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Shifting Positionalities: The challenges of researching class-based marginalised service workers in postcolonial contexts

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Consumer research has explored a range of topics associated with marginalised groups. While the findings from these studies contribute to knowledge of the consumption practices, coping strategies and identity work of such populations in marketplace settings, much of this research fails to appraise the challenges associated with researching such groups. To address this, our study, which notes the challenges to researching members of marginalised communities, explored the complex process of identity transformation within class-based groups in Nigeria. By reflecting on our research design choices, we offer insights to help future researchers navigate the challenges of studying marketplace actors in similar contexts. In so doing we acknowledge the fluidity of positionalities that are required for this type of study and that a key trait for researchers undertaking such work is methodological flexibility.

Keywords: marginalised groups; postcolonial markets; positionalities; service workers; stigma

Introduction

Over the years consumer researchers have explored a range of topics associated with marginalised and vulnerable groups. This includes studies of (1) the marketplace risks faced by consumers due to their illiterate status (Bernales et al., 2021); (2) the purchase and consumption behaviour of vulnerable consumers during the pandemic (Kursan Milakovic, 2021); (3) the consumption strategies gay men in Germany adopt to manage the interplay of fragmented representations related to this group (Eichert & Luedicke, 2022); (4) the consumer acculturation process of immigrants to the United States (Penaloza, 1989); (5) how possessions are used in the complex identity work undertaken by survivors of domestic abuse in New Zealand (Fischer, 2015); and (6) the 'prevalence of racially motivated discriminatory experiences' amongst minorities 'across consumer contexts' in America (Bennett, Hill & Daddario, 2015: 328). While the findings from these studies have significantly contributed to

the developing body of knowledge of the consumption practices, coping strategies and identity work of marginalised populations in marketplace settings, much of this research fails to appraise and discuss the challenges associated with researching such groups. Market theorisation has broadly neglected the interplay between researchers, their informants, and research contexts and how this manifests, in their reports and knowledge creation. As a result, there has been a broad neglect of research and critical reflective accounts of the experiences of researchers who explore issues of race, colonialism, violence and dependency and other forms of marketplace vulnerability as the concrete socio-cultural conditions of consumers and market actors across the globe.

In seeking to address this, our study, which notes the challenges to recruiting and researching members of marginalised and vulnerable communities, explored the complex process of identity transformation within class-based groups in Nigeria and was framed within postcolonial theories such as subalternity (Spivak's,1994), othering, differentiation, and inferiority (Fanon, 1952;1967). This study was granted ethics approval by Sheffield Hallam University's Research Ethics Committee. All participants provided informed consent and agreed to the publication of the research findings.

Using participant observation and depth interviewing, we examined how the identities and experiences of service workers in the beauty stores of Nigeria's capital city Abuja, are mediated through interactions with their wealthy elite clients. The findings broadly demonstrated how these workers confront and are shaped by the asymmetric power relations that are deeply embedded in the socio-historic context of this country in their everyday interactions. In brief, the study's findings exposed how inequalities in wealth, economic status and field specific cultural capital came to play a key role in shaping the experiences and subject positions taken by the service workers. More importantly, we found stigma and

shame to be a significant element of the lived experience of the workers who collectively and consistently expressed a deep sense of inferiority to their client's status. This manifested in their rich stories of struggle and a striving for acceptance.

However, the research was not without its challenges. Notwithstanding the geographical issues confronted by this study in terms of the sheer distance between the researchers' home base and the field site (the UK and Nigeria), we encountered difficulties that impacted our positionalities during the fieldwork.

In this special issue, we therefore contribute to the body of research exploring the complexities of representing marginalised voices by discussing the methodological challenges experienced in relation to this. By critically reflecting on our positionalities and practical research design choices we hope our experience and reflections will help future researchers to navigate the challenges of studying marketplace actors and unheard voices in the Global South and within postcolonial settings. In this respect, we make an original contribution to knowledge by outlining the challenges and implications associated with recruiting and interviewing class-based marginalised groups in postcolonial contexts. Research of marketplace actors in the Global South is scant and this research note will aid future consumer and market researchers in designing their studies to account for these issues. In particular, we identify the need for fluidity in both the research approach and the positionalities of the researcher when undertaking this type of study.

The research context and participants

The research context is Abuja, the capital city of Nigeria. Much like the rest of the country, inequality and abject poverty remain unabated (Olayiwola, 2014; Ogbeide & Agu, 2015). This is because about 80% of the nation's oil wealth is concentrated in the hands of a very few individuals (Seteolu et al., 2018). In addition to the prevalence of poverty, postcolonial

theorists such as Fanon (1967) argue that most of these subjects still suffer the psychological and material effects of the spill-over of previous colonial administrations. According to Rizvi et al. (2006), the colonised bourgeoisie replaced colonial rule with their forms of dominance, surveillance, and coercion, resulting in a profound internalisation of prejudices. This has reinforced the prevalence of poverty in these countries (Jones et al., 2004; Sivaram et al., 2009) and amplified feelings of marginalisation, exploitation, domination, and stigmatisation (Parker & Aggleton, 2003). Accordingly, the ghost of colonisation still looms large in postcolonial settings (Imhonopi et al., 2013), with the lower-classes suffering from the deep psychological trauma of otherness rooted in socio-cultural violation and objectification (Fanon, 1952; 1967; Varman & Belk, 2012).

