

# MASCULINITY AND SYMBOLIC CONSUMPTION AMONG BLACK AFRICAN CONSUMERS: AN INTERPRETIVE STUDY

## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** Despite the plethora of scholarship outputs on masculinity showing it as a fertile research domain, there are noteworthy lacunae on the topic especially in relation to its dynamics among ethnic minority groups. Accordingly, this paper addresses masculinity and symbolic consumption among Black African consumers in the UK.

**Methodology:** The study is interpretive in nature with the use of in-depth interviews conducted with twenty participants in London and the data analysis follows the grounded theory orientation.

**Findings:** It shows masculinity-oriented categorisations of market offerings but with an incidence of cultural tension. It suggests the prevalence of symbolic consumption among participants as demonstrated in their quest for admiration and commendation about their consumption and how masculinity is communicated. A new masculinity typology emerged from the study which depicts men in this context as falling into four categories of Gay, Conservative, Contemporary, and Men on Acme.

**Originality:** The study unpacks issues around masculinity, and multiculturalism, and proposes a novel typology on the topic vis-à-vis the discourse on segmentation, targeting, and positioning strategy.

**.Keywords:** Masculinity, Black-Africans, Symbolic-consumption, United Kingdom

## **Introduction**

Gendered division has been a powerful force in the discourse of consumption and consumer identity over the years (Gbadamosi, 2019). It is pronounced in various marketing cues such as packaging, labelling, and branding (Azar *et al.*, 2018). The prevalence of gendered narrative is evident in the fact that when a brand is associated with a sex type, it may even be difficult to link it to the opposite sex (Avery, 2012). The literature acknowledges that boys and girls are conscious of this even at their early years as it features in marketing stimuli through product and services designs (Pennel, 1994; Schroeder and Zwick, 2004). This is not surprising as evidence shows that the segments that emerge from this are not only identifiable but also easily accessible and substantial (Darley and Smith, 1995; Azar 2013). Hence, it is a fertile research domain with theoretical and practical implications. Despite the huge research interest on gender division as a general topic, research attention on masculinity and consumption is rather limited and there is a palpable theoretical gap in the literature with regard to ethnic consumers. This study draws from the claim that consumers' identities could be dynamic, and what an individual esteems may be rejected by another (Jones, 2007; (El Banna *et al.*, 2018; Cleveland & Bartikowski, 2023) as well as the contention of Hefner (2017) that masculinity is not static but culturally constructed and varies in relation to space and time. This study addresses the overarching question of 'to what extent do Black African men in the UK use consumption as the basis of explication of their masculinity?'. Hence, it specially and empirically explores masculinity and symbolic consumption among Black African consumers in the UK and through this contributes to the extant literature on the dynamics of ethnicity, gender, and consumer behaviour.

## **A critical overview of the Masculinity Construct**

Studies around masculinity have been more about its positioning in relation to feminism since 1970s (Patterson & Elliott, 2002; Silva, 2008; Thébaud & Pedulla, 2016; Borkowska, 2018; Ulrich et al., 2018; Barry, 2018; Pfeffer, 2019; Williams et al., 2019; Luna-Cortes & Aristizabal, 2022) which explains the contention of Schroeder and Zwick (2004: 23) that, semiotically, masculinity is irreversibly associated with, opposed to, and in relation to femininity. Drawing from a body of literature, Littlefield (2010) highlights ecofeminism, a feminism philosophy, as a paradigm that focuses on the view that, historically, men have their dominion over women and the natural world for the creation of the patriarchal societies. In this context, men's and women's works are perceived differently with the former noted as economically valuable while the latter is noted as caregivers. This has been questioned to some extent vis-à-vis the changing political and economic landscape ((Borkowska, 2018). For instance, it is stated that men enact different forms of masculinities (Kaiser, 2012) and it is not necessarily correct that the traditional model of fathering gives no value to caregiving or involvement in rearing children but only that paid job is given priorities over other responsibilities (Gatrell, et al. 2015; Hunter et al., 2017). Meanwhile, it has been argued that the ultimate form of masculinity is the ability to 'perform' sexually and have children, which is a primary objective of marriage (Sarpong, 1991; Adinkrah, 2012). Closely related to this is the view that some men did not only take pride in being heterosexual but also in having relationships and sex with various women as a way of 'making a name' whereas some women try to avoid such pattern of behaviour so that they will not be given a name 'slut' (Currier, 2013). In view of these contrasting perspectives and the documented multiplicity of social constructions enacted by ethnographers and historians, reconciling the notion of homogeneity in masculinity is rather complex (Connell, 2003; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

Furthermore, masculinities are not only fluid but also conflicted (Connell, 1995; Hillman & Henfry, 2006; Pettersson, 2013) as some men in the gay fraternity do embrace hegemonic masculinity by excluding women but also embrace femininity in the form of sharing their feelings with each other (Yeung et al., 2006; Barry, 2018). Accordingly, the incursion of some women into areas that are notably traditionally acknowledged as men's territory is an endorsement of the claim that the discourse of masculinity is changing (Nagel, 2017). As indicated by Connell (1995: 77), hegemonic masculinity could be explained as 'the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women'. In the discourse of masculinity, it is noted that not only do masculinities give men various benefits and power over women, but the power also applies to different groups of men differently (Pettersson, 2013; Roberts et al., 2017). As noted in the extant literature (Kaufman, 1994; Connell, 2008), there is heterogeneity in men in terms of being able to experience both power and vulnerability together.

