, and two were on the west side of Detroit.

Data Collection

Data collection began with basic information about the actual stores. In terms of general building characteristics, information garnered included answers to, is it located in a strip mall or an individual building? What products are promoted on the outside of the building? Are there open windows or Blackout windows? Do the doors have bars? Observations about the inside of the store included answering questions such as, is there a security guard present? Is there a metal detector at the door? Is there one door for entering and a different door for exiting? When entering, what side is the cashier desk? Is it higher than the sales floor? Observations of the merchandise sold in the store including answering, where are the weaves, wigs, and braiding hair located? Where are the natural hair products, shampoos, perms, and hot oil treatments? Are the combs and brushes on hooks or a table? What items are behind glass-locked cabinets? What unique items are present that are not sold in larger stores? What do the aisles closest to the cashier's desk have? What small items are for sale at the cash register? Are there jewelry items available? Other general questions that helped to establish the feel of the store include, what promotions are being offered? Are there signs around the store? Are there cameras present? Is the store silent or loud? Is there music playing or television on? Are the aisleways narrow or spacious? Do they sell food or beverages, clothing, or shoes?

Interviewees were identified by asking several store clerks if they were interested in answering questions about themselves for an ethnography. The interview questions are in the appendix section entitled interview guide. The clerks were given a printed version of the interview guides and consent forms.

Data Analysis

The social division between Asian American beauty supply clerks and the Black American clientele is thought to be two-sided but this study does not divulge into all sides. The interactions with store clerks are analyzed to give more insight on store clerk ideals of customers through checking allowance of conversation, and demeanor while speaking with them. Each location was observed for the amount and degree of security devices used towards customers. Overall, the data collected confidentially supports a mistrust on the part of store owners. Every store had multiple security measures outside and inside the building. The number of clerks that were willing to talk about topics outside of customer service related was extremely low, and the demeanor when asking for a short interview was defensive. Numerous clerks mentioned they were unable to answer questions without an okay from a manager who was not present. Although there was a low participation in interviews or willingness for small talk, the lack of communication did not prevent any store clerk from having a professionalism where they were still willing to discuss store products.

Mistrust and Security in Beauty Supply Stores

All the stores visited had similar storefront signage, either 3D plastic or flat plastic-plated signs; the locations in strip malls or plazas usually had an additional sign underneath the strip mall's sign. Every store had some array of posters of hair product advertisements outside the store and all stores were designed with elevated counters for clerks to be above the shoppers.

Most stores had advertising posters shown through glass windows and doors where the posters got taped on the inside but faced the outside. More than one store had mannequins dressed in plain spandex clothes that were sold inside, signs about surveillance cameras and store hours were also present on the entrances of most stores.

Store #1 is in a strip mall near Conant Road and Eight Mile Road. There are large windows where racks of jewelry, shoes, and mannequins dressed in bright outfits get displayed to the public. Just inside the door is a metal detector. The counters are higher than the ground floor as the clerks observe shoppers, and customers pass signs with camera icons stating the store has surveillance. Behind the elevated counters that occupy about half the store are rows of packets of weaving hair separated by type: Brazilian, remy, or yaky. The store has a large selection of purses and wallets, most are located on a see-through shelf in front of the entrance with a big hand-drawn sign "Handbags Sale." Then there is a long table with a row of mannequin heads wearing various styles of baseball caps or snapbacks and surrounded by more purses and wallets. The other areas of the open space of the store are jewelry and wig areas, both are accompanied by a counter space for assistance. Above the aisles, there are numbered posters each number has a different wig sold by the brand ModelModel's 100% human hair. Some aisles have moisturizers, shampoos and conditioners, or hair perms or hair coloring. Most brands are marketed toward Black women consumers with a photo of a woman on the item or brand name referencing Black or Africa or queen. Behind the aisles on the back wall, there are plastic-wrapped headbands, children's hair barrettes, bows, and boppers (also called hairballs). Also, the hair extensions used for hair braiding are separate from the hair for weaves or wigs because they are not behind the counter or near the front of the store.