Most of the participants of our study were rural people who migrated from other parts of the country in search of better living standards. The majority live in several shantytowns on the outskirts of the city (Abubakar & Doan, 2010; Abubakar & Doan, 2014; Onochie et al., 2018), which are, unplanned, overcrowded areas lacking in basic amenities and infrastructure (Jubril, 2006; Onochie et al., 2018). The poor living conditions experienced by people in these areas go beyond constrained financial incomes to limited access to education, clean water, adequate housing, and decent employment opportunities (Vanguard, 2023). With limited resources for upward mobility, most individuals settle on learning trades and services such as beauty and hairstyling. These skills are subsequently in high demand from the wealthier citizens of the population who seek out their beauty services such as hairstyling, braiding, pedicures and nail treatments to cement them in the cultural milieu of the elite class in the city (Ustunier & Thompson, 2010). As for our study participants, they were mostly living in the suburban squatter communities and worked in big salons with many years of experience interacting with the higher-class individuals who live in the heart of the city. For example, Gab is a male stylist who is 28 years old. He was born in Lagos and moved to

Abuja when he was eight years old. This informant practically grew up in Bwari, which is one of the poor suburbs on the outskirts of the capital city. He completed secondary school and learned the trade of a stylist. He has worked in one of the salons sampled in this study for over 13 years. He has risen to the position of a supervisor in the stylist section of his store. He has a broad customer base with many repeat clients. Table 1 presents the basic demographic information of all the participants from the service worker sample. In line with ethical protocols for this type of research, the names of the participants have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Table 1. Participant Information

Names (pseudonyms)	Gender	Age range	Education	Occupation	Job experience
Presh	Female	30-35yrs	Primary School	Nail technician	15yrs +
Fatima	Female	30-35yrs	GSCE	Stylists	17yrs+
Gloria	Female	40-45yrs	Primary School	Braider	10yrs+
Richard	Male	20-25yrs	GCSE	Stylist	6yrs
Ruth	Female	30 - 35yrs	Diploma	Stylist	13yrs
Tessy	Female	35-40yrs	GCSE	Stylist	12yrs
Sarah	Female	25 -30yrs	GSCE	Braider	6yrs
Steven	Male	25-30yrs	Primary School	Nail technician	8yrs
Dave	Male	25-30yrs	GCSE	Nail technician	4yrs
Michael	Male	30-35yrs	Diploma	Nail technician	10yrs
Patience	Female	35-40yrs	Primary School	Stylists	12yrs
Chinyere	Female	40-45yrs	Primary School	Stylists	15yrs
Angela	Female	35-40yrs	Primary School	Braider	15yrs
Bukky	Female	30-35yrs	Primary School	Nail technician	12yrs
Omotola	Female	25-30yrs	Primary School	Braider	7yrs
Gab	Male	25 – 30yrs	GCSE	Stylist	13yrs
Mercy	Female	20 – 25yrs	Primary School	Braider	5yrs
Anthony	Male	30 – 35yrs	GCSE	Stylist	10yrs

Conceptual Development and Theoretical Framework

To support our paper's focus, we draw upon a broad body of literature concerning researcher positionality and the challenges associated with studying subaltern groups as well as scholarship into the role of affect and emotion in qualitative research. We begin by looking at the importance of researcher positionality when studying marginalised subjects, then turn our focus on subalternity as a concept for defining marginalised groups and the importance of adopting researcher reflexivity and fluidity when undertaking research with informants from such populations. We finish the discussion of our conceptual framework by exploring the role of emotion in consumer research and the strategies researchers should adopt when implicated in affective atmospheres in their studies.

The importance of Shifting Positionalities in Consumer and Marketing Research

When planning qualitative consumer and marketing research projects, many researchers recognise the need to critically examine how their identities, perspectives, biases, and relationships with participants influence each stage of the process (Carling et al., 2014). As researchers question how their background and worldviews become entangled within the research process, they are drawn into research reflexivity.

That is, they start to recognise how their positionalities and perspectives that are linked with their age, class, ethnicity, gender, language, marital status, nationality, profession, and religious beliefs, etc, come into being in producing research outcomes and choices (Egun & Erdemir, 2010). Or, as Sultana (2007, p. 376) puts it, these identity constructs manifest in 'grids of power relations… that influence the methods, interpretations and knowledge' produced during research projects. This is especially the case with ethnographic studies where researchers are intrinsically implicated in the lives and life worlds of their respondents

and are cast into negotiating the continuum of insider and outsider positions (Hall,1990). In making choices about their position and the nature of the relationship with their participants, the research approach is inherently fluid (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013). In reference to this, Fine (1994) brings to bear the metaphor 'Working the Hyphen', to highlight the complexity and fluidity inherent within interactions between researchers, their respondents, and research contexts. An understanding of Fine's conceptualisation of hyphen-spaces is crucial for qualitative researchers, who through their work are compelled to navigate multiple and sometimes conflicting positionalities and identities. These range from amongst other things: (1) being cast as an insider or outsider in relation to the lifeworld(s) of the subjects under study; (2) sharing demographic and experiential similarities or differences with the informants in respect of ethnicity, age, gender, nationality or social status, etc.; (3) the extent to which the research team are emotionally engaged or distant from the experiences and plight of research participants; and/or (4) the level of political engagement or neutrality the researchers hold in the research setting (Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013). Thus, the 'hyphen-spaces' that researchers confront in their studies will simultaneously shape how they interact with their research contexts and informants, and how they, and those interactions are perceived and addressed in return. (Wagle & Cantaffa, 2008).

With working the hyphen, Fine (1994) thus encourages researchers to aim for a more nuanced and responsible approach to understanding the complexities of human relationships and experiences within their research contexts and to foreground positionalities in the research process. To quote Cunliffe and Karunanayake (2013, p.368), when engaging in research with marginalised and vulnerable individuals and groups,

'*we need to surface the fluidity and pluralities of our research site and relationships… [and adopt] … a reflexive stance to explore… [the] … mutual and multiple*

influences on the co-constructions of meanings and identities in the relational spaces that we and our research participants jointly inhabit'.

Or as Fine (1994, p.72-79), puts it, where 'self and Other are knottily tangled', in working the hyphens, qualitative researchers must be prepared to explore the 'blurred boundaries' in the relationships with their participants, as well as account for the power relations manifest in their research settings and interactions.

