Consumption as a tool of cultural resistance against patriarchy: the case of first generation Nigerian women living in Britain

Conference or Workshop Item

How to cite:

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

© 2010 Association of Consumer Research

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher’s website:

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online’s data policy on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.
Consumption as a tool of cultural resistance against patriarchy:
the case of first generation Nigerian women living in Britain
Applying Consumer Culture Theory to acculturation and consumption we argue that first generation Nigerian women, living in Britain, actively use consumption, as a form of cultural resistance, to reassert their power in patriarchal households. By interviewing British white and first generation Nigerian husband and wife we show how the latter negotiate cultural differences through consumption. In particular, the Nigerian husband’s needs to replicate a position of power and dominance in the home produces various acts of cultural resistance using consumption by their wives – sometimes explicit and other times implicit.
Studies focusing on consumption are often lacking in their focus on immigrants. By applying Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) to acculturation and consumption we argue that first generation Nigerian women, living in Britain, actively use consumption, as a form of cultural resistance, to reassert their gender and personal power in patriarchal households, where they are expected to be culturally subservient. Previous research into immigrant consumption has tended to be American centric with theories and methods favouring comparative studies of assimilation amongst different ethnic groups. Whilst this approach is helpful it fails to understand the micro inter-relationships and complexities of integration that the family unit faces. This problem is compounded by previous studies typically focusing on the experiences of the male immigrant, resulting in female immigrants becoming either invisible or stereotyped or; ignoring the differing opinions and needs of the wife. By focusing on the relationship between husband and wife this paper makes an important contribution to existing research.

How immigrant culture influences consumption provides an understanding of consumption becomes a form of cultural resistance. As an individual is a product of their culture, tensions may arise during the acculturation process, where differences between the old and new culture manifest. One particular area of acculturation stress is gender roles, with African cultures viewing men as the provider and women as the carers. Acculturation offers an opportunity for these gender roles to be challenged and renegotiated, with employment providing immigrant women with empowerment. However, it has been noted that within the domestic home, traditional cultural values that perpetuate patriarchy may still be evident. One way that this difference can be resolved is through resistance.

The sampling procedure employed was theoretical, relational and discriminative allowing for theoretical concepts to be inter-linked, providing a means to test and assess any emergent theory. The emergent theory could then be assessed and inform the next interview until theoretical saturation was reached and no further emergent theory was evident. A total of 40 participants were selected, consisting of the wife and their husband (20 married couples), with 10 white married couples, and 10 first generation Nigerian couples living in Britain achieving theoretical saturation. Participant interviews were conducted on a sequential basis. Each participant was interviewed twice; first the wife and husband were interviewed to hear their shared story about life in Britain, their decision-making process and how they consume. The interviews were conducted by one of the researchers who identified herself as a 2nd generation female, Black, Nigerian.

To understand the comprehensive mechanisms through which culture influences individual consumption patterns, the data was analyzed using Venkatesh’s (1995) ethno-consumerist framework; a method of data analysis consisting of four categories. Each of these four stages contributed to understanding how cultural resistance through consumption manifests. However, it was also important to assess whether female Nigerian participants demonstrated issues of cultural subservience to their husbands that was in contrast to their British white equivalents. Notes taken during the interviews and subsequent data analysis identified subtle nuances or contradictions between what the Nigerian female participants had said with their husbands and during their one-to-one interviews. These contradictions indicated that these participants were undertaking cultural roles of the culturally subservient wife, whilst the latter interviews illustrated how acculturation had led to cultural change in their roles and values. These narratives were not replicated amongst the British whites.

Stage one, social histories and memories, explored how memories were used to establish the family context. This was achieved by focusing on stories of immigration. All our Nigerian participants had immigration stories surrounding difficulties experienced, with female participants commenting on the need to support their husband. Whilst these narratives
replicated Nigerian cultural values, privately they discussed how migration had empowered them through new responsibilities.