Location #2 is in a plaza near Evergreen Road and Seven mile Road. Underneath the 3D plastic sign there are remnants of another name with Beauty in it, still readable metal stained onto the building. The window area was full of posters taped from the inside: lashes by Absolute New York, a sale on human hair by Mayde's Yaky, men's hair trimmer RED by Kiss, and other novel items. Also, the storefront has party triangles hanging from each end that trail to the neighboring store. The bulletproof glass entrance door leads to a small area or vestibule with a railing that leads the entering customers to one door and people exiting will be on the opposite side. Entering the store floor there is a metal detector to cross and hovering above those who enter is a bright monitor showing live surveillance video. The cashier counter to the left of the entrance is elevated above shoppers. There is an open shopping area filled with some individual product displays, cardboard shelves designed with the brands logos, and filled with the items. Also, at the front of the store there are home products and other daily items like luggage, umbrellas, and shoes. Another area was just racks of t-shirts, pants, and socks. Above the aisles, numbered posters hang advertising hair from the brand MilkyWay. Bottled hair products are in each aisle usually grouped by brand name or purpose (e.g. hair dyes are predominantly in one area).

Location #3 was in a shopping plaza on Gratiot Road and Seven Mile Road surrounded by clothing stores, and a grocery store. The exterior windows and doors were bulletproof glass that were full of posters which were primarily from the hair bundle brand Outre. The largest poster was of a woman with dark-brown skin in braids and large text of the words "Outre," "100% Kanekalon [hair]" and "3X more". Then there were ads of remi weaving hair by Outre's Mylk, human hair wigs by Outre's MyTresses, weave closures by Outre's Duby, straight bob-style wigs by Outre, children's braiding hair by Outre, remi short hair by Outre's TaraVelvet, and

pre-stretched ombre braiding hair by Outre's Braid-Babe. In the small spaces that remained there is a sign informing not to leave children unattended, a list of the store hours, a camera icon stating the store has security cameras, an icon by the home security company Guardian Alarm, and icons of the payment cards the store accepts. Above the doors is more bullet-proof glass with security bars next to the building address and an LED "Open." Before reaching the door, you must pass the array of protective bright yellow posts that are surrounding the entrance area.

Store #4 is in a plaza on Rosa Park Boulevard and Grand Boulevard. The exterior did not have any windows to display ads, but the bulletproof glass doors and the small window above it had security bars. The door had a sign listing the store hours, and an icon of a security camera icon with the word "WARNING" and a short paragraph informing customers there are surveillance cameras or shoplifters will be prosecuted. In the vestibule between the first entrance and the second entrance there is a bubble gum machine, a sign stating, "If you break anything in this store, you must pay/buy it" and more hair marketing posters such as olive oil hair moisturizer by ORS. The second entrance leads to a metal detector onto the store floor, to the right there is an elevated clerks' counter made of thick clear bullet-proof glass. Within it there are necklaces, blinged-out clutches, and other flashy items. To the left are more elevated counters and the store floor has racks of clothing then there are isles full of products.

Location #5 is a stand-alone building near Joy Road and Jeffries Freeway, and it is emic knowledge for Black American Detroiters who shop this location to know the building was previously a bank. The store architecture is a mirror image of a twentieth-century American bank-styled building, except all the windows are boarded off and painted blue or yellow to match the store sign. Over the closed off and front door are bright yellow posters that say "50% Off," "NOW OPEN," "Entrance in the Back," and the store's phone number. The parking lot and main

entrance are around the back where the brick building walls, boarded windows, and security bars are all painted eggshell white. Then the entrance has a large blue display. There are no product posters on the bullet-proof door but there is a sign with the store hours, a sign saying “an Authorized Surge Product dealer,” a flier with a surveillance photo and a short paragraph with the title 1800-SpeakUp then there are icons of payment cards the store accepts.

The entrance leads to another entrance and there are posters of hair products. After customers enter the second door is covered in security bars there is a metal detector leading into the store. Behind the elevated counters on the right, are mannequin heads with different wigs and a closed area with a table where a clerk is working on a wig. Nearby is a salon chair secured to the floor circled by mirrors and surrounded by more rows of wigs with tags hanging out and discounts and 50% off signs. On most of the walls are mannequins wearing sets of stretch outfits (pants, shorts, skirts, shirts or dresses) in different colors with matching purses. Above the aisles are numbered product posters with a different hair model for each number 1-5. At the end of aisles are individual product racks; one aisle-end had a display of a nail polish brand, another had an edge-control product, and non-branded plastic-wrapped ankle bracelets and earrings.

Overall, the beauty supply store observations depicted the concept of mistrust as supported because each store had multiple security measures. Every location had bullet-proof glass on the doors, windows and counters. Also, one store had an extensive amount of plastic barriers around the entrance that are used to secure things from car accidents which can be interpreted as extra protection from a car colliding into the storefront to force entry. The exterior windows had security bars and stickers of a camera icon stating the store has security cameras inside, as well as small posters around the store stating the surveillance present. Additionally, there was a large amount of product marketing outside the store and within the shopping areas of

the store where all the models in the posters were brown-skinned, and most likely African American ethnicity. The ads that were for expensive hair weaves or wigs such as the brands on the aisle-number posters were found behind the counters or closer to the clerks. Whereas, the items wrapped in plastic were in less monitored areas, they were usually plastic hair accessories, children's hair accessories or non-brand items.