### **Typologies of Masculinity: A Theoretical Background**

In the analysis of the masculinity construct, the literature presents four types of masculinities as hegemonic, complicit, marginalized, and subordinate (Connell, 1987; 2005; Azar, 2013). The hegemonic masculinity stresses the significance of power in men and drawing from Delphy (1998) and Mathieu (1991), Azar (2013) specifically cites the power to dominate women as embedded within this. In this schema, although the men in complicit masculinity category have most of the attributes of men, they still do not meet all the requirements of hegemonic masculinity. The marginalized masculinity identifies men of ethnic minority group in which case, the criterion of differentiation is ethnicity but according to this postulation, the subordinate masculinity describes the gay men. In another study, Martin et al. (2006) identify

what could be termed ‘situational masculinity’ among the women. This involves the women who engaged in hyper-masculine behaviour through the use of Harley-Davidson biker subculture. However, in this Hyper-masculine culture, the women still displayed overwhelming feminine expressions (Martin et al., 2006). In similar pattern, Littlefield (2010), using ecofeminism as the theoretical insight into hunting, found that the men studied in the research context exhibited different kinds of masculinities. These include those that revolve around being traditional, family-oriented values, connection and care for the environment, and mastery of technology; in contrast to the stereotypical expectations of masculinity of being disconnected from nature, socially isolated and dominating women and the nature. It is noteworthy that these postulations still leave us with many unanswered questions in relation to ethnic consumers especially in the UK context in which this study is situated.

As stated by Michalski (2015), the term hegemonic masculinity was first introduced to the literature in the early 1980s but specifically a more detailed version was first discussed by Connell (1987). As indicated by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), the term was first introduced within the context of social inequality in Australian high schools (Kessler et al., 1982). It is described as the cultural ideal masculinity type, which is practically unattainable by any man but exerts controlling effect on all men through the ritualization of everyday social practice (Lima, 2012). According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 841), ‘hegemonic masculinity has multiple meanings...Men can dodge among multiple meanings according to their interactional needs, Men can adopt hegemonic masculinity when it is desirable, but the same men can distance themselves strategically from it at other moments. Consequently, “masculinity” represents not a certain type of man, but, rather, a way that men position themselves through discursive practices’. Therefore, it is argued that masculinity is not a monolithic block (see for example, Lima 2012; Littlefield, 2010).

Lida (2005) writes about the feminization of masculinity and explores the significance of the act of young men employing feminine's aesthetics for practicing new masculine identities. Averi (2012) notes that since most of the people with money and power are men, [it is viewed as rational that women are crossing into men's terrain in the form of wearing clothes associated with being masculine](#). Conversely, crossing into women's feminine domain by wearing clothes associated with feminism is considered irrational, against male-dominated culture and downward mobility (Averi, 2012). Meanwhile, despite the complexity, it seems logical that masculinity has its place in the marketing of a number of products and services. Examples of this relevance and application abound. Averi (2012) raised the example of how Volkswagen used its 2012 relaunch of its Beetle to bring men into the female-skewed market with the claim caption of 'it's a boy'. Further examples include Harley-Davidson (Martin *et al.*, 2006) and Formula 1 sport (Sturm, 2011) in which the potential 'fantasy' of a male fan identify with another male sport star. To a great extent, this validates the claim that cultural messages within advertising discourse still function to revolve around the traditional gender roles, hence takes cognisance of masculinity and femininity constructs (Schroeder and Zwick, 2004). However, how this plays out specifically in the context of ethnic consumers especially Black African men in the UK remains a palpable lacuna in the extant literature.

In terms of categorization, hegemonic masculinity which dominates all other types of masculinity types and womanhood (Connell, 1987), is notably the most honoured or desired masculinity form as it gives an indication of what it means to be a man (Connell, 2003; Hunter *et al.*, 2017). Some of the masculinity characteristics are stated as being capable, strong, unemotional, in control, and successful (Connell, 2005; Hefner, 2017). Its further characteristics include being hard, not backing away from violence and anticipating war

(Berggren, 2012; 2013; 2014). As stated by Montes (2013), while emotions like interdependence, sadness, and social support are associated with feminism, emotions such as pride, anger, and independence are strongly praised in cultures that are characterised by masculinity (Fernandez et al., 2000; Montes, 2013). However, it has been noted that there could be ethnic differences in drive for masculinity (Swami, 2016). Meanwhile, some men noted as falling short of adequately achieving masculinity include the disabled, mentally ill, unemployed, and homeless (Hansen et al, 2013; Taylor, 2014). Shuttleworth et al. (2012) specifically highlight that masculinity and disability have conflicting physiognomies as the former is associated with being powerful and autonomous but the latter is noted for being dependent and helpless. In view of this, it is reasonable to indicate that while men belong to a group of status characteristic, they are in the constant risk of being stigmatized if they inadequately enact hegemonic masculinity (Goffman, 1963; Taylor, 2014). Despite the significant contributions highlighted in the extant literature on masculinity and consumption, far little is known about its dynamics in the symbolic consumption of the UK Black African consumers.