Stage two, conceptual schemes and structures, assessed how the participants’ sense of culture was used to construct their cultural identity. Although not relevant to British whites, our Nigerian participants demonstrated marked differences in their beliefs about Nigerian culture. Male participants aimed to maintain Nigerian culture, viewing it as superior to British white culture, the latter which lacked respect for elders. During the paired interviews, our Nigerian female participants agreed with their husbands, but when interviewed alone their narratives suggested a diminished importance attributed to Nigerian culture in their lives.

Stage three, practices and experiences, explored how our Nigerian participants existed in various cultural contexts. Whilst not relevant to British whites (because they represent the dominant majority), our male Nigerian participants sought to maintain and perpetuate Nigerian cultural values through engaging with their community, and disengaging with white society. This was in contrast to the female participants who actively engaged in white social events, often at the annoyance of their husbands.

Finally stage four, cultural objects and consumption, examined how differences in cultural values between our Nigerian husband and wife participants manifested in the latter using consumption as a form of resistance. Acts of resistance took two approaches: open acts of resistance justified by necessity and acts of conscious, premeditated, resistance. The former were typically done to by-pass their husbands inability to undertake to complete a demand, such as house repairs, even though this was seen as undermining the husband’s authority. Acts of conscious, premeditated resistance through consumption aimed to provide female Nigerian participants with a sense of empowerment, with resistance ranging from clothing choices that the husband disagreed with through to buying presents for selected children as a means of reasserting power in the family unit.

Although our female Nigerian participants used consumption as a form of cultural resistance in their homes, the question – why did their husbands hold onto Nigerian cultural values, requiring the wife to be subservient, remained unanswered. The answer lies in experiences of racism and the need to maintain and value their sense of identity.

Bibliography

Consumption as a tool of cultural resistance against patriarchy:

The case of first generation Nigerian women living in Britain

Introduction

Studies focusing on decision-making and consumption are often lacking in their focus on ethnic minorities; specifically in the case of immigrants (Greave et al, 1995). By applying Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) to acculturation and consumption we will argue that first generation Nigerian women, living in Britain, actively use daily acts of consumption, as a form of cultural resistance, to reassert their gender and personal power in patriarchal households where they are expected to be culturally subservient. Previous research into immigrant consumption has tended to be American centric with theories and methods favouring comparative studies of assimilation amongst different ethnic groups (Waters and Jiménez, 2005). Whilst this approach is helpful it also fails to understand the micro inter-relationships and complexities of integration that the family unit faces. This problem is compounded by previous studies typically focusing on the experiences of the male immigrant, resulting in female immigrants becoming either invisible or stereotyped (Dona and Ferguson, 2004; Reid and Diaz, 1990); ignoring the differing opinions and needs of the wife (Dion and Dion, 2001) or solely focusing on the way immigrants resemble consumption practices of host nation through assimilation (Cleveland and Laroche, 2007). By focusing on the relationship between husband and wife this paper makes an important contribution to existing research into immigrants. In particular this paper addresses the lack of research into issues of: gender and power in relation to husband and wife dynamics in immigrant families (Dion and Dion, 2001; Kallivayalil, 2004) and changing power dynamics in immigrant families in relation to acculturation, cultural identity and ethnicity (Gentry, Commuri and Jun, 2003; *, *, 2006).
Literature review

Immigrant consumption, we believe, must be understood by investigating the comprehensive mechanisms through which culture influences individual consumption patterns. We will address this by reviewing what culture is, how acculturation affects it, its relationship to the family unit, and its links to cultural resistance and consumption.

Recent definitions of culture have focused on categorizations of culture with the individual seen as a product of that culture (De Mooij, 2003). Cultural categorizations of individualism and collectivism can be used to categorise a societal culture by its level of inter-dependence. Individualistic societies, such as Britain (*.*, 2006) are socialised into cultural values of independence and achievement, with individuals wanting to be perceived as unique persons whose needs and rights take precedence over that of their society. In contrast, Asian / African countries are termed collectivist, placing emphasis on the group’s rather than the individual’s needs, such as the family. De Mooij (2004) adds that individual’s within a culture are conditioned by their social cultural environment to demonstrate conformity.

