

## Postmodernism, Ethnicity, and Celebrity Culture in Women's Symbolic Consumption

### Abstract

While postmodernism and celebrity culture are closely linked, research attention on this has not been adequately synthesised with ethnic minority groups. Hence, this paper, which is rooted in an interpretive research paradigm, explores the symbolic consumption of Black African women in the UK with specific reference to celebrity culture. Although the study shows some purchase decisions based on products' functionality, generally, it shows the robust interplay of personal, cultural, social and commercial factors in the symbolic consumption of these women. This is shown to be linked to the prevalent celebrity culture in the society. They consume to enhance their self-esteem and keep up with the societal trend in the host environment. Hence, the notion of acculturation features prominently in their consumption. The paper extends the discourse on the extant ethnic minority studies and augments the current knowledge about symbolic consumption especially with reference to Black African women.

**Keywords:** Celebrity culture, Women, Symbolic consumption, Black African, Gender, United Kingdom

### Introduction

The connotation of value as a construct in marketing vis-à-vis consumers' choices is not only interesting but could also be enigmatic in the postmodern era. This is because consumption in this day and age plays a myriad of roles in the society and assumes several layers of meaning for various groups of consumers. In the words of Solomon

(1983), consumption does not occur in a vacuum. It is a significant source of symbolic meanings that are used to sustain our project of the self (Piancetini and Mailer, 2004; Wattanasuwan, 2005; Suarez and Belk, 2017; Bronner & de Hoog, 2018). At a level, consumers crave for functional attributes of an offering but in several other contexts, consumption could be symbolical. For instance, consumption influenced by celebrity culture as characterized by a plethora of social objects of adoration and adulation is akin to this latter category. Patsiaouras and Fitchett (2012) cite examples of ostentatious display of goods and status consumption as playing key roles in our social relationships. It is not surprising that consumption is described as a key arena of popular culture with significant pedagogical and cultural implications that must be understood by educators (Hoechsmann, 2007; Sandin *et al.*, 2011). So, exploring consumption could be described as a route for understanding human needs, desires, and practices (Perez *et al.*, 2010). Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to explore the symbolic consumption of Black African immigrant women in the UK with specific relevance to celebrity culture.

Meanwhile, a growing body of knowledge argues that the idiosyncrasies of various consumer groups constrain the extent to which we can generalize about existing postulations on how people consume, what they consume, where they buy them, and how often they do so (Nwankwo and Lindridge, 1998; Gbadamosi, 2009; Cleveland *et al.*, 2011; Warden, *et al.*, 2012; Funches *et al.*, 2017). They note consumers' differences in terms of characteristics such as age, educational status, income, gender, ethnicity, cosmopolitanism, and ethnocentrism.

So, it will be theoretically beneficial to explore symbolic consumption in relation to women in a particular ethnic group as in the focus of this paper. Meanwhile the value of this paper extends beyond this contextual contribution of focusing on women in a particular ethnic

group (Black African) but extends the discourse on symbolic consumption by linking it to celebrity culture. **This is the gap** addressed in this study as highlighted in the aim of the study above.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND:

### *Postmodernism and Symbolic Consumption: A Conceptual Overview*

It is widely acknowledged that consumption's role in the construction of the social world is huge. Postmodernism provides the consumer the opportunity to construct, maintain, and communicate identity and social meaning (Elliot, 1997). **In his description of postmodernism, Cova (1996:16) explains it as 'the juxtaposition of contradictory emotions and cognitions regarding perspectives, commitments, ideas and things in general, and consumption in particular, to wit: heterogeneity with uniformity, passive consumption with active customization, individualism with tribalism, fragmentation with globalization, and so on'.** Reinforcing this contention from a different perspective, Catterall *et al.* (2005) argue that postmodernism challenges elitist assumptions and critique the traditional orders, absolute truths, high culture, the commonly acknowledged binary oppositions in language such as male/female and **reason/emotion**. Put together, these viewpoints corroborate the argument that consumers in the postmodern era are no **longer seeking centered, unified character** (Firat and Shultz, 1997). **They want to feel good in separate, and pursue different moments through the acquisition** of self-image that shows them as marketable, desirable, and likeable in each situation (Firat and Shultz, 1997). Accordingly, postmodernism encapsulates a situation characterized with acceptance of different styles, different ways of thinking and different ways of living, and direct response advertising will have some significant roles to play in the marketing communication package (Patterson, 1998).

