Beyond the Dyad Migrants-Dominant Society: Migrants’ Distinction and Affiliation With Other Migrants

Andrew Lindridge, The Open University Business School
Anne Smith, The Open University Business School
Ben Diabah, The Open University Business School
Luca Visconti, ESCP Europe Business School

Previous research on migrants’ use of consumption appears to have ignored how similar ethnic minority groups use consumption to engage with each other. This paper explores how Ghanians migrants in Britain maintain their sense of ethnic identity, whilst immersing themselves within other Black diaspora. Central to this process is consumption.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research has shown that ethnic minorities use consumption to negotiate host and original cultures by constructing multiple identities in differing cultural contexts (Lindridge et al., 2004) or demonstrate adaption to the host culture (Verbeke et al., 2005). However, these studies have focussed on relationships with the dominant society, failing to understand how similar ethnic minority groups use consumption to engage with each other. Extant consumer acculturation studies therefore fall short in explaining how and why migrants reproduce distinction among themselves. Elaborating on Bourdieu (1979), we define distinction as the set of practices supporting affirmation of a personal identity and social vision.

Risks of over-simplification stem from how Western culture defines notions of culture and ethnicity. Culture is “a dynamic set of socially acquired behaviour patterns and meanings common to the members of a particular society or human group, including the key elements of language, artefacts, beliefs, and values” (Sojka and Tansuhaj, 1995, p. 469). Inherently linked to culture is ethnicity, describing a group who share: a common nationality, culture, language, and common descent (Hunt, 2002) often becoming evident when people are considered outsiders (Peraloza, 1994). Relying upon such positions, Cooper (2006) asserts that White society categorises Black men as outsiders through the ‘Bad Black Man’ (crime-prone and hyper-sexualised) or ‘Good Black Man’ (dissociating from Blackness, to associate with White norms).

This study explores this issue through understanding how Africans in Britain use consumption to negotiate their identity, when British Whites may categorise them as Black, whilst African migrants see themselves as separate from African-Caribbean communities. While British Whites are often unable to see distinction among various subgroups of British Africans, the latter may resist or negotiate assimilation to a meta-African culture if they do not want to succumb to such reductionist positions. Our research question becomes: How do African migrants use consumption to engage with each other, African-Caribbean communities (who they share a perceived homogeneity with) and White society that classifies these two groups as Black?

Wamwara-Mbugua and colleagues (2008) studied Kenyan migrants, in the United States noting how Kenyan consumer behaviours were shaped by White, African-American, African-American and Kenyan cultures. Although, the study noted the Kenyans inter- and intra-group tensions around consumption, particularly towards African-Americans, these issues were not explored. Our paper aims to explore these issues further.

Participants consisting of 10 first-generation Ghanians living in Britain (six men and four women) recruited from a town north of London, achieving theoretical saturation (McCracken, 1988).

Participant interviews were conducted on a sequential basis. Each participant was interviewed and then transcribed, notes written up and then analyzed. Following this process the participant was then interviewed separately again to clarify the research findings. The interviews were conducted by one of the authors who identified himself as Ghanaian. Interviews, transcribed, and the subsequent data analysed, ranged from 45 to 120 minutes.

Participants’ arrival in Britain triggered an almost prescribed level of behaviour, in which local British White culture and original Ghanaian culture represented the two preliminary key cultural references. Arrival in Britain was facilitated through informal networks consisting of other Ghanaians who assisted them in integrating into the British consumer environment, for example by introducing them to African food shops (such as Sabi) which sold primarily African and Black Caribbean items (for example, salted fish, plantain, smoked fish). Typically these networks were introduced to participants through extended family members or social contacts. Engaging with the local Ghanaian community also offered opportunities for participants to exercise their cultural identity, which was regularly achieved through conspicuous consumption of Ghanaian clothing products at family gatherings, parties, and religious events.

Alternatively, as part of this socialisation process participants were introduced to mainstream British supermarkets (such as Tesco). Access to British White culture tended to be limited to a need to engage basis. Whilst participants did not necessarily feel that this self-exclusion was a consequence of racism, this behaviour was indicative of a sense of cultural distance. Instead engagement was often motivated by economic reasons, such as food products being cheaper to access through British supermarkets rather than specialty stores. Familiarity with brands available in Ghana and Britain facilitated this engagement, such as Coca-Cola. Social contacts with British White culture was limited to encounters that were either work related or necessary. In such instances, clothing and food consumption necessitated an imposed sense of conformity that participants could identify with their own places of work in Ghana.

Whilst participants readily identified with other Ghanians and self-excluded themselves from British Whites, the reality of being an ethnic minority encouraged participants’ reconstruction of their self-identities within the British African community. With other Black Africans living nearby cultural differences and negative stereotypes gave way to a wider sense of African identity in which consumption played an important role. An identity consolidated through social events where foods were shared and clothing compared, often resulting in merging of cultural differences; for example through amalgamation of clothing and fashion designs.

Broman et al. (1988, p.148) defined Black identity as “the feeling of closeness to similar others in ideas, feelings, and thoughts”. This perspective evident in the emergence of an African identity partially extended towards African-Caribbean’s. Whilst participants engaged in these groups social events, comparing food differences and similarities, such engagements tended to be based upon a shared Black identity. For example, at a local African-Caribbean carnival, whilst participants shared the experience of being Black, they also took the opportunity to wave Ghanaian flags, along with related clothing, to assert their identity.

Our findings suggest that a migrant group selectively seek out alliances with related ethnic minority groups to reinforce their own sense of cultural identity, whilst submerging themselves in a broader ethnic group based upon shared ethnic characteristics. Facilitating this process of alliance building is the use of consumption to assert not only affiliation but also to assert distinction of their ethnic identity, an identity that also engages with the dominant culture but in a manner that supports and does not compromise it.