Importantly, as Fine (1994, p.72) notes, this <u>isn't</u> always the case in qualitative research and ethnographies whereby the *'relationship as lived between researchers and informants is typically obscured in social science texts protecting privilege, securing distance and laminating... contradictions'.* Along these lines, echoing terminology coined by Spivak (1988), Khandaker & Narayanaswamy (2020) suggest that qualitative researchers who ignore their positionalities can effectively be engaging in 'epistemic violence' by excluding and silencing marginalised voices, thereby reinforcing existing inequalities through their knowledge production. Accordingly, Bilgen et al. (2021), have asserted that the positionality of a researcher is more of a political problem than a technical one. This, other scholars argue, is especially the case in postcolonial research where many researchers from the Global North misrepresent and 'speak for' their research subjects in the Global South (Mohanty 1988; Kobayashi, 1994; Radcliffe, 1994; Staeheli & Lawson, 1994; 1994; Nagar, 2002). Accordingly, the challenge of misrepresenting informants during the research process has drawn numerous qualitative researchers to particularly focus on the power relationships manifesting in their studies, to address hidden voices and identify the extent of disclosed narratives in their work. This is particularly the case with researchers and scholars who work within the traditions of anthropology, postcolonial studies and feminist methodologies (Bondi, 1999; Geertz, 1988; Valentine, 1999; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Van Maneen, 1988). Many of these researchers draw inspiration from Spivak's (1988) influential essay, 'Can the

Subaltern Speak?', which exposes in rich detail the epistemological challenges in giving voice to marginalised groups. Whilst the argument within Spivak's essay is debated and contested (Michaud, 2013; Laudry & McLean, 2013), a central theme researchers take from this work is to foreground the power dynamics and ideologies manifest in the research process and through their knowledge production. In other words, researchers and scholars influenced by this critique become more attuned to their positionalities in the research process. However, in as much as Spivak's claims have instigated debates about the theoretical and political implications of researching subaltern and marginalised groups across the social sciences (Guha, 1988; Morton, 2003; Parry, 2004), there is still scant attention afforded to the associated methodological challenges of investigating and representing the voice and experiences of such populations in marketing and consumer research (Ahmed, 2004; Berlant, 2008, 2011; Cvetkovich, 2012). There is thus a need to explore the relationship between subalternity and positionality to expose the implications and challenges for consumer researchers and what this entailed for our study.

Subalternity and Positionality

The term 'subalternity' was first coined by Gramsci (1992;1996), as a designation for people who are economically, politically, and socially subjugated by class, gender, caste, race, language or culture. Since then, subalternity has been used extensively within postcolonial and critical theory scholarship to describe the oppressed or marginalised and others excluded by dominant and subjugating discourses. According to Varman (2018), there are limited consumer research or marketing studies that explore the experiences of such marginalised groups. Of these, very few researchers acknowledge how their findings and reports de-centre and misrepresent the voices of the informants they investigate. This it is argued, is due to the challenges researchers face in establishing meaningful dialogue and shared understandings

with their informants. More specifically, due to the conflicting worldviews between researchers and the people and populations they study, there is great risk of failure in achieving a dialogical status where mutual understanding and the exchange of lived experience is possible (McLeod, 2007). In keeping with Spivak's argument (1988), as academic scholars attempt to represent the voice of subaltern people, their original testimonies are filtered through the lens of external knowledge systems that cannot fully capture their experiences. Thus, researchers risk systematically silencing their informants within the hegemonic power relations embedded within the epistemological, and ontological discourses that structure the postcolonial context (Spivak, 1988; Maggio, 2007). For Andreotti (2007) and Kapoor (2004), when the subaltern is privileged to speak, their voice or identity is always affected because any attempt by scholars to represent them reproduces the same power relations they are seeking to dismantle. Or as Cherniavsky (2011) puts it,

'The intellectual's responsibility is to the history of the Subaltern's silencing, a silence that cannot be 'filled' without repeating the original act of erasure (by representing her who cannot represent herself)' (p. 153).

Therefore, to reduce the possibility of misrepresenting the subaltern voice, researchers have called for studies that involves the adoption of critical, reflexive, participatory, and multi-modal methodologies (e.g., Maggio, 2007; Michaud, 2013; Zembylas, 2018). These, they suggest, should prioritise listening, empathy, and the acknowledgement of power imbalances to ensure an ongoing reflexivity and respect for the subaltern's agency and the complexities of their lifeworlds. This calls for an approach where researchers continually question their positionalities in relation to their backgrounds, assumptions, and the influence of power on the research process. It involves being transparent about their roles whilst

acknowledging potential biases and minimising the risk of misrepresentation (Zembylas, 2018). Further, Dragomir (2020) suggests that researchers must continually acknowledge and shift their positionalities; a process which is crucial for conducting ethically responsible, nuanced, and transformative research with subaltern groups. Collectively, these practices recognise the inherent subjectivity of the researcher, mitigate risks of domination or misinterpretation, and uphold the dignity and agency of subaltern participants in knowledge production (Canella, 2015; Zembylas, 2018).

Emotion and Affective Atmospheres in Consumer Research

In addition to the epistemological and ontological challenges we encountered regarding our insider/outsider positions in representing the voice and experiences of our research informants, we also confronted their emotions and feelings of shame during our fieldwork. In this respect, to prevent exploitation and preserve a commitment to the dignity and agency of our participants, we developed and upheld a reflexive strategy of empathetic engagement while seeking to maintain analytical clarity. In doing this, we took inspiration from the literature in consumer research and sociology that explores the interplay and consequences of emotion and affect within marketplace and social structures.

In Ahmed's (2004) conceptualisation of affective economies for instance, emotion is described as a social and relational force that extends beyond individual feelings, and which plays a key role in shaping social identities and structures. Echoing the same theme, Schmitz & Ahmed, (2014), argue that though emotions are expressed by how we feel, such feelings are influenced and animated by the social and cultural context in which they manifest. Or as Preece et al, (2022, 361) suggest, to understand emotional responses and our experiences of marketplace phenomena, such as the servicescapes and marketplace interactions we were studying in the beauty stores of Abuja, we must move beyond the purely psychological to

more sociologically grounded understandings of affect and emotion. In parallel with these ideas, the last decade, has seen an upsurge of consumer research that focuses on the ways in which affect manifests in marketplace settings through the social-cultural context and in turn acts to shape consumer sentiment and social action (Badje & Rojas Gaviria, 2021; Hill et al., 2021; Higgins & Hamilton, 2019; Linnet, 2013; Steadman et al, 2020; Yakhlef, 2015). For example, in drawing on theories of affective governmentality and consumer responsibilisation, Badje & Rojas Gaviria (2021, p.496-506) reveal how a range of affective 'apparatuses deployed by market intermediaries' related to online microlending platforms 'nurture and dramatize… feeling[s]… [to foster]… lender responsibilisation by translating… complex and relatively distant social problem[s] (i.e., poverty) into personal encounters inscribed by feelings of affinity and connection'. In this way, the authors of the paper show how affective encounters with such apparatus inspire consumers to voluntarily provide interest-free loans to disadvantaged groups.