Clearly, it could be deduced that women's consumption and postmodernism will be considerably linked especially in relation to the society and its various stakeholders such as the media, and other marketing agencies.

As emphasized by Patterson (1998) consumers need to have their consumption choices reinforced in what could be described as a vote of confidence from other tribe members. The associated state of tension seems to be more heightened by the prevalence of the celebrity brands as linked to celebrity culture in this day and age. Celebrity brands as indicated by Kerrigan et al. (2011: 1506) 'operate as 'map-making', cultural devices, functioning at the level of lifeworld praxis as social forms which embed consumers within networks of immersive resources'. So, through these brands, there is high tendency that the followers' consumptions could be patterned in their social settings. In the words of Elliot (1997), this use of consumption as a resource to create meaning and social transactions involves making choices and could be regarded as existential. Ligas' (2000) claim is that consumers attribute meaning to purchases and this is accompanied by specific goals that he or she intends to fill. This supports the contention of Davies and Elliot (2006) that consumption in recent times revolves around the consumers' happiness and freedom and pressure to consume (Benn, 2004; Davies and Elliot, 2006). So, it could not be limited to the realm of the functional value of the associated offering but should be considered holistically (Stephens *et al.*, 1994; Sirgy and Johar, 1999; Clark *et al.*, 2007; Mann & Sahni, 2015; Japutra *et al.*, 2018). This is main crux of symbolic consumption. It is defined by Szmigin and Piacentini (2018: 265) as '...the tendency of consumers to rely and focus on the meanings attached to goods, beyond their physical properties, and provide an important means by which consumers define themselves'. Meanwhile, in spite of the myriad of views on women's consumption,

there is still dearth of studies that specifically focus on the symbolic consumption of Black African women in the UK context. Hence, the focus of this research will not only extend the discourse on women's consumption but does so specifically on a consumer segment that has been described as hard-to reach (Nwankwo *et al.*, 2012).

Quoting Mafesoli (1996), Veloutsou and Moutinho (2009) characterize postmodern communities with instability, small scale nature and not clearly defined by established parameters of modern society. This is reminiscent of meaning beyond the surface which is inherently symbolical. In their work on Supermarkets as libraries of postmodern mythology, Kniazeva and Belk (2010) explored the link between the point-of-purchase brand rhetoric and how consumers read the poetry of packaging. Among others, this study shows that consumers are co-creator of marketplace myths and the process remains open to interpretations by consumers. A closely related theoretical standpoint is evident in Varman and Belk's (2012) study of consuming post-colonial shopping malls. Essentially, they found that young middle-class consumers interpret shopping malls as arenas for identity transformation. It shows that these consumers disguise their Third World realities. In other words, they wear the mask of the West in order to achieve modern and developed identities (Varman and Belk's, 2012). It may be logical to argue that in the postmodern era, women will be producers of symbolic meaning associated with goods and services (Catterall *et al.*, 2005). As argued by Cova (1996), the consumer in this era crafts a customized experience out of the elements of market offerings and attempts to restructure her identity. The synthesis of the foregoing presents a point of convergence that postmodernism is paradoxical, and while the postmodern individual is isolated, he is also in virtual contact with the whole world in various transactions electronically (Cova, 1996b; Laroche *et al.*, 2013; Laroche, 2016). Hence, the postmodern

consumer creates a customized personal consumption from the elements of the market offerings (Cova and Cova, 2000; Healy and McDonagh, 2013). A closely related contention has been made in the digital world context (Sheth and Solomon, 2014). Nevertheless, we are still left with a **considerable gap in the literature in terms of relating this to celebrity culture in the** context of Black African women consumers.

