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SOCIOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Beyond affordability: Explaining the consumption of Chinese products in Ghana

Mark Kwaku Mensah Obeng*

Abstract: The dominant thesis undergirding the surge in the consumption of Made-in-China (MIC) in Africa is the idea that Chinese products are patronised by low-income earners because they are cheap. This paper, however, argues for a discourse beyond affordability and asserts that the motivation for the consumption of MIC products are broader and more complicated. Data for this paper was collected using in-depth interviews with 65 individual consumers and 15 distributors of MIC electronics in Accra, Ghana. The findings indicate that apart from cost, the rising consumption of MIC products is anchored on product and service innovations such as product warranty and free after-sales services. Other factors include demands of urban living, perceptions of improved quality, identification with product ambassadors and product accessibility. This observation offers a conceptualisation of consumption consistent with the trickle-across model of consumption. While these Ghanaians do not discredit the quality of other brands, they envisage achieving similar or superior utility from consuming MIC products.

Subjects: African Studies; Asian Studies; Sociology & Social Policy; Urban Studies; Urban Sociology - Urban Studies

Keywords: Made-in-China; Ghana; Chinese Products; affordability; consumption; trickle-across



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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

It is no secret that China is a major player in Africa's economy today and has subsequently enhanced African's participation in global consumer goods. The volume, the variety and nature of the items imported into Africa from China continue to expand despite a general concern about the quality of made-in China. Focusing on consumption of Chinese electronics and household appliances in Accra, Ghana, this study investigates this puzzle by going beyond the dominant idea that made-in-China is popular in Africa solely because it is affordable and thus patronised by the poor who cannot afford higher quality and established brands. The outcome indicates that aside from cost, Africans patronise Chinese brands for different reasons including innovative products, superior and consumer-sensitive services such as extended product warranty and free after-sales services. The study does shows that African consumers are not trapped in fruitless heritage, instead they are ready to embrace innovation that rewards.

1. Introduction

Consumption experiences have formed the subject matter of many books and articles in recent times as an indicator of African modernity. In many respects, these are presented as a more sophisticated representation of classical Western sociological construction of the traditional/modern dualism. The central theme in these discourses is the construction and representation of African consumption as an attempt to catch-up with Western concepts of personal success and achievement through the acquisition and utilisation of western/modern imported goods. For instance, while analysing consumption patterns in Cameroon, Rowlands (1996, p. 190) concludes that ... “in other words, in Cameroon, and perhaps more widely in Africa, to be developed is measured in terms of the manner by which the products of Western technologies are consumed rather than the capacity to produce them”.

Conclusions such as the one above, somewhat placed a “freeze” on the passion and need to study African consumption beyond the duality and thus making it difficult to appreciate the symbolic, the socio-cultural, and the dynamism that characterises African consumption. With the onset of the era of mass production and its associated consumption patterns, Ghana like many other similar societies has become fertile grounds for consumption analysis (see Akyeampong, 1995; Buxton & Hagan, 2012; Osei-Asare & Eghan, 2014; Tampah-Naah & Twumasi Amoah, 2015; Woolverton & Frimpong, 2013). This is essential because consumption is appreciated as a cultural process (Osei-Asare & Eghan, 2014), permitting individuals to shape their identities in relation to goods (Stillerman, 2015). By consuming things, people do not only maintain their physical existence but also create or strengthen their personality broadly. It is thus not surprising when consumption and culture are described as mutually dependent (Zahradka & Sedlakova, 2012). Research into consumption, therefore, represents a means of understanding contemporary societies and in this instance the Ghanaian society.

The need to research consumption in Ghana and Africa, particularly the consumption of modern technology, has coincided with China’s emergence as a global hub for consumer and household products (Ayenew, 2019; Gao et al., 2003; Wu, 2005). This has also reignited academic interest in the “country of origin” studies – also known as the COO effect (Obadia, 2009; Huang et al., 2016).

In researching the consumption of made-in-China products, researchers have questioned their quality as part of a complex, intermingling, and conflicting imaginations with reference to other established brands (Obadia, 2009). This makes made-in-China goods one of the biggest nightmares for marketers (Kabadayi & Lerman, 2011). In the process, a consensus has emerged among some scholars, consumers, traders, and policymakers that made-in-China products are of inferior quality compared to products from the global North (Lampert & Mohan, 2014; Liu, 2019; McNamee et al., 2015; Obeng, 2015) and are purchased by the poor because they are affordable (Dobler, 2009; Shelton & Paruk, 2008; Zi, 2015). This observation notwithstanding, some studies suggest that the purchase of made-in-China products is rising and is consumed by people of various social strata (see Röschenthaler, 2021). This study therefore sought to answer the following question: who purchases and utilises Chinese products in Ghana/Africa? and what are the motivations and drivers for the purchase and consumption of Chinese products? The outcome of this qualitative study provides context to consumption patterns and interrogates in a more nuanced manner the motivations as well as the drivers for the purchase and consumption of MIC products in Africa. For the participants in this study, Chinese products are useful investments and not a mere cheaper alternative. It indicates that the rising consumption of MIC is principally driven by the innovative and consumer sensitive approaches adopted by distributors including product warranty and free after-sales services. Other factors are the demands of urban living, the perception of improved quality of Chinese products, the growing preference for brand-new products, identification with product ambassadors and ease of access to MIC products.

The rest of the paper is organised in three main sections. The first section is dedicated to the literature review. It begins with the review of the consumption literature and sequels into the

major model of consumption flow and ends with the review of relevant works on China and Africa trade and consumption patterns. The second section discusses the research method employed for the study. It draws on how the data for the study was gathered, managed and processed and utilised in the research paper. The third is the findings of the study. Broadly, it focuses on the motivation for the consumption of made-in-China. The article concludes with a set of remarks about the consumption of made-in-China household and electronic appliances in Ghana as well as some limitations of the study.

2. Consumption flow and made-in-China products

While the use of objects to satisfy biological needs and to construct lives are cultural universals (Stillerman, 2015), the notion of consumption as a means by which individuals and groups construct their personalities or individuality is a feature of the modern era. The emergence of this modern era remains questioned (see McKendrick et al., 1982; Mukerji, 1983; Sombart, 1967). This discrepancy notwithstanding many of the references to the culture of consumption date back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when economists first attempted to identify the consumer as the centre of analysis. Classical economists postulated that consumers were rational actors who consistently aim to maximise their returns in every endeavour. One way they do this is to ensure the best price for a given product and through their combined actions determine prices of commodities. The neoclassical economics emphasis on individual rationality was later criticised for ignoring the fact that desire rather than calculation motivates many economic exchanges such as consumption, gift-giving, which may not satisfy personal needs or desires (Stillerman, 2015) and the many instances where actions reflect motives that are non-rational (Campbell, 2005; Sassatelli, 2007; Smart, 2010). Other works have also challenged the emphasis on individual self-awareness and suggest that consumption rather emphasises the collective identities of consumers either as workers, employers and as women or as men. Marx (1978) argued that production and consumption are mutually dependent. Producers provide consumers with specific goods that shape their lives and at times create needs. For example, the mobile phone, a symbol of modernity was first introduced to Ghana in 1992. For many at the time, it was an unneeded investment, but currently Ghana and Africa have the highest penetration rate, a clear indication of its acceptability and to some great extent its indispensability (Asongu, 2015). Stillerman (2015, p. 8) argues that a product only exists as such if it is used and when a product is consumed it generates a demand for additional production. This point is innocuously pervasive in the entertainment and gadgets industry where consumers are made to believe that a product will enhance their lives in some dramatic fashion. Adorno and Horkheimer (2000) make this point lucidly when they argue that producers and advertisers create false needs for goods or services and manipulate consumers into buying goods which momentarily satisfy their curiosity but ultimately create additional desire in order to achieve this phantom pleasure.

