



Indigenous Design Aesthetics, Cultural and Gendered Preferences as Catalyst to Navigating Market Dynamics

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Abstract. The Nigerian textile industry has experienced a severe decline, with the collapse of 150 companies in 2023, leaving only two operational firms, both foreign-owned. This downturn is primarily attributed to the rampant influx of textiles, particularly from China, which has saturated the market and undermined local manufacturers' and designers' competitiveness. This paper examines the interplay between textile design aesthetics, consumer preference and the socio-cultural dimensions of gender within the Nigerian context. Data is collected from a survey involving 23 Nigerian respondents who patronize imported textiles. The findings highlight the cultural significance of indigenous textile patterns, deeply embedded in the identities and traditions of various ethnic groups, underscoring the need for local designers and producers to innovate and align with consumer preferences. The paper also discusses the economic implications of the failing local textile industry, including job losses and capital flight and offers strategic recommendations for local manufacturers. Ultimately, this study emphasizes the importance of integrating traditional design aesthetics with contemporary trends to foster a sustainable and competitive textile sector in Nigeria.

Keywords: Textile design, gender construction, Nigeria, cultural aesthetics, motif, pattern

1. Introduction

The Nigerian textile industry has witnessed a significant downturn, marked by the collapse of 150 textile companies as reported by Punch Newspaper in August 2023. This liquidation left only two operating local textile firms, both of which are not Nigerian-owned. The Nigerian Textile Employers Association attributes the decline to rampant smuggling of textiles into the Nigerian market. Smuggling has severely impacted the Nigerian textile sector, undermining the

competitiveness of local manufacturers (Ikpotu, 2023). The influx of illegally imported textiles, particularly from China, has saturated the market, making it challenging for local producers to thrive. This phenomenon is not unique to Nigeria; similar challenges have been observed in other developing economies where regulatory enforcement is weak and smuggling is rampant (Olumide & Daramola, 2022). The dominance of imported fabrics, especially from China, is driven by two primary factors: cost-effectiveness and design adaptability. Chinese textile manufacturers have successfully captured the Nigerian market by producing affordable fabrics that resonate with local design preferences. These manufacturers have tailored their designs to reflect indigenous Nigerian aesthetics, such as the intricate and colourful patterns of Yoruba Adire and Aso-oke, the symbolic Isiagu motif of the Igbo, and the bold zebra stripes of the Tiv (Chinweizu, 2023).

The cultural significance of Nigerian textile design, particularly within the context of some selected ethnic nationalities, is profound and multifaceted. The textiles patterns are more than just fabrics; they constitute cultural artefacts, artistic expressions and identity declarations (Lemi, 2024). They symbolise a complex and diverse tapestry of Nigerian cultures, histories and values, while also influencing and defining the international fashion scene. Labode and Braide (2022) conjecture that Africa's diverse cultural landscape portrays the ways in which these dynamics manifest the intricate relationship between textile aesthetics and the social construction of gender. By synthesizing insights from fabric design preferences, cultural influences, gender theory and art history, there is a need to examine the complex interplay between textile design aesthetics and gender identity in juxtaposition to aesthetic appeal, ethnic intersectionality influences as well as sustainability considerations in textile purchasing choices. This

paper aims to explore and analyse the fabric purchase behaviours and design preferences among Nigerian consumers, focusing on the influence of cultural elements, personal taste, and socio-economic factors. It examines the factors contributing to the decline of Nigeria's local textile industry and suggests strategic measures for local manufacturers to remain competitive by aligning with consumer design preferences and behaviour.

2. Review of theoretical Perspectives on Textile and Dress Culture

In August 2023, Punch Newspaper reported the collapse of 150 Nigerian textile companies, leaving only two foreign-owned firms operational. The Nigerian Textile Employers Association attributed this to textile smuggling. Local manufacturers must study consumer preferences and design trends to compete, as Chinese imports dominate due to cost-effectiveness and alignment with indigenous designs. Within this historical context, indigenous designs encompassing gendered symbolism has played a pivotal role, shaping the ways in which textiles are produced, worn and interpreted within Nigerian society. Roach-Higgins and Eicher (2016) assert that dress imposes identities on individuals by communicating roles within cultural and social constructs. As such, the communicative

elements of dress is exclusively embedded in the textile design and fashion style.