Identifying the individual as product of their culture assumes a sense of cultural homogeneity that is not available to immigrants, themselves a product of two cultures (country of origin and country of residence). Particularly those immigrants who leave behind a collectivist culture for an individualistic one may present a number of difficulties arising from cultural adaption, i.e. acculturation. Acculturation refers to a process of culture change between two differing cultural groups who interact with each other leading to psychological and socio-cultural outcomes (Ward and Kennedy, 2001). The former refers to a collection of internalized outcomes including psychological well being and good mental health, manifesting with a satisfaction with their new culture. Socio-cultural outcomes refer to how individuals relate to their new cultural environment, in this paper existing as a Black person in a White society. Although a variety of acculturation models have been proposed, such as
Berry’s (1997) four acculturation outcomes, these models have been criticized for their tendency to categorize immigrants and ethnic minorities into fixed acculturation outcomes. Instead, it would appear that immigrants are continuously reconstituting and negotiating their identity often with mixed cultural values existing within the same individual depending on the context encountered (Rohner, 1984). Such criticisms are reflective of the assumption that immigrant women are not passive receptors within acculturation but are able and do make decisions that protect and promote their own needs and interests. Bhatia’s (2002) dialogical model of acculturation addresses this criticism by proposing that an immigrant individual continuously moves between opposing cultural positions, allowing them to demonstrate various positions of being assimilated, acculturated, separated and marginalized. Acculturation then involves multiple negotiations and renegotiations of identity, such mediation involving political and historical practices that are linked to and shaped by the specific culture of the immigrants’ homeland and host society (Bhatia, 2002). By adapting to the context they encounter, Bhatia’s theory builds upon Oswald’s (1999) discussion on code-switching amongst ethnic minorities’ sense of behavior and identity. Most importantly, Bhatia’s theory provides a means of understanding an individual’s behavior from both inter- and intra-cultural perspectives, unlike previous research that has tended solely to focus on inter-cultural contact (Cleveland and Laroche, 2007; *, 2005).

Acculturation theories have not explicitly identified the role of gender as an influencing variable on acculturation outcomes, even though previous research notes its relevance. An assumption in acculturation literature is that men may acculturate more quickly than women; however this opinion has been challenged partially as immigrant women do not always experience the same or comparable benefits as men (Costigan and Dokis, 2006). As a consequence, female immigrants may experience greater acculturation conflict arising from cultural conflicts in everyday situations (Morris and Shin, 2004). Sources of conflict arise
from female immigrants being more: patriotic, conservative, conformist, and concerned about preserving social harmony and promoting positive feelings among group members than their male counter-parts (Entzinger and Cross, 1988). However, the process of immigration may provide an opportunity for culturally determined gender roles to be reconstructed in the new host society (Dona and Ferguson, 2004). For example, female support networks, that were embedded in extended family and friends are reduced upon migration, leaving women struggling alone with their multiple roles as mother, car, employee and so on (Erhenreich and Hochschild, 2002).

Immigration, however, does not necessarily mean continued sub-ordination for the woman. Immigration from non-Western cultures to the Western cultures usually entails drastic change in gender environment with increased exposure to feminist ideas and sexual liberty, as well increased prejudice from their own community, and conflicting moral values of the old and new cultures in the realm of femininity, sexuality, and fertility (Pessar and Mahler, 2003). In understanding gender and immigration the question arises to what extent does immigration improve or undermine a women’s ability to renegotiate hierarchical gender relations (Moon, 2003)? As the needs and resources of the immigrant family changes after immigration, the duties assigned to each gender changes as well, often leading to traditional gender roles being questioned and consequently renegotiation of power arrangements (Kibria, 1990). Employment opportunities for immigrant women are deemed necessary to sustain the family, with increased financial contribution enabling women to renegotiate their roles, providing them with the ability to share decisions within the family (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Kibria 1993). For example, Ganesh (1997) found that amongst Indian immigrants to America, women had more power in dual-career marriages than in single-career marriages, suggesting greater egalitarian sex roles similar to western households. This renegotiation of roles can then be identified with Bhatia’s (2002) previous Dialogical Model of Acculturation.
Immigrant women then will be able to create a self-identity that allows them to exist in the workplace, draw upon appropriate cultural norms and demonstrate appropriate levels of acculturation to succeed in this environment. In contrast, the same women will also be able to construct a self-identity in the home environment that is reflective of their original cultural values, even if this means they have to be subservient to their husband. It is within this context that we argue that immigrant women will actively use consumption acts and opportunities to carry out acts of cultural resistance.