### **Ethnicity and Symbolic consumption: A Theoretical overview**

The cases of developed nations that are characterised by the influx of people from various other societies in search of one opportunity or another (Gbadmosi, 2012; Schiller, 2013; Gbadamosi, 2018; Woldeab et al., 2021; Akova, & Kantar, 2021; Fazli-Salehi et al., 2023) have increased the relevance of ethnic marketing. This contributes to the increase in scholarship efforts on ethnicity as a research topic. Ethnicity as defined by Eller (1997) is ‘...a social and psychological process whereby individuals come to identify and affiliate with a group and some aspect(s) of its culture. According to him, it is what emerges when a person, completes the expression: "I am a \_\_\_\_ because I share \_\_\_\_ with my group. Cultural identity which is the

degree to which an individual perceives to be included in an ethnic group (Cokley, 2007) is of key relevance to the discourse of ethnicity and consumption. Hence, the notion of assimilation or ‘melting pot’ has featured prominently in the consumer research literature in relation to this phenomenon. Its main crux is on whether the pattern of consumption of immigrants reflects their host culture or home culture (Wallendorf and Rely, 1983; Kizgin et al., 2018). Hence, it is reasonable to agree that borders are losing their traditional perspective function as markets and people are becoming integrated, yet some ethnic consumers are reaffirming their identities in this changing world (Laroche, 2018). This is linked to the notions of acculturation and enculturation that are mediated by cultural transmission channels which have been identified to be vertical, horizontal, and oblique (Berry, 2014; Ferguson et al, 2016). Based on this perspective, the parent-child cultural channel is noted as the vertical system whereas the child-to-child cultural interaction is the horizontal channel of cultural transmission. The oblique cultural transmission lies in the interaction of the other adults and institutions with the child. The study of Kizgin et al (2018) on the consumption of products from heritage and host cultures pinpoints the complexity and dynamics of living in a multicultural system in which immigrants navigate the terrain of maintaining their home culture and showing solidarity for the host culture through adjustment to the latter. Some of the useful findings associated with ethnicity lie in the area of the connections among members. A typical example is the finding that diaspora communities aid sojourners who are also known as temporary residents to thrive in the host culture as well as strengthening in-group cohesiveness for maintaining ethnic identity, and share marketplace information (Cleveland and Bartikowsku, 2018).

To a great extent, ethnicity, varying lifestyles, value and cultural background provide explications of some differences in people’s consumption (Cleveland et al, 2009; Ha et al., 2016). Accordingly, it has been noted that there are significant differences between non-



western and western sub-cultures (Schiele and Venkatesh, 2016). So, marketers now acknowledge that people of different ethnic groups tend to have different needs and consumption preferences (Gill et al., 2017). These seem akin to the contention of Maslow (1943) that human needs are diverse, hierarchical, and somewhat complex. These need patterns for ethnic consumers are shown in many contexts such as financial markets in the UK (Burton, 1996), Chinese and Malay households in Malaysia (2020); social media consumption and ethnicity (Bozkurt, et al., 2021); and Lao and Filipino consumers' ethnicity in Australia (2023). While these have enriched our knowledge of ethnicity and consumption to a great extent, none of these has provided an explication of masculinity on symbolic consumption, which pinpoints an obvious research gap.

Generally, consumption is a universal phenomenon in its widest sense, it is fundamental to the meaning practice of our day-to-day living and serves as a significant source of symbolic meanings with which we, as consumers implement and sustain our project of self (Wattanasuwan, 2005; Smaniotto *et al.*, 2021). In a nutshell, people do not only see consumption as an extension of who they are but actively express themselves through it (Belk, *et al.*, 1982; Gbadamosi, 2015). Closely linked to this, it is found that people who are actively involved in parting with old self-identity and forming a new one may result to using joint consumption to develop relationships with the new world central to the construction of the new self, desired (Gainer, 1995). Consequently, the lack of homogeneity due to cultural and other factors, makes the case to support the claim of Nwankwo and Lindridge (1998) that “one size fits all” strategy might not be right for capturing all the peculiarities of the ethnic minority market in Britain. Hence, studies that position the topic of masculinity into cultural contexts will be greatly beneficial and extend the current understanding of this increasingly popular marketing subject Accordingly, this study unpacks the extent to which Black African men use

masculinity as a construct to pattern their perception and attitudinal reaction to product and services consumed in their host cultural environment.

## **Methodology**

Driven by the need to 'link parts of the whole' in respect of this study, as emphasised in the literature (El-Amir and Burt, 2010), and for rigorous and authentic interpretations in this research (Schembri and Boyle, 2013), the study is essentially interpretive in nature. Hence, it is guided by the principle of theoretical saturation (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). After obtaining the necessary ethical approval, twenty (20) Black African ethnic minority consumers from London whose details are presented in Table 1 were purposively selected for the study. The sample consists of a mix of married and single men whose ages range from 20 to 69. As shown in the table, most of the participants have had a lengthy stay in the country (designated as not less than 10 years) which is inclusive of those born in the country. Essentially, the study is holistically interpretive in nature and focused on cultural constructs with the use of in-depth interviews. The attempt is to capture how the respondents construct their identity using the lens of masculinity. As argued by El-Amir and Burt (2010), the focus in this tradition is to build theory of social reality from the viewpoint of the participating social actors. The study also assumes that this reality is socially constructed within a non-dualistic ontology in other words allowing for inseparable interaction between the person and the world (Schembri and Boyle, 2013). Given the specific objective of this current study, the chosen methodological stance is deemed to be of good fit. Ensuring this consistency is considered important as has been demonstrated in previous studies on related topics based on their specific objectives such as Thebaud and Pedulla (2016) which used a survey-experimental design and Hefner (2017) which used in-depth interviews.

