

Brand Personification and Symbolic Consumption among Ethnic Minority Teenage Consumers: An Empirical Study

Abstract

A plethora of evidence suggests that developed societies such as the UK are becoming increasingly multicultural by the day. Hence, the diversity of consumption in these societies becomes gradually evident in the form of residents' age, gender, income, and ethnicity. Accordingly, this paper explores the brand personification and symbolic consumption in respect of London-based Black African teenage consumers. The study is rooted in the interpretive research paradigm with 36 in-depth interviews conducted with the target respondents. The study shows the interactions of personal, social, cultural, psychological, and commercial factors in how these young ethnic minority consumers make their consumption decisions, define, and manage their various 'selves' in the postmodern society. It specifically highlights that they use symbolic consumption to address their need for acceptance in the society. It updates the extant ethnic minority studies and enriches the current understanding about symbolic consumption and brand personification especially with a focus on a specific segment of the society. The managerial implications of the study are highlighted in the paper.

Keywords: Symbolic Consumption, Brand, Personification, Teenagers, Africans, London

Introduction

The use of brands as cues by consumers in various marketing transactions is a well established phenomenon in the marketing literature (Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1997; Fournier and Yao, 1997; Keller and Richey, 2006; Raggio and Leone, 2006; Kim *et al.*, 2013; Athanasopoulou *et al.*, 2015). In some cases, they give indications of the functional attributes of a product to the consumer. However, our knowledge of consumption will be incomplete if limited to this threshold because there are cases when consumers' reaction to a product or the associated brand is based on symbolic meanings, especially in this era of postmodernism. It has long been established that consumers' purchase decision could be driven by symbolic meanings of the products (Levy, 1959). For instance, people can use product or brand to express their social status and personality (Kim *et al.* 2002), and to construct, maintain and communicate identity and social meanings (Elliott, 1997; Belk, 1988; Elliott and

Wattanasuwan, 1998; Barnister and Hogg, 2004; Amine and Lazzaoui, 2011; Reed II et al., 2012). This lays considerable credence to the claim that most of consumers' assumed happiness in this modernity emanate from their consumption, be it individually felt, collectively organised or socially reproduced (Lai, 1994). So, it is not surprising that Castaño *et al.* (2010) note that the issue of consumption reflects not only what is in our mind but what is in our hearts. Indeed, as research attention becomes increasingly focussed on Symbolic consumption (Belk, 1988; Nairn *et al.*, 2008; Amine and Lazzaoui, 2011), the need to know more about it in relation to various consumer groups becomes triggered. This explains the position of this paper which explores Brand personification and Symbolic Consumption among Black African teenage consumers in the UK. Meanwhile, a phenomenon closely related to Symbolic consumption is Brand personification which involves metaphorically representing brands in some kind of human behaviour (Delbaere *et al.*, 2011). A synthesis of these issues in the chosen context will extend the current understanding especially as evidence shows that consumers with different cultural background will likely have different attitude towards products (Rahman, 2008; Palan *et al.*, 2010; Chen-Yu *et al.*, 2010). Hence, there is a need to have a more focussed target and avoid undue generalisation about consumers. Besides, it has been stated that adolescence is a critical life stage for people's behavioural development emotionally, physically, and socially, as their life skills become more defined at this stage (Keating, 1990; Chen-Yu *et al.*, 2010) and their emotional consumption autonomy could also vary along different cultural contexts (Palan *et al.*, 2010; Tansuhaj and Foxman, 2010). Hence, it will be both theoretically and managerially beneficial in many ramifications to explore this topic as it will address the existing lacuna in this academic domain.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Brand personification and relationship marketing

A rich body of marketing literature acknowledges the prevalence and potency of personification in relation to consumers' decisions about their value-oriented marketing transactions (Aaker, 1997; Fornier, 1998; Brown, 2011; Delbaere *et al.*, 2011; Lee, 2013; Schade *et al.*, 2014). It is now all around us in various forms, ranging from brands of cars, mobile phones, to fashion items, and other offerings. Brown (2011) acknowledges the plethora of brand personification examples in marketing as seen around in recent times, and makes references to the fact that personification is enshrined in the company law because it recognises joint stock companies as artificial persons with rights and obligations