### ***Ethnicity, Women's symbolic consumption, and Celebrity Culture: Integrative Perspectives***

The multicultural nature of the developed societies such as the UK and the US becomes increasingly palpable by the day. In a review of the extant literature, Makgosa (2012) identifies a number of factors responsible for this. Among these are high fertility rate, the historical colonial expansion in places like Africa and India, the need to seek employment, have a better living standard, education, and avoidance of political persecution and instability in their home country. Consequently, the purchasing power of these ethnic consumers are increasing and has implications for marketing transactions, especially in terms of their consumption behavior. This is now even more pronounced during this postmodern era. The acknowledgement of this diversity is evident in the suggestion of Demangeot *et al.* (2013) that effort should be made by multicultural marketplace actors to ensure that consumers of all categories can pursue their universal cultural, economic, and social rights in the system. Meanwhile focusing on women as a specific consumer segment has been a good and fertile research endeavour (Catterall *et al.*, 2005; Gbadamosi, 2012; Xavier *et al.*, 2015). It is argued that the current discourses about women and consumerism show women as special consumers that enact particular disposition, values and behavior (Sandlin and Maudlin, 2012). While a number of reasons can be given to this special interest in women's consumption, some authors have simply emphasized fashion and beauty as very key to this (Martin and Peters, 2005;

Hume and Mills, 2013).

Considerable evidence shows that the link between women's consumption and beauty cannot be ignored. Virtually every ramification of women's life such as related to hair, eyes, nails, complexion, body size and shape among others are linked to beauty in one way or another. It is stated that to avoid falling into 'the shadows' of a set of elitist social relations, it is now a standard feature **that women attempt to make the 'correct choice'** (McRobbie, 2008 in Rafferty, 2011). For example, Jantzen (2006) states that women's consumption of underwear might be used for defining a feminine identity by managing bodily presentation in a social life. Consequently, Olivas-Luján *et al.* (2009: 231) states that 'From the end of nineteenth century through the first decades of the twentieth, Brazilian society attributed to women purity, sweetness, maternity, generosity, spirituality, and patriotism, and made them responsible of all beauty that should impregnate social life'. This explains why advertisers prefer to use female models rather than their male counterpart in their marketing communications messages (Saad, 2004) as shown in a study based on data from the US, China and Thailand (Zang *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, the same study shows that females were portrayed more than men in decorative roles while males were more frequently portrayed than women with regards to recreational roles (Zang *et al.*, 2009). Logically, it can be deduced that there are more than meets the eyes about what women buy, why they buy them, where they buy them and how often they buy them. Hence, there is a tendency that their purchases and consumption will have some symbolic explications.

Meanwhile, there is far **less research that specifically focuses on Black women in the media**, rather, the sheer volume of work available is on white women or Black people in general

(Mastro and Greenberg, 2000; Gordon, 2008). Emphatically, a meticulous search shows a palpable gap in the literature concerning symbolic consumption of Black African women, especially in the UK context. The available information relates mainly to the US-context. As reported concerning the US context, the common portrayal of Black women is found on Black comedies which have attracted criticisms on the ground that they propagate negative images and rely on minstrel-era stereotypes as the basis for their humour (Coleman, 2000). Among these stereotypes of Black African women is sexually promiscuous Jezebel, which is an image popularized to justify the sexual exploitation of Black women during and after slavery (Harris and Hill, 1998; Patton, 2001; Simms, 2001). Supporting this contention, Townsend *et al.* (2010: p.274) claim that ‘although women of other ethnicities have also experienced sexual victimization, the legacy of slavery associates the sexual exploitation of African-American women with distinct dehumanization and degrading practices’. Moreover, there is a claim that colourism may have influence on African-Americans and shape their life experiences (Townsend, *et al.*, 2010; Wilder 2010; Bennett, *et al.*, 2015). The term colourism is used for skin colour stratification of African-American, and has a more significant influence on women (Harris, 2009) as there is a tendency to associate lighter skin with beauty and desirability (Townsend, *et al.*, 2010). Putting all these viewpoints into perspective, it could be argued that individuals within the black culture are differentially influenced by two cultures, the African-American culture and the larger dominant white culture (Helms, 1990; Abrams *et al.*, 1993). This brings in the relevance of consumer acculturation which is about culture change that occurs due to extensive contact between cultural groups (Alvarez *et al.*, 2014). The explication provided by Luedicke (2011) extends this further by exploring the socio-cultural and commercial dynamics associated with migrants moving from one nation to another. He came up with a model which shows that migrants and locals, while constructing their identities, are enmeshed in a complex system of recursive social-cultural adaptation