Ethnic Tensions Between Beauty Supply Clerks and Customers

Each beauty supply store visited had signs of ethnic tension between Asian and Black Americans within the beauty supply store atmosphere. At Store #1, the clerk that greeted me was quick to reject any conversation that was not about a purchase. Immediately when asked for a few moments, he shook his head *no* and said, *"No I don't know but you can ask her."* Then the other clerk at the cash register answered, *"I don't know. I just started working here,"* and *"Sorry, I don't know, the manager isn't here."* I briefly added that it was about her experiences, my interest in the Asian American experience in small business ownership, and my being a previous customer at the store. There was no small talk or casual conversation during my first visit, but they gave me the store number to contact the manager in the morning. However, calling the number resulted in endless ringing. It was a socially tense experience because of their deflection of answers and claiming to be a new clerk.

Store #2 was unique because the clerk viewed the beauty supply store as less controversial than the liquor store or gas stations where he had previously been a clerk. *"I've been working in different retail stores. This is more quiet and less problems. I worked for convenience, I worked for gas station. You know, more when you buy or sell cigarettes, tobacco, and beer, it's more trouble."* The beauty supply store is a less culturally tense inner-city small business for this clerk. At Store #3, a security guard welcomed me, but when I asked to speak

with the manager, the guard explained that he was the manager. He was at the entrance with the attire of a security guard, such as a Black vest and firearm. There is an inside commonality at beauty supplies where the security will answer a complaining customer to filter out conflict directed at the workers behind the counter. I found out the guard held dual positions as security and floor manager. The floor manager, named D, and the clerk, named M, at the counter, were willing to be interviewed about their experiences. Clerk M shared that *“over 90 percent of people are good. It's those, just a few people bother me.”* Clerk M explained that he feels disrespected by some customers, which complicates the job.

Then they discussed controversial incidents. Clerk M made comments that overlap with the high degree of security measures found in beauty supplies, *“one time for me a customer (was) crazy. They cannot say anything. Anytime. And then somebody looks like on drugs. And then somebody's steal from our store for many things, so many times.”* The clerk describes a few different customers who made him feel unsafe. Even if those customers were harmless, this was Clerk M's perception. It exemplifies the tensions between the clerk and the customer. Manager D gave another perspective stating, *“You know what the crazy thing is, the majority of people who steal already have money, that's what the crazy thing about it.”* So, the idea of who is a security concern is questionable because those who would steal would not seem conflictual. Beauty supplies' high-security measures create a tense environment.

The demeanor of the clerks at Store #4 was defensive as soon as they learned the conversation was not about some purchase. They quickly responded, *“Whatever,”* and *“You must talk to the manager all or nothing.”* Their refusal to engage in any small talk made it impossible to do observations inside the store. In Store #5, the clerk did not want to participate in the project because of being busy, *“I'm busy so maybe you can come back next time because I*

only have two people working.” At the time, the store had only one customer inside and the clerk was not occupied. So this was them refusing to have any small talk or casual conversation. The clerk at Store #5 was not as aggressive and defensive as the previous store employees who prevented product observations. I explained my purpose was to get more information about the interaction between Black American beauty supply customers at Asian American-owned businesses. The clerk did not participate in a full interview but informed me they were worried about scams.

Lack of Communication and Miscommunication

On the second visit to Store #1, the same store clerk avoided interview questions by saying the manager was not there to talk. I waited for a few customers to get checked out to re-explain my project and my being a previous shopper at this store. I noticed from a distance that one customer got frustrated with the clerk about an item behind the counter. The customer pointed and asked to see an item hanging against the wall, but the clerk did not respond immediately. The clerk could have unintentionally delayed responding, overwhelmed, or frustrated with the customer, but the clerk slowly walked to grab the item. The customer muttered, “f*cking annoying.” The clerk and customer only spoke about the minimal amount needed to complete the transaction. They did not have small talk, and the atmosphere was tense, but this is an average inner-city beauty supply communication style from an emic Detroit perspective.