(Micklethwait, and Woodbridge, 2005 cited in Brown 2011). The study of Aaker and Fournier (1995), Aaker (1997); and Fournier (1998) are noted to have significantly lifted the tone of this argument. Fournier (1998) explores consumers' relationships with brands. This postulation metaphorically assumes brands to be like humans. In the study, argument about the legitimacy of brand as an active relationship partner is made and brands are conceptualised as "powerful repositories of meaning purposively and differentially employed in the substantiation, creation, and (re)production of concept of self in this marketing age" (Fournier, 1998: 365). One of the key dimensions of this study is relationship marketing. It reiterates the foundational contribution of Bagozzi (1975) in which a number of dimensions of exchange paradigm are analyzed. In the article, Bagozzi emphasises that the scope of relationship in marketing is broad, and may involve both tangible and symbolic aspects. This standpoint has been re-echoed, extended, and applied in several forms in the marketing literature (see for example Grönroos, 2004; Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009; Hansen, 2012). Essentially, the convergent view on this issue is that keeping and maintaining good relationships with customers will enrich customer value and strengthen the firm's sustainability (Arnett *et al.*, 2003; Barroso-Mendez *et al.*, 2015; Alam, 2015). Hence, it is logical to infer that a good relationship could lead to brand loyalty.

Evidently, relationship marketing is logically linked to this phenomenon whereby people personify brands as evident in postulations such as those of Aaker and Fournier (1996) and Fournier (1998). Another way by which this link has been explicated is through brand personality. It is simply explained as 'the set of human characteristics associated with a brand' (Aaker, 1997: p. 347). According to Murase and Bojanic (2004), brand personality serves as a complement to attributes, value, benefits, culture, and user to make the six levels of brand meaning. Indeed, Aaker's (1997) contribution to brand personality discourse has been widely lauded. According to Heiding *et al.* (2009), it has stirred the pot and set new agendas. Aaker (1997) draws on the 'Big Five' human personality structure and develops a theoretical framework of the dimensions of brand personality. This research effort resulted in the Big Five major groupings of personality that consumers associate with brands which she claims is reminiscent of the same way human beings have distinct personalities. Subsequently, it has been applied in many other related research efforts such as brand preference Business Schools (Opoku *et al.*, 2006), destination image (Hosany *et al.*, 2007); facial image and cosmetic usage (Guthrie, *et al.*, 2008), retail environments (Möller and Herm, 2013), and critically explained from the evolutionary biology, evolutionary psychology, and social psychology perspectives (Veer, 2013).

Given the complexity and diversity of human behaviour, the way and manner brand personification is perceived may as well differ across products, situations, and customer groups, especially as these factors influence the degree of involvement people have in various goal objects (Zaichkowsky, 1985; Gbadamosi, 2013). Hence, focusing on Black African teenagers' reaction to brand personification will extend understanding in the literature.

Symbolic Consumption: A theoretical overview

Fundamentally, consumptions are goals-oriented, and the diversity of the consumption behaviour patterns exhibited offers significant opportunity for enriching knowledge. Focusing on symbolic consumption shows that consumers strive to project the appropriate image through their marketing transactions (Sirgy and Johar 1999; Kim *et al.*, 2002; Reed II *et al.*, 2012). As 'order' becomes increasingly important in these modern societies, consumers tend to use symbolic consumption to achieve a sense of continuity, identity (Chaudhuri and Majumda, 2010), social status and affiliation (Kim, 2002) and are more cognisant of self-congruity which is defined by Sirgy and Johar (1999) as the match between the brand image and the consumer's self-concept. Indeed, the seminal work of Belk (1988) entitled *Possessions and the extended self* contributes significantly to the academic discourse on Symbolic consumption. He argues that consumers' possessions could be conceptualised as major parts of their extended selves, which supports the contention that consumers are what they own. Solomon's (1983) contribution known as a symbolic interactionism perspective stresses that product symbolism mediates self definition and role performance. According to him, 'A theory of symbolic consumption must account for the mechanism(s) by which the consumption of products is related to the rest of social behaviour (Solomon, 1983: 326)'. Extending these postulations further is the view in Elliott (1997) which indicates that the functions of the symbolic meanings of products operate in two directions which are the social symbolism and self-symbolism. In his view, while the former is outward in constructing the social word, the latter is inward towards the construction of our self-identity (Elliott, 1997). So, acknowledging the interaction of the social setting vis-a-vis the individual is important for an in-depth understanding of symbolic consumption. This represents a reverberation of the contention that, in this postmodernism era, the consumer is interested in feeling good in separate, different moments through the acquisition of self-image which presents her as marketable, desirable, and likeable in each situation (Firat and Shultz, 1997).