Based on ideas of the flow of consumption pattern and the origin of such influences, the modern concept of consumption can broadly be placed under three main models. These are the trickle-down, trickle-up and trickle-across models of consumption. The trickle-down model has been influenced and manifested in the works of classical writers such as Marx, Weber, Veblen, Simmel and Bourdieu. Karl Marx in criticising the classical economists for their failure to acknowledge exploitation of workers as the origin of profit, argued that in every historical era, the dominant class develop worldviews that justify its rule to the rest of the society, and this also encompasses what is to be seen as appropriate consumption. It is theorised that lower status groups emulate the consumption pattern of the adjacent higher status groups-as lower-status groups would move on to new styles to differentiate themselves. This directional process of imitations or conforming and subsequent innovations of new styles by the elite form the basis of the trickle-down theory; innovation disseminates from the elites down the status hierarchy (Lillethun & Welters, 2011, p. 117). Influenced by Marxist philosophy, Thorstein Veblen, an economist and sociologist, wrote the theory of the leisure class (Veblen, 1912/1994). He argues that the high class, marks their superiority by the opulent display of wealth through consumption which he terms as conspicuous consumption. The source of this superiority or status was broadened by Bourdieu through his

concept of economic (money) and cultural capital (education, taste). He argues that both wealth and education can be used through consumption to assert or claim status (Bourdieu, 1984). Research into made-in-China have been dominated by this orientation (see Dobler, 2009; Zi 2015) and have essentialised the view that people purchase made-in-China products despite its “inferiority and derogatory” description as a struggling attempt towards achieving a sense of belongingness. In this study, similar responses were recorded although in the minority when they explained their choice of Chinese products on the grounds of its affordability and explained further that with improved income, they were likely to move up their preferences away from made-in-China.

Whereas the trickle-down theory focuses on the power of producers and status in shaping consumption, the trickle-up perspective focuses more on consumers active role in crafting meaning through consumption. The theory suggests that styles are adopted from “the streets” or lower-income groups, and then those same styles flow to upper-income groups and designers where it then becomes a trend that can become known worldwide. There have been different examples of this theory throughout history, especially in the fashion industry. Field (1970), for example, observed a reverse phenomenon, calling it the status float phenomenon. He states that by the mid-twentieth century, technology was transforming communications, and many other cultural attitudes shifted from the past ones. In the West, these included the youthquake, the sexual revolution, the struggle for civil rights and acknowledged cultural diversity. In this restless society, affiliation with subgroup or ideological cause found symbolic expression in appearance and was not necessarily associated with socioeconomic status. Subgroups innovated new looks to maintain uniqueness and to purposively differentiate themselves from others. These innovators emerged outside of the elites and often from the lower-status groups and overtime got even the high class to imitate them. Field’s proposition is thus called the trickle-up theory, to characterise the upward flow through strata in opposition to the trickle-down theory of downward flow through strata. This is referred to as the bubble-up by Ted Polhemus (1994), who found that in the late twentieth century, an insatiable craving for authenticity motivated subgroups to create unique styles. He further argued that authenticity also motivated those who copied their looks (Lillethun & Welters, 2011).

Another variation to the trickle-up model of consumption can be seen from the works of Naomi Klein and Alex Kotlowitz. Klein (2010) in her famous work “No logo” discusses resistance towards brand bullies from below. This movement she recounts is gradually shaping attitudes even in large business conglomerate to act responsibly. The working of such minority groups in various facets, including university campuses, clustered around the bullish and disregard for the right of others particularly businesses with high name-brand recognition. These anti-corporate grassroots movements highlight issues such as labour rights, corporate power and unfair discourse on the working of the global economy. Citizens are encouraged to speak with their funds against businesses that fail to respect and support just courses. Consumer citizens are authorised to “do good” by “buying good” and within the context to shift conceptions of citizenship and brand cultures, along with contours of specific political practices and ideologies such as environmentalism (Banet-Weiser, 2012). A reminiscence of this perspective could be glanced from respondents who view some notable items as a direct response to their localised problem. A case in point is the multi-purpose solar-powered fan (inbuilt with radio) introduced to the country during the 4-year-long electricity power rationing between 2012 and 2016. This is clearly a bottom-up approach where producers ceased on a “localised” problem and through collaborations with major distributors strategically developed solutions to their peculiar situation.

The third model is trickle-across. This is the theory that applies most to this study. Coincidentally it is the least studied among the models (DeLong, 2005). The proponent of this theory asserts that fashion and the culture of consumption move horizontally between groups on similar social levels (King, 1963). Styles and patterns of consumption emerge and are disseminated simultaneously across each stratum. This happened as products were manufactured at many quality levels and

price points and marketing increased consumers' awareness of fashion change through promotion and advertising across media. In this model, there is little lag time between adoptions from one group to another. Evidence for this theory occurs when designers look simultaneously at prices ranging from the high end to lower end. Robinson (1958) supports the trickle-across theory when he states that every social group takes its cue from contiguous groups in the social stratum. King (1963) mentions rapid mass communications, promotional efforts of manufacturers and retailers, and exposure to fashion leaders as reasons for this pattern of distribution.

As germane as these models are to the understanding of consumption and consumption practices even in the global South, fewer studies have been done to confirm, challenge or even extend the utility of these models. This is because it has generally been assumed in the South that the North serves as the melting pot from where consumption cultures are adopted. The need to understand and theorise such practices, taking note of other emerging paradigms have coincided with the increasing penetration of Chinese products in Africa. This has opened the continent and its people to varying consumption behaviour that requires further interrogation. It is a well-established fact that China is Africa's leading trading partner, a feat chalked almost a decade ago in 2009 (Ayenew, 2019 2017) and the largest export economy in the world. This is evident in the massive volumes of imported products that have flooded the global markets including African markets with its attendant opportunities and challenges. China's trade with Africa has increased from about \$10 billion in 2000 to \$300 billion in 2015 and projected to reach \$440 billion by 2025 (Sun et al., 2017). With companies manufacturing capital goods and household appliances almost non-existent in Ghana, imported products serve as the major means by which Ghanaians are meaningfully partaking in the consumption of global trends such as mobile phones, computers, TVs, air conditioners etc. (Dankwah & Valenta, 2019; Obeng, 2019). The origin of such products began to shift from Western Europe, the United States of America, Japan, and South Korea when China joined the World Trade Organisation in 2001. Data compiled by the United Nation's sponsored International Trade Centre (ITC) for 2016 indicate that China has overtaken the USA and the European Union as the leading exporter of electrical machinery and equipment (a category that comprises sound recorder, television, telephones, or cellular phones, etc.) into Ghana. Out of a total import value of \$1,005,468, import from China constituted \$200,775 representing 20% of the import. The other major destinations making it in the top 10 were British Virgin Island, Germany, Turkey, India, Hong Kong, USA, UK, South Africa and Sweden.