The conversation with the clerk at Store #2 was unique because he was willing to be interviewed and open about his experiences. When asked about his association with the Black community (because he was not of Black ethnicity), he said “*Yeah, I do. Not outside. Just inside work. I have a good relationship.*” The clerk was not closed off about his interaction at work,

then asked how and when he interacts with the community where he works, and he shared his experiences. *“Not just to customers. I have friends, but because of me, you know. And I do have friends that I support, like her. She was the first one to put her product in my store.”* He showed me a product display in the front of the store, a local Black-owned hair product. Although, he did not discuss any reservations or views on cultural tensions in beauty supplies in-depth concerning the topic of Black customers shopping at stores owned by other ethnicities.

A security guard greeted me in Store #3. When I asked to speak with the manager, the guard explained that he was the manager. He was at the entrance with the attire of a security guard, including a Black vest and firearm. There is a tendency at beauty supplies for the guard to answer a complaining or novel customer to filter out conflict directed at the workers behind the counter. However, this the guard worked two positions: security and floor manager. The clerk behind the counter, named M. He is an immigrant from Korea with a degree in engineering from a Korean university. The clerk shared his reservations about conversing with customers, *“over 90% of people are good. It's those, just a few people bother me.”* The clerk shared how he feels disrespected when customers curse at him.

Clerk M shared stories on having bad interactions with customers, *“one time for me a customer (was) crazy. They cannot say anything. Anytime. And then somebody looks like on drugs. And then somebody's steal from our store for many things, so many times.”* The clerk described some customers he believed had bad intentions or committed larceny. Even if those customers posed no issue, the clerk mistrusted them. Similar to beauty supplies having high degrees of security and keeping communication to a minimum, it exemplifies the tensions between the clerk and the customer. Also, the guard added an interesting point about whom clerks may mistrust, *“You know what the crazy thing is, the majority of people who steal already*

have money, that's what the crazy thing about it." The guard implies that the security measures and lack of communication highlight customers who seem promiscuous, but they are less likely to pose any issues.

In Store #5, the clerk did not want to participate in the interview or have any casual conversation. *"I'm busy so maybe you can come back next time because I only have two people working."* At the time, only one other customer was in the store, but the clerk stated the cash registers needed to be covered and had a dismissive demeanor. It is arguable that if I had asked about a product to purchase, the clerk might have been open to talking.

The customer-clerk dynamic in beauty supplies tends to lack communication. The interactions supported this understanding because the dismissiveness by the clerks was consistent during the store visits. The guard at Store #3 provided an outlook on improving cultural tensions *"We all basically work together like Koreans, Black, Filipinos..... we have to come together. We got to work together."* Ideally, communication within beauty supply stores can improve, for a better customer and clerk experience.

Ownership Has More Benefits Than Controversy

Although beauty supplies are stores with culturally tense atmospheres and low communication between shoppers and staff, the clerks seemed to value the business. At Store #1, the first clerk did not get interviewed and avoided any small talk conversations, but her demeanor stayed in good spirits, and she was available if I decided to make a purchase. The clerk at Store #2 was open about being appreciative of the job, *"I've been working five years, no problem."* The clerk shared that his family gave him the job, and he plans to own the business after he learns more, *"I'm more interested in it because I'm trying to learn. Maybe have my own store."* Also, cultural tensions were not a factor for this clerk. He compared working at a beauty

supply to others working at liquor stores or gas stations and said beauty supplies have “*less problems.*”

When one clerk was asked about their opinion on the lack of African American-owned beauty supplies, they responded, “*I didn’t know usually not Black people own in the company. People cannot keep this business.*” The clerk seemed uninformed about the social norms of inner-city small businesses and added that any business is tough to maintain. Also, it is unfortunate that the beauty supply store’s significance as a cultural landmark to urban communities and a vendor catering to Black women’s hair preferences is unknown by the non-Black employees.

When asking the clerk at Store #3 about the lack of African American-owned beauty supplies, he responded, “*I didn’t know usually not Black people own in the company. People cannot keep this business.*” His perspective was that he did not know about the cultural divisions, the low percentage of Black ownership of beauty stores, and the significance of Black-owned beauty supplies for inner-city Black communities. Likewise, the clerk at store #5 was not a participant in the full interview and even stated, “*I got to be at the register, I don’t have time for that.*” However, while I was doing in-store observations, she approached me and shared about an incident of a scammer calling beauty supplies causing her resistance to participate. Here is another example of avoiding casual discussion while assuring customer service in a beauty supply store.

Discussion

How the Findings Add to the Topic

This ethnography added to the niche findings on beauty supply stores in America. The subculture of the African American women marketed stores for inner-city and urban residents

that are well-known for being owned by immigrants of other ethnicities. It attempted to connect the information from the few previous findings, conduct interviews, and participant observations.