which involves various stakeholders within a large system. Corroborating this postulation on the complexity of this phenomenon, Schau et al (2017) show how migrants use native and second languages to make sense of service protocols in the retailscape. Invariably, drawing from this discourse on acculturation and the foregoing, it could be argued that culture, appearance, beauty, and other associated issues could be linked to the individual's self-esteem. It is therefore not surprising that Abrams *et al.* (1993) found that a young woman who is dissatisfied with her appearance and engaging in severe dietary behaviour is also troubled by low-self-esteem, anxiety, and depression. Meanwhile, the extent to which these findings and contentions apply to Black African women **in the UK and their consumption is yet unclear but deserves in-depth research attention.**

Meanwhile, the reality of today is that consumers live in a media-saturated world overwhelmed with various visual images. Marketers use celebrity endorsements in various ways to communicate the value of their offerings (Gwinner, 1997; White *et al.*, 2009; Zamudio, C., 2016; Chang and Ko, 2016). At one end of the impact of this strategy on a continuum is the very high positive image and equity of the firm. In this regard, Milne (2009) describes the celebrity as a significant symbolic element in market economies and represents to the audience the process and behaviour of the consumption. **An example of this is demonstrated by Wicks et al (2007) who contend that children draw on discourses around celebrities, consumption, commodification, and the spectacular for moral development.** Meanwhile, on the other end of the spectrum, everything can also go horribly wrong through 'celebrity trouble factor' or 'celebrity scandal' that can affect the equity of the sponsor. Nevertheless, beyond the repertoire of this celebrity endorsement phenomenon, the celebrity culture **has witnessed a dramatic turn in which icons become brands**, sustained by technology and use the media for the benefit of her

own branding (Kerrigan *et al.*, 2011). While the idea of celebrity is not new, its mutation into an **important cultural force is a relatively recent development** (Furedi, 2010). **On this pedestal, celebrity influence could be conceptualized** as involving stagings such as celebrity fashion exhibition that work to broaden the appeal of the celebrity as demonstrated **through the Kylie Minogue Brand Mythology** (Hewer and Hamilton, 2012). A number of celebrity examples across various walks of life such as film stars, celebrity politicians, celebrity lawyers, celebrity scientists, and celebrity academics abound (Furedi, 2010; Brownlie and Hewer, 2011; Driessens, 2013). **Alpion (2006) reports about media and celebrity culture around Mother Teresa who was** one of the most publicized 20<sup>th</sup> century women. Although there are certain issues that differentiate Mother Teresa, the nun, a religious celebrity, from other celebrities; she also used the press and other medium of mass communication to reach out to her intended audience (Alpion, 2006). Citing Marshall (1997: 51), it has been stated that the celebrity figure is a “locus of formative social power in consumer capitalism” (Milnes, 2009). The impact of this celebrity culture is becoming increasingly pronounced. Nonetheless, there are still unanswered questions about the phenomenon when considered in relation to Black African women in the UK. For example, it will be of great value to know the relevance of the prevailing celebrity culture in the consumption behaviour of these women as ethnic consumers in the UK.

## **Methodology**

**This study is rooted in an interpretive research paradigm.** As shown in Table 1, a sample of 27 Black African immigrant **women drawn from London were interviewed for the study.** **These semi-structured interviews took place** in the respondents’ homes as this was the option considered most convenient for them. Given that the data collection and

analysis are conducted in accordance with the Grounded theory orientation, a theoretical sampling method was used. In the explanation of Strauss and Corbin (1998: 202) which has also been consistently shared in the literature (Silverman, 2000; Denk *et al.*, 2012) it ‘...means that sampling, rather than being predetermined before beginning the research, evolves during the process’.

Each interview, lasted about one hour, was tape recorded and transcribed for analysis. As the tradition for this approach, the data collection was in tandem with the data analysis, and it continued in that form until when no new ideas were forthcoming - the *point of theoretical saturation* (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Locke, 2001).

