Sociology and Fashion Designing in 21st Centrury Africa

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ABSTRACT

Fashion designing is commonly understood as a creative and technical activity concerned with the aesthetics, construction and marketing of clothing. Sociology, by contrast, studies the social structures, relationships, meanings and inequalities that shape human life. The article argues that the two fields are far more closely connected than is usually recognised. Their connection has become especially significant in Africa in the 21st century. Every design decision, from the choice of fabric and silhouette to the selection of models, markets and production methods, is shaped by and in turn shapes social relations of class, gender, generation, ethnicity, religion and global power. The article draws on secondary data analysis of peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, industry and policy reports and international conventions. Afrocentricity provides the theoretical lens of the article, placed in dialogue with classical and contemporary sociological theories of fashion. The analysis reveals the following themes: fashion designing as a collective social practice rather than an act of individual genius; fashion design as a mechanism of social differentiation and identity formation; the colonial foundations of the global fashion system and the rise of decolonial design; creative labour, gender and entrepreneurship in African fashion; and the ethics of cultural appropriation. The article argues that the fashion designer occupies a mediating position between the individual and the collective, the local and the global, culture and market, and heritage and innovation, and that the quality of this mediation determines whether African fashion design reproduces or transforms existing social hierarchies. Drawing from Afrocentricity, the article contends that fashion designing in Africa should be grounded in African cultural knowledge and social realities rather than in the imitation of Euro-American fashion centres. The article concludes by recommending the integration of sociology into fashion design education, protection of indigenous designs, and the adoption of community-centred design practices.

Keywords: sociology of fashion; fashion designing; African fashion; identity; creative labour; decolonial design; Afrocentricity.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Africa has one of the oldest and most diverse traditions of dress and textile design in the world. The kente of Ghana, the adire of the Yoruba, the bogolan of Mali, the barkcloth of Uganda, the beadwork of the Ndebele, Zulu and Xhosa, and the many traditions of weaving, dyeing and adornment across the continent represent sophisticated systems of design knowledge (Picton & Mack, 1989; Rovine, 2015). In the 21st century, African fashion has gained unprecedented global visibility. Designers from the continent show at international fashion weeks, Lagos, Johannesburg, Accra and Nairobi have developed vibrant fashion scenes. South African designer Thebe Magugu won the LVMH Prize for young designers in 2019. UNESCO (2023) described the African fashion sector as one with significant potential for growth, employment and cultural expression, particularly for women and young people.

This visibility coexists with deep structural contradictions. UNESCO (2023) estimates that Africa exports textiles, clothing and footwear worth approximately US$15.5 billion a year while importing about US$23.1 billion, a deficit that reflects the decline of local fashion design production. African motifs are reproduced by global brands without benefit to the communities from which they originate (Vézina, 2019), and much of the ‘African print’ cloth worn across the continent has been manufactured in Europe and Asia (Sylvanus, 2016).

Many African designers and tailors work in informal, precarious conditions with limited access to capital, training and markets (UNESCO, 2023).

The developments raise important sociological questions. Who decides what counts as fashionable, and from which locations in the world? How does fashion design reproduce or challenge inequalities of class, gender and race? Who benefits from it? Can fashion designing in Africa draw on African cultural knowledge while competing in a global market without reducing that knowledge to a marketable exotic aesthetic? What