Essentially, the reasoning in symbolic consumption has been widely applied into different contexts in the literature. Hollenbeck and Kaikati (2012) explore this in the context of the use of social media with specific focus on Facebook. Applying it to the football clubs context, Derbaix *et al.* (2002) came up with four key symbolic functions of merchandise bought by football fans to be integration, identification, and expressions and sacralisation. In other words, fans buy these items to be identified as belonging to the team's unified community during sacred sport moments. Amine and Lazzaoui (2011) relate the phenomenon to modern retailing systems in Morocco. Their findings show the existence of differences in shopping strategies based on social classes, and that differences in social classes generate singular symbolic representations of shopping experiences. This is corroborated by the findings of Varman and Belk (2012) that young middle-class consumers use shopping mall as arena for transforming identities. Meanwhile Pettigrew (2006) moves the discussion of symbolic meaning away from the usual consumer goods context to location and shows that meanings that are symbolic in nature could be associated with consumption locations and there is possibility that individuals could perceive contradictory meanings to the same location. This contention is corroborated by Ekinici *et al.*, (2013) who show that self-congruence, brand-identification, and lifestyle-congruence are fundamental parts of tourism destination brands. Ekinici *et al* argue further that tourist show loyalty to particular tourism destination on symbolic basis. Among other contexts where symbolic consumption has been studied include counterfeit luxury goods (Perez *et al.*, 2010); and fashion industry (Banister and Hogg, 2004). The key findings in Perez *et al.*'s (2010) study is that, consumers of counterfeit luxury products view themselves as smart decision makers, and their self-esteem enhanced. The core message in this study is in tune with the main finding of Banister and Hogg (2004) whose study revolves around fashion consumption by young professionals. They explore how young adult consumers use the negative symbolic meanings associated with fashion products as a key to identity negotiation, which involves balancing autonomy and affiliation. The study suggests that consumers sometimes make reference to undesired end state to maintain self-esteem. For instance, in their study, participants used symbolic features of clothing to satisfy two opposing functions, namely approach and avoidance. According to them, approach relates to social identification with groups while avoidance relates to distinction from less desirable groups. While these findings and postulations have strengthened the literature specifically on symbolic consumption and on consumer behaviour in general, the extent to which they apply to Black Africans in the UK remains yet to be explored in the past studies.

Ethnic minority and marketing in the UK

United Kingdom (UK) like other developed societies is notably populated with a rich mix of people of different ethnic minority groups. Available evidence shows that the population of non-white in England and Wales has increased considerably since 2001 and 2011 (ONS, 2011). Hence, research attention is becoming increasingly positioned in this direction (Nwankwo and Lindridge, 1998; Nwankwo and Gbadamosi, 2013). Although there are many implications associated with this trend, one of those considered germane by marketers is their consumption behaviour. Much as it will be beneficial to have an explanatory model of how all these groups behave in terms of their consumption of goods and services, the cultural differences among them sets limits on the extent to which such effort can go. Hardly could any serious consumption explanation be offered without considering the cultural issues associated with it (Arnould and Thompsom, 2005; Gentina *et al.*, 2013; Solomon 2013). It ‘...affects people’s tastes, preference for colours, and attitudes towards product classes’ (Mühlbacher, Leih, and Lee, 2006; p.182). This heterogeneity explains why it could be argued that “one size fits all” strategy might not be right for capturing all the peculiarities of the ethnic minority market in Britain (Nwankwo and Lindridge, 1998). Hence, this study which focuses on how Black African teenagers in London perceive and respond to brand personification is a step towards addressing this concern.

Another twist that could provide some relevant explanation on how ethnic minority groups consume within the society is acculturation. It is about the change which occurs when multiple autonomous culture interact (Berry, 1980; Martin, 2005). The convergence of these views could be seen in the four models of acculturation listed by Burton (1996) as Integration, Separation, Assimilation, and Marginalization as cited from Berry (1990). Integration in this typology relates to people who imbibe the cultural values of their host culture but still maintain their own culture. Those who refuse to integrate into their host culture are described as operating within the Separation category while the Assimilation explains the act of adopting the cultural values of the host culture and forgetting one’s own original culture. When the immigrants feel rejected by the host culture, and do not want to maintain their original culture, they are seen as operating in the marginalization category in this schema. In the discussion of Social Psychology of intergroup relations, Tajfel (1982a: 2) quotes Sherif (1966:12) that ‘whenever individuals belonging to one group interact, collectively or individually, with another group or its members in terms of their group identification, we have an instance of intergroup behaviour’. Tajfel (1982a) then highlights