Psychological research on dress and textile design appeal, though lacking a unified theoretical framework, spans various domains within psychology and related fields. Johnson et al. (2014) provide a comprehensive overview of these diverse research aspects. One area examines how observers infer women's sexual interest based on their attire (Treat et al, 2016; Hester & Hehman, 2023). Another line of inquiry, rooted in evolutionary theories of sexual selection, investigates the effect of the colour red on perceived attractiveness (Lehmann et al., 2018). Research on enclotted cognition explores how clothing influences the wearer's cognition and behaviour (Crutzen & Adam, 2022; Hester & Hehman, 2023). Studies in applied professional journals often discuss how attire affects perceptions of professionalism and competence in specific settings (Furnham et al., 2013). Personality psychology investigates how accurately clothing reflects the wearer's personality, culture and how it shapes observers' impressions and culture (Stolovy, 2021). Additionally, research explores how dress influences social categorization, such as associating specific clothing items with particular social groups (Rhodes & Baron, 2019).

To contextualize the discussion, it is imperative to acknowledge the rich historical legacy of Nigerian textile traditions, which encompass a diverse array of techniques, motifs and cultural meanings. Labode and Braide (2022) highlight the intricate symbolism embedded within traditional African textiles, with patterns and designs often carrying deep cultural and spiritual significance. Beyond their aesthetic appeal, Nigerian textile designs frequently have symbolic significance and function as a type of social communication. Specific patterns, motifs and colours can provide information about the wearer's age, marital status, social standing, or even mood. These designs function as a visual language, allowing people to express themselves and communicate within their communities.

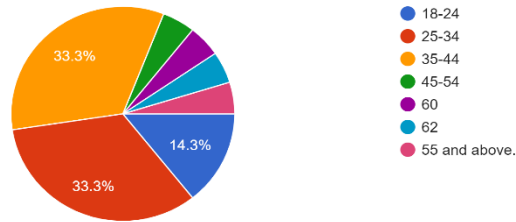
3. Methodology

Demographic Information

The survey consisted of 21 respondents, predominantly from two major ethnic groups: Yoruba (11) and Igbo (9), with one respondent from the Atyap and one from the Calabar ethnic groups. The gender distribution was 10 females and 11 males. Occupations varied, with civil servants, students, traders/business persons, and others (professionals).

Data was randomly collected via an online survey with 23 respondents answering structured and unstructured questions. The demography shows the majority of the respondents were Nigerians between the ages of 25 to 44 years of age as shown in the pie chart below. This was followed by interviews of some Nigerians, who patronize merchants dealing in imported textiles and whose preferences for textile designs for occasions are mainly native clothing.

1. Age?
21 responses



4. Presentation of Result and Findings

The study surveyed 23 Nigerian respondents to understand their fabric purchase preferences, revealing diverse tastes influenced by cultural, personal and practical factors. The frequency of fabric purchases varied, with most buying fabrics every few months. Preferences for fabric designs included abstract, stripes, geometric, floral and ethnic/traditional patterns, highlighting a strong inclination towards personal comfort and fashion trends. Colour choices are balanced between bright and muted tones, driven mainly by personal taste. Cultural elements in fabric choices were deemed important by a majority, emphasizing the cultural significance in fabric selection. Local markets and specialised shops were the primary sources for fabric purchases, while sustainability was of moderate concern. Fabric design preferences shifted based on occasion, with considerations such as suitability, durability and event nature influencing choices. Respondents' colour preferences spanned bright colours, mixed tones and muted combinations, reflecting a nuanced approach to fabric aesthetics and functionality.