Limitations and Future Studies

The aspects that may have been limited in this ethnographic study, particularly the interview portion, include the demographic of the interviewer, the beauty supply locations chosen, and the study's verifiability. That the interviewer and a Black woman may have negatively influenced the clerks' willingness to participate. They may have considered me a customer, although I did not purchase any items during those visit and this could have lessened the chances of an interview because of the relationship norms between clerks and customers in beauty supply stores.

Also, I chose to keep the store selection consistent and only study beauty supply stores in inner-city Detroit. This Michigan city is mentioned in national ratings to have a higher crime rate than most places, which may have influenced their participation due to fear of safety. Perhaps, future studies could select locations outside of the inner city. Towns less associated with crime or considered more suburban may have better participation. There are cities in Metropolitan Detroit with beauty supplies, such as Sterling Heights, Roseville, Dearborn, Redford, and among others.

Another disconnection may have been because I am not of Korean background or not fluent in Korean. The store clerks may have been less comfortable speaking in English about a novel topic, such as their opinions on the job rather than product questions. There may have been cultural norms I was not aware of that someone of Korean descent would know. Other than safety concerns, some clerks questioned the validity of the project. I gave each store a consent form that contained an overview of the project, the Sociology professor's information that was overseeing the study, and my information. I took time to explain the project thoroughly to most

store clerks but may have been less detailed to clerks that immediately declined. Future studies could have multiple interviewers to make sure no information gets missed.

Also, an interviewer who does not fit the demographic of an average beauty supply store customer may receive higher feedback because of the reservations held among the clerks toward customers that allot minimum conversation. All of these factors are related to the issue of trust between clerks and African American consumers.

Appendix A: Interview Guide

STORE CLERKS:

1. Is this a family-owned business?
2. Are you a first-generation business owner?
3. Can you tell me how you decided to start this business?
4. How did you finance the opening of the business? (group funding, bank loans, etc.)
5. What sparked your idea of selling Black beauty and hair products? (demand, availability, etc.)
6. Were there any obstacles that had to be overcome when opening the business?
7. Do you use the products that you sell in the store? Why or why not? If not,
8. Have customers stolen from the store before? May you explain what happened?
9. Have you ever had a bad interaction with customers? If so, what happened?
10. Was this industry your initial job choice? Is this business a necessity for making a living?
11. If you could choose to work in any industry you wanted, where would you work?
12. What do you consider your race/or ethnicity?
13. What are your thoughts on the history of Asian immigrants finding entrepreneurship though opening beauty retail?
14. Can share any insights of these experiences, for example is it true that Korean immigrants initially started selling weave products with their own hair?
15. In what ways do you associate with the Black community in your personal life?
16. How do you perceive Black customers? How has this changed over time?
17. Do you live in the community where you work? Why or why not?
18. Do you use wholesalers that are located in the country your family is from?
19. Are you aware that Black Americans own only a few thousand beauty supplies in the US?
What are your thoughts on this?

SHOPPERS:

20. What do you consider your race/ethnicity?
21. How long have you been shopping here? Why did you choose this store?
22. What are your thoughts on Black-owned beauty supplies?
23. Are the products you get only available at beauty supply stores and not commercial chains?
24. Would you have another way to get these products if beauty supplies were not available?

25. What are your thoughts on non-Black owned stores exclusively selling items that are marketed towards mostly Black/Hispanic shoppers?
26. Do you shop at any Black owned beauty supplies? What about other Black-owned businesses?
27. Are all the beauty supplies you shop non-Black owned?
28. As a customer do you feel like you're being judged when shopping at beauty supplies? Can you explain how?
29. What do you recommend to improve beauty supply store shopping?

Appendix B: Beauty Supply Interviews and Conversations Transcripts

Store #1 (second visit) 2 employees behind the counter & 1 employee carrying boxes:

It's just questions about the beauty supply store experience because usually, like the store clerks and the employees usually are different. But I learned about how the small businesses have like how you had to work to kind of get ownership of it. You have a perspective about working here. Was this your first line of work? "Yeah." So I will just start with your name. What's your name? "My name is Premo." Okay. I thought you were Mr. Can. "The other guy working here. He is out of town." Oh, is that who she was telling me about? Mr. Can? "Yeah." She said he is here in the mornings. "I don't know what time you want to come back. You want to leave it like your name, your name right here? And this is your phone number. Phone number 9347836. I got you. I don't know much about this one." No. I mean, but how long have you been working here? "But I've been working here for a long time. The other guy he been working more than." More than you? "He is out of town, has more information." My granny live right over there so I could come back. I'll be doing this for the next couple of weeks, so yes. "I just will be sad. I didn't want to I feel bad because she was like, Oh my gosh, I don't know. So I don't know much." I can just read this to you. What do you consider your race or ethnic background? I guess it don't matter, but what do you consider yourself to be? Which one is your race or ethnic background? (Premo talks to other clerk) "I don't remember this much Ms. Rich she going to leave information." (okay.) My granny lives down the street so I could just try back later. "Yes, I'm sorry." (talking to the other clerk) "Once you've gotta, behind them, the comb. You know she can, she can call you when their here upcoming, to not waste your time you know, it's better." And I think, I think she gave me she me the store number. "You gave her a store number yesterday?" (Yeah.) Do you use any of the products in the store for yourself? "No. No." Not, particularly okay. "I'm getting all from different companies. Chicago." Oh, okay. "So, I don't even know. I just see and wait for a call from them. So you now have to waste your time. So here, we can call you and you can come back, okay?" Okay. "So yeah, you know, come and say he's not here and whatnot because then you see." Okay. And you were telling me that you did work here for a little while. And then what you say or what you consider your race or ethnicity is you could use something like a white, Black. What is your background, your family from? Cuba. Cuba? Wonderful. Okay. So do you say it is a hard business to work in the retail business? Kind of like enjoyable? "Yeah." Okay. Have you had issues with customers and concerns? "No, all nice, nice." That's good. Yeah. What is your opinion on how immigrants had to start small businesses? Like they had to come over here and start counting from the bottom and open the businesses. "I don't know. I didn't know. You have to talk to him about that.(laughter) Okay. You'll have to talk to him about that one." Okay. So as an African American, do you associate with any Black people outside of work or do you just do at work? "Just at work." Okay. And do you live in this community or do you just work

here? Somewhere around here? "Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah." *You really helped me out a lot. I'll just hold out for your call. Yeah. Just hold on to the information because it'd be cool to see how it is from an owner point of view to see because I know it was like it wasn't easy, so that's why I just wanted to know more about that side of the story. So I'll answer, please please have them leave a message. "Sure." Thank you so much. "Okay. Give it to me." All right.*

Store #2, one clerk at the cashier counter:

So you're not the store owner? You're not the store owner, you just work here? "Yes." Okay. So do you do you use any of the products in the store? Any of the products in the store, like personally for yourself? "Yeah, I use ah Cantu." Oh, you use Cantu, aaye. "For my hair." Okay. And have you had issues with customers in the store before, like bad interactions? "No. No. No." Like issues or nothing? Okay, cool. "I've been working 5 years no problem 5 years No problem. Five years, no problem." That's what's up. Okay. Was this industry yo initial job choice or did you want to work somewhere else? "No. I'm more interested in it because I'm trying to learn. Maybe have my own store. Yeah." So you wanna do like yo like a business ownership yourself? "For sure" Okay. Um, so right now this is just you working to try and get it up. "I've been working in different retail stores. This is more quiet and less problems. I worked for convenience, I worked for gas station. You know, more when you buy or sell cigarettes, tobacco, and beer, it's more trouble." I couldn't imagine. "Yeah. So over here dealing with woman and none of the above Yeah." Okay. Okay. And you already said where you want it to work. What do you consider your race or ethnicity even though it's not even like it don't even really matter. But as far as like your background. "Oh its Arabic. Arabic." Okay. Okay. "Middle Eastern, another words." Which like Yemeni? "Yeah Yemeni." Okay. For sure because I'm from over there on six-mile like near Hamtramck. "Oh yeah there you have a lot of them." Grateful. Are you first second-generation? Third-generation? Over here? "Yeah Second second-generation." Okay. And do you associate with most of the customers here, they'd be like Black or Hispanic customers. Do you associate with the Black community in your personal life? "Yeah. Yeah, I do." Okay. So like outside of work and what ways do you? "Not outside. Just inside work." Okay. "I have a good relationship. Not just to customers. I have friends, but because of me, you know. And I do have friends that I support them, like her. She was the first one to put her product in my store." I'm going to take a picture down below. "And lives, she's locally." Okay. Okay. I'm going to definitely take a peek at those so we could get more advertisement for that. Okay. And then do you where do you know where the wholesalers like where the products come from? "Well, the owners it's different. Some of them, they all come from China. Okay. But there's suppliers in New York, New Jersey, and Chicago." Oh, okay. "From vendors like this different company. This is different. I buy it don't all come from one spot. It's more than 10-15 vendors for this location. Yeah." Oh, wow. "Yeah." I didn't even think of it like that. "The clothing from somewhere and the hair from somewhere else. You know, that's a lot." Yeah. A lot. When you apply for the job, did you know like the owners, were you like able to get a good recommendation? Like how did you find the job? "This actually was family, family-owned." Aww forreal? "That's what I've been learning about." Like when other minority immigrants get here, they really worked hard to get small businesses going on and stuff for us was like part of my project is seeing how each perspective, because yo, yo culture, you definitely have to put in the hard work as well. And then we add like a Black American, like we had different obstacles too. So this is just supposed to help understand what both sides is coming from. "Yeah." Man, that was really helpful. I'm not going to bug you too much. I appreciate you sharing. It let me take a picture of your friends product