More recently, in their study of 'landing in affective atmosphere's' Preece et al. (2022, p.374-375) argue for a more fine-grained theorisation of affect whereby emotions should be understood as relational and mediated by 'our own (micro) personal affective biographies… [and]… (macro) socio-political context[s]'. To this end, their study highlights the situated and contextual nature of affect and the importance of accounting for the relational, embodied, and affective processes that shape our experiences and interactions in consumption spaces. Therefore, in drawing on this body of work, and to paraphrase Preece et al (2022, 353), in conducting this consumer research, whereby we 'landed in the affective atmospheres' of the salons of Abuja, we needed 'to consider how our own personal affective biograph[ies] surfaced in our encounters with our informants and how…[our] socio-political contexts' configured our understandings and interpretations of their lifeworlds and affective experiences. Indeed, in our interpretation and sense-making during this research project we

also needed to consider how our informants' biographies and respective socio-historic contexts came into play in shaping their everyday affective experiences of service work in this setting.

Entering the Field and Shifting Between Insider and Outsider in our Sense-Making in the Salons of Abuja

In seeking to make sense of the identity work and experiences of the service workers of Abuja's beauty stores during their everyday interactions with their clients, an ethnographic approach was used. This laid the foundation for achieving an in-depth and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon we were investigating in its naturalistic setting. Participant observation was deemed to be crucial to this research because, though a community may share the same perspectives and worldviews, individuals will have their own particular experiences and places in the social system, and this approach allowed a deeper emersion into the field sites and the lifeworld of the participants.

On entering the field, purposive sampling was used to identify and approach the stores within the part of the city that attracts families of wealthy citizens. This choice ensured that the sample was developed explicitly around the wealthy of the capital and that these customers had the resources to regularly visit the salons. As such, we could ensure that the service workers would come into frequent and regular contact with some of the highest economic strata from the population of the city. We note here that the background and personal biography of the first author of this paper is a Nigerian national who has significant familiarity and prior knowledge of the deep social divisions and income inequality within the Nigerian class system (Adilieje et al., 2009). As a familiar setting, accessing one of the salons was therefore relatively straightforward, but this was not the case with the other beauty stores in the sample. Hence, a gatekeeper was needed to help facilitate access and support the

recruitment of informants in the other stores (Nikidehaghani et al., 2023) and to help gain

their trust (Emmel et al., 2007; Bonevski et al., 2014). Due to the first author's biographical

background with shared nationality and ethnicity, we embraced an insider position at the

outset of our observations to foster familiarity and rapport with the participants. This 'insider'

status, which is often hailed as the 'holy grail for the qualitative researcher' (Ganga & Scott,

2006, p. 7), offered a chance to develop a unique level of trust and openness that might

otherwise be elusive (Dwyer & Buckle,2009, p.58). Assuming the position of an insider

helped us to gradually develop rapport through our interactions (Patton, 2014). By

demonstrating an openness with the participants that entailed engaging in active listening

(Gubrium et al., 2012; McClelland, 2017) this also helped to significantly increase the depth

and richness of the data we were collecting (Prior, 2018). However, due to our perceived

status, we had to be aware of how we may have been influencing some of our informants and

their unwillingness to reveal sensitive information (Gary & Holmes, 2020). In addition, the

participants were initially concerned about the harmful effects of the study and the limited

perceived payoffs. For instance, they did not see any immediate direct or periphery value to

themselves or their community to engage in the research, or that our observations and

findings would reach the right people to foster positive change (Corbie-Smith et al., 2004;

Jacklin & Kinoshameg, 2008). In other cases, there was a general climate of mistrust, which,

as Dibartolo & McCrone (2003) have previously reported, is common when conducting

research in rural contexts where individuals from such communities are suspicious of

outsiders. However, while some of the service workers remained cautious about their

behaviours and were reticent to speak in the early stages of our fieldwork, as the observations

and initial conversations unfolded, they became more familiar with our presence and started

to relax. Resultantly they became more open to sharing information about their activities and

client interactions. In addition, we took on tasks in the stores to help gain rapport and deepen

our immersion into the field of study (McCurdy, 2009). This level of involvement further helped to foster trust amongst the service workers and led to them feeling more secure in sharing sensitive information about their experiences and interactions within the stores. Consider the following excerpt where the respondent explains why they moved to Abuja to escape the hardships in their villages, and how their trade (handwork) enabled them to pursue these opportunities. Clearly, there was a growing willingness to reveal their stories:

'I learnt this, my handwork, in my village and then moved to my state capital, Lokoja. Though it was a big store, the owner used to pay us irregularly, and my salary was not much. I could not do anything meaningful with my salary, for it could not take care of my needs, and so I complained to my elder sister, who then advised me to come to Abuja to look for a better job here. That was why I left my village and state capital city to start living here in Abuja. I came to Abuja to start a new life. Yes, to start a new life. That was why I came to Abuja'.

As we began to understand the daily pattern of life in the different stores, we became more involved in the main daily activities. Additionally, the prior understanding of the salon's cultural setting enabled us to quickly grasp the language used by the workers, including colloquial and non-verbal cues (Gary & Holmes, 2020) as well as the Pidgin English that many of the participants used when communicating with each other and with us during the interviews. Our ability to chat informally with the workers on their own terms helped in forging more familiar and trusting relationships. Sometimes, our conversations could be about fashion, other times the local news or events happening within the country, on other occasions, family, etc. As a result, we began to secure an in-depth glimpse of the interrelationships and dependencies between the customers and the workers as well as insights into their interests and lifeworlds.