The joint family system can be seen as a structural arrangement that ensures male domination within the household through the traditional gender roles. However, immigrant women’s increased financial status allows for the renegotiation of gender roles within the family. Feminist theories of households highlight the possible effect of migration for disrupting and changing gender relations, power, and status within trans-national households and the conflict and tensions that such changes engender (Mahler and Pessar, 2001). Joy and Dholakia (1991) noted how women who take on independent or co-equal financial responsibilities make augmented consumption decisions – they acquire goods and make purchases for their homes and may resist imposed patriarchal cultural values through various acts of resistance (Kandiyoti, 1988). The role of the women, as a wife, reasserting her power through consumption acts, differs from the traditional perception of the women, where consumption is perceived as a feminine activity reflecting self-indulgence and a concern with style, aesthetics and fashion, in contrast to men who are linked to production (Kacen 2000).

Viewing immigrant women then as existing in various dualities (home-work, wife-wealth provider, assimilated-traditional cultural values) therefore presents women not as a passive accepter but actively resisting through various consumption acts. As Reynolds (2006) notes marital conflicts may be resolved through the woman taking charge of purchases in order to resist power from her husband. Existing research does not appear to have
investigated how and to what extent immigrant women use consumption as a means of resistance, not only to re-assert their identity but also to manage acculturation conflicts within the family household. By considering Bhatia’s (2002) earlier Dialogical Model of Acculturation we argue that immigrant women, who are employed and be expected to demonstrate assimilation into society, will struggle from a cultural perspective in demonstrating cultural conformity in their domestic situation, i.e. subservience to their husband leading to acts of resistance through consumption. Furthermore, we posit that research has not studied how this resistance through consumption is culturally embedded in the use of specific culturally laden products.

3. Methodology

The aim of this research paper is to explore the power dynamics between a husband and wife in immigrant families, with particular attention on how immigrant women assert their power in the household through consumption as a form of resistance. To understand the antecedents and manifestations of this culturally derived behaviour, Song and Shin (2004) suggest that immigrant consumption patterns must be understood by investigating the comprehensive mechanisms through which culture influences consumption patterns. To identify these comprehensive mechanisms Ventaktesh’s (?????) ethno-consumerist framework; a methodological framework that consists of three core assumptions: (i) consumer behaviour is grounded in culture, (ii) that historical and socio-cultural forces, as well as current research practices, form cultural categories, therefore satisfying the dialogical acculturation theory discussed previously and (iii) recognising that culture is an evolving entity that responds to changes in society, such as immigration.

To satisfy the requirements of ethno-consumerist framework a number of methodological procedures were undertaken. First, a text view was created by undertaking an extensive literature review of academic, cultural and Government materials. Secondly, we collected oral data from a sample group. The sampling procedure employed was theoretical,
relational and discriminative allowing for theoretical concepts to be inter-linked (Miles and Huberman 1994). This approach provided a means to test and assess any emergent theory, which could then be assessed and used to inform the next interview. This process was continued until theoretical saturation was reached and no further emergent theory was evident; an approach that removed the need for random sampling as participants were chosen solely for theoretical reasons. The rationale for approach is supported by the theory that immigrant women, empowered from acculturation, and subservient in their domestic, ethnic cultural lives, resolved this incongruence using acts of consumption orientated resistance. A total of 40 participants were selected, consisting of the wife and their husband (20 married couples), with 10 white married couples, and 10 first generation Nigerian couples living in Britain achieving theoretical saturation. The number of participants then exceeded the “suggested minimum of eight for generating cultural themes and categories” (McCracken 1988, p. 17 cited in Askegaard et al 2002, p. 13) allowing us to “to investigate typical phenomena pertaining to theoretical issues of identity” (McMahon 1995, p. 34). To ensure the behaviors noted were identifiable to cultural and societal differences, with all participants matched in terms of socio-economic status, religion (self-identified as Christian and attending church) and education.