three components of group identification from this definition which are very important for a thorough understanding of group dynamics specifically in the context of the present study. According to him, the first is the cognitive one which is about the sense of awareness of membership of the group, while the second is the evaluative part which emphasizes that this awareness relates to some value connotations. Tajfel (1982a) identifies the third to be emotional investment in both the awareness and the evaluations. This explanation relates closely to the one provided on Social Identity Theory. According to him, social identity could be understood as that part of the individuals' self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership (Tajfel 1982b:2). If critically reflected upon, these postulations serve to constitute a theoretical background for studies about ethnic minority groups in social settings characterized with high level of diversity. Accordingly, previous studies have explored ethnic minority consumption and reported the prevalence of symbolic consumption (Gbadamosi, 2012; Makgosa, 2012). However, none of these (based on a meticulous search of available information) specifically looked into brand personification and symbolism in the context of Black African teenage consumers. Hence, filling this palpable lacuna will update the literature and provide strategic direction on the pattern for the use of marketing strategy in respect of the context of this study.

METHODOLOGY

For this study, thirty six Black African teenagers resident in London were interviewed on the topic of the research. Nineteen of them are female, while the remaining seventeen are male, and their ages range from thirteen to nineteen as shown in Table 1. As there is a clearly defined target respondent for the study, purposive and snowballing sampling methods were used for the recruitment of the research participants. The sampling started with the recruitment of eight respondents at a local multicultural religious centre in London which later snowballed through networks to other respondents in various other settings in the city. The city of London chosen for this study is considered suitable because available evidence pinpoints its deep ethnically diverse population structure (ONS, 2012). Meanwhile, the choice of interpretive research methodological paradigm for this study is based on the research objective. Besides, this methodological stance provides rich and valuable insight into the discourse of contemporary consumerism and acknowledges consumers in their culturally constructed world (Goulding, 1999). This corroborates the contention that this research paradigm is aimed at having a deep understanding of the respondents based on their

unique characteristics by interpreting their actions on the basis of their subjective frame of reference (William, 2000; Hoyt and Bhati, 2007; Collis, and Hussey, 2014). Specifically, choosing depth-interview for this study among many other data collection methods allowed the respondents to explore the subject of study at length which is consistent with the claim of Thompson (1997) and McKhardt (2005). These semi-structured interviews were tape-recorded, and meticulously transcribed for the analysis which was done following the tradition of *qualitative thematic data analysis method* (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The combination of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification associated with this method of analysis proved very valuable in the teasing out of the themes reported in the paper.

Insert Table 1 here

The thirty six interviews conducted were considered adequate for this study because this was the stage of the interview when no new insight was forthcoming as all available information has been collected (Sarantakos, 1998). This stage is consistently identified as the point of theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Locke, 2001 Corder *et al.*, 2015).

Extant literature (see for example, Stanley *et al.*, 1987; Scally, 2014; Bryman and Bell, 2015) emphasise the value and growing importance of adhering to the necessary ethical issues for studies involving human subjects. A synthesis of the literature shows that the basic ethical concerns in research could be summarised into informed consent, anonymity, and protection from harm. (Fontana & Frey, 1998; Moran, 2006). Hence, they were all observed for this study. While the consent of the participants were sought and obtained for the study, permissions were also obtained from their parents and guardian, and their identities were kept out of the records associated with this study. This is evident in the use of letters (R1, R2... R36) to represent them as a way of complying with the anonymity promise that was made at the outset of the study. Moreover, they were protected from harm, not only in relation to the selection of the interview locations but also throughout the entire process of the study.

The three main criteria for justifying knowledge produced within interpretive approaches identified by Sandberg (2005) as communicative validity, pragmatic validity, and transgressive validity were duly observed in this study.

The key issue in communicative validity is that, from the outset, there should be an understanding between the researcher and the research participants of what the study is all about. This can be achieved at the main stages of the research process. This could take the form of reminding the respondents what the study is all about, and asking for and making clarifications as the interviews progress. As suggested by Sandberg, apart from reminding the respondents of the purpose of the study at the beginning of every interview conducted in the present study, further questions that could probe more deeply and clarify issues better were asked. It is also suggested that, researchers should strive for coherent interpretations at the stage of the analysis of materials to achieve communicative validity; this line of action was also taken. According to Sandberg (2005: p.55) ‘... a text can be understood only in relation to its parts and, conversely, the parts can be understood only in relation to the text as a whole. Hence, striving for coherence means that the parts of a text must fit the whole and the whole must fit the parts’. The communicative validity of this study was also achieved through peer debriefing (the discussion of the findings of the study with other researchers) as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Guba and Lincoln (1989).