Once the fieldwork was well underway, observations were carried out almost daily. We compiled field notes and piloted interviews with some of the service workers we thought to be more interactive with the customers. We interviewed these participants in the stores in which they worked. This enabled us to interact and 'converse' with them in the 'context of their everyday experiences' and to more deeply engage with the setting of the field site (Varman , Sreekumar & Belk, 2022, p.661). As the project unfolded, we agreed to, and conducted eighteen formal interviews with the service workers across the various stores sampled in the study. All the interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim and our approach to data analysis and thematisation adhered to the conventions of textual and intertextual analysis.

During the process of transcription, the testimonies of the service workers were translated from Pidgin English to standard English. By adopting a reflexive approach during this translation, we ensured accuracy by maintaining and reproducing the implied meanings and language used by the participants. After considerable discussion we decided not to translate all words to English especially the colloquialisms and slang used by the participants as these we deemed to be reflections of the dominant discourses structuring their voices. Hence, these texts were interrogated to uncover the unspoken assumptions and power relationships inherent within them and which we considered to have shaped the very form that they were taking in the first place. Therefore, we moved beyond a simple examination of our interactions with our informants to engage in a broader analysis of the socio-cultural and historical context that was being reproduced through our discussions with the service workers as well as the resulting material and psychological implications of their testimonies (Grand et al., 2004). To facilitate this, drawing inspiration from Arnould's (1989) pioneering study into preference formation and the diffusion of innovation in the Zinder Region of Niger, the first author conducted an historic review and socio-cultural analysis of the country's colonial and postcolonial past and

social struggles. This form of analysis is rooted in the CCT tradition, where it is used by researchers to provide greater contextualisation of consumer narratives collected through interviews. It is believed that this approach enhances interpretation and deepens understanding by locating marketplace phenomena such as consumer identity work or consumption practices within broader socio-historic and cultural discourses and societal transformations. As such, in following this process we were able to achieve a more detailed and nuanced contextual analysis of the service worker narratives by bringing into focus the power dynamics and discourses that were being revealed and (re)produced in this setting.

Shifting positionalities and adopting researcher fluidity during the fieldwork and data analysis

As the study progressed, we became acutely aware of the power dynamic that existed between the participants and ourselves and the implications that this manifested. This was especially the case in this research setting where significant variations in language ability and use, social position, and perceived occupational status were part of the equation. As such these dynamics underscored our relationship and interactions with both the participants and the research context and setting (Collins, 1999). The risks associated with the asymmetries in power between the researcher and their participants have been noted in the past. For example, Bourdieu explains that

'It is the investigator who starts the game and who sets up its rules: it is most often she who, unilaterally and without any preliminary negotiations, assigns to the interview its objectives and uses, and on occasion, these may be poorly specified – at least for the respondent. This asymmetry occurs every time the investigator occupies a higher place in the social hierarchy' (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 19).

As argued earlier in the paper, given the increased challenge of representing marginalised

voices in qualitative studies, researchers have reported the necessity for adopting a reflexive approach that recognises the interconnectedness of researchers' identities, positionalities, ethical responsibilities and the diverse realities of their participants lifeworlds and experiences (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Coffey, 1999; Giampietro, 2011 & Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013). In contrast with the typical approach to managing the 'messiness' of qualitative research, which involves navigating the complexity and unpredictability of human experience through careful documentation and reflexive accounting of the researcher's influence (Law, 2004), we sought to more closely approximate and represent the voices and affective experiences of our informants, while remaining attentive to the power dynamics between us. To this end, we adopted a critically reflexive approach that entailed an intentional effort to avoid reinscribing colonial or hegemonic discourses and cultural models during our interactions and data analysis (Spivak, 1988; Zembylas, 2018). In a practical sense, in the first instance this involved considering the first author's Nigerian background and shared ethnicity with the informants, while also being aware of the differences between their subject position and socio-cultural biographies and lifeworlds. By maintaining detailed field notes which sustained an ongoing dialogue with the interview and research process, we could account for our research positionalities and interrogate how our insider and outsider statuses were manifesting in our interactions and sense-making. In so doing, by continually questioning our assumptions and experiences during the fieldwork we assumed reflexivity and worked 'the hyphen' (Fine, 1994). Again, following Fine (1994), we aimed for a more nuanced and responsible approach to understanding the complexities of human relationships and experiences within our respective research contexts, and centred the influence of positionality in our research process. As such in accounting for the multifaceted and fluid identities that were being shaped by our own and our participants' gender, ethnicity, and social class positions, we were able to navigate the dynamics of power unfolding through our

fieldwork.

In working through this process, we engaged in a continuous dialogue (Kariippanon et al., 2020) and questioning of our preconceived assumptions about what we were witnessing and experiencing during our interactions in the stores and brought our values and beliefs into sharp relief to examine how these were manifesting in our interactions and interpretations (Takhar & Chitakunye, 2012). We were also mindful of our influence on informants, and how this shaped our interactions, and their willingness to offer testimonies of their experiences. This implied a process of being between two different existential planes at the same moment (Meyer & Land, 2005; Turner, 1967, 1995). That is, being simultaneously in the store, amongst our participants yet in our minds, researchers cataloguing and interpreting the events as they unfolded through everyday interactions. Hence, despite the pretence to level with our respondents, there was no escaping the fact that we were fully implicated in the research process through the epistemological assumptions, knowledge, personal experiences, and values we were bringing into our encounters in the stores. (Pillow, 2010; Takhar & Chitakunye, 2012). Irrespective of our intentions, we were also unable to completely isolate ourselves from the asymmetries in perceived status that existed between us and the participants. As such, our positionalities had to be fluid during the fieldwork for this study. We had to be mindful of when to take an insider perspective and when to shift to an outsider position. However, there are suggestions that there are no clear-cut distinctions between the insider and outsider positions, but rather, it is better explained as a continuum on which the study's context influences the researcher's positionality (Christensen & Dahl, 1997; Surra & Ridley, 1991).

Even when adopting the insider position, we faced significant challenges with the participants. That is to say, the insider position does not automatically guarantee access to

richer data beyond the researcher's realm of experience (Ryan, 2015). As mentioned earlier, positionality is not a linear process but a continuous interplay of multiple relationships, identities and expectations (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013), hence, researchers must expect to shift boundaries within hyphen-spaces (Fine, 1994) in relation to their participants under study (Bott, 2010).