The data obtained were analysed by searching for patterns and common themes cutting across both emic and etic interpretations (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994; Chong, 2010). So, the analytical process begins during the early stages of data collection in the field and continues beyond the field-oriented activities (Schembri and Boyle, 2013). Essentially, it follows the grounded theory orientation as depicted in Figure 1 developed based on Strauss and Corbin, (1998) and (Gbadamosi, 2024). Hence, the open coding, axial coding, and selective coding were conducted as facilitated by the principle of constant comparison to identify differences and similarities. Accordingly, at the open coding level, the data were broken down to events, discrete incidents, ideas, and acts. So, it is about conceptualising, discovering categories, and developing them vis-à-vis their dimensions and properties. This was followed by relating those categories to subcategories in relation to their properties and dimension in the process known as axial coding. After a sentence-by-sentence microanalysis of the data, the selective coding involving developing paradigmatic constructs, delineating relationships, and specifying relationship (Spiggle, 1994) was done.

*Figure 1 (about here)*

### ***Validity and Reliability***

In view of the criticism of the alleged ‘lack of rigour’ levied at studies conducted within interpretive paradigm, considerable efforts have been made to address the contention (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Guba and Lincoln 1989; Goffin *et. al.*, 2012) and the tradition eschewed in this body of literature has been duly applied for this study. As suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Guba and Lincoln (1989) one of the basic criteria for assessing a qualitative study is its trustworthiness which encapsulates *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability*. According to them, these criteria are comparable to the positivist criteria of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and

objectivity in respective order.

Credibility aspect of this typology involves ensuring that the study is done in such a way that the probability of the findings being considered credible is enhanced and the findings approved by the constructors of the social world that were studied (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In this study, the use of notes and tape-recorders for the interviews, and respondents' validation address this. The respondents' validation as used in the study involved going back to the participants after the transcription of the data for them to confirm that the data actually is an accurate representation of what they said in the course of the interviews.

The focus in transferability is the issue of whether the findings of the study hold in some other contexts or even in the same context at some other time (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), this could be addressed by the researcher by providing a thick description that would enable anyone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about the possibility of the transfer. In this article, verbatim quotations from the respondents as related to the themes are reported in the findings section for making a thick description of the phenomenon under consideration as recommended (Gaskell and Bauer, 2000). The parallel equivalent criterion for reliability in quantitative research is Dependability. Essentially, it involves having complete records of all phases of the research process in an accessible manner as accurately as possible (Bryman, 2004; Goffin *et al.* 2012). As argued by Gaskell and Bauer (2000: p.346) '...clarity of procedures of data elicitation and data analysis are an essential part of quality research work'. This was achieved in this study as evidenced by the information in Table 1 and Figure 1. Confirmability addresses the question of whether the researcher handles the

study in unprejudiced manner (Goffin et al. 2012). To address this criterion for this study, efforts were made to ensure that guidance and direction during the interviews were kept to a minimum to avoid overtly influencing the findings.

*Table 1 (about here)*

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

This study is significantly revealing in relation to the objective and the findings that emerged. Although a good number of themes emerged from the study, they have been pruned down to product categorisation and cultural tension, symbolic consumption, admiration and commendation, communicating masculinity, masculinity typology, and opinion **leadership as shown in Figure 2**. Each of these is now discussed below in turn.

*Figure 2 (about here)*

## **PRODUCT CATEGORISATION AND CULTURAL TENSION**

**Participants indicate that several products are specifically indicative of masculinity and quite demonstrate how they are different from women in terms of their disposition to issues. They explain these products as those they do not and would not like to use.** Some of these are indicated by marketplace cues: such as brand, colours, packaging and other marketing communication tools. Examples includes perfumes, lingerie, hairstyles, and feminine-hygiene products

*If I understand you very well, then I will mention products that do not apply to us as men which include women feminine hygiene products, you know what I mean, pad or something like that, foundation, make-up, Yes, all these are meant for women (P4).*

*I think from one way, it can be easy to mention, like looking at what product women buy as distinct from what we buy as men. Lingerie and some perfumes are not our cup of tea as men but we as men are more into boxers, and some shoes that have been clearly designed for men. By that, I mean those things that you will see every now and then on men, If women wear them, people would be like what is happening here?(P6)*

Nevertheless, they acknowledge that due to socialization and their prolonged engagement in the UK, a country characterised by a significant degree of diversity, there is a limit to which some products communicate the differences.