Pragmatic validity is about striving to know whether the respondents were really saying what they actually do without any distortion. As suggested by Sandberg (2005), one of the ways to achieve this validity is by asking follow-up questions. With reference to Kvale (1989), he suggests observing respondents’ reactions to issues during the interview. Accordingly, non-verbal cues from the participants were noted during the interviews to aid further understanding of the issues being explored, and the follow-up questions were framed and used to ensure conformity of this study to this type of validity.

The primary emphasis in transgressive validity is on becoming aware of certain aspects of the projects which the researcher may have taken for granted. One of the major ways of establishing this aspect of validity is to look out for contradictions which Peräkylä (1997) refers to as ‘deviant cases’ and Lincoln and Guba (1985) call ‘negative cases’, rather than for coherence. This approach was also adopted and results in some interesting findings for this present study. For instance, while some respondents in this study buy to conform to siblings and other family members’ tastes, some specifically buy to demonstrate their unique consumption as a departure from the family’s preference in consumption decision. The reason given by these respondents is that such consumption behaviour gives them the opportunity to achieve their need for self-esteem as they buy to be in tune with their peers in the society rather than conforming to their families’ preferences.

Summary of findings

The convergent view of the respondents shows the following interrelated themes as closely linked to the way they use brands to define and locate their various selves in the society. These are Brands and personification, Brand relationships, Celebrity endorsements, Symbolic consumption, Social need and peer pressure, Family, Culture, maturity and self-esteem, and Marketing communications. These findings are summarised in Figure 1 and explained below.

Brands and personification

It is interesting to note that the teenagers are not short of ideas when prompted to mention brands that they think or perceive to be like humans. A good number of popular brands were mentioned. These include Apple, McDonalds, BlackBerry, L'Oreal, Unilever, Nokia, Gucci, Nike, Red bull, Zara, Miss Selfridges and many others. Beyond the mentioning of these brands, the meanings assigned to them sound interesting:

I will have to say L'Oreal is quite friendly, caring, and makes me feel good. It is now like a friend to me. This is not just my view, I know all my friends use it, and I am proud of using it (R5).

Apple will definitely be the one to mention here. It's great. ...Em, I can say it is trendy, knowledgeable, modern, up-to-date, I can go on and on. I think, it is the issue of how I see it anyway but Apple is a favourite anytime (R19).

I can say Unilever is like a mum who takes care of everybody. It kind of has solutions for all problems (R35).

Brand relationships

It became evident in the study that respondents have some form of relationships with the brands whose personalities they have described. These relationships are mainly identified to be symbiotic in nature. As ethnic consumers, they believe that these brands help them to fulfil their aspirations in the society especially on gaining acceptance among others outside their ethnic group while they also remain loyal to them when compared to several alternative offerings:

I can explain it to be like a bond...From my own end, I have chosen the brand and will still continue to buy it, and on the other hand, I get the quality I need, and the satisfaction for buying it. As I have said before, it makes me feel good, and that's cool for me. As long as I am happy about what I use, I'm fine (R17).

Whichever way we look at it, it's been going on as a relationship for say about three years now. My family knows it's my favourite and when I'm not out ... with them for

shopping, they do buy it for me sometimes. I can call it my Nivea if you like. It's lovely and caring in the way I see it, that is why I love buying it (R12).

For me, my love for iPad, as an example is really personal and with great feelings. I can say I have what everyone else has. This [holding the gadget] is across different groups and cultures. I am proud of it! (R6)

Celebrity endorsements

The respondents tend to see congruence between the brands promoted and the qualities of the celebrities promoting them. These findings cover a wide range of brands like those related to sport items to several fashion items and are discussed to revolve around celebrities of different gender categories:

Willi.I.am is a great guy. He has this great deal about Beat with Apple. He is an inspiration and... take it or leave it, I love the guy for his great work in the society. Not only him... there are other great guys doing amazing things that I have known. They appear for products but this is down to their personality, you talk of people like Jay Z, Tinie Tempa, Labrinth, and Kanye West .they are cool and lovely celebrities...that endorse one brand or another (R11).

Interestingly and in most cases, it was found that the relationships the respondents develop with these brands personally are prompted by the link they establish between these celebrities and the brands. Participants claim that these brands when linked to key personalities (celebrities) make them fulfil their various personal life aspirations:

In my mind, Beyoncé is a life-time figure to beat. She is the face of L'Oreal my favourite. I love it to bits...Yes, I suppose you can say it (preference for L'Oreal) is because of Beyoncé. It is my favourite. (R4).

It is noteworthy that respondents have special affinity for celebrities of their ethnic minority group. This became clearly evident in their views across different products or spheres of life such as sports, music industry, and fashion world.