British white and Nigerian immigrant couples were initially recruited using a mixture of personal contacts and acquaintances (McMahon 1995) from two large multicultural conurbations in Britain - London and Manchester. Further respondents were also selected from referrals of the initial respondents (Malhotra and Birks 1998) after they had been screened to ensure that they met the sought participant profile.

Participant interviews were conducted on a sequential basis, with each female participant was interviewed twice. First the wife and husband were interviewed to hear their shared story about life in Britain, their decision-making process and how they consume. The interview was then transcribed, notes written up and then analyzed. Following this initial
interview, the wife was then interviewed separately, at a later date, with similar topics asked and clarification sought on points raised from the first interview. The purpose of this second interview was to partially note how female participant narratives changed (if at all) and explore the cultural and societal reasons for any change in their narratives. By identifying any changes in the female narrative would allow for the identification of any perceived cultural subservience in their relationship and household. Although this approach was applied to both British White and Nigerian immigrant couples, the specific aim of this approach was to focus on the incongruence experienced by female Nigerian immigrants. Subsequent interviews with other participants allowed for previous interview topics to be replicated and extensions of the previous participant’s interview findings to be explored. An approach that allowed for emergent and environmental themes to be explored allowing for greater in-depth analysis and continued testing of the emergent theory. The interviews were conducted by one of the researchers who identified herself as a second generation female, Black, Nigerian.

The interviews were taped and transcribed producing preliminary codes, which were then transcribed onto data sheets. These sheets were annotated to allow for identification of comparisons, metaphors and tropes in the data.
Findings

To understand the comprehensive mechanisms through which culture influences individual consumption patterns (Morris and Shin, 2004), the data was analysed using Venkatesh’s (1995) ethno-consumerist framework; a method of data analysis consisting of four categories, which have been reversed from the original order proposed by and justified in great depth by *.* (2004). This approach allows for the identification of the antecedents and origins of resistance through consumption by our female participants. However, it is also important to assess whether our female Nigerian participants demonstrated issues of cultural subservience to their husbands that was in contrast to their British white equivalents. Although page limitations restrict a full exploration of the evidence, all the one-to-one interviews the Nigerian female participants produced different narratives, regarding the same topics, compared to what had been discussed in the presence of their husbands. Sometimes these differences were subtle nuances or clear contradictions of what had been said previously. Where the wife would not publicly criticize or undermine her husband in his presence, critiquing of the husband became part of these female only interview narratives. An example of this is provided in conceptual schemes and structures aspect of the data analysis. In contrast, female British white participants’ narratives did not differ noticeably from when they were with their husbands or by themselves. Instead these narratives reflected a greater sense of equality and ‘in-jokes’ between the couple, each knowing their partners supposedly secret behaviours, such as the wife going shopping for clothes every time the husband wanted to play golf. It is this recognition that allows us to focus our analysis on our Nigerian participants.

Social histories and memories - explores how memories are used to establish the family context within which multiple role obligations can be seen. This is achieved by focusing on stories of immigration. All our Nigerian participants had immigration stories they
wanted to share, ranging from economic hardships, struggles finding a home and simply surviving in a new culture. Most of these participants noted how the decision to migrate was undertaken by the male participant, with their partners joining them later. For male participants, immigration stories focused on their need to maintain marital cultural beliefs:

*A woman’s role is to look after her husband and her children, whilst a man’s role is to provide for his family, he should have the resources to support his family.*  
**Bob**

The home for our Nigerian male participants represented a symbolism and embodiment of their economic and social prowess; not only providing for their family but also demonstrating their success in a new country. This finding reflects traditional African cultural values that men are the providers and women are the carers (Daley, 2007). Ishii-Kuntz and Maryanski (2003) also support this observation noting how male African immigrants assume responsibility for providing financial resources for their families, whilst women are expected to maintain domestic chores in the role as housewife, even if the wife is employed. The home then became a place where the male could recreate a Nigerian cultural world, one where they were respected as head of the household. However, a cultural world of male dominance in the home was often contentious for our female Nigerian participants. When interviewed with their partners, they wanted to reassert the cultural perspective of the authoritative husband:

*.....culture demands a wife should be a wife, their main priority should be focused on the home. It is not only about cooking and cleaning it’s more than that. Women must be a beacon to their family, giving their husband due respect.*  
**Jane**

Yet cultural respect for their husband and their role as a wife also produced narratives that reflected their own sense of empowerment. Devoid of the cultural resources that their native society would have provided for them to maintain these cultural roles, our female participants instead had to improvise and adapt to meet the cultural demands of family life. These stories typically involved the difficulties of caring for a young family with the economic hardships
of migration; resulting in our female participants transgressing from a cultural supportive role to the husband, to one financially supporting the family, as well as maintaining a home. Financial support arose from paid employment, offering an outlet to demonstrate their skills and abilities bringing with it new responsibilities. These narratives reflected a sense of independence outside of the home, only to return to the cultural dependence on the husband on their return to their home. This dependence manifested in maintaining the cultural roles expected of a wife, regardless of employment status or earning capacity etc:

You know before I came to this country I really wasn’t responsible …but this society makes one to work, when I first came I had to do everything, he only had to go to work then come back and eat [laughs]. Till this day it is the same I have so many responsibilities…it’s not easy. Jane

Our female Nigerian participant had used employment as a means of internally renegotiating their own roles, supporting Erhenreich and Hochschild’s (2002) earlier observations. Whilst our Nigerian narratives illustrated a power imbalance between husband and wife, in terms of culturally defined roles, this was not evident amongst our white participants. Instead for our white participants household roles were either shared (for example, the male – garden, wife – cleaning) or blurred (for example, taking turns cooking).

Conceptual schemes and structures - having identified how memories of immigration were used to establish the family context, we now need to assess how the participants’ sense of culture was used to construct their multiple identities and positions (Bhatia 2002). This will then provide an understanding of how our Nigerian participants differed and how this will lead into consumer resistance.

Our white participants struggle to identify what constituted British culture, and ultimately made them British, was in stark contrast to our Nigerian participants. Where Entzinger and Cross (1988) noted how female immigrants tend to be more patriotic,
conservative, conformist, and concerned about preserving social harmony this was not evident amongst our Nigerian participants. Instead, these roles were fulfilled by the husbands. Their narratives regarding culture predominately reflected distrust or diminishing values within British white culture, typically about the lack of respect for hierarchies based upon status attributable to age. (In Nigerian culture, the older you are the more status your community attributes to you). Narratives that reflected the loss of culturally attributed power that would have been bestowed upon them in Nigerian society were instead recreated and acted out inside their homes, supporting Costigan and Dokis’s (2006) observations. Nigerian culture for our male participants became the embodiment of self-respect. For example:

...culture is who we are as people. You only have to look at us as people, compare ourselves to English people and say ‘yes we are blessed’. You see sometimes we as people get caught up in this society. We start forgetting where we come from and who we are, and then what do, we teach our children, that our culture is something meaningless .... Peter

All our Nigerian female participants’ narratives, in the presence of their husband, demonstrated similar narratives regarding culture. These narratives served to support and reinforce the husband’s perception on the supremacy of Nigerian culture. For example, immediately following Peter’s narrative, his wife added: “This is right, we have to ensure that we practice our culture”. However, when interviewed alone her narrative changed, in contrast to her husband’s, becoming more dismissive of the importance of Nigerian culture:

....this culture thing is sometimes too much….as for me I know my culture but it is not the be all and end all. There are more important things. Some people focus on it too much, as for me I know my language, I know how to cook so it's fine [laughs] Mary

These narrative differences were common amongst our female Nigerian participants, when interviewed alone, often reflecting an awareness of the limitations Nigerian culture
placed on women. These limitations were not applicable in a British world where they were employed and contributed financial resources to the home. Living in Britain allowed perspectives of the role of women in Nigerian culture to be challenged and re-interpreted allowing them a sense of freedom. As one participant noted:

...English culture for me is about freedom, being liberal...but for women, well comparing this culture to others, I would say it's got something to do with freedom, equality.... Margaret

Migration offered then these women a means to reinterpret their cultural roles and identities, and begin to renegotiate their roles as women, wives, mothers and workers, as suggested by Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) and Kibria (1993). Whereas the male participants saw their role in maintaining Nigerian culture in their daily lives, family and home, our female participants had become selective regarding Nigerian culture, choosing values that suited their needs as women who worked but also maintained a family. However, their husbands roles linked to production appeared to be endorsed by our female Nigerian participants, even though the reality contradicted this; a finding that partially supports Kacen’s (2000) observations of gender roles amongst immigrants, and Moon’s (2003) renegotiation of gender relations.