*That is very tricky. We can be here talking about this product or that product especially as we know from Africa, but think about it this way, UK is very cosmopolitan where various people mix and interact. We see issues like immigration playing a major part. So, some of the stereotypical patterns we were used to in Africa do not necessarily apply here. In some places in Nigeria, you don't see women smoke or wear trousers but that apply vividly here in London (P8).*

## **SYMBOLIC CONSUMPTION**

The study shows the prominence of symbolic consumption in the form of creating and maintaining identity by participants. According to them, most of the purchases made that depict

them as men are driven by the need to feel good and ensure personal image enhancement. Hence, they consume to suit specific occasions for image enhancement.

*I believe that is part of life. We buy for others to know what we are made of. One of the things common to us as Black African men is our love for parties. While we do more of this in Africa, we attend parties here in the UK also. Personally, I can tell you that I have clothes for special events like birthday parties and marriage ceremonies that I share with my friends. The truth is that if I don't have the clothes, I will be somehow uncomfortable among my friends at the occasion. So, as I make provision for things like food, water and cigarette, I think of the purchase of stuff like clothes that put me together with my friends (P12):*

A key relevant and recurring point made here is the respondents' ostentatious consumption. Interestingly, while some of the participants merely acknowledge that this consumption behaviour does take place among men within this ethnic group because they have noticed it among their friends and associates, others clearly admitted to engaging in this purchase pattern. This specifically relates to high involvement products like cars, clothes and trinkets. As claimed by participants in this study, ironically, some of those who engage in this behaviour fail to fulfil their other primary responsibilities such as making adequate provision for the family:

*I will have to admit that I do that especially when I remember the stuff I have bought like my Rolex wrist watch, and Gucci shoes. This is just like the MC that announces your arrival when you get to the parties. If I work hard on my business as I believe I do, it is absolutely proper for me to treat myself to things like that. I feel good when people appreciate what I use. It's a very good feeling (P17).*

*I agree that most African men do this. It is really complex because some people that do this are really using it to live what we can call fake life. The work that some of them do cannot really sustain that lifestyle but they still struggle to buy and change their cars, I mean really big cars. Others can go as far as not fulfilling their family responsibilities while going on this shopping spree. But to address your question, I will say that this shopping pattern can be seen among Black African men (P14).*

### **ADMIRATION AND COMMENDATION**

The drive to be admired and commended as ‘men indeed’ trigger the consumption habits of most of the participants. It is stated that there are some widely accepted masculine consumption patterns that result in admiration and commendation. Therefore, given their drive to be loved, accepted, and commended, more often than not, they tend to follow these consumption patterns. As example, the clothing that typically depict masculinity are bought and used very widely.

*Women are lovely people, no doubt about that. It is not really about ‘good’ or ‘bad’ or something like that between the two. Having said that, we men tend to love our ego. I mean in some kind of way. Yes, so, we love what will make that to be seen by people around us. So, it explains why I would be very keen to buy those things that will show us as real men (P1).*

Another example is automobile. While this does not specifically indicate masculinity in general sense, it tends to concretize this within the ethnic minority group context. Respondents indicates that there are specific brands often used by men. Hence, having these brands give



them some sort of admiration and commendation within their social context. According to them it connotes success and strong positioning for specific men (responsibility in the society).

*To be a trailblazer, you will have to be seen as worthy of it. For example, they will look at the your career, you cannot be a breadwinner, or head of a home without something reputable. Even something as simple as the type of car can make people look up to you as someone to admire in the society. A real man should not be comfortable with the ordinary (P8).*

## **COMMUNICATING MASCULINITY**

Another interesting finding of the study is the habit of consuming to communicate masculinity among participants. They communicate masculinity through their consumption in the form of various product types such as wrist watches, clothing, and masculine colour selection. A specific point mentioned here which is linked to symbolic consumption is that some of the consumers live ‘fake; life by consuming beyond their means just to communicate that they meet the standard of masculinity embraced in the ethnic group.

*In Ghana and I can actually say across Africa to a great extent, people tend to gauge this from what you buy, and have to give you the respect. I know this can be a little different here in the UK but, the drive for success and shopping to show it makes one admired as a man (P20).*

*I also need to say that there is a trend going on especially among black men. They buy to show off by living beyond their means. They go for popular clothes and brands when they have almost*

*nothing else left to take care of their families. I see that as fake life or maybe I can say, it is the way they set their priorities as African men (P16).*

## **MASCULINITY TYPOLOGY**

Based on their responses, a good number of patterns of men categorisations emerged from the study but they could be fine-tuned to fit the schema of: Gay, Conservative, Contemporary, and Men on Acme. The basic criteria used are indications about respondents' wealth, psychography, level of socialisation, and biological factor. While the biological factor explains the categorisation of Gay men, the Contemporary category are those men that are up-to-date in terms of fashion trends and consumption issues around what make men to be men, the conservative are old fashioned and nonreceptive to current trend on masculinity:

*It can sometimes be challenging to admit this among some friends, as a man of colour, that I am Gay, but that is it, I am proud of it. Some may look at me as a kind of a different man. That is their problem. I am proud of it (P7)*

*I can say, I am up-to-date as a man in terms of what I buy and use... but I know I still have some that I can say are high up there in terms of wealth and lifestyle as African men (P20).*

*My way of life is different as I still believe in what some will call old way of life. It may be because I am a bit religious. I believe in moderation in what I buy, eat, what I wear and others. It is not because I am poor per se but my personality and belief system are different (P15).*

Meanwhile, Men on Acme depict the highest level of masculinity that fulfils all the criteria commonly associated with masculinity in this ethnic group including wealth and a high level of socialisation:

*Although it could be seen to be arrogant saying this, ... I think I am really comfortable as a man with what I have achieved so far. I am happy that, apart from being educated and happily married with children, I can say that I have ticked all the main boxes...I have a good status among my friends and associates. The truth is that, not all African men in this country can tell you that. I feel good. (P17)*

However, it is important to note one of the key distinguishing factors between the contemporary and the 'Men on Acme' categories of this masculinity schema. This lies in the fact that those in the former may be aware of the dynamics of contemporary consumption issues, but they are constrained by the lack of the resources needed to follow the life pattern of the 'Men on Acme'.