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The data analysis procedure used in this study follows the tradition in the grounded theory approach which comprise: the open coding, the axial coding, and the selective coding (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Open coding which sets the pace for other stages of the process involves conceptualizing, discovering categories, and developing those categories in terms of their properties and dimensions. As done in this study, conceptualizing involves breaking down the data into discrete incidents, ideas, events, and acts and the data are then given a name that represents them. As suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990), in this present study, at the stage of the open coding, the data that were broken down into discrete parts were closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences.

In this study, the completed open coding of data was followed by axial coding which is the task of relating categories developed to subcategories at the level of their

properties and dimensions. As explained by Strauss and Corbin (1998) the subcategories answer further questions. Therefore, this linkage of the categories and subcategories reassemble the data that were broken down during the open coding. Thus subcategories gave the concept greater explanatory power. Micro analysis which includes both open and axial coding was conducted. In this present study, a sentence-by sentence approach was adopted for the microanalysis. The third, selective coding was done. In the description of Spiggle:

{it} involves moving to a higher level of abstraction with the developed paradigmatic constructs, specifying relationships, and delineating a core category or constructs around which the other categories and constructs revolve and that relates them to one another (Spiggle, 1994: P495).

In this, the basic tasks are integration, **discovering of a central category and refining of the theory**. These basic tasks were observed and led to the themes reported in the findings section below.

### **Summary of findings**

Although in some circumstances, buying products because of their functionality was still reported by the respondents, generally, symbolic consumption is prevalent among them and ranges across many products especially with high involvement products like designer clothes, shoes, bags, cars, and cosmetic products among others. It is also interesting to note respondents' perception of the link between their consumption and the prevailing celebrity culture.

Essentially, a number of factors associated with their symbolic consumption emerged from

this study. Although the factors that came up are numerous, as indicated in the methodology section, they were pruned down to those presented in Figure 1 below for coherence and clarity in their interpretation. As shown in the figure, the factors have been categorized and discussed under the main themes of Culture, Market offerings, Personal factors, Marketing communications, Social trends, and Economic factors. The impacts of these factors in the symbolic consumption of the women are mediated by the celebrity culture.

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**Culture:**

Findings show that as respondents are in a new cultural environment different from their home countries, the need to be socially relevant in the host cultural environment encourages buying symbolically - acculturation. As reiterated by the respondents, the UK as their host cultural environment, has a good number of celebrities in various aspects of life. Accordingly, by virtue of their achievements and the respect in the society, these celebrities constitute brands themselves through which they influence their followers' consumption decisions for various products. Given that the respondents are closely linked to some of the existing fans of these celebrities based in the UK, they tend to engage in emulative consumption to belong:

I don't think many Black women can deny doing it, but my close friends and I buy what the celebrities are using. It's a lovely experience...when people see it, they know it, and know the value, especially when you talk about fashion...that is the truth (R21, aged 30-39).

I buy clothes for my esteem. Sometimes, I still do my African attire. It shows me who I am and where I come from. But the UK is a different environment. So, we will have to use fashion stuff that is in vogue. Although people say they are very expensive, but when I hear or know that a celebrity has introduced something, I mean their own brands like perfume or something else, I will buy it, even if it is not immediately (R12, aged 30-39)

Furthermore, respondents also emphasized the significance of their symbolic consumption as a means to combat their experience of cultural stereotypes. As noted by most of the respondents, to be oblivious of the existing celebrity culture in the UK could put them in a 'pigeon hole' of cultural stereotypes. Hence, celebrity culture works positively for them regarding their consumption as it provides direction for 'coping' in a strange cultural environment:

It's like Clinique facial products because I was having quite a lot of breakouts and stuff and so I obviously did a lot of research online which is what I do and... Asked a few people although not a lot of black people that I know would use Clinique, but I think it's one of those things where, because in the UK you find that a lot of products are marketed for, not necessarily people of ethnic backgrounds or you know of dark skin colour or whatever. ...Anyway what I am saying is that doing research will give information on what people are using, say like celebrity stuff (R9, 30-39).