5. Analysis of Findings

The research findings present a comprehensive overview of fabric purchase preferences among Nigerian respondents, showcasing an inclination to cultural and personal influences. The frequency of fabric purchases varies significantly, with some respondents purchasing monthly and others rarely, reflecting diverse consumer behaviours influenced by socio-economic factors and cultural practices (Etuk et al., 2022; Amdan & Zanna, 2021). Preferences for fabric designs such as abstract, stripes, geometric, floral, and ethnic/traditional patterns indicate a dynamic interplay between contemporary fashion trends and cultural heritage (Allen, 2024; He et al., 2022). Influences on colour preferences primarily stem from personal taste, with fashion trends also playing a significant role, suggesting an increasing

globalization of fashion preferences (Gray et al., 2014; Gazzola et al., 2020).

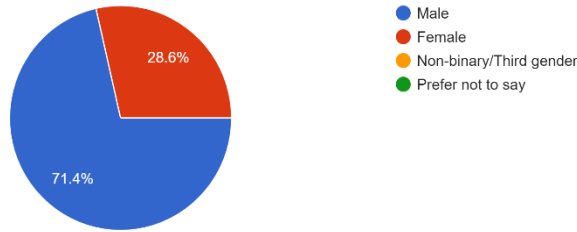
Incorporating cultural elements in fabric choices is crucial for many respondents, emphasizing the role of textiles in expressing cultural identity and heritage (Lange et al., 2022). The preference for local markets and specialized fabric shops highlights a trend towards personalized and culturally relevant shopping experiences, which support local economies (Zhang & Huang, 2024). Responses to the importance of sustainability reveal a growing, albeit uneven, awareness of environmental issues (Abbate et al., 2023). The adaptability of fabric preferences based on the occasion portrays the functional and symbolic role of textiles in non-verbal communication (Jang & Ha, 2023). Varied colour preferences, particularly the inclination towards bright colours, reflect the vibrant cultural aesthetic characteristic of Nigerian fashion, symbolizing joy and social cohesion while blending traditional and contemporary trends (Tachia-Bai & Dajo, 2024).

6. Discussion

Gendered Symbolism and Textile Aesthetics

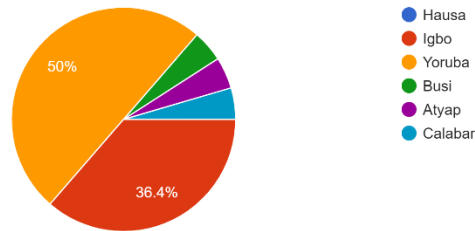
Textile designs often serve as visual markers of gender identity, with specific motifs, colours and patterns associated with masculinity as can be inferred from the response of men who constitute over 50% of the population of the survey. These male respondents also constitute the majority of importers of foreign textiles into the Nigerian apparel market. Interviews from both populations favoured the use of stripe, abstract and geometric patterns on Ankara and other fabric designs. For example, the use of geometric patterns and earth tones in men's attire may symbolize strength and authority, while the incorporation of floral motifs and vibrant hues in women's clothing may signify elegance and fertility. Through an analysis of these aesthetic conventions, we can gain insight into the ways in which gender norms are inscribed and reinforced within Nigerian textile traditions.

3. gender
21 responses



The textile traditions differ from one ethnic nationality to another. Whilst some ethnic group portray a good deal of gender disparity in the selection of fabric designs, others have both male and female genders having same taste in design selection. The Yoruba, one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa constitute the majority of respondents in this research (47.6%) show little or no disparity in the selection of fabric design used by both the male and female genders.

2. Ethnicity:
22 responses



However, what is prominent is a rich tapestry of the use of motifs, icons and sundry design elements embellishing the entire fabric. There are hardly any such things as poor distribution of motifs to create specific patterns especially when the popular Ankara fabric is evaluated in this regard. There are no restrictions with the use of motifs and background design. Design elements including lines, shapes and colours are generously used with a specific design in most fabric design preference of this demography. What may be considered a riotous use of colours in some other climes, may be pleasant and appropriate among the Yoruba, especially when it comes to textile pattern appeal. This is because the Yoruba chromatic system of colour use is culturally classified into three including funfun, pupa and dudu (Ibrahim, 2014). The funfun group of colours include white, sky blue, turquoise, silver and icy colours. The Pupa group include red, orange, yellow and gold, whilst the dudu group of colours are black, dark blue, dark greys, burnt sienna, burnt umber, indigo, purple and other dark shades. Colour combinations can align with the basic grouping of colours, hence varying slightly with well-established western colour combination schemes. Conversely, locally produced Adire fabric designs among the Yoruba shows an economic colour use with a few designs having monochromatic colours. Whilst this is common for locally designed Adire fabrics, the choice of selection of Ankara clothes were mainly colourful. It can be inferred that the cumbersome process of producing multicoloured Adire is a reason for the relatively less availability of the colourful locally produced apparel.