This change is part of a broader global discourse on the growing penetration of made-in-China products which has resulted in the two schools of thoughts on China's impact on Africa. Whilst one group, the optimist emphasise the opportunities China offers Africa, the other envisages a bad deal for Africa. One area that the optimist has consistently emphasised is the increasing access to material commodities that seemingly has transformed the lives of many including those who previously could not participate in the world economic system (Yanyin, 2015). This claim is rebutted by the pessimists who amongst others have questioned the quality of made-in-China products and argue that such products are patronised only by the poor because they are cheaper. This practice, the pessimists argue, on the whole tend to be more costly to the poor as they are replaced more frequently than usual. This paper, however, argues that drivers for made-in-China products are multifaceted, intertwined, and nuanced contrary to the perception that Africans are solely motivated to buy Chinese products because of its affordability.

While the importation and adaptation of such products in the era predating the emergence of China typically represented the catching-up phenomenon as embedded within the Veblenesque stereotypical characterisations particularly when those who could not afford these products gleefully embraced the used version of these items as a sign of achievement or personal success (Amankwah-Amoah, 2015; Rowlands, 1996), same cannot be said now as an observation that is symptomatic of the trickle-across flow of consumption. This is because four of the key assumptions underlying this model is exemplified in this outcome. Firstly, the model emphasis the multiplicity of producers, brands or makes. Second is the understanding that products are manufactured at

different quality, grades, and price points. The third is increased product marketing and promotions thus leading to improved consumer awareness. The fourth assumption is that there is little or no time lag between adoption from one group to another. Significantly, majority of the participants in this study recount shifting away from the practice of buying and consuming used products of known brands from the West for brand-new ones, which are lesser known or advertised brands, usually of Chinese origin. Accounting for this major shift is a combination of factors engineered by the growing use of mass media and employment of effective and persuasive marketing by the distributors. The companies behind these new products have invested heavily to popularise the products on radio and television. Some have also engaged the services of celebrities and brand ambassadors. The study's participants are generally aware of the existence of various grades and brands of products. However, a combination of factors including price differentials, previous experiences, provision of additional values (free after sales service and product warranty) and perception of improved quality as well as exorbitant cost of repair makes them prefer made-in-China products, to meet increasing demands.

2.1. Research methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design as part of a broader study on consumption of Chinese products. This was to ensure that individuals were able to express their subjective experiences with their products and to be able to generate data that is rich and in-depth encompassing the opinions of consumers, which are embedded in context (Maxwell, 1996). This design ensured that the study was done to incorporate and reflect the views of the “actors” in the study. According to Lofland and Lofland (1995, p. 16) and Bryman (2001, p. 277) views of actors are better captured through face-to-face interactions. It further enabled the study to generate more descriptive details and explanations for the activities of these Ghanaian consumers of MIC products and the transnational traders engaged in the China-Africa trade. This approach is informed by the understanding that it is difficult to identify the behaviour of members of a social group other than in the specific environment in which they operate (Bryman, 2001).

The study area was Accra, the administrative and commercial capital of Ghana.

The study was conducted in Accra because it is a microcosm of the Ghanaian society as a result of its growing heterogeneity. It is the biggest city in the country with a population of almost 3 million people who come from almost all the 16 administrative regions of Ghana. Additionally, Ghanaians tend to source capital goods from the capital city. In addition, almost all the major outlets from which electronics and household appliances are sold outside the capital have their operational headquarters in Accra. Thus, although the study was in Accra it offers a great insight into the possible Ghanaian orientation towards made-in-China products. To ensure that all consumers in Accra were given an opportunity to be involved in the study, Accra was zoned into three, namely, South, East, and West. The zoning was also done to accommodate the two main types of market systems in Accra. These are the open-air traditional markets and the emerging mass retail outlets, which reflect a social class divide (see Hinson, Anning-Dorson & Kastner, 2012). Although almost all categories of Chinese products are found on the Ghanaian market, this study focused on electronics and household appliances in Accra because of their popularity and growing uptake in Ghana (Obeng, 2019). Additionally, since these electronics and household appliances are generally deemed as high investments and longer lasting items a lot of analytical works and preparations go into the decision to buy or not to. The study involved two sets of participants: consumers and distributors of made-in-China products. Sampling for the consumers was guided by category of electronic products procured, age and gender. On the supply side, the type of products and longevity in the distribution business influenced the sampling process.

Age was deemed critical in the selection because perception studies on made-in-China had indicated age as a key variable in determining attitudes towards made-in-China by Ghanaians (Pew Research Center, 2014). Gender was also deemed critical because of the gendered nature of

product choice and generally because capital items such as electronics tend to be culturally gender sensitive (Darkwah 2007; Awumbila et al. 2011; Bowles, 2013);

Three non-probability sampling methods, namely, accidental, purposive, and snowballing were employed to sample a total of 80 participants. This comprised 65 consumers and 15 suppliers. Forty of the consumers were sampled in the traditional markets and 25 from the modern retail markets. Samples were taken from all the three zones. None of the suppliers was however sampled from the modern retail markets. All the 15 traders were sampled from the Accra Central Business Districts and Kwame Nkrumah Circle business areas. These two areas are well known for hosting chains of retail outlets whose owners' import and sell various brands of electronic and household appliances. In sampling participants, the researcher positioned himself at different retail outlets and after the clients were done with their purchases, they were approached and the purpose of the study explained, and their consent sought. To facilitate the recruitment processes, potential participants were presented with a list of notable brands of Chinese products on the Ghanaian market (although they were not informed of their country of origin). People who identified a product they were using, or its equivalent became the core sample from which participants were sampled. This strategy proved helpful for two major reasons. First, it was in response to a major challenge encountered during the pre-test. At the pre-test, it emerged that some participants were not aware of the Country of Origin (COO) of the brands they were using. The approach also helped to eliminate non-users of made-in-China products from the study. Secondly, the use of the template helped to minimise motivated response biases and enabled the study of aspects of attitudes that were not open to introspection (Webb et al., 1981).