## Personal factors

The notion of respondents' individuality emerged clearly from the study. **The study reveals that, in some instances, the respondents' need to maintain a unique identity** among others, like celebrities, direct them to buy certain products. While as individuals in the society, the **women buy to feel belonging** to other social settings, they are also driven to buy to maintain their individuality. As stated by the respondents, this gives them the opportunity to be pace-setters in some occasions. It boosts their self-confidence and image when they appear in public.

For that reason, I got a bag, like four months ago, I was really, really like upset, personal reasons, and I just went out and I found this bag. It's a really nice orange bag, it's quite nice, Ted Baker, you know nice bag, and I've not touched it, I just look at it and it makes me feel happy (laughs). I've only used it like once, but, because I spent so much on it, I look at it as in that bag will come out on a good day...I know when I use it, it will give me a very good feeling of **myself (R18, aged 40-49)**.

Closely related to this is the respondents' 'self' concept. By this, they have the perception of their desired or 'dream' 'self' which in most cases is different from their 'actual' or 'current' self. Hence, the need to actualize their 'dream self' drives them to buy certain products symbolically:

I don't know. It's always that you get, you know that dress to impress, when you go

to a party or when you go out.... you know you've got to be the bombshell. As soon as you walk in everyone looks, it happens for every girl,... every girl feels that way when they wear something. It's almost like, you dress for yourself, if you feel like you look good, somebody else is going to think like you look good (R13, aged 30-39).

I come from a background where I did not have the things that I desired as a teenager growing up as a young girl, but I always had a nice eye for things. So naturally being here when I got to get them I wanted the best like the desire for 800 pairs of shoes (R19, aged 40-49).

Interestingly and paradoxically, this is also mediated by the celebrity culture as these women indicated that with this feeling, they are motivated to follow the consumption tradition of some celebrities who are notably outspoken, clearly distinct, and have what could be described as a courageous personality. Hence, they are interested in maintaining an image of distinctiveness in a society where, as they claimed, it will take courageous living to survive the barrage of products, brands, and marketing communications:

Also being in a different social setting here [in the UK] has given me a lot of independence to find who I am for myself. Take it or leave it, that is what I like in some of the celebs in this society (R2, aged 18-29).



## **Marketing communications**

The role of marketing communications covering factors like branding, social media, and celebrity endorsement came out strongly as a factor that is instrumental to fine-tuning these women's consumption in many ways. As shown in the study, the various marketing communication tools are becoming increasingly used by businesses to make favourable mention of their market offerings to these women who feel encouraged to consume symbolically:

Concerning the question you asked on what persuade me to buy. You know this girl, Rihanna, she just came out with her own clothing line and I like the way she dresses. So, seeing the way she dresses and her bringing out a clothing line...I would buy her stuff. I know it is expensive but there is one or two things there that I will definitely buy (R16, aged 40-49)

In other words, they continuously show how these products are beneficial to make the women fulfil their life aspirations. One of the very potent aspects of this influence is the celebrity endorsement. These women indicate that, as respected members of the society, the use of celebrities for endorsing products is pivotal to what they buy and where they buy them. From a broad perspective, these marketing communications further enrich the celebrity culture which also mediates the consumption of these ethnic women in the UK marketing environment:

I think it kinds of go back to advertising again. I mean if it's advertised in a great

way then you want to feel how that person is feeling in the advert. Like for example, if you see Beyoncé advertising her perfume, you are like oh my God, I want to get her perfume. It's Beyoncé, you want to feel like Beyoncé, you want to feel like a superstar (R20, aged 30-39)

### **Market offerings**

While women use different types of products on a day-to-day basis, they especially highlight some products as being very significantly symbolic in their purchase. They are basically high-involvement products, mostly endorsed by well-known celebrities and feminine products such as foundation, underwear, perfumes, clothes, and shoes. There are clear overlapping scenarios in this typology as some products fall into both categories. For products in both categories, respondents exhibit conspicuous consumption:

I love taking holidays because it takes me out of this environment. I go on holiday twice a year. I just want to leave my environment and go somewhere new. Although I have issues with the food there, I just like new places...new friends and just enjoy a new experience. (R13, aged 30-39)

Well my hair makes me look good, or people have said. So I buy certain types of hair extensions, to do my hair, hair pomades, hair creams etcetera, and clothes that fit me in a certain way and change my image, the way that I want to look that day (R2, aged 18-29).