There is something great about this endorsement thing, especially from my own view, I like the fact that you see people like you, I mean Black celebrities promoting brands. We see this on TV, in magazine and all over. That is an inspiration (R34).

Symbolic consumption

The prevalence of symbolic consumption among respondents is clearly evident. Their interest in the brands they named as depicting their personalities goes beyond their functional benefits. While they mentioned quality and physical features as part of the motives for purchasing these brands, the study shows that the personalities of the brands (human

attributes) play more persuasive and positive roles in how the participants feel about themselves personally and the purchases. The study shows that these brands offer them benefits associated with identity support in the multicultural society as shown in the following quotes:

Some may call it superstition or something else but I know within myself that it makes me feel good. Using that brand makes me to be me. You know what I mean (R22).

I personally feel proud of myself using Apple...Carrying it all about gives me a kind of joy or should I say confidence that I may not be able to explain, but I just know somehow that it is a part of me (R18).

If we want to be totally honest, this issue covers a lot of stuff, I mean something like cosmetics, perfumes, and even clothes. They come in different brands that I will say I buy mainly as a Black girl, that sort of things make me feel belong. It is really true (R.26).

Social needs and Peer pressure

The influence of peers in the respondents' lived experiences as connected to brand personification and symbolic consumption is very considerable. The influence come from various places where they interact with other people which include schools, neighbourhood, religious and recreational centres. These opportunities, couple with the solidarity of ethnic similarities among peers prompt their purchases:

There is no young person of my age, who will not have at least a Blackberry....., maybe something of that range. Not having it will make me feel odd (R28)

It is difficult to stay without having those things now. Even parents know it. I need to look good, feel good to my self and to everyone else, especially people of my category. That is basic (R21).

As shown in this study, the teenagers' need for affiliation in the society drives their need to buy the named brands. The study also shows the implicit social needs of the respondents as ethnic minority group being met with the use of these brands. It suggests the culture of togetherness among respondents. They buy brands to bridge the gap between their cultural orientations and the prevalent macro societal norms to fulfil their social needs:

Of course the reason for buying them is because I want to use them. But I think the main reason for buying stuff like that is because other people around me are using it... we buy the same thing and hang out together all the time. We are friends and buy similar things...it takes the feeling of being a minority away, so to say. (R11).

Some people may think, erm..because you don't have this or that, or because you are from a different country, and... do not belong to this society. But there is nothing they are using that I don't have or cannot buy (R35)

Family

It is also interesting to note in the study that these teenagers buy some brands symbolically because their siblings, especially the older ones buy those brands for self-esteem. Hence, the younger ones follow after their siblings to buy the brands. Closely related to this is the parental influence on the respondents which influences and closely links to consumption pattern of these young consumers:

My mum and sisters use the same thing [L'Oreal]. I can't just think of changing now... I think it is now part of us...laughs... (R2)

Dan my big brother has been using it for a very long time. And I have realised he uses the same thing as his friends that I know. So, I am really following in their footsteps...it's cool. (R19).

On the other hand, there are isolated cases where some of the respondents embrace the use of certain brands as a show of differentiation from other members of the family. Those who exhibit this consumption pattern are more attuned to buying brands that resonate with their peers' choices than the ones that conform to the family's preferences. Their belief is that exhibiting this deviant position gives them the opportunity to achieve and maintain their various desired selves:

...but I don't have to do it their [family] way. I have my guys, I mean my friends, we share things in common, we've got to buy things that make us like who we really are, especially clothes (R27).

Maturity and Self-esteem

The symbolic consumption of these teenage consumers is also revealed to be closely linked to maturity stage in their lives. As they move into adolescence and adulthood, the 'self' consciousness becomes more pronounced, and the need to buy specific brands as signs of this stage in life becomes increasingly triggered by cues in the environment:

If I was still a baby, maybe things may be different but at this stage I believe I can decide for myself, and that is why I buy those things and different styles, and brands to suit me and my taste (R24).

I think the key reason for being fussy about these brands is our stage in life. Maybe they don't have loads of brands like we do these days, back then; but older people today will also remember they did something similar back in their days as teenagers. It is like a feeling of respect, when we meet to discuss and talk to friends (R1).

The need to have and maintain self-esteem was mentioned as a key driver for their purchase decisions. Findings show that as they relate with friends in various social settings, buying

specific brands of products, like mobile phones, shoes, clothes, bags, fragrances, and other offerings that could be visibly evident to others gives them a sense of esteem and acceptance in the groups, especially among teenagers of the mainstream culture in the UK.

...some will say since you are a student, how can you afford to get Gucci. It is down to what I like.., it may take me a bit of time to get it, but with savings from the money that I get everywhere, I am able to get it, see my belt.., if you know it, you will see it. I feel good about it (R22).