The in-depth interviews were conducted with the aid of two interview guides. One tailored to the supply side and the other to the demand side. In addition to their profile, participants were asked questions pertaining to the history of the use of their identified made-in-China product(s), the decision-making processes leading to the purchase of their notable products of Chinese origin and their experience(s) with the named product(s). The participants were also asked whether given another opportunity they will repeat the same product or its newest models. This was supplemented with a systematic observation of the market. This included product examination and assessment to draw first-hand, and personal understanding of the perspectives expressed by participants during the interview sessions. All interviews, except five, were conducted in and around the market areas. Three were conducted in the homes of the participants whilst two were conducted on phone. All the interviews were tape recorded with the consent of the participants, transcribed as verbatim as possible and themes developed guided by the literature as well as others that emerged alongside. All the names used in the analysis are pseudonyms. This paper is, however, based on the consumption side of the interviews. The interviews with the suppliers nonetheless offered context to the views and positions expressed by the consumers.¹ Table 1, below shows selected attributes of the respondents and their consumption of MIC products.

3. Consumption of made-in-China products in Ghana

There is clear evidence that China's explosive presence in Africa has offered people opportunities to engage in global consumption in unprecedented numbers. This feat notwithstanding, made-in-China is a phrase that has broadly become associated with counterfeit, inferior, and low-quality. This notion has endured since the heady days of China's Open-Door Policy but particularly in the early 2000s. Fast forward to today, where Chinese manufacturers are not just catering for low cost, but also innovative quality products and services (Winkelman, 2016), the low-quality image still lingers in the minds of many consumers. With such baggage surrounding the Chinese labels, the consumption of made-in-China products has been justified mainly based on its affordability. This study, however, extends the motivation for the uptake of made-in-China beyond the subject of its affordability. Without necessarily contesting the influence of price/cost in consumers purchasing behaviour, this study argues that apart from price, the rising purchase and consumption of MIC in Ghana, is undergirded principally by the innovative and consumer sensitive product marketing strategy executed by the distributors of made-in-China electronic and household appliances. Key is

Table 1. Key and essential attributes of respondents

Respondents characteristics	Categories of Respondents	Number of Respondents
Age	18–25 26–35 36–50 51–60 61+	13 18 22 7 5
Gender	Male Female	43 22
Education	Basic Secondary Tertiary Postgraduate	8 21 31 5
Employment status	Employed Unemployed Students (National Service Personnel)	62 2 1
Rank in employment	Managerial Non- managerial N/A	21 41 3
Income range	Generally, above the minimum wage of 265.00 a month	Average monthly income of GHC 1500. Lowest income 350.00 Highest earner 8000.00
Top 10 MIC (Brands) featured	Hisense 2. Huawei 3. Techno 4. TCL 5. Infinix 6. Itel 7. ZTE, 8. Xiaomi, 9. Lenovo, 10 Motorola	
TOP 10 Type of products featured	(1) Mobile phone Flat screen Television Sound system/Air conditioner Fridge/refrigerator Microwave oven Electric pressing iron Electric/gas cooker/oven Washing machine Dish Washer	
Frequency of MIC ownership	Average number of MIC products used by respondents is 3	

the offer of product warranty and free after sales service. Other factors are the demands of urban living, the perception of improved quality of Chinese products, identification with product ambassadors and ease of access to MIC. This is evidently demonstrated through a shift in attitude towards second-hand goods. The motivation, as well as the strategies that are employed by participants, reflect broadly the trickle-across model of consumption emphasising the importance of mass communication and the ability of marketing to shape consumer behaviour particularly in a pluralistic and competitive business environment such as Ghana. The study consequently challenges the position that MIC is patronised solely by the poor who lack the means to purchase other known and expensive brands on the market. This position is strengthened further by the realisation that some participants are utilising MIC to express dissatisfaction with a known brand while others do so in a complementary manner to other established brands on the market. Additionally, it must be noted that most of the items listed are generally in the category of high investment and luxury commodity, a category that is ordinarily outside the reach of the poor.

Crucial to this revolution is the innovative and consumer sensitive approaches deployed by these key distributors including extended product warranty and free after-sales services particularly for consumers of electrical and household appliances. With a product warranty, the consumer is assured that should the product fail to meet his expectation, he has the right to return the product within a stipulated time. The offer of free after-sales service operates usually in two main forms. First is the free delivery and initial installation and periodic servicing of the product. Second may also include part(s) replacements and repair works at no cost to the buyer. In Ghana, one of the major factors that hinders the uptake of new products is concerns over the services of competent repairers or suitable spare parts for novel items. In the absence of such facilities many were hesitant to try new products irrespective of what it promises (including price). So, if they cannot afford the expensive known brands, then they will settle for home-used version of known brands because they are guaranteed adequate parts/repair should it develop any fault during its use. This is emphasised in the following quotations from two participants: First is Yaw Manu who offers

a broader outlook of Ghanaians towards new products. This was his response when I asked whether his decision was not influenced by the numerous advertisements on the said product?

... I observed similar responses from Ghanaians. I don't really think it's about Chinese products. For me it's more about people been careful about how they want to spend their hard-earned income. Similar concerns were raised I remember in the early 80s and 90s when Toyota and other unknown cars were introduced to Ghana. ... So even though advertisements make products popular, for me it was more because I had the assurance that if it did not work as expected, I could freely return it for it to be fixed or replaced (Yaw Manu, Hisense sound system and Freezer user).

Adiepena, was more emphatic on the availability and workability of the service: She recounts her experiences, when she was asked if she had ever had her product returned at no cost.

Oh yes, before I bought the TCL Flat screen, I ... I had bought this microwave oven from the same shop but within three months it was not working properly so I went to the shop, and they immediately offered to replace it because it was still within the warranty period. They even asked whether I was willing to pay some small amount in addition to have a higher version or if I just wanted it replaced. I opted for the latter, so they replaced it ... so I can say that the service works because I am a beneficiary of the system.

Being mindful of the negative stereotype associated with Chinese products in the country, distributors employed the use of superior product warranty at no cost to assure customers of the durability of their products. For instance, Hisense, one of the fastest growing brands of Chinese products in Ghana offers a 5-years product warranty on all major products including fridges, air conditioners, flat screen television, and home stereo/sound systems. This is 3 years more than the average product warranty in Ghana. Even though the workings of this warranty apply in a limited sense because it does not cover product return or money refunds as is the practice in other countries [it must be noted that in such countries extended warranty are sold and implemented in a form of insurance] (Albaum & Wiley, 2010). A third of the respondents, factored in the availability of warranty in their decision-making process. This is consistent with happenings elsewhere where product warranty has been established to reduce purchase risk both in perceived (Shimp & Bearden, 1982; White & Truly, 1989) and actual forms (Kelley, 1988; Weiner, 1985). By offering this form of product security, consumers get extra motivation to try "new entrance" instead of consigning themselves solely to perceived "high culture" products (Slater, 1997). Baudrillard (2000) attributes this to the influence of modern advertisement which has taken over modern culture and thus breaking exclusive promotion of a limited set of products. From the responses of the participants, I maintain that although the introduction of product warranty is a strategy employed by customers to safeguard their interest against the purchase of sub-standard products, the practice also promotes sales for the traders because it gives further impetus to nascent consumers to try the lesser-known item on the market.