## Social trends

The respondents stress the fact that the society has an acceptable standard of living, dressing codes, and modes of appearance. In their words, to live in such a society without matching up will be stressful. This explains why their purchase decisions are tailored to follow after celebrity culture and symbolically indicate that they are relevant in the milieu. There is an acknowledgement of the fact that the media is awash with various developments in the world of fashion. Analysing this view shows how it is closely linked to the respondents' personal factors.

If I buy something nice in this place...with H &M, they have these dresses you know the body con dresses, really nice. I like the material. It started with the material from work, the little skirts, the material is nice ...I've just started liking anything they do in H & M . Then like Punky Fish, they do brighter, rocky things like diamante things, I really like that kind of fashion. Punky Fish has got this little, kind of clothes. They are what many people are using in the society now (R5, aged 18-29)

For example their narratives repeatedly pinpoint the significant role of their self-esteem and social needs in propelling them for symbolic consumption. It became evident that these women see the need to be respected by societal members such as those in their various organizational affiliations, as a key factor for their symbolic consumption. The findings clearly show that respondents know they need to match up with the social trends in order to fulfil these personal aspirations. So, this explains their reason for craving celebrated brands:

So, I would say I am swayed by reviews... I am less likely to buy something with one star or two stars but if it has 5000 ratings or 5000 buys then I would buy. I normally take note of this trends and what others are saying about things that I will buy (R4, aged 40-49).

### **Economic factors**

The relevance of the financial commitments associated with their consumption also emerged as a key finding in the study. Although some of these products, such as fashion items are considered expensive, they do not consider this pricing to be a strong inhibitor of their purchase of these products because they consider the value derived from the use of the products as relatively considerable, especially as they show their link to specific celebrities:

it's nice to buy something, ....if I wear a dress, I'm thinking, like I worked four hours for this. It makes you feel good and the other thing I tell myself is when you are angry working and your managers annoying you, it's like think about the shoes you want,... to work again. It gives you that motivation. Seeing what you are working for is nice as well ....it is what you can show people and be proud of (R5, aged 18-29).

I don't have any kid, if I don't buy myself something, who else am I going to buy... for? Yes. Family {it's good to think about family}, but what I consider important is how what I buy make me feel than having to bother so much about the price (R7, aged 40-49)

## Discussion

Evidence in the literature shows that consumers, especially in this age of postmodernism 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. In consistency with this line of reasoning, this study shows how Black African women, as a consumer segment in the UK engage in symbolic consumption and are linked to the prevalent celebrity culture. A myriad of factors influence this type of consumption among this consumer segment. The study shows these factors as culture, social trends, and marketing communication. With this, the women claimed that they are confronted with the challenge of the likelihood of being ‘pigeon holed’ or perceived in a demeaning way in the society if they make no attempt to communicate their relevance in the society. This resonates with the contention of Coleman (2000) and Townsend et al. (2010) about Black African women in the US. It is interesting to report about the UK society where the topic has not been previously empirically explored. Moreover, it is known that there are pressures in the society on the increasing need to be on a par with the societal trend as depicted in the media. Accordingly, this study shows that it becomes increasingly compelling that the women’s consumption transcends the threshold where the key factor and decisions lie in the functional attributes of such offerings. This confirms Solomon’s (1983) argument that consumption and social behaviour are linked and are at the heart of symbolic consumption but this study extends the reasoning to a distinct consumer group for who there is little data. Meanwhile, the significance of marketing communications tools in the forms of the firms’ brands, celebrity endorsement, social media and other tools are noted as very potent in propelling these women to engage in symbolic consumption. The popularity of

marketing communications to firms in making favourable mention of their various offerings is well acknowledged (Schroeder and Zwick, 2004; Gbadamosi, *et al.*, 2012; Ibroscheva, 2013).