Acculturation

One of the main themes that emerged from this study repeatedly is the culture of the respondents and more significantly how it relates to embracing a different cultural environment in the UK. They have been exposed to the environment through various socialisation agents in different social settings like schools and social functions. Hence they have adapted to the local cultural environment and buy what other people of their age buy regularly to secure identities at par with others:

Ifeel it is right to say so. If I had not been in this country, I'll have a different taste of fashion, food, and many things. When I first came to the country, it took me some time to blend with the guys around. For somebody like me that have seen the two sides, I can tell you that the way of life here is quite different from places like Ghana or Zimbabwe. But we've got to adjust and change to blend to things here in the UK. ...definitely, I can say these brands have some roles to play here. As you make friends, you see their take on things, and ...keep up (R13).

Ultimately, they are driven by need to be accepted in the society, which is a new cultural environment, in these consumption decisions.

Oh...I am sure, that we don't have that many brands in Kenya. Coming to this country has opened my eyes to fashion more than before. And, let me tell you. I try to be up to date... I buy what will make me feel really belong here (R20).

Marketing communications and Entertainment

Respondents note that their understanding of brand personification emanates from various marketing communication stimuli they have been exposed to. They acknowledge that various marketing communication messages often suggest certain brand personality forms:

I tend to buy things that suit me and show my real me when I see it in the advertisement. If I see, and it is what I like, 9 out of 10 I will just go for it (R25).

The popularity of the influence of social media like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube on how meanings of the brands and their personalities are shared among these young ethnic consumers is considerable. According to them, these have broken the barrier to communications and encouraged meaning sharing among peers irrespective of locations.

Facebook is definitely. For me, I have loads of friends and contacts on Facebook, as we share pictures and jokes; we also share things like picture and brands. It is a different...level (R17).

Emphatically, they stress the keen interest in such messages promoted by people of ethnic similarity as acknowledgement of their equal importance in the society. Moreover, the study shows the significant relevance of the power of entertainment in influencing these teenagers towards making symbolic consumption and in their conceptualisation of their various 'selves'. This includes music and musical stars which can be from their cultural group or outside the group. However, they tend to be more triggered to buy these brands when the celebrities involved are of their cultural group – celebrity match-up.

Insert Figure 1 here

Discussion

Researchers argue that the individual is confronted with the challenge of search for self-identity, and exercises free will to create images of who and what she or he will like to be in the postmodern society (Elliot and Wattanasuwan, 1998). Consequently, consumers buy certain products because of their symbolic meanings and the roles that the brands play constantly towards helping them to achieve this goal in the self-construction project. This underpins the notion of symbolic consumption. This study shows how Black African teenagers as a consumer segment react to brand personifications and engage in symbolic consumption. There are a number of factors propelling their symbolic consumption behaviour which emerged from the study and are useful in the explication of the relevance of brand personification in this milieu. These are celebrity endorsements, social need and peer pressure, family, culture, self-esteem, maturity, and marketing communications. While symbolic consumption is a popular issue in the literature, this study specifically shows that these young ethnic consumers are driven to embrace it by their need for acceptance in the

society. The various brand personifications identified by the respondents in this study show that the phenomenon is increasing in popularity among various consumer groups. This finds support in the work of writers like Fournier (1998), Aaker (1997), Veloutsou and Moutinho (2009), and Kim *et al.* (2013). This is also closely linked to the relationships that the teenagers have with the brands as shown in this study. It is noteworthy that the respondents emphasise the symbiotic nature of the relationships they keep with these favourite brands. This supports the finding of Lee *et al.* (2014) about the Korean young consumers. Apart from the consistency with the postulation of Fournier (1998), these findings also reinvigorate the long-standing understanding of exchange as the bedrock of successful marketing transactions (Bagozzi, 1975; Grönroos, 2004). Just as the common understanding of relationship marketing lies in how firms and their brands satisfy the customers and how the consumers reciprocate with repeat purchase and brand loyalty, these teenage consumers are especially keen about how the brands they buy help to position them to meet their aspirations and actualise their desired self. As young consumers of Black African ethnicity in a multicultural environment, the acknowledgement of the diversity and stratification in the society which Tajfel (1982a) refers to as the cognitive component of group identification serves as a drive for their consumption behaviour of certain brands.

Accordingly, the use of various products, brands, and their personifications to create internal and social harmony for this group of consumers is established. This confirms Solomon's (1983) argument that consumption and social behaviour are inextricably linked and constitute the thrust of symbolic consumption but extends it to a consumer group of which relatively little is known.