As positive as these innovations are in cultivating a cheerful outlook towards MIC in Ghana it may pose a greater challenge with a possibility of an ethnic clash between Ghanaian-owned companies and the Chinese companies if not managed properly. All buyers who considered warranty and the added services as a necessary component in their purchasing decisions made their purchases from the modern retail outlets and other key Chinese known brands distributing outlets where such licensed retailers operate. A sizeable percentage of these suppliers are foreigners compared to Ghanaian retailers who dominate the traditional market space. The Ghanaians because of their limited trading capacity are not licensed to offer manufacturing warranty to their clients. This situation, if not professionally managed, could reignite the existing trade-related antagonism between local and foreign traders in Ghana, including the Chinese especially within the commercial business district of the capital (see Obeng, 2018). The Chinese, however, appears to have tactically watered down the potential threat with the increasing engagement of Ghanaians as lead actors in the sales, branding, and other related services including the installation and repair

works. Such engagements aside potentially warding-off trade-war further work to boost customers confidence in the new and less known Chinese brands. During the field observation it was discovered that about 95% of the workers in these key distribution outlets were Ghanaians. This is consistent with other studies across the continent that have indicated a massive engagement of local employees except in key sensitive areas where the Chinese entrepreneurs or close family members tend to be in charge (see Giese, 2014).

Also linked to product warranty is the emerging preference for brand new products as compared to the used known brands. Historically Ghanaians have nurtured a vibrant appetite for second-hand goods of all kinds particularly from the Western World (Amankwah-Amoah, 2015). There are therefore dedicated markets across the country for the sale and repairs of such items and this remained the main medium by which majority acquired capital goods (Amankwah-Amoah, 2015). Operators in such sectors are economically powerful and overtime have succeeded in securing the attention of policymakers to yield to their demands. Specific to electronics and gadgets, this has led to the emergence of a booming informal e-waste recycling industry in Accra (Oteng-Ababio, 2014). The enterprise for the sale of second-hand merchandise for decades has been facilitated by the Ghanaian migrant community in Europe and the Americas and served as means by which returned migrants have reintegrated economically (Setrana & Tonah, 2014). Even when the Ghana standard authority promulgated Legislative Instruments (L.I 1586) and (L.I 1693) in 2001 to place a ban on imported second-hand items such as sanitary ware, mattresses and underwears, this only encouraged smuggling because there was demand for them. Consequently, there was the belief that used items from certain countries are superior to brand new products (of lesser-known brands) with some even selling at higher prices than brand new ones. The increasing uptake of Chinese products thus defy this long held tradition, and thus an indication of an emerging change in such value. The participants mentioned the increasing cost of products, wanton repairs to these used items and the lack of guarantee for such products. This observation resonates with the emerging perspective that individual consumers increasingly seek meaningful experiences rather than specific goods, and this desire for authentic experiences is based on emotions (Addis & Holbrook, 2001). The provision of these added services in the form of product warranty, free installation, periodic maintenance, and servicing therefore makes it more rational to buy a brand-new product compared to second-hand products, a product whose quality was not guaranteed anyway. Interrogating this further it was discovered that certain policies by government and other quasi-state agencies have also contributed to this development. For instance, the state began implementing a ban on the importation and sale of used fridges in 2012 to reduce CFC emissions. As a motivation government introduced a rebate system to encourage people to surrender their used fridges for a new one. The energy commission, with the support of the UNDP undertook to sell 50,000 energy-efficient refrigerators under the rebate system. This was projected to save 216 MWh of electricity

In addition to product warranty and free after-sales service, the growing demand and utilisation of MIC products in Ghana is also in response to the ever-changing social structure of Ghana. These changes make it practically impossible for urban residents to live a less “technology-infused life” especially when images of such innovations inundate the media and is glorified as bringing respite to its adopters. For these participants, although ownership of such items may bring some social prestige as demonstrated in the various advertisements, their primary motivation for procuring these items are the personal reliefs they envisage for themselves and their family. Even though they assert that the assurance of return and the guarantee of a qualified technician to help fix the products when it becomes faulty contributed to their ultimate decision in buying MIC. The personal reliefs that the item was to bring to them were also very essential in their considerations. Yaa Anowa, a university professor, a wife and a mother of a two-year-old daughter expressed her motivation for acquiring some household equipment as follows:

... My priority was how these items were going to bring some reliefs to my home ... the truth is that I cannot cope with my multiple responsibilities [as a mother, a teacher and a wife]

without these items. So, for me the initial motivation ... for example, for the microwave oven was how it was going to ease the stress in my home. I couldn't continue with cooking dinner every day. With the microwave, all I do is to spend one weekend to cook as much food as I can and then during the week, we reheat them.

Technology for Anowa and others with similar orientations could be said to view technology as critical alternative to the declining availability of domestic help or maids and their associated challenges. Bloom 2015, for instance, states that in America: the absence of maids, largely invisible workers who for decades made keeping a middle-class family house a much easier task, is one of the biggest reasons today's middle-class families feel stretched for time. In response to their absence, middle-class families had to resort to technologies such as microwaves, dishwashers, and laundry machines.

Yaa Anowa's exposition above reflects a view shared by a little over half (36) of the participants in this study. For example, Kweku whose most notable made-in-China item is a Hisense air-conditioner explained that he was motivated to purchase an air-conditioner because of its anticipated reprieves to his family. He explains further:

... between May and June, I think the last two years [2016] there was this heatwave that engulfed the country. It was so unbearable, and it began to have a serious effect on my family. There were days where together with my wife we had fan our children back to sleep at night. After three of such experiences, I told my wife we will have to have an air-conditioner and that was why we got the air-conditioner.²

With increasing population because of urbanisation and its associated climate change conditions, urban centres tend to be reporting rising temperatures as the forest belt and sometimes gardens tend to give way for estate development for residential and commercial properties with little regard for the vital roles that trees and wetlands play in creating a cool and conducive environment.

This perspective is in sharp contrast to some of the dominant trickle-up oriented consumption studies, most of which have glorified the assertion that people develop desires for material things to boost their social prestige, and for their symbolic entitlements rather than their functional benefits (Slater, 1997). It must be noted that some aspect of Ghanaian culture exemplifies this symbolic entitlement. Observations in situations where the poor spend excessively on death rituals (Bonsu & Belk, 2003) and make implicit references to the power of money in obituaries (Bonsu, 2008) are just a few such instances. This view, synonymous to Veblen's conspicuous consumption hypothesis expressed that status was a product of economic wealth and consumption a practice of the leisure class (Veblen, 1912/1994).