Obviously, this study follows the tradition of previous studies and postulations on self, extended self, brand relationship, and celebrity culture (Elliott, 1997; Belk, 1988; Sirgy and Johar 1999; Kerrigan et al., 2011; and Hower and Hamilton, 2012) but with a focus on a particular research context towards enriching the existing understanding. It shows the interconnections of personal, commercial, social, and cultural factors as important in how African women consumers in the UK make their consumption decisions. These findings provide explication of consumption decisions which reiterates the view that consumer transactions could not be limited to the scope of functional benefits.

### **Managerial Implications of the study**

If examined thoroughly, the implications of this study could be explained in two perspectives - theoretical and managerial. From the theoretical perspective, the paper extends the discourse on the extant ethnic minority studies and augments the current knowledge about symbolic consumption especially with a focus on a specific segment of the society. From the managerial standpoint, it is expected that this knowledge could be incorporated into various global marketing programmes especially in the area of marketing communications strategy, and segmentation, targeting and positioning. Evidently, postmodernism is increasingly widening the scope of consumption by the day, especially far beyond the functional benefits associated with the offerings. This

strengthens the call for marketers, be it at the retailing level or others to follow this trend such that they can address all categories of consumer needs in relation to specific offerings. This will include targeting various consumer groups with appropriate offerings, in relation to the diversity which exists among them in terms of gender and culture in multicultural marketplace.

### **Limitation of the study and directions for further studies**

Basically, this paper revolves around symbolic consumption of Black African women consumers in the UK. Even though it has shed some light on this focused research domain, it has some notable limitations which make the possible opportunities for future research become apparent. Essentially, the small sample size constrains the extent to which the findings can be generalized to the wider population. However, this does not appear to be very compelling since the study is not positioned to test any pre-defined hypotheses but for constructing a substantive understanding of the researched subject-matter. Meanwhile, one of the promising avenues for future studies is to explore symbolic consumption of other ethnic groups in the British marketing environment vis-à-vis various demographical variables such as age, income, and educational qualifications. In fact, the topic could also be explored in relation to different product categories. This has the potential to extend the current understanding on the topic.

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**Table 1: Demographics**

Respondents	Age Category	Marital Status	Annual Income Per annum	Educational Qualification	Years of Stay
R1	30-39	married	£12001-20000	First Degree	5 years and more
R2	18-29	Single	£12001-20000	A levels	5 years and more
R3	18-29	Single	Below £12000	GCSE	Between 3 and 5 years
R4	40-49	Married	£20000-30000	First Degree	5 years and more
R5	18-29	Single	Below £12000	First Degree	5 years and more
R6	18-29	Single	Below £12000	First Degree	5 years and more
R7	40-49	Single	£20000-30000	First Degree	5 years and more
R8	40-49	Widowed	£12001-20000	GCSE	5 years and more
R9	30-39	Single	£20000-30000	First Degree	5 years and more
R10	18-29	Single	£12001-20000	First Degree	5 years and more
R11	40-49	Married	Below £12000	First Degree	5 years and more
R12	30-39	Single	£20001-30000	Masters Degree	5 years and more
R13	30-39	Single	£30001-40000	Masters Degree	5 years and more
R14	30-39	Widowed	Below £12001-20000	First Degree	Between 3 and 5 years
R15	18-29	Single	Below £12001-20000	GCSE Access to social work	5 years and more
R16	40-49	Married	£20001-30000	First Degree	5 years and more
R17	30-39	Married	More than £50000	Masters Degree	5 years and more
R18	40-49	Single	£30001-40000	First Degree	5 years and more
R19	40-49	Married	£30001-40000	First Degree	5 years and more
R20	30-39	Divorced	£30001-40000	Masters degree	5 years and more
R21	30-39	Married	£20001-30000	First degree	5 years and

					more
R22	30-39	Single	Below £12000 per annum	GCSE	5 years and more
R23	40-49	Married	£20001-30000 per annum	Higher national diploma	5 years and more
R24	50-59	Widowed	More than £50000	First Degree	5 years and more
R25	50-59	Married	£30001-40000	GCSE	Between 3 and 5 years
R26	60-69	Widowed	£20001-30000 per annum	First degree	5 years and more
R27	60-69	Divorced	£20001-30000 per annum	GCSE	5 years and more

Figure 1 : Black African Women and Symbolic Consumption