Despite the shared background and national identity between the participants of the study and the first author of this paper, the existing prevalence of colonial hierarchy and subordination within this postcolonial setting (Varman & Belk, 2012) seemed to create boundaries with the participants on some occasions. This is to say, the first author's perceived social class position and academic status often acted to mark her as an outsider. It is conceivable that the participants were experiencing some form of discomfort and anxiety in front of the author due to her position and perceived status as a representative of Western culture. This resonates with the ideas and writings of Fanon (1952), on the psychological effects of postcolonialism, who argues that the colonised suffer from a profound crisis of identity and inferiority, worsened by exposure to global consumer culture, and which causes fresh anxieties for such populations, especially amongst those occupying the lower social strata. This was a challenge similar to that experienced by Soni-Sinha (2008) during her study of female employment in India. Despite her shared nationality and gender with the research subjects, her class position, education, and urban lifestyle cast her as an outsider. This complexity of establishing a mutually accepted 'insider' position (Ryan, 2015) underscores the challenges of conducting qualitative research in field sites like the beauty stores of Abuja.

Shifting between the insider and outsider contours of language

To enhance the rapport and trust between us and the participants, we decided to converse

with them in their primary language. Taking into account the class disparity that underscored our interactions with our informants, it would have been inappropriate to converse with them in 'standard' English. As outlined in the participant information table (Table 1), most of the participants had basic primary education. In relation to this it is conceivable that some informants would have potentially struggled with the right words or tenses to match the standard of English being communicated to them had we elected to converse in this way. Moreover, the inability to express themselves in standard English would have impeded their responses during our informal conversations in the stores. Thus, as explained earlier we interacted with the participants using local English, called 'Pidgin English'.

As a language of commerce, West African Pidging English, also known as Guinea Coast Creole English, was mainly spoken along the coast during the Atlantic slave trade in the late 17th and 18th centuries (BBC, 2016). This form of English is a mixed dialect of the English language and some local languages and is the most widely used means of communication in Nigeria, especially amongst the lower classes. This is because most Nigerians do not share a common ethnic language as a lingua franca. Pidgin was described by Rickford (1998) as a language which usually combines elements of English with native languages. It is typically simpler with fewer words, less morphology and a more restricted range of phonological and syntactic options. According to Balogun (2012, p.90), the 'Pidgin English spoken in Nigeria is a fully developed language with rich lexicon-semantics and syntax, which have evolved like any other language through contact and modification'.

Within the Nigerian context, pidgin, was known to have historically emerged from colonization during trade contacts. This approach to language use and speaking in postcolonial countries, reflects a complex and contradictory linguistic identity-negotiation emanating from the postcolonial subject's desire for an identity that transcends the politics of

linguistic and cultural dominance of English (Bhatt, 2010). From a critical perspective and from our observations in the stores, it was clear that daily interactions between the workers and clients were conducted in standard English, which Boussebba et al. (2014, p. 1156) equate with 'linguistic imperialism'. This is consistent with previous research in similar settings, which has reported that English operates as an invisible boundary or symbolic capital in service settings, acting to exclude non-fluent English speakers (Cayla & Bhatnagar, 2013). In the words of Cayla & Bhatnagar (2013, p.191) 'more than ever, English now separates the 'global haves' with English competence, from the non-English speaker 'have-nots'.

Mindful of these dynamics and how 'language reproduces power' (Cayla & Bhatnagar, 2017, p.189), communicating in Pidgin English with the participants helped to increase the rapport and trust that developed as our interactions advanced. In turn, this improved the quality of the interviews. Even when speaking the English language, we avoided research terminologies and broke down complex words into more straightforward and understandable language, making it less intimidating for them. This approach aligns with prior studies, which have reported that the researchers changed the language to correspond with the participants' dialect and has been used as a creative way of influencing trust (Ellard-Grey, 2015). For instance, Shedlin et al. (2011) changed academic words such as 'research' and 'interviews' to 'conversation' and 'dialogue', respectively, which made the words less intimidating for their participants. Another study by Sutherland & Fantasia (2012) elected to use the terminology 'nurses doing research' rather than using the general term 'researchers' as this was deemed to be more of a person-centred approach and a label that was more familiar to the research population. As with other studies that have adopted this type of strategy, it resulted in increased trust and further willingness from the service workers to participate in our study (Sutherland & Fantasia, 2012).

As previously explained, we were mindful of translating the data from Pidgin English because it mediates between the cultural and linguistic contexts of the participants and ourselves, which risks reproducing existing hierarchies or unconsciously distorting the subaltern's voice (Maggio, 2007; Kapoor, 2004). This aligns with the inherent political, ethical, and epistemological tensions raised by Spivak's (1988) essay regarding how the voices of subaltern participants should be translated in their pure form. The methodological implications of this for consumer and market researchers undertaking studies of postcolonial contexts, is that they should constantly question their approaches to data collection and interpretation so as to understand and limit the reproduction of all forms of hegemony and cultural dominance on subaltern subjects.

In addition to these challenges, we also needed to ensure that the cultural meanings implied in the participants' voices were not silenced through failing to engage with the dialect in use. This is because languages carry embedded meanings, cultural codes, and contextual nuances (Maggio, 2007) that are essential to sense-making in everyday life. Hence, the first author presented as an advantage to our research by being able to provide deep cultural insights into the subaltern voice that could have been essentialised, distorted, or flattened in its richness and cultural context if simplified into Western cultural categories. Consider the following excerpt from one interview, which was interpreted by the first author to ensure that the participant's implied meanings were not lost in translation.

'My life has changed. You know when somebody says from the streets, from grass to grace. I have moved...I am moving. I am seeing things. You know, when I worked at the nail place in Lagos, I met so many people. The nails place is prominent also and I worked with a different calibre of people, but you see in Abuja here...levels pass levels! The thing is that the way Abuja people carry themselves, in fact, the way they will speak English... forget you will

just be confused'.

