

"Fake It Till You Make It?" Post-Coloniality and Consumer Culture in Africa

Written by Duke Mwedzi

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Mike Featherstone (1990) describes the effect of growing rates of production and consumption of goods on social relations. Other than the intended use of a purchased item, consumer goods can also become communicators of ideals and social status (Featherstone, 1990: 5). This is known as consumer culture, and it is one of the ways that social and economic class distinctions are maintained (Featherstone, 1990: 5). In order to understand consumer culture in an African context, one must consider the historic colonial relationship between African and European states, as well as the current economic relationships Africa shares with other parts of the world. Globalisation and the development of complex international supply chains have increased the rate at which foreign goods are consumed in Africa and politically, the ideals that were brought about by colonialism have been internalised by African people through cultural assimilation. This essay will discuss these realities and how they relate to consumer culture in African societies.

Understanding Consumer Culture

The first element of consumer culture is how consumption of goods can be a marker of social distinctions, particularly class distinctions (Featherstone 1990: 5). In late capitalist societies, the perception of value is no longer in a product's use value, but in its exchange value (Featherstone, 1990: 7). This means that the value of goods is generally inflated, and wealthy individuals purchase expensive products with high exchange value to display status rather for intrinsic value (Featherstone, 1990: 7). This practice is also known as conspicuous consumption and features prominently in the fashion industry, particularly in jewellery made from precious gemstones (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004: 25). When an individual purchases an expensive diamond necklace, they communicate their wealth by spending an amount that is beyond the reach of most people. This creates a condition of 'haves and have nots', where those who own items of high value distinguish themselves from those who do not, and in so doing communicate their status as members of the upper class.

A second element of consumer culture is the idea that accumulating goods can be a means of gaining power (Featherstone, 1990: 5). Once the distinction between classes has been made, one can use their elevated position to gain other advantages. Being a member of the upper class grants access to social capital, which can be translated into other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986: 252). Economically, one can use contacts within their social class to gain a competitive advantage, such as an industrialist meeting with potential investors at an exclusive country club. Politically, upper class individuals often use contacts with political influence to achieve their own ends, as exemplified by the American special interest process (Domhoff, 1967: 176). Gaining social capital is one of the more obvious benefits of buying into consumer culture, but in African contexts, it is important to consider the effect of cultural assimilation.

Cultural Assimilation

In simple terms, cultural assimilation is the process by which one group acquires the ideals and values of another group (Teske & Nelson, 1974: 359). This requires direct contact between cultural groups, where one group takes on the sentiments and attitudes of the other (Teske & Nelson, 1974: 359). Often it is the case that groups with less

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political influence are assimilated into the cultures of more powerful societies, and this was evident in the attitudes of colonial powers to their subjects. Natives in French colonies like Senegal who learned the French language were 'trained' in French culture and rewarded with political power (Blanton et al, 2001: 478). Ostensibly, this was a reward for showing ambition, but in reality, ambition was closely tied to adopting French culture (Blanton et al, 2001: 478). Consequently, the cultural identity of the colonised was undermined and replaced with European culture. Fanon (1952: 418) develops this idea further, observing that black African culture is denigrated by colonialism and white European culture is offered as a superior alternative. Within the colonial framework, the colonised were considered sub-human and so was their culture. In order to achieve full humanity, black Africans would need to forsake their own culture and adopt that of the white, fully human European (Fanon, 1952: 421). This made culture one of the ways that the distinction between African and European was maintained, and the standard by which full humanity was measured. This is analogous to how class distinctions that are maintained by consumer culture, especially in many African societies where class and race are closely tied. Contemporary African societies have all been liberated from formal colonial rule, but the legacy of cultural assimilation can still be seen in the attitudes of consumers.