## **OPINION LEADERSHIP**

This study shows that respondents believe that attaining the highest level of masculinity (Men on Acme) gives them the highest opportunity to be opinion leaders in the society especially within their ethnic group. Hence, this is linked to their pursuit of significant landmarks in their social interactions, and leadership within the society. As typical of opinion leaders, findings show that the consumption pattern of these men tends to be prescriptive in terms of which products to buy, use, where to buy them and when to do so as signals to other members in the ethnic group.

*I have been very fortunate in my career over the years. This shows in my life as many people look up to me. Some aspire to be like me in this society. I have been in the country for many years... It is such a great feeling that I can command respect in that way (P8)*

*As a black man, yes, there are many black African men that have made it here in the UK. Some are in the Music industry, others are investors. I am also trilled by black footballers and Politicians in the country. I know I do not have the kind of money they have, I am proud of them as it shows that sky is the limit for those of us that are upcoming (P2)*

## **DISCUSSION**

This study addresses an important issue on masculinity and symbolic consumption among Black African consumers in the UK. Overall, it is enlightening. The findings show the prevalence and acknowledgement of gendered division as reflected in the participants' product preferences and consumption vis-à-vis masculinity. Interestingly, this finds support in the extant literature (Schroeder and Zwick, 2004; Avery, 2012; Azar 2013). The tension in the dynamics of culture in terms of masculinity as a core factor influencing consumption is also noteworthy. The immigrant status of the respondents indicates that they are exposed to two main cultural systems in which conflict and tension apply. While the findings and claims in the extant literature is not specific to masculinity as done in this study, this finding aligns with established claims on culture and consumer identity as Jones (2007) speculate that there could be disparity between individuals on this. Specifically, the literature (Laroche, 2018; Kizgin et al., 2018) accentuate that borders are losing their traditional roles of differentiating communities as people are integrating with other countries. Meanwhile, the prevalence of symbolic consumption among participants is noteworthy. This is linked to their quest for admiration and commendation, and how they communicate masculinity with their

consumption. In its broad sense, we can position these findings alongside existing postulation in the relevant academic literature (Connell, 1987; 1995; Azar, 2013). For example, Connell (1995) raises the issue in relation to hegemonic masculinity that its pursuit could be used to address the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy and dominance in the society. Meanwhile, the claim that some of these men live ‘fake life’ could be linked to the literature which stresses that men adopt masculinity differently and can move in and out of hegemonic masculinity to suit their interactional needs (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). So, it is reasonable to explain that these Black African men have desire to achieve the ‘ideal’ and best masculinity possible but are inhibited by resources. Hence, they juggle their resources-expenditure ratio to achieve the societal standard of masculinity in their host country. It seems as a question like this applies ‘How can one be an opinion leader if he does not have what is expected that communicates power and achievement?’.

A close analysis of the data also suggests a typology among these men in varying ways of conceptualizing masculinity. **These are Gay, Conservative, Contemporary, and Men on Acme.** As shown in the study, the gay men are noted as such due to their special sexual orientation which distinguishes them from other men that are heterosexual. This fits the same gay masculinity type given by Azar (2013). Meanwhile, the remaining masculinity types that emerged from this study are different from the one documented in the literature (Connell, 1987; 2005; Martin, et al., 2006; Azar, 2013). For example, the existing postulation identified ethnic men as a marginalized type of masculinity (Azar, 2013) which is short of the threshold associated with Hegemonic masculinity. In this study, apart from the gay masculinity type, there are conservative, contemporary, and Men on acme masculinity types, In this proposed typology, the conservatives are old-fashioned and resistant to change but have aspiration to be among ‘Men on acme’ at some point, which describes the peak and the end of a this masculinity

continuum. The Men on Acme is analogous to the 'Self actualization' stage of the Maslow hierarchy of needs which is a stage when one could be deemed to have fulfilled his potentials (Maslow, 1943). Meanwhile, to an extent, the men in the contemporary masculinity fit the 'complicity' type identified in Azar (2013) in that it does not clearly fit the ultimate masculinity type, which is identified as The Men on Acme in this study. The current study extends this understanding further by stressing that the main distinction between the conservative and the contemporary is that the latter is up-to-date, embraces latest technology such as social media in relation to their consumption. However, there is a gap between the Contemporary and those categorised as 'Men on Acme' because the latter category has more resources for consuming goods and services for the purpose of communicating their masculinity to project power and achievement in the society.