As an individual who had previously lived in the southern part of Nigeria which harbours most minority tribes, the participant's expressions of 'I have moved,', 'my life has changed', 'from grace to grass' highlights his perceived movement through the social strata and that daily contact with his clients has had a positive impact on his life. In saying, 'I am seeing things' illuminates his understanding of the global cultural flows that are touching his life through his interactions with his clients. Additionally in sharing his understanding of the differences between the 'calibre of people' where he worked in the past – Lagos - with where he currently works – Abuja - and that 'levels pass levels' he shares insights into the social order of cities in Nigeria and that the elites in Abuja are different. Equally in expressing 'the way Abuja people used to carry themselves' he refers to how this strata of Nigerian society embodies cultural capital. In this informant's mind, compared to those from Lagos, the elites in Abuja are wealthier, far more exposed to Western cultures and more greatly symbolise class, refined taste and reflect Western civilisation and modernity. As such, with the first author sharing a familiar cultural background with the participants and being familiar with the language in use, aided more penetrating insight into the service worker narratives and testimonies, which without such cultural familiarity could have resulted in inadequate translation and lost meaning.

Still, despite these clear benefits to the research process, the background of the first author sometimes limited the quality of the data being produced. Due to her familiarity with the research context, one consequence was that familiar phraseology and terminology sometimes remained unexamined. By assuming shared understanding and knowledge without delving into specific experiences and beliefs (Chavez, 2008), we potentially missed out on key insights (Kanuha, 2000). Thus, by sometimes failing to unearth and interrogate key

components of the social context under study, we limited the insight and nuance emanating from our interactions with the research context and our interviews. That is to say, the insider position does not automatically guarantee access to richer data beyond the researcher's realm of experience (Ryan, 2015). In hindsight, had we taken the opportunity to explore some of the rhetorical forms and conversational nuances from our informants' perspective further, it may have significantly enhanced our understanding and interpretation of their experiences and potentially led to different insights.

Encountering emotional struggle and affect during the fieldwork

During our fieldwork, it quickly became apparent through our observations and interviews that several of the service workers were often subjected to mistreatment by their clients. The following extract from the testimony of one of our participants is an example of this mistreatment and how the workers typically feel about the behaviour of their clients:

Yes, when she came, and she was shouting at us because she feels that she has money, and so she can intimidate us, and they treat us as if we are slaves because we are working in the salon. Sometimes, these customers will even frustrate you to the point that you will feel like quitting the job. Yes, I do feel so because some of these customers that come here think that they have money, and they want to frustrate us as if we are slaves because we work in the salon as if we are not humans. Sometimes, they come here very late to braid their hair as if we are not human beings and we do not have our homes to go to. At such times, I will look at them and shake my head, saying, Oh God, in the next life I will come to this world, I will not come from a poor family, I will just be thinking so many things (she got emotional and started crying).

Another participant revealed the following:

'Sometimes, they feel that we are just stylists, pedicurists, or nail technicians, and

they look at us and think that they are paying for the service we give them. They believe they can talk to us rudely and get away with it. There was a time when I was attending to a female customer, and when you saw her, you would know she was very wealthy. I heard she is a family relative of [notable dignitary]. I think she is Fulani by tribe due to her looks. While I was doing the pedicure, maybe she got angry and complained. I did not know why. I did not see any fault in how I attended to her. I thought I was giving her the best service, and the next thing she did was being rude to me, saying, 'Do this side properly,' and I said, 'Are you fine with this? Can you feel it?' The next thing she (hesitating to speak) spat into the water. I looked at my colleagues, who were watching what was happening. I felt horrible and swallowed the saliva inside my mouth. I had to put my hand into the bowl to open the drain, and the water drained away. Then, I cleaned her feet and polished them'.

These excerpts depict broader experiences of mistreatment of the service workers by their clients and how they feel undervalued. The reflections of such encounters reveal how the differences in social class and economic status between the rich and poor in this context manifest in difficult marketplace interactions and performances. In addition, the narrative shows how the 'elite' customers exercise their wealth as a form of social control and utilise their status to place demands on the workers to serve them out of reasonable working hours to the point that the workers feel like quitting their jobs. Therefore, in contrast to the low caste participants examined by Vikas, Varman & Belk (2015, p.491) who can 'escape to markets' as a form of liberation from the clutches of the oppressive communal order' of India'…[so as]… to embrace the logic of markets… [and]… to create a status contest with the upper castes' the service workers of Abuja are seemingly still locked into the social order of Nigeria's postcolonial past. So even though many have migrated from the south of the country to secure work in the capital city, which places them in close contact with the economic and socio-cultural elites of the country, their status and experiences are tinged with

a deep sense of inferiority and social struggle. Indeed, upon further analysis of the data, it became apparent that the majority spoke about how they had felt shamed because of their backgrounds. Consider the following excerpt from the interviews:

'Even the customers themselves, for if I am not well dressed and not looking presentable, they would not want to associate with me. It takes the grace of God for a few of them to see that the people who are not in their class as humans. Yes, some of them downsize us.... You know that we are human beings, all these customers that come here for our services, they look at us as village people and who are we?'

In using the phrase, 'they look at us as village people' this informant feels that the clients look down on the service workers, framing them as primitive people who emanate from minority tribes and lack education and cultural capital. In addressing their feelings of inferiority and shame, the participants continually referred to themselves as 'us' and their customers as 'they'. As Jean-Paul Sartre (1996, p. 221 - 222) puts it, 'Shame… realises an intimate relation of myself to myself... I am ashamed of myself as I appear to the Other'. This echoes the work of Sharma & Sharma (2010), who show that marginalised and minority people experience increased levels of stress, alienation and feelings of injustice and, in turn, become socially disconnected with a growing sense of confusion and uncertainty about themselves and their self-worth (Arnett, 2002; Kinnvall, 2004). In their confusion and shame, and against the backdrop of their interactions with their clients, they have begun to question their identities, asking, 'Who are we?'

Drawing insights from Ahmed's (2013) 'cultural politics of emotion' and the other strands of scholarship we reviewed in our conceptual framework (e.g. Badje & Rojas Gaviria, 2021; Hill et al., 2021; Higgins & Hamilton, 2019; Linnet, 2013; Steadman et al, 2020; Yakhlef,

2015) we theorised that these experiences were not merely expressions of how these individuals were feelings about themselves at these moments in time, but that they were entrenched in, and manifesting from deeply embedded narratives entwined in the socio-historical context of the research setting.