Store #3 Clerk and Store Manager:

Okay I am gonna go and actually ask a few questions. Let me know if it's too much. I'm just super interested. This is for my school. Your partial owner of the store. Are you a first-generation or business owner? "Yes" Okay. And can you tell me how you decided to start the business? "Actually, I was getting older I had some challenges retired from company. Yeah. I was engineer, colliding, was working for GM." Oh my gosh General Motors? "General Motors. Yeah." So what made you come to switch to a retail? "One of them, my friends, old lady he has store, beauty supply." Wow. Now I learned about the hard work that goes into especially minority immigrants coming to work and how, how hard that is, the challenges and things I just know a little bit about it. Could you tell me more about the obstacles? If you had to go through? Well, like for funding, like... "I was created in Korea, South Korea. And then previous, my Korean company made a contract with General Motors, for some projects." Okay. "That's why I was here." Okay. "Korean company sent me here, here, and then more growing. And they need me to stay in the United States with my family." Yeah "I think I was discussed by wife and my daughter. Finally, (they) decided to stay the United States with me." And this has been this would you start this until when? "Just the one year, one year, 2022. I was here." It's been a minute since I've been back on my side of town. They they changed the whole park the whole park or structure? They changed everything. Let me see. Okay. So you were engineer and you switch and this is like paying your bills for your family, is like keeping keeping stuff going? "Yes" Okay. If you had to choose what you said you'd like this. "Yeah. It was challenging, I like a challenging job." Okay. And you said you were originally from South Korea. Right? And you could you share with me some of your experiences about, I guess, because I know it was a lot to come over and start your own business and things like that. Anything else you could tell me about that? "Actually, I was working on over my changes for people, opened this store. One year or 1.5 years. Every Saturday, every other Saturday. I work at there to run. And then suddenly chance I got a chance to support me. (break for customer) So you were saying that working with your friend your friend's store? "I learned learn what's the beauty beauty supply." Okay. That's interesting because do you use any of the products here? "No. No. Absolutely not. That's why I'm still learning here with Darnell" I'm so you said? Of course not. Okay. So do you live in the community you work like Do you live around here or do you live somewhere else and you just come here for it? "I live Rochester here. Clinton county. Clinton township. More, more, (motioning away) more out there." Okay. More north. And then you just commute for work and stuff. Then do you associate with the Black community outside of your job? "Not really". Okay. And then the wholesalers that you buy from, are they from South Korea? Because I know I read a lot of wholesalers come from Korea, has a lot of money, right? "Right. Yeah. I just heard from community, South Korea Beauty supply owners 90% answer. from South Korea and then hair chemical only Korean company." Yeah, that's what I found out. I was like, wow, they offer them from around and then okay. Have you had any issues with customers? If so, how was it? " So many times. (He laughed.) Well, one time for me as a customer, crazy. I know. They cannot say anything". Oh my gosh. "Anytime. Yeah. And then somebody looks like drug (motions to eyes). Yeah, and then somebody's steal Our store for many things, so many times. Okay. But I, I believe 90% over 90%. people is is good. It's good if either it'd be those just a few people bother me. they just had my joy." "You know what the crazy this was the majority of people who do steal already have money, that's what the crazy thing about it" Few people, just a few people make it bad, right? So, okay, Here' another big question. So these are mostly selling stuff to Black and Hispanic people, and they