By and large, the act of using celebrity endorsement in marketing has been both popular and controversial in the marketing parlance. The popularity is palpable in the way businesses adopt it from various professions like sports, film industry, and fashion in various marketing communication messages. On the other hand, the controversy about the risk of celebrity scandal that could affect the equity of the brand being promoted cannot be dismissed as immaterial. Interestingly, the respondents in this study believe the link between the achievements of these celebrities, the acceptance they have from societal members, and the brands they are promoting. Something striking to note here is the keen interest in ethnic celebrity match-up. So, they engage in emulative consumption in such a way that demonstrates connections between them, the celebrities, and the brands they use. The finding is also logically linked to the one that revolves around marketing communications and entertainment. Given the age group of the target respondents, it is not surprising that

entertainment and social media emerged as part of the key factors that propel their symbolic consumption (Solomon, 2013).

Evidently, this study follows the tradition of the previous postulations on self, extended self, brand personality, and brand relationship (Solomon 1983; Elliott, 1997; Aaker, 1997; Belk, 1988; and Fournier, 1998; Sirgy and Johar 1999) albeit with a focus on a specific research context. It shows the interconnections of personal, social, cultural, and commercial factors as significant in how a group of young ethnic minority consumers make their consumption decisions. The interaction of these social and emotional factors that explain their symbolic consumption practice re-echoes the view that consumer transactions transcend the scope of functional benefits. While the findings are consistent with the argument in the extant literature in many ramifications, the sample and the context of the present study extend this understanding in the literature and emphasise that they are driven by need for acceptance by peers in other groups including in the mainstream cultural system. So, it is logical to suggest that the Black African teenagers in the studied context buy to ensure continuity and self-identity construction in the postmodern society as argued by Elliot (1997), Belk (1998) and Chaudhuri and Majumda (2010).

Implications of the study

From a very broad perspective, the implications of this study could be conceptualised to be theoretical and managerial. From the theoretical standpoint, it updates the extant ethnic minority studies and enriches the current understanding about symbolic consumption and brand personification especially with a focus on a specific segment of the society. Hence, it highlights further the increasing relevance of sub-culture in marketing. Managerially, the implications of this study specifically permeate the areas of marketing communications; as well as segmentation, targeting and positioning strategies. Evidence shows that, cultural homogeneity is waning by the day within many nations (Cleveland, 2015) including the UK. This brings to the fore, the key limitation of mass marketing strategy which is its ineffectiveness at reaching specific niche markets very precisely, hence, Brand managers will see the findings of this study useful, in that it will help them in targeting the Black African teenagers as a sub-cultural group in relation to their 'behind-the-surface' needs. Specifically, as the number of Black African ethnic group continues to grow in the UK (ONS, 2012), the relevance of this group of consumers in the marketplace cannot be ignored in terms of scale and significance. Essentially, the interplay of brands, their perceived personalities, the associated personifications, and consumption among Black African teenagers can provide

directions to corporate organisations in knowing how to position their brands when targeting this consumer segment. As an example, in the selection of celebrity endorsers and other marketing communications stimuli for their market offerings, Brand managers will need to pay strategic attention to the selection of culturally congruent stimuli. Similarly, in view of the prominence of the acculturation of these consumers in the UK that is linked to their social and esteem needs for specific brands in the country, incorporating marketing strategies to revolve around aspirational groups could appeal strongly to this consumer group. This bolsters the call to marketers to follow the trend of addressing specific categories of consumer needs vis-a-vis specific offerings. By and large, this will include targeting consumer groups with appropriate offerings, in relation to the diversity which exists among them in multicultural societies. Being able to do this effectively, will enhance firms' ethnic market competitiveness with regards to this group, increase their market share, and result in consumer loyalty as this sub-cultural group will have a sense and experience of value delivery associated with their consumption decisions.

Limitation of the study and directions for further studies

Basically, this paper is positioned to explore brand personification and symbolic consumption in relation to Black African teenage consumers in London. Much as it has shed some light on this topic, it has some noteworthy limitations which make the possible avenues for research become apparent. Essentially, the small sample size constrains the extent to which the findings can be generalized to the wider population. Nonetheless, this does not seem to be very compelling given that the research is aimed at constructing a substantive understanding of the researched phenomenon rather than testing any pre-defined hypotheses. In terms of future research, one of the promising avenues for future studies is to explore symbolic consumption of Black Africans in British marketing environment in relation to various other demographical variables such as gender, income, and educational qualifications. Besides, the topic could be explored in relation to different product categories.

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