## **Conclusion**

The study focusses on how masculinity, symbolism, and ethnicity influence consumption with reference to Black African men in the UK. It shows their product preference as highlighted in the differences between items that communicate masculinity as compared to others. Meanwhile, the strong link to their home cultural setting that guide their consumption as men is limited by the process of acculturation as they become exposed to the UK cultural system. In this, the distinction between masculinity-oriented products and others becomes less pronounced. This cultural tension persists as both home and host cultural settings become combined to pattern the thoughts and consumption of this consumer segment.

In what is reminiscent of the fundamental understanding of symbolic consumption, the consumers are triggered by their need to be admired, commended and seen as opinion leaders, to pursue their consumption that typically emphasizes their masculinity. So, they communicate masculinity through their consumption which further stresses that their purpose of consumption

transcends the need for functional benefits offered by the market offerings. It is also noteworthy that some of the men are seen and depicted as living a 'fake' life which still emphasizes the incidence of symbolic consumption. In line with the claim in the literature that masculinity is neither static nor monolithic block, this study suggests a different typology indicating types of masculinity. This is a crucial part of the findings in that some of the existing literature conceptualize male consumer of ethnic group as a type of masculinity different from others, but this current study focuses specifically on this consumer segment and suggests a pattern. This typology shows men types to be Gay, Conservative, Contemporary, and Men on Acme. The gay is noted as such because of their sexual orientation but the conservative and contemporary are different in terms of the exposure of the latter to latest trends in the world of consumption. The Men on Acme category tops the list in terms of power, wealth and impact. This typology is different from the existing ones in the literature and extends the current understanding on this phenomenon.

### **Implications and Limitations of the study**

This study has both theoretical and managerial implications on this important topic explored. Theoretically, it delves deeper into the phenomena of masculinity and ethnicity to extend the extant literature. It unpacks the subterraneous underpinning of these issues and specifically shows its relevance and link to the symbolic consumption of Black African consumers. This is quite revealing. The study shows that this consumer segment uses products, through their symbolic elements to communicate in the society. It raises an understanding of consumption significantly beyond the superficial domain to a threshold where the consumers use their consumption and masculinity to seek admiration, and commendation, and serve as opinion leaders. As society is inherently characterised by stratification of various forms, the masculinity typology in the study is enlightening and valuable to marketers. Managerially, the paper draws

attention to how masculinity and culture could provide strategic direction for contemporary strategic marketing activities. As ethnic marketing continues to grow, it is becoming increasingly important for marketers to be effective in this highly competitive marketplace. Hence, this study goes beyond ethnicity as a broad phenomenon and offers marketers insights into how their segmentation, targeting, and positioning strategies could be better formulated and implemented in order to provide the target market with the utmost satisfaction desired that will equally result in business profitability and sustainability. Meanwhile, the paper has some limitations that highlight avenues for future studies. The study is focused on one ethnic group and features data collected through interpretive study. This suggests that there is a need to apply caution when interpreting the findings of this study. Besides, the study also acknowledges the limitations commonly associated with interpretive studies. Nonetheless, it is important to note that these do not compromise the integrity of this study as it still enriches knowledge on the themes addressed.



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**Table 1**  
**Respondents' Demographics**