Consumer Culture in Nigeria

Consumption patterns in Nigeria present an interesting case study in African consumer culture. Generally, Nigerian consumers tend to prefer foreign brands and products (Lysonski & Durvasula, 2013: 495). This is partly a result of large-scale corporations employing transnational marketing strategies, but it is also important to consider the local reputation of Nigerian goods (Lysonski & Durvasula, 2013: 495). Nigerian-made products are viewed as unreliable and backwards, so many consumers opt for goods imported from Europe and further afield (Lysonski & Durvasula, 2013: 495). The fact that this belief is held by Nigerians themselves has been described as 'reverse ethnocentrism', a kind of shame in what is produced locally (Lysonski & Durvasula, 2013: 495). This is the kind of disparaging attitude that informed colonial beliefs, which Nigerians are now internalising and reproducing in their consumption preferences. In this instance, consumption is a means of maintaining not only class distinctions as Featherstone initially argues, but also distancing oneself from negative ideas about one's own culture. Consumers in Nigeria purchase foreign goods as an economic statement of social status, but also as a cultural statement of their adoption of foreign ideals. What is African is considered backwards, and what is foreign is seen as sophisticated, so in order to gain the sophistication of European culture, one must consume European products and reject African products. This is an example of the influence of cultural assimilation. Individuals can develop a deep commitment to an adopted culture, to the point of accepting beliefs that undermine their own culture. Local African culture is considered inferior, and this is communicated by consuming foreign goods.

Counterfeit Goods

Consuming foreign goods is an effective sign of status in African societies, but in some cases, there is an oversaturation of these signs. Many Africans are lifting themselves out of poverty to join a rapidly growing middle class which is eager to cement their newfound status (Walters, 2017: 111). This makes African societies among the most brand conscious (Naude, 2015: 250). However, because these branded goods are manufactured abroad, they are often unavailable to buy or unaffordable due to the added cost of importing. This combination of a brand conscious, growing middle class and the unavailability of branded products makes Africa an ideal market for counterfeit goods (Walters, 2017: 111). Items like designer clothing, watches and personal electronics communicate all the status of foreign branded goods, but since they are not locally available for purchase, they communicate the added status of having travelled to acquire them. This gives branded items an extra layer of meaning in African societies like Zimbabwe, where there is a high demand for counterfeit products because branded goods are unavailable to buy locally (Naude, 2015: 250). As seen in Nigeria, individuals consume foreign goods to communicate status by rejecting what is local, but when these goods are unavailable, the demand for counterfeit products grows. Even in South Africa where international brands are relatively accessible, the counterfeit industry is estimated to be worth upwards of R360 billion (Singh, 2011). Foreign goods have become so valuable to African consumers that many purchase counterfeit products, sometimes even knowingly (Naude, 2015: 250). This indicates the power of consumer culture in African societies. Branded goods are purchased not for their quality but for what they communicate, and when communicating status is the intention, authenticity becomes less important. As a result, the market becomes flooded with foreign branded goods, so their effectiveness as status symbols is reduced. When

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expensive goods are overly available, reading cultural signs of wealth and class becomes more difficult and other, less ubiquitous signs are used to recognise social distinctions (Featherstone, 1990: 12).

Cultural Capital

In a situation where status symbols are widely owned, ownership of goods loses its value as a social distinguisher (Featherstone, 1990: 12). Individuals begin to use non-material cultural signs to mark social distinctions (Featherstone, 1990: 11). The upper class becomes recognised not by the value of what they own, but by their choice of purchases (Featherstone, 1990: 10). Upper class individuals are identifiable by their knowledge of what is in good taste (Featherstone, 1990: 10). Knowing good taste separates them from the rest of society, who may be able to afford the same items, but lack understanding of what is fashionable and how to use it (Featherstone, 1990: 10). Good taste is an asset and forms part of what Bourdieu (1986: 244) calls cultural capital. Cultural capital is different from material capital in that it cannot be transferred and, unlike many of the goods in Africa, is difficult to counterfeit (Bourdieu, 1986: 244). This makes cultural capital a more authentic cultural sign that marks distinctions in African societies. An example is food tastes. Enjoyment of a particular food is something that cannot be transferred, so when an upper class individual consumes expensive and exclusive food, they distinguish themselves from other individuals who would not be equipped to make the same choice. In fact, some foods like white wine and blue cheese are unpleasant to the uninitiated, but to those who have knowledge of how to enjoy them, these foods are considered 'acquired' tastes. Culinary tastes are an example of non-material ways to identify the *nouveau riche*, or impostors of the upper class, and social distinctions remain visible even when material status symbols are widely owned (Featherstone, 1990: 13).