Practices and experiences - whilst we have already shown how Nigerian women conform to cultural expectations and roles in the home, this section explores how our Nigerian female participants multiple identities emerged in response to their community and wider British society. Interviews with female British whites did not reveal a need to construct multiple identities, arising from a greater transparency in their lives, i.e. as they represented the majority population their need to adapt to various situations was not an issue. Our female Nigerian participants’ identities did appear to respond to differing situations, reflecting at times a sense of empowerment but also demonstrating Bhatia’s (2002) multiple I positions.
For example, our female Nigerian participants discussed how they attended certain social events, often to the objection of their husbands. For example, Nigerian community meetings were often viewed as a means of reinforcing cultural norms and behaviours, but also reinforcing Nigerian cultural values that ultimately aimed to perpetuate through expectations the gender hierarchy the women were against. For example:

Well I do sometimes [attend community meetings] but it is usually with my husband. Just once in a while when they have special occasions but to be honest I don’t waste time on all those things [laughs]. What would one gain from them? …I ask my husband why he likes going to these meetings, he just says he just wants to keep in touch with home, but to me it is just a place where people go and gossip.... Shirley

Our female Nigerian participants’ selectiveness in attending community gatherings were reversed when it came to socializing with British whites, often with the husband staying at home. A behaviour reflecting their wider level of acculturation noted previously:

...he does not like the environment. I always think it is important to socialise with people you work with. You never know when you will meet them again. He does not like gathering like that, he always complains about Oyibo¹ people and how they can drink. It’s true but that’s their culture… but my husband does not go, in fact he always complains that he does not like me going to these things, ah he becomes funny. Jane

Our female Nigerian participants’ engagement with white social events, unlike their husbands, reflected not only their sense of multiple I positions (Bhatia, 2002) but also a renegotiation of power within their marriage, supporting Kibria’s (1990) observations.

Cultural objects and consumption - having identified important between our Nigerian participants on the basis of their gender, the final stage of the analysis is to examine how these divergences manifested in their consumption behaviours, providing a tangible

¹ Oyibo means ‘white’ person/people.
affirmation of resistance. Trying to prove that our female participants dealt with their culturally oppressed need for autonomy through acts of resistance was difficult. For our white participants the wife’s resistance to enforced male behaviours, with the husband present during interviews, was openly communicated and joked about. For example, one white female participant joked that every time her husband left her to go and play golf, her response was to going shopping for clothes. An intervention they both commented was a valid response to his perceived selfish behaviour. In contrast, our female Nigerian participants never publicly undermined their husband’s status and position when interviewed together. Instead Nigerian cultural values of respecting the husband, noted earlier, were prevalent. Narratives surrounding acts of resistance manifesting through consumption acts where only openly discussed and acknowledged when these women were interviewed alone. Acts of resistance took two approaches: open acts of resistance justified by necessity and acts of conscious, premeditated resistance.

Open acts of resistance justified by necessity often arose from the pressures of migration and the husband working long hours. Our female Nigerian participants described after numerous requests for house repairs etc to be done, simply resolved the problem themselves. Typically these situations arose because the husband was out working and unavailable to undertake household chores associated with their role, for example making repairs, putting up curtain rails. For example:

...there was a time that I had to replace one of the curtains in our room. Well I couldn’t wait for him, so I had to replace it myself. I just went to Homebase and got a new rail, I then called one friend I have that knows a builder, and that is how he came to fix the curtain rails. They are still there today!