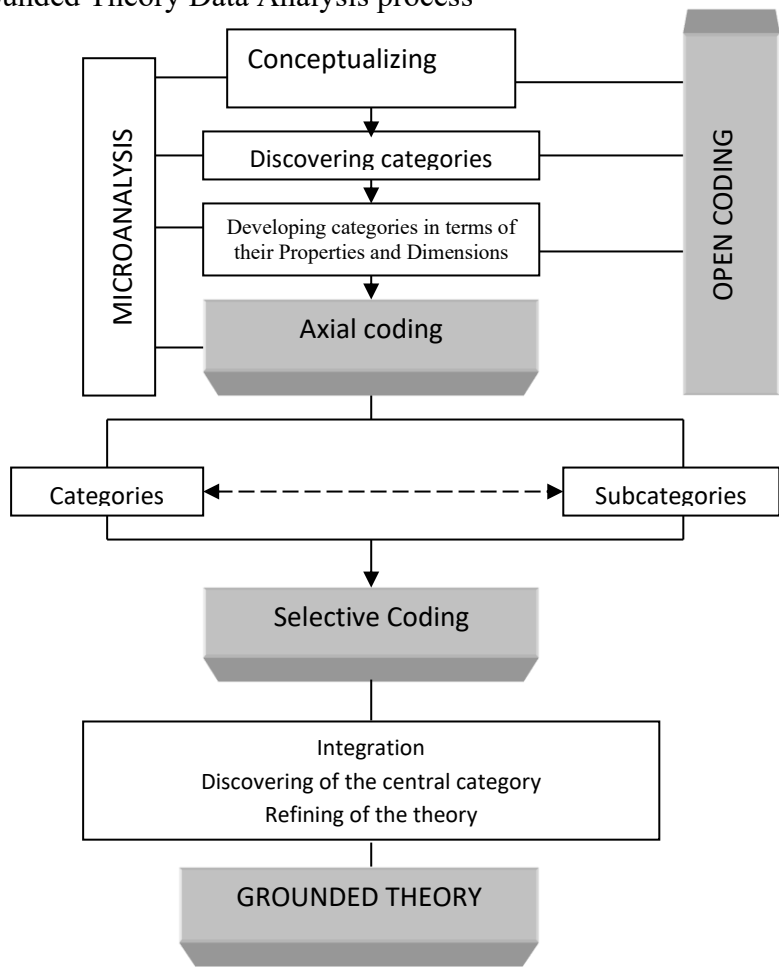
	Respo ndents	Age Category	Marital Status	Country of origin	Annual Income Per annum	Educational Qualification	Years of Stay in the United Kingdom
1	P1	30-39	Single	Nigeria	£30001- 40000	First Degree	10 years and more
2	P2	30-39	Married	Cameroon	£10001- 20000	First degree	10 years and more
3	P3	40-49	Married	Ghana	£20001- 30000	GCSE	Between 5 and 10 years
4	P4	40-49	Married	Zimbabwe	£20001- 30000	First Degree	10 years and more
5	P5	50-59	Married	Nigeria	£30001- 40000	PG Diploma	10 years and more
6	P6	40-49	Married	Kenya	£ 30001 – 40,000	First Degree	10 years and more
7	P7	30-39	Single	South Africa	£20001- 30000	First Degree	10 years and more
8	P8	40-49	Married	Nigeria	£50,001 - 60000	Masters degree	10 years and more
9	P9	50-59	Married	Nigeria	£ 30001 – 40,000	First Degree	10 years and more
10	P10	40-59	Married	Tanzania	£20001- 30000	First Degree	Between 5 and 10 years
11	P11	40-49	Married	Namibia	£30001- 40000	First Degree	10 years and more
12	P12	50-59	Married	Cameroon	£50001- 60000	Masters Degree	Between 5 and 10 years
13	P13	40-49	Married	Nigeria	£50001- 60000	Masters Degree	10 years and more
14	P14	20-29	Single	Ghana	£30001- 40000	First Degree	Between 5 and 10 years
15	P15	60-69	Married	Democratic Republic of Congo	£30001- 40000	GCSE	10 years and more
16	P16	40-49	Married	Ghana	£20001- 30000	First Degree	10 years and more
17	P17	30-39	Married	Nigeria	£50001- 60000	Masters Degree	10 years and more
18	P18	50-49	Married	Kenya	£30001- 40000	First Degree	10 years and more
19	P19	40-49	Married	Morocco	£30001- 40000	First Degree	10 years and more



20	P20	20-29	Single	Ghana	£20001-30000	HND	Between 5 and 10 years
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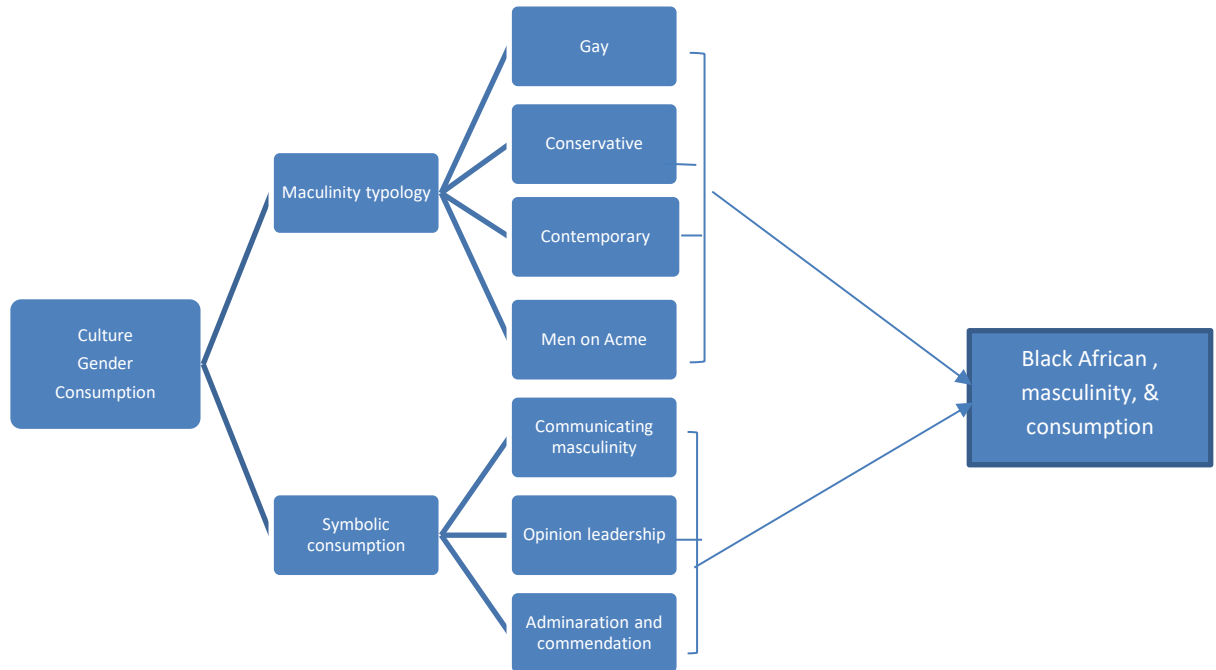
Source: (Author's own work).

Figure: 1: Grounded Theory Data Analysis process



Source: Gbadamosi (2024)

Figure 2: Masculinity and Consumption among Black African men



Source: (Author's own work).