

The selling of 'Trailer Park Chic'

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Perfect is out. In its latest twist, marketing has taken up what Michelle Lamar describes as the anti-Martha Stewart, the anti-Pottery Barn. It's called - offensive or not - white trash.

"If you're not that ideal person, then you're white trash," says Lamar, who runs online retailer White Trash Palace near Kansas City.

The book "White Trash Etiquette" dispenses advice on how to win bar fights. Earlier this month, gift bags for the Oscars included kitschy T-shirts, from White Trash Palace, with slogans such as "Every mother is a working mother" - alongside a pair of \$1,000 black diamond Havaiana flip-flops. advertisement

Once strictly a pejorative label with racist undertones, the term "white trash" is now being taken up by marketers and retailers. Call it white-trash chic, redneck couture or trailer fabulous - whatever it is, the idea is to make it cool.

Lamar calls herself white trash and proud of it. Just read her blog, titled White Trash Mom. Her Christmas lights stayed up months after all the gifts were unwrapped. She has mastered the art of driving while talking on her cell phone and yelling at her two kids in the back seat. And sometimes she buys cookies from the store and crumbles them at the edges so they look homemade.

Now she has an agent who is shopping a White Trash Mom book. That's a sign that "white trash" has shed its connotations of rural poverty and poor education to become a symbol of everyman, said marketing consultant Simon Sinek. It now evokes a simpler life and more comforting times - terrorists don't attack trailer parks.

"We live in times of high stress," said Sinek, who also teaches at Columbia University. "Messages that are simple, messages that are inspiring, messages that are life-affirming, are a welcome break from our real lives."

The trend has been percolating in pop culture for several years: Think Von Dutch trucker hats, Kid Rock's White Trash on Dope tour and the recent MTV trailer-park home makeover show.

Pennsylvania State University sociologist Karen Bettez Halnon describes it as the latest incarnation of a broader movement she calls "poor chic," in which well-off consumers mimic lower-class culture. American consumers are constantly seeking ways to keep it real, from punk to grunge to hip-hop.

"What consumers are shopping for more and more is authenticity," Halnon said. "And where they can find authenticity ... is to go through traditional activities of the lower class."

She worries that that sends the wrong message.

"This is making fun of poverty, making it recreation," she said, "but divorced of any kind of social obligation."

The term "white trash" still carries a heavy stigma in many communities. Sociologist Carl Taylor of Michigan State University said he has seen young people fight over the label.

"They may call each other and may laugh and make reference to being white trash," he said. "But if I was doing a survey and said, 'How do you feel about the words white trash,' they would reject the word itself, the label."

The premise of Pete Kotz's upcoming book on the ins and outs of white-trash living, "White Trash Etiquette," is that white-trash tendencies are universal. His topics include "How to scam out of your gambling debts" and "Is eloping bad financial management?"

"It's kind of a state of mind, I guess," said Kotz, who lives in Cleveland and writes under the name Dr. Verne Edstrom, Esq. "I used to get letters from black guys who wanted to be white trash. ... You just have to follow the belief system and not turn yuppie."

Lamar started her retail Web site in August on a lark. The response was almost immediate, with up to 4,000 visitors a day, she said. She had no previous retail experience, but her career in advertising had honed her instincts for what consumers want.

"You just get used to the lowest common denominator," she said.

Her business received celebrity cachet when Distinctive Assets, a Los Angeles-based entertainment marketing and corporate gifting firm, tagged her products for awards-show gift bags and the VH1 reality show "The Surreal Life."

"I was like, 'I love it!'" Lash Fary of Distinctive Assets said of his reaction when one of his sales reps bought him a Lamar creation. "It's not like they're in every hot-spot boutique in L.A. - yet."

Business is good as well for Jason Saffer of suburban Washington, who operates the Web site Jolene's Trailer Park and claims to be one of the Internet's first white-trash retailers.

He sells T-shirts and novelties such as trailer-park awareness bracelets ("in lovely wood-paneling brown," he says), and is developing a fragrance called Trailer Park Woman. Saffer, who hosts a regular comedy night at a local bar and teaches a cooking class as the larger-than-life character Jolene Sugarbaker, Queen of the Trailer Park, is negotiating with several producers to create a TV show.

"It's a way of living," he said. "White trash with class: That is real Americans."