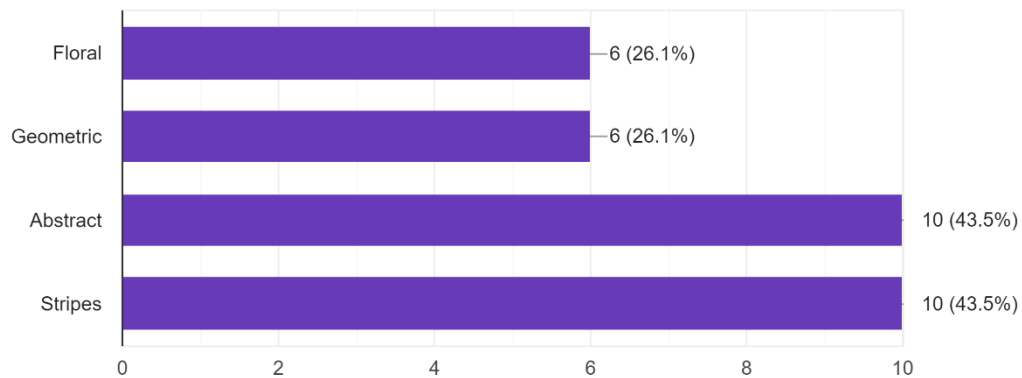


Locally designed fabric. Source: The Lagoon Gallery, Unilag

In northern Nigeria, where religion and culture have profound influence on design appeal, women sometimes dress in Ankara of all shades of colours with a plain or standalone colour hijab for covering head to abdomen. The male gender prefer a non-pattern embellished fabric often in sky blue or white projecting a sense of purity among the northern muslim community. However, whilst Ankara design fabric is not popular among northern males, this gender sometimes have their babariga clothes and hats embellished with a variety of embroidered designs. These embroidered designs may be associated with masculinity as its process of execution and durability are considered of higher societal status of the male gender. In this case, the use of vibrant colours does not portray an individual as belonging to a higher social status. Although, whilst the gender disparity exists among the majority of the northern Nigeria population, there are a few groups that portray unbiased apparel design based on gender difference. The Fulani, the Tiv and the Igala among others have both genders adorn in the same kind of pattern design traditionally. For instance, the black and white stripes of the indigenous people of Benue state (Tachia-Bai & Dajo, 2024) is a relic of consistency in male and female genders apparel patterns. At any rate, fabric designs with stripes and abstract (including embroidered motifs) are the most preferred patterns among Nigerians.

6. What type of fabric designs do you prefer? (Select all that apply)?

23 responses



Gender disparity in traditional fabric design taste is ostensibly most prominent among the Igbo of southeast Nigeria. Igbo women adorn themselves in colourful fabric usually with less busy embellishment unlike the Ankara designs popular among the Yoruba. The design appeal among the Igbo indicates a preference for sparingly distributed standalone motifs derived from recognizable forms. These forms could be simplified animals, letters of the English alphabet, regular shapes, iconic elements and floral motifs. Most Igbo women will wear these fabrics as traditional wrappers combining any of the design with a plain colour blouse. To match and create harmonious colour combination, the colour of the blouse is normally drawn from one of the colours of the fabric patterns and this is exclusively for women. In this case, what counts are the colours combined with blouse and wrapper, not the texture of the fabric. Conversely, the modern Igbo dress culture serve as influence for the growing costume culture in Nollywood (Okadigwe, 2019), with the popularity of Igbo men's traditional Isiagu pinafore worn originally by the Abiriba people of Abia state and the Arondizuogu people of Imo state becoming the traditional design for important men and ceremonies in many part of Igbo nation.