usually don't be owned by Black people. How do you feel about that? "I did usually not Black people own in the company. People cannot keep this business." Yeah. Yeah, that's true. That's true. Man. I know it's difficult for the entrepreneur, entrepreneurship. You have any advice for people who wants to start a business? "We we all we all basically work together like Korean, Black, Oh, yeah. Filipinos we had all different cultures had worked here before. Yeah. Not only one race We more than one races how we together, to accomplish something together." That's what I'm trying to do here. Because we all kind of, we are trying to survive. And I think the American society really split people up. "That the thing is, we have to come together. We got to work together. To make ways higher, better. Majority of people angry of the next person what they doing We got to work together. Achieve more." When I was doing my research about, I guess how like the work that immigrants had to do to get their businesses. Then kinda like the suffrage of our people. Here in America. It was like it started a lot of tension, like in the 90s. Did you have you heard about that? Have you all heard about that? Like in the when the riots happened in California and how the, the cops were really protecting the white people and not the minority businesses in sort of had like a Kali. Now is always this stereotype that the Black customers in the Asian store owners have conflict. And that's why I was trying to do this to kinda, kinda tap into see why that was a thing. "Like, I don't know if Whenever there is some not good People. People inside our store. And I had called 911 to the police Police very kind, kindness. Yeah. And they come through, they come over. Okay, They are very kind. like any like I feel like it's good people and bad people everywhere." But as you know, that's a bad stereotype that's out there. And yes, so that's basically what this was about. Just trying to see trying to see your perspective about like how it is owning and how do you feel, do you feel comfortable like, is it something you enjoy? "There's just more for work, you know, like I don't know." I'm I'm hoping when I graduated to do more work like this and try to unify people because it is very separated and people are, everybody is hurt really. Just hopefully I help people. I appreciate all your feedback and hearing your story. That's amazing that you all the way from South Korea." Anytime I can help behind a soldier. American troop." Oh, okay. Oh, veteran. "I really honor them because I believe American soldier alive in our country. You have Korean War history. For many people came in, I'm sorry, but almost died. Somebody. That's why I really honor them. So enabled history." Right? Right. "So then in New York I was stopped by one over lessen area Oh, and that time somebody seen me And then tell me So I can see those. He he was a surgeon." Oh, my gosh. I hate seeing that. "I was he would keep it to auto." So nice. I hate seeing that. Not overhear. But they usually be when you come off the freeway. So sad seeing that lead and really touched me. And of course, we American. We live here. We deserve I guess the same rights and the same everything is everybody else. And, you know, I feel like it's time that we don't have to be as stressed as in the past because of stuff other people did to us, you know, so I'm hoping to finish school and continue continue doing stuff like this to help. But thank you for being a part of this column. This is my town. "Maybe you serve over 90% Black people. If they have manners. Yeah, I cannot respect that is right there. I think very important thing is respect each other. We won't have any issue." I'll make sure to note that because respect is deserved deserve respect as well. I hear you. That's key point I hear you. Okay. I'm about to head on. Thank you so much. Thank you.

Store #4 two clerks behind the counter:

So I can have your name down. What's your name, sir? "My PG here. I'm sorry here." Hmm? You said what? "Next time here, okay?" No, you were answering the questions. You said you were here for ten years. [Clerk #2] "We don't need give the name, you know, we don't need to

give those. (looking at paper) What's that?" *Oh this is a project I'm doing. I was explaining to him about beauty supply stores and how I guess the owners have the immigration and how they had to work on small business ownership is all here. This is for you guys.* "No, you wait for the manager to come in." *I can ask you guys as well. You guys you guys work here part-time.* "Yeah we work in here." *How long have you been working here?* "We don't want to talk today. When the woman here you got to talk to her." *Okay. I was just going to ask about how you guys like to sell beauty supply products.* "No so you can hear communication with her later when the owner here." *All right. I know it should be I'm closing up my interviews today. That's why I was just saying, your owner won't let you?* "I don't know what you talking about owner. We just employees." *Oh employees* "Yes. Employee." *Okay. I get what you mean. I didn't mean to like, it isn't that important. Like that is just a research thing.* "Whatever it is." *Well, no, it's okay. It's just really about how you guys feel. Like you guys feel a tension with the customers because they're Black and you're not Black.* "I say that I don't want to talk. You got to talk to her all or nothing." *Okay. I will just put you guys down as I didn't want to get into it. That's fine.* "All right." *Thank you.*

Store #5 two clerks:

How long have you been working here? "I can't say I have work to do. I got to be at the register, I don't have time for that." *Is there somebody else?* "Um, no she is busy too. I'm busy so maybe you can come back next time because I only have two people working." *Ok, I will be real quick.* *What is your name and how long have you been working here?* "Sorry you can come back because I don't want to give you that information, sorry." *My bad, of course not. I mean, you don't have to. I'll give you this. This is what it is.* "What is it?" *Well, why would I come back? If you don't want to give information. Like, if you don't now, it wouldn't matter later.* *Okay. Thank you. I'm just going to take notes on the store for my project.* "(speaks to the other clerk in another language) I just don't know if it's a scam. I had a friend who was scammed just over the phone." *(later explains past issues with being scammed over the phone.)*

ENDNOTES

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