In this respect, we were able to interpret emotions from a contextual point of view to explain individual perceptions of self-worth and status in accordance with normative and prevailing societal standards based on deeply entrenched social hierarchies and dynamics of power (Ahmed, 2004). Hence, through this lens, we were able to further theorise about the ways individuals and groups are defined and positioned within the social order in this setting.

Emotional positionality and negotiating affect in the research process

When confronted with the emotional experiences of the service workers during the fieldwork, the first author was often left with feelings of anxiety and guilt, which were exacerbated by the fact that she could not offer much hope to the participants who seemed trapped within the systemic injustices that are re-produced from the macro to the micro in this research setting (Brankamp, 2021). In this respect, the observations of the maltreatment of the service workers by some of their customers alongside their stories of shame and embarrassment, took their toll on the first author (Akehurst & Scott, 2021). According to Adeagbo (2021, 189 – 190), 'it takes a lot of willpower and preparation not to get caught up in the emotions despite being human, when participants share sensitive stories'. These experiences frequently evoke strong reactions and emotional responses in researchers and are often reflected through the lens of their own personal affective experiences (Dickson-Swift et al., (2009). In this way, researchers might come to empathise or sympathise with their participants (Liamputtong, 2007; Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). However, while empathy is key in forming successful and trusting research relationships, Dickson-Swift et al., (2009) highlight the importance of

researchers maintaining a professional and impartial stance and to 'wear masks' that don't display or give away their emotions. All the same,

> *'despite the emphasis on emotional detachment and neutrality, researchers can become deeply involved in their subjects' lives, particularly when there is sustained contact between researchers and subjects'* (Bellas, 1999, p. 104).

Indeed, this was certainly the case with the first author who sometimes struggled to separate out and bracket these affective encounters so as to engage in analytical clarity. This was especially the case when transcribing the narratives of the service workers as it meant returning to and absorbing the voices and stories of the research (Warr, 2004), which posed an emotional challenge. There is no doubting the difficulty in negotiating the insider/outsider hyphen-spaces when faced with the affective states and emotional experiences of research informants. Still, confronting emotion and affect is not uncommon in this type of research. For instance, both Coles et al. (2014) and Pio & Singh (2016) have argued that researchers often encounter emotional challenges as they face issues of social justice, inequality and powerlessness, resulting in various emotions, including anger, sadness, guilt, fear, helplessness and depletion. As such, ethnographic market and consumer researchers who seek to investigate the experiences and lifeworlds of marginalized groups will occasionally land in affective atmospheres (Preece et al., 2022) that are charged with emotions linked to power, ownership, and voice (Fenge, 2010). In landing in these contexts, it becomes essential for researchers to develop a strategy to not only empathise with the affective experiences of their participants but to also maintain analytical clarity at the same time. We must also open ourselves up to not only what is said but also felt through the visceral (Micieli-Voutsinas, 2013). The recognition of such visceral responses, such as tears, pain and other bodily responses enables researchers to access affective depths of pain that often lie

outside the conscious and spoken words of participants (Zembylas, 2018). In researching vulnerable groups an additional challenge is how to engage with and write about their emotions without sentimentalizing their oppressive experiences. According to Belant (2000), sentimentalizing emphasises feelings of suffering and oppression so that their true nature appears purely emotional or individual rather than being embedded within structural or political contexts. In the case of our informants, sentimentalising their experiences would have made their treatment and oppression seem a mere spectacle rather than a concrete condition of their everyday experiences (Berlant, 2008, 2011; Zembylas, 2013; 2016). As such in working with these issues, we showed respect and care for the participants and tried not to trample on their dignity during our fieldwork and data analysis. With this in mind, researchers should always consider the inherent power differentials in relation to their participants, especially in cross-cultural contexts and seek to ameliorate the effects. Expanding on this idea Smith (1999, p. 176)., writes

'researchers receive privileged information ... they have the power to distort, to make available, to overlook, to exaggerate and to draw conclusions, based not on the factual data, but on assumptions, hidden value judgements, and often downright misunderstandings. They have the potential to extend knowledge or to perpetuate ignorance'.

In our minds this is increasingly crucial when engaging in research with marginalised individuals and vulnerable groups.

Conclusion

This reflective note addresses the challenges in researching marginalised consumers in postcolonial contexts, and outlines the methodological choices taken. In so doing we acknowledge the fluidity of positionalities that are required for this type of study and that a

key trait for researchers undertaking such work is methodological flexibility. Our reflections here draw upon Fine's (1994) conceptualization of 'Working the Hyphens' to help explore and explain the complex and interconnected relationships between ourselves and the participants of this study and to emphasize the fluidity of our positionalities as we shifted between insider and outsider positions. As a team it is clear that we were able to benefit from a great deal of cultural familiarity during this study and that this played out favourably in building the rapport with our participants. With the first author and primary researcher being a Nigerian national, holding the ability to converse in a familiar and context specific language proved beneficial in co-creating the testimonies with our participants. What is more, by taking the time to immerse ourselves in the research setting and by engaging in the everyday activities that are performed by the service workers in the stores under study, this allowed us to build the levels of trust required to capture the stories that spoke to the collective experience and identity struggles of these workers. Of course, this level of engagement and immersion will always be dependent upon the resources and time available for any study, but we must acknowledge how this will impact on the quality and trustworthiness of our research accounts. Given the challenges encountered during this fieldwork, we can sign off in support of Denzin's (2009, p.148) argument that 'guidelines' and 'checklists' have only a limited role in qualitative research and that 'we must resist the pressures of a single gold standard' (ibid, p152). Equally, we concur with Fine's (1994) thesis of explicitly acknowledging the multiplicity of identities and power dynamics that underlie research in such settings and to take account of how this shapes the research process and outcomes. In this regard, we maintain that a key component of researching market actors in postcolonial settings is to fully account for the multi-layered power dynamics that unfold during the research process and that researchers must recognise the need for shifting along the continuum from being an insider to an outsider. As such, we must reflect on our identities and roles as academics and

researchers during our studies of marginalised groups, and how these impact upon the research setting and the quality of data that is co-produced. We must be prepared to negotiate multi-positionalities during our fieldwork.

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