Consumption of technology as a response to urban demands has been identified in studies in Africa previously but was limited to the uptake of the mobile phone (Asongu, 2015). One of such examples is the statement of Paul Kagame, the President of Rwanda at the "Connect Africa" summit in 2007. Paul Kagame remarked: "in ten short years, what was once an object of luxury and privilege, the mobile phone has become a necessity in Africa" (Asongu, 2015, p. 706; Aker & Mbiti, 2010, p. 208). This study thus extends the urban driven demand for electronic consumption beyond ownership of the mobile phone to other electronic and household technology. This is because the absence of these electronic appliances makes it difficult for them to perform their expected social roles as members of their changing communities.

The functionality-based consumption rather than the symbolic argument for the uptake of made-in-China is relevant because, for majority of the participants the consumption of these products was not the only means they could gain acceptance or to express their higher social statuses: Table 1, above, showcases some of these attributes. The table indicates that the sampled consumers are not of the lowest socio-economic status: for instance, all participants in the study have formal education with the

majority (57) having a minimum of secondary education. Additionally, all but three of the participants were gainfully employed with a third in managerial or supervisory positions. They earned almost six times more than the minimum national monthly wage which stood at GHC 262.00 (US\$ 60.5). The participants earned on the average GHC 1,500.00 (US\$350.00) a month. The highest monthly income was GHC 8000.00 (US\$ 1800.00) and the least person earned GHC 350.00 (US\$ 80.00). The socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents make them more open to developments within their society and thus their actions, a reflection of their personal values and understanding.

The decision to buy Chinese products despite the proliferation of other known brands may also exemplify a rebellion against the established regime as observed by Holt and Cameron (2010). In underscoring the above, participants described the cost of certain alternative products as ridiculous and excessive misuse of economic resources (all in the name of keeping pace with a supposed economic or social trend. A participant, Mildred expresses this position when she was asked whether she was not using MIC because she could not afford the known brands. She responded by drawing an analogy between two items: a baby car seat for her daughter and a new mobile phone. She explains that although she earns enough to afford whatever phone or car seat she desired, she was unwilling to invest beyond certain threshold into buying a mobile phone because of its frequent replaceability. She was, however, willing to spend more money on buying the baby car seat to guarantee her daughter's comfort and safety. The position of Mildred on the items is tenable simply because for her there are other equally good options from which she could choose to satisfy her desire. A position that is highlighted by the trickle-across perspective.

The analogy as presented by Mildred also indicates the subjective and contextual meaning of quality contrary to the dominant view that define quality as a matter of who can afford. Mildred's readiness to replace her phone periodically also fits within the concept of planned obsolescence, a phrase in industrial design and economics in which a product is planned or designed with an artificially limited lifespan, so it will become obsolete after a certain period (Bullow, 1986). In the case of the mobile phone, the desire for replacement after a short period, is due to stylistic obsolescence—a situation where obsolescence occurs when designers change the styling of products, so customers will purchase products more frequently due to the decrease in the perceived desirability of the fashionable item. In other words, a new mobile phone is primarily desired for aesthetic reasons rather than functionality. Buying a relatively cheaper product that is functional allows this respondent to keep pace with the fashion cycle (Obeng, 2019, p. 115).

This position is strengthened further in the words of Onaapo who questioned the justification in spending more than one's monthly income on fashionable items especially when similar utility could be derived from other alternatives?

... why should I spend more than my monthly income just on a phone? The Huawei that I spent about half of my salary on can do all the things that an iPhone or Samsung galaxy 7 can do. All the software that an IOS can support, the Huawei can support, and I really think that some of these companies are only playing on our intelligence with this so-called prestigious tag ... *if you double my salary today, I will still not spend that much on a phone.*

The last point in Onaapo's statement is in sharp contrast to a recent McKinsey study on Chinese consumers which reveals that given an improved income, people were more likely to abandon lesser-known brands for more superior known brands (Zipser et al., 2016).

Improvement in the perception of Africans towards made-in-China products and China as a model of economic development is another motivation. Although the quality of MIC has dominantly been viewed in relation to other established brands, participants had a nuanced application of the concept of quality. This ranged from superiority to other previous MICs, specific feature superiority compared to other brands and to the questioning of the notion of inferiority of MIC compared to other established brands. This was discussed in relation to price, appearance/

package, and user satisfaction/utility. Azikiwe's narrative below is an example of the first. He compares his current TCL Flat screen with his previous MIC phone among others:

... there is much improvement in the MIC products currently on the Ghanaian market. The first Chinese phone that I bought was really a bomb (useless). My experience with that phone was very terrible ... It easily hanged on me and could become so hot that you got scared placing the phone to your ear to either make or receive a call. I even vowed never to buy anything made in China ... Unlike that Phone, this TV [current MIC], which I have being using for close to 3 years. It has really served me well. This has even made me to buy another made-in-China phone ... maybe it's also because it's not as cheap as those previously on the market.

The position of observed improvement of MIC in relation to other previous MIC is made differently by Agyaaku in the following words:

The products that are currently on the market are different. They look so attractive and fit for purpose. In fact, the first time I saw the Infinix phone and the Huawei that I am currently using it never crossed my mind that that phone could be made-in-China. The voice and pictures are clear. It also came with these polyphonic ringtones unlike the noisy ones that easily gave one out as a China phone.

As indicated, participants also identified specific areas where they found the MIC products to be even more superior to known brands on the market. This position is emphasised in the words Kwekus, Alidu and Naadu. Kwekus, for instance, explained that he opted for a Hisense air-conditioner because it had the least kilowatts of electricity consumption. Explaining further he stated that the addition of the 2-horsepower air-conditioner to his domestic electronics has marginally affected his electricity bill because of its lower rate of electricity consumption.

A similar assertion is made by Alidu whilst he justifies his decision to buy a Techno phone. He emphasised the strength of the phone battery:

I had a Samsung phone, but the battery was running down almost every two hours and that kept disturbing my business. I was even forced to buy a power bank as a back-up but to no avail. So, when I heard the advertisement and they talked about how strong and long lasting the battery was, I considered it seriously. So that was the main reason I went in for the Techno phone. ... when I charge the phone fully, sometimes it could take me up to three or four days. One of the unique features about this phone is that I can use it to charge other phones. ... on this feature [referring to ability to use it to charge other phone] Techno has no competition on the Ghanaian market!

However, for Naadu, it was the superior picture quality of the Huawei Short X. She expresses this below:

I enjoy taking pictures. So, when my other phone got spoilt, I decided that my next phone should have a superior camera. Then I was told that Huawei Short X has a perfect camera. So, I went online and did some reviews and was convinced. Went to the shop and requested for that phone and I think it has proven to be a great choice.