Researcher: So what did your husband think?
Well what could he say? I couldn’t wait, something that he should have done…he hadn’t done. So I had to do it myself, it did not matter what he thought [laughs]. Jane

Increased socio-economic wealth arising from employment also empowered our female participants to make direct cultural challenges to the husband’s right to make family decisions. In these instances resistance manifested in the over-riding of the husband’s wishes, indicating a higher level of autonomy then was evident amongst our white participants; consider this narrative about a female participant building a second home in Nigeria:

Well he wasn’t too happy as he felt that we should have had the main family house in the village. But we discussed it and I reminded him of the house we already had, although it is in need of decoration it is still there [in the ancestral village]...I can’t imagine the children wanting to stay there when they visit. So I just took it upon myself to start to develop my land, and to be honest it was the best decision that I have ever made. The house is wonderful…Margaret

The participant then discussed how her cultural resistance was being extended further by planning to purchase more properties in Nigeria, against her husband’s wishes, using her sister for moral and financial support:

Yes, actually I have been discussing with my sister and we want to invest in a few properties in Nigeria, the market it so good. But I have to keep that hush, hush for now [laughs].

Researcher: Why

Well you see my husband is really not into property investment. But I feel it would be an ideal way for use to have another external income when we go back to Nigeria.

Margaret

Margaret’s ownership of her own financial wealth and how she wanted to assert it, against her husband’s wishes was a familiar story amongst our Nigerian female participants,
supporting Kandiyoti’s (1988) comments on resistance of patriarchal cultural values. Money had been earned from these women working and these participants felt empowered to spend it as they wished; a renegotiation of power that contradicted traditional gender roles (Kacen, 2000). Issues surrounding ownership of wealth was not evident amongst our white participants reflecting a greater sense of cultural equality. Whilst purchasing land perhaps represents an extreme example of cultural resistance through consumption, our female Nigerian participants noted how more mundane acts of consumption became forms of resistance to their husband’s assertions. Clothing, including designs, textures, and cultural outfits – Western or Nigerian – clothing all became areas of dispute and assertion, with clothes chosen with the explicit knowledge that the husband would not like it.

Other examples involved consumption used as a means of reasserting female power within the family unit; often involving the female participant intervening and contradicting their husband’s wishes. Although similar behaviours may exist within white families, the level of concealment occurring purchases with the intention of undermining the husband was not evident. Consider the following narrative, from a female Nigerian participant, where perceived favoritism in the family provides the impetus for the wife to use consumption not only as an act of resistance against the husband’s wishes but also to reinforce her position and power within the family:

…there was a time when he [their youngest son] got so vexed with my husband, as he gave my eldest son his laptop for university. My son was not happy…[and the act of going against her husband’s wishes provoked marital tensions so] it nearly became something serious…well [laughs] don’t mention this to my husband but later I bought him one of those computer games. They call it [pauses] a Ninten, Nintendo, he deserved it anyway, he did well in his exams! Jane
Jane’s use of consumption to contradict her husband’s wishes, assert her power and position in the family with regards to her children was a common occurrence. These acts are indicative of Reynold’s (2006) observations of marital conflict and Moon’s (2003) renegotiation of hierarchical gender relations.

Conclusion

Our paper has illustrated how acculturation leads to female Nigerian women, through acts of consumption, to reassert a sense of individuality, experienced from engaging in an individualistic society, in culturally, collectivist, traditional homes. The need of the husband to assert his sense of cultural power in the home ultimately led to their wives seeking ways to reassert their own sense of power. Yet, the question arises why did their husbands want to reassert Nigerian cultural roles, of male supremacy, in their households? The answer lies in acculturation stress and the need to be accepted and valued. All our Nigerian participants discussed, at length, their experiences of racism and their effect on self-esteem. For the men, brought up to be respected by their wives and wider community, it was particularly difficult:

Well [sighs]. You see I can understand when people are not used to change....I remember there was a time that, actually my first day of university in this country. I was waiting on the bus and some of the local children out of nowhere were making monkey sounds [laughs]. At first I was wondering what was happening, then it finally dawned to me that they were making the noise at me! George

Bibliography


Reid, Pamela T and Comas-Díaz, Lillian (1990), Gender and ethnicity: Dual perspectives, *Sex Roles*, 22, 397-408