Another non-material cultural sign is how one uses language (Featherstone, 1990: 12). Linguistic cultural signs like an accent cannot be transferred and are difficult to counterfeit, so they serve as another easily readable cultural sign. In South Africa, the English language has been associated with business, power and whiteness (Spencer, 2009: 69). As a result, the type of English that is spoken by white South Africans is held as the standard (Spencer, 2009: 70). Those who speak English fluently and with European pronunciations become distinct from those who speak the language less proficiently or with non-European accents (Spencer, 2009: 71). Since whiteness carries the connotations of political power and economic activity, which are both elements of the upper class, one must adopt this way of speaking English to gain acceptance into elite political and economic spaces (Spencer, 2009: 71). It is also interesting to note that this kind of prestige is not afforded to African languages. African languages are viewed as less culturally valuable in comparison to the global language of English. This is another indication of the extent of cultural assimilation, which is likely exacerbated by the African fascination with foreign goods. It is easier to enjoy European brands and media if one speaks the language. The status of linguistic cultural signs show how African culture is undermined and foreign culture is idealised, as Fanon (1952: 417) describes. Language is an effective marker of social distinctions because learning a language requires time, and mastery of a language cannot be counterfeited the way products can (Fanon, 1952: 418). Proficiency in English as spoken by white people serves as an easily readable marker of social distinctions in countries like South Africa.

Shortcomings of Consumer Culture Theory in Africa

Featherstone's theory allows some incisive understandings of the social dynamics of consumption in Africa, but there are some realities it cannot account for. While it is true that many consumers in countries like Nigeria have negative attitudes towards local products, there are notable exceptions, such as the film industry Nollywood. Nigerian film has gained widespread popularity in the country and abroad, partly because these films depict many aspects of Nigerian culture (Ukah, 2003: 204). An especially popular subject is religion, specifically Pentecostal Christianity (Ukah, 2003: 204). This is interesting because Christianity as a cultural item was introduced to Nigeria from Europe, but it has become such a part of Nigerian life that it is included in locally produced film. This is an example of bricolage, the combining of cultural items from different origins to create something new (Hebdige, 1979: 105). It also indicates that African consumers do not necessarily have negative attitudes towards what is locally produced. A binary understanding that consumers view the local as bad and the foreign as good should be avoided because the reality is more complex. A market exists among African consumers for African products. Avoiding African products in favour of foreign brands does not always communicate social status, and some status can be communicated by African

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products.

Featherstone's theory of consumer culture is also ill equipped to account for the reality of poverty in Africa. In a condition where most people in the population live below the poverty line, social status is communicated in ways other than monetary spending. This is the case in a society like Somalia, where half of the population lives below the poverty line (UNICEF, 2016: 23). Another factor is that much of Africa's population resides in rural communities. In 2018, almost 60% of Sub-Saharan Africa's population still lived in rural communities where consumer goods are less available, authentic or otherwise (World Bank, 2018). Social status in such communities is communicated by other means, such as polygamy among the Yoruba people of Western Africa (Bascom, 1951: 495). Measurements of social status reflect the values of a society, so consumer culture is less likely to persist in African societies where material goods are not valued as highly as they are in the West.

Conclusion

Featherstone's theory of consumer culture may have originated in Europe, but it offers valuable insights in an African context. The initial argument that consumption is a way to mark social distinctions rings true, but in post-colonial Africa consumption also communicates status through the adoption of foreign ideals and culture. However, much of what is consumed on the continent is counterfeited, indicating the demand for branded, foreign products. As a result, non-material signs such as language and taste become alternative ways to mark social distinctions. This is largely true in more affluent, urban environments, but in poorer, rural parts of Africa, status is communicated in other ways. This indicates the presence of a wide variety of diverse societies in Africa whose behaviour cannot be accounted for using a single theoretical framework. On the whole however, consumer culture is present in many African communities and it is heavily influenced by cultural assimilation.

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