Intersectionality and Nigerian Textile Aesthetics

The intersectional lens, popularized by scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), provides a valuable framework for understanding the complex interplay between textile aesthetics and gender within Nigeria. Intersectionality highlights how other axes of identity, such as ethnicity, class, and religion, intersect with gender to produce diverse experiences and expressions of identity. Recent studies by researchers such as Falola and Oyebade (2019) have explored the intersectional dimensions of Nigerian textile practices, revealing how factors such as regional diversity and socioeconomic status shape individuals' engagement with textile aesthetics and gendered expressions.

The Role of Design Adaptation in Market Competitiveness

The ability of Chinese manufacturers to adapt and domesticate their designs to local tastes has been a significant factor in their success. This flexibility contrasts sharply with the offerings of local manufacturers, who have struggled to compete on both price and design fronts. Akinola and Olowu (2023) suggest that understanding and integrating cultural motifs and consumer preferences into textile designs can significantly enhance market acceptance and competitiveness.

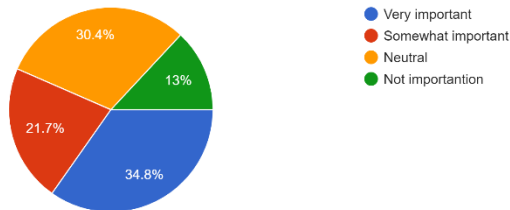
7. Economic Implications

The continued dominance of imported textiles not only poses a competitive challenge but also has broader economic implications. The loss of jobs in the local textile industry and the resultant capital flight are critical concerns. Local manufacturers must therefore innovate and adapt to regain market share and sustain economic viability. The success of Chinese manufacturers in the Nigerian market underscores the importance of aligning product offerings with consumer preferences while maintaining cost competitiveness (Eze, 2023).

Resistance and Innovation in Textile Design

Despite the ways in which textile aesthetics often reinforce traditional gender norms, there is also evidence of resistance and innovation within contemporary Nigerian textile practices. Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso (2015) highlights the role of textile designers and artisans in challenging dominant narratives surrounding gender and promoting alternative visions of identity and expression. Through innovative designs, collaborative initiatives and conscious reinterpretations of traditional motifs, these creators are reshaping the cultural landscape, fostering greater inclusivity and empowerment within Nigeria's vibrant textile heritage. The implication to manufacturers is to stick to indigenous motifs in designing fabrics as most of the population surveyed favoured the incorporation of their cultural motifs into their textile designs as shown in the pie chart below.

14. How important is it for you to incorporate elements of your culture in your fabric choices?
23 responses



8. Recommendations for Local Textile Manufacturers and Designers

To revitalise the local textile sector, Nigerian producers must employ a multifaceted strategy including market research and customer insights, design innovation synthesizing indigenous motifs and patterns as well as cost management:

Market research and customer insights: Conducting extensive market research to understand changing consumer preferences and trends is critical. This includes researching popular designs, hues, and motifs that appeal to different ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Design Innovation: Investing in design innovation that combines traditional Nigerian aesthetics with current trends might help local producers differentiate their products. Collaborations with local designers and artisans might provide a competitive advantage.

Cost Management: Improving operational efficiencies to lower production costs will help local manufacturers compete with less expensive imported fabrics. Cost savings can be achieved by leveraging technology and optimising supply chain processes.

9. Conclusion

The decline of Nigeria's textile industry underscores the need for local manufacturers to adapt to market dynamics and consumer preferences. By focusing on design innovation, cost management and effective branding, local textile firms can regain their competitive edge and contribute to the sustainable development of the Nigerian economy. The experience of Chinese manufacturers in the Nigerian market offers valuable lessons on the importance of

aligning product offerings with local tastes and preferences. Moving forward, it is essential to continue engaging in interdisciplinary dialogue and research that celebrates the diversity of traditional expressions and experiences within Nigeria's rich textile traditions, thereby fostering a more inclusive and equitable cultural landscape for all.

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