This finding is a confirmation of earlier studies across Africa. For example, a study by Wang et al. (2014) in Ghana indicated a growing Ghanaian confidence in Chinese new products (p. 1025). A similar observation is recounted by both indigenous and Chinese merchants and users of MIC in Botswana (Yanyin, 2015). The Afrobarometer survey in 36 African countries including Ghana, makes similar findings. The report indicated that 63% of Africans believed China to be somewhat or a very positive influence on the continent as opposed to 15% who see it as somewhat/very negative -. Specific to Ghana a report by Pew Research Center in 2014 indicated that 61% of Ghanaians had a favourable view of the Chinese and 23%

reported unfavourable views of China. China was viewed even more favourably by the younger generation: 66% of Ghanaians between the ages 18–29 reported favourable views of China compared to 56% for those 50 years and above. This may be explained by the form and profile targeting commercials being undertaken by Chinese companies in Africa (see Gauns et al., 2017). I return to this subject later when I discuss how celebrity endorsement is shaping attitude towards made-in-China.

A third perspective, questions entirely the inferiority tag of MIC products. Baba Ali, a mechanical engineer who uses a TCL Flat screen TV explains his decision to buy made-in-China by questioning the notion of inferiority.

”We sit here in Ghana and say some brands are sub-standard because they are made in China. What product on the market today is not manufactured in China? [he quiz!] It’s just the ownership of the companies that distinguish these products. I bought an iPad for about \$500 in 2013 and that iPad was made in China. The Chinese are making everything in the world. You look behind your TV set or any electronic appliances and you will see that it’s made in China [he tells me!].

Baba Ali’s exposition above obviously indicates his level of exposure to global production chain. His perspective is enshrined within the critiques of the COO effect who questioned the utility of such nomenclature since to them multinational production, integrated worldwide supply chains, outsourcing and manufacturing set ups and global branding have blurred the influence of COO on consumers (Usunier, 2011). In the case of China, this is happening because well-known or established brands have either relocated their production plants or have outsourced the production of critical components to be manufactured in China to take advantage of its economical labour cost and to maximise profit (Sarwar et al., 2013). As strategic as the relocation may be in cutting cost to businesses, the comments by the participants indicate potential negative unintended consequences for such brands should the COO effect work on consumers (see Roger et al. (1994). Further complicating this discourse is the increasing takeover of established brands by Chinese companies. For example, in 2004 IBM, a well-established maker of personal computers, was acquired 100% by Chinese owned Lenovo at the cost of 1.75 billion dollars and the trend of global brand acquisitions by Chinese see no end.

Although the majority (83%) of the consumers reported a perception of improving quality of made-in-China products as factors explaining their uptake, a minority (13%) reported a directly opposite position 4% were indifferent. For the minority, (13% of the respondents), the dominant view was that makers of made-in-China employ masquerading tactics aimed at deceiving their clients (see Zi, 2015; Dobler, 2009; Shelton & Paruk, 2008 similar reports across the continent). They were of the view that as a strategy the Chinese first introduce a high-end version of their products onto the market and when they are received favourably by the population, then they import the inferior version to make more money from unsuspecting clients. They argue that people who testify to owning quality Chinese products were just fortunate to have benefitted from the quality prototype and not because of a systematic improvement in the quality of Chinese imports into the country. This observation which has been reported earlier (see Giese & Thiel, 2014; Obeng, 2018) brings into question the system of product certification in Africa that makes it possible for sub-standard products to be imported into their markets.

Another factor that has triggered the increasing uptake of Chinese products is the ease of access to foreign products into the Ghanaian market. Ghana, since the early 1990s has embarked on series of neoliberal policies under the direction of IMF as part of the Economic Recovery programme adopted in 1989 (Kragelund, 2009). Interventions such as the abolishing of a 10% sales tax on import, the establishment of a parallel foreign exchange market by issuing licenses to private citizens to set up foreign exchange bureaus, and the eliminations of import licensing boasted the importation and trading in global consumer items (AK Darkwah, 2002). Additionally, the SAPs had a negative impact on the manufacturing sector as several of the companies which were divested

as part of the transition failed to survive, with a sizeable number of them eventually collapsing. This served as further motivation for the thriving import enterprise. People had enough incentives to import any consumable from across the globe so far as they envisaged a market without any threat from domestic manufacturers (Obeng, 2018, p. 49).

The players in the import business and trading in global commodities thus prospered (Bodomo, 2012; Bowles, 2013; A. K. Darkwah & Gunewardena and A. Kingsolver, 2007) and the business and import became the last resort to making a living in Ghana, as many who could not find employment in the formal sector because of the contraction in the economy looked up to the trading sector for survival.

Ghana currently have one of the freest import regimes in the sub-region With China emerging as a hub for global consumables, Ghanaians, and foreigners alike through their combined efforts bring assorted products to sell particularly to urban residents who desire these products. These importers include new entrants who envisage a living in the import enterprise as well as the more experienced importers who have shifted their destinations from the global North to China (see Obeng, 2015). MIC have become so popular to the extent that some participants suggested that made-in-China currently appears not to have or at best have very little competition in the local market and even across the continent (Röschenthaler, 2021).

Aside the neoliberal regime that makes MIC easily accessible on the Ghanaian market, is one critical elements of the trickle-across model of consumption flow. The trickle-across model emphasises how through the medium of mass communication and advertisement members of the community get to be exposed simultaneously to several types of products on the markets that seeks to target people from different socio-economic brackets. This is manifested in some deliberate works of the distributors/franchise holders of made-in-China brands in the form event sponsorship, persuasive advertisement, and the recruitment of celebrities as product ambassadors. First, the companies introducing and distributing these brands are vigorously supporting high profile programs as title sponsors and in the process offering samples of their products as rewards to participants and attendees to such events. In 2016, Star Times (a Chinese owned company) a leading digital-TV operator in Africa bought the media right to all elite football matches in Ghana in a contract worth \$ 17,950,000.00 for 10 years. This contract granted Star Times exclusive media right to all the eight football products of the Ghana Football Association. This featured the Ghana Premier League, the Gala, the National Division One League, the MTN FA Cup, the Ghana Women's League, and the Ghana Juvenile League. As part of the media right, the over 10 sports stadia used for the Premier League matches, their entrances and the roads leading to these facilities were decorated with the brand and billboards of all kinds were mounted to display these products. This is in addition to on-screen display during live coverage of these matches. With football as a major passion of Ghanaians particularly, the young people, the choice of such a platform is very tactical to their commercial interest. With such deliberate act aimed at making made-in-China visible, it is to be expected when customers assume that they have limited choice as to what product to buy.

Huawei, the largest telecommunications equipment manufacturer in the world, adopted a similar approach when it entered the Ghanaian market. Huawei opted to partner the two largest telecommunication companies in Ghana, MTN and Vodafone. This partnership instantly introduced Huawei to almost 80% of mobile service subscribers in Ghana. Subscribers of these two networks were offered the opportunity to own variety of Huawei phones at relatively cheaper cost. On the back of these networks' goodwill, Huawei within just 2 years became a household name in Ghana and has since not looked back. In essence, the strategic and massive advertisement that were deployed by these companies successfully overshadowed the other brands making them the obvious choice among potential users.

The success of this exercise has been influenced greatly by the personalities that have been engaged as brand ambassadors and portrayed as the faces of these products. Known as celebrities because of their distinctive qualities such as likability and attractiveness (Silvera & Austad, 2004). This exercise is

done with the understanding that their endorsement of products will endear their followers to such products (Erdogan et al., 2001). This is because in some cases these celebrities are not just liked but are worshipped (Dash & Sabat, 2012). In this study, almost all the major products had such celebrities as their brand ambassadors. For instance, in the case of Hisense, which is relatively new to the Ghanaian market compared to other Chinese brands, the advertisement featured three of the most famous movie stars in the country: Nana Ama McBrown, Kwadwo Nkansah (Lilwin) and Akrokobeto. These are three TV personalities whose act appeal to a broad segment of Ghanaians, particularly among the youth and the less educated. In this advertisement, these celebrities take turns to share their purported first-hand experiences with different Hisense products. The ad is changed, and the content modified seasonally to mark landmarks events in Ghana and with targeted forms of product promotions. The adverts and the personality endorsements remain sticking points for these uptakers. Similar to the reports and works of Bowman (2002) to the effect that celebrity endorsement led to increased level of product recall, some of the participants chose to call the products they were using by the names of the celebrities behind the products, a clear confirmation of the potential of celebrities to increase brand awareness among their targets (Chan et al., 2013).

Felicity, a hitherto critique of MIC speaks of what triggered her eventual interest to make her first notable made-in-China product purchase.

“I was once very sceptical about Chinese products and in fact sworn never to buy any product from China ... but when I saw Nana Ama McBrown’s adverts, in fact, she is my role model; she is such a confident woman, beautiful and intelligent person. I felt I should try it. Coincidentally, at the time I needed to get a fridge, So I said to my friend ... I will have to try that product and that is what I did ” a year later I got this Air-conditioner also a Hisense product.

Also linked to this, is the strategic and persuasive manner that these brands are being popularised through massive spending on products advertisement in the media space. Some of the most advertised brands in Ghana currently are Huawei, TLC, Hisense, Star Times, and Techno. In introducing Techno mobile phones, for example, to the Ghanaian market, the holders of the franchise in Ghana mounted billboards and flags from about 100 m on both sides of the road leading to the shop in the capital city to attract attention to the product. He also bought an advertisement slot on one of the most listened to radio station in Ghana: Peace FM morning show- Kokrokoo. This advert has been ongoing for the past 5 years and the commercials are played at least twice every working day on the 15 min sports segment of the programme. This is in addition to the uncountable number of deliberate product expositions done by the presenters of the program at the start and at the end of the program. The decision to sponsor the sport segment is very strategic because Ghanaians are very passionate and enthusiastic about sport particularly football. Sponsoring a popular sport program therefore opens-up the brand to a large population of young people: a group that research have indicated are more accessible to new products (Gauns et al., 2017). This is consistent with other findings that indicate that advertisers are willing to pump millions of dollars to media platforms to ensure that their products remain visible and to create an emotional attachment to their products among target audience and viewers (Gauns et al., 2017; Stillerman, 2015).

Similar views are expressed by participants Mildred, Alidu and Kwekus. Mildred justified her decision not to spend beyond certain amount on the constant introduction of newer versions of phones through advertisement. Alidu and Kwekus indicate that they were drawn to the adverts on radio primarily because of the celebrities used for the ads. For these respondents, had it not been the personality they may have overlooked the adverts. The personalities made them pay closer attention and to identify relevant contents such as the warranty and free after-sales service among others.

4. Conclusion

This paper has interrogated the motivation and rationale for the increasing uptake of Chinese products in Ghana despite the general negative product outlook. Stigmatised with a tag of inferiority, consumption

of Chinese products has been justified on the grounds that such consumers cannot afford established and high-end products from the developed economies and subsequently argued that with improved socioeconomic status, such products will be jettisoned for superior western brands. An explanation that is consistent with the trickle-down paradigm of consumption which emphasises hierarchy and status as standard bearers of innovation. This has adequately been demonstrated in the works of some classical theorists such as Marx, Weber, Veblen, and Simmel. These works and others in similar orientation have shown how over time consumption and choice of what is valuable are shaped and determined by the powerful in society to create and recreate new taste and values aimed at maintaining their exclusivity.

This paper, however, broadens the discussion on the factors driving the uptake of Chinese products beyond the catching-up phenomenon by asserting that contrary to the exclusivity of cost-motivator, Ghanaian rising consumption of made-in-China products is dominantly a response to the dexterity, innovativeness and consumer-sensitive approaches introduced by the distributor to serve as buffer to prospective Ghanaian buyers. Principal among these approaches are the offer of product warranty and free after-sales services, leading to a preference for brand new as against the established practice of consuming used version of popular brands. The rest of the factors are demand for technology in urban-living, perception of improvement in MIC, the influence of the media and engagement of celebrities as brand ambassadors. The multifaceted nature of the motivation for the uptake of MIC in Ghana triggers demystification of the emphasis on affordability as the sole rationale for the consumption of Chinese products and the conclusion that it is the poor who purchase and use such products. On the contrary, the data indicates that Ghanaians of different socio-economic statuses consume Chinese products either as a manifestation of rebellion or as a calculated response to perceived wastefulness on known brands. Such participants do not necessarily challenge the durability of other known brands but are of the view that similar utility could be derived from consuming lesser known-brands and thereby putting their funds to better use. This understanding is in support of the trickle-across model of consumption. An understanding that has emerged because of the availability of comparable design and innovation by multiple manufacturing companies that target various strata within the society. This effort has been facilitated through the power of the media and promotional efforts in the distribution sector. This further adds to the emerging theoretical position that challenges the dominant view that quality is synonymous to “expensiveness” of a product. This understanding conceptualises price as a complex process determined by the level of scarcity and competitiveness and not simply as a measure of quality. This paper therefore concludes that quality products should lead to higher demand in a competitive environment which ultimately must lead to lower prices as the benefit of economies of scale. The innovativeness of this study notwithstanding, it is envisaged that since MIC has become a household name in Ghana and broadly in Africa, an exercise to understand the consumption pattern and attitude towards made-in-China must not be limited to urban centres but also endeavor to include the rural and smaller communities whose needs, incomes and perspective are different. Future studies on the consumption of made-in-China must therefore include residents of smaller and rural communities to adequately capture and theorise perceptions, experiences and motivations for the purchase and consumption of such product of science and technology.

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Notes

1. Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the University of Ghana Ethics Committee for the Humanities.
2. Kwekus resides in one of the emerging high rising apartments that is built with air tight sliding windows and doors. These buildings are constructed in a manner that maximise every land space resulting in a poor air circulation and ventilations. The rise in the temperature during the season therefore rendered the fan less useful thus the need to procure and install a Hisense air conditioner. Until then he never conceived the idea of installing an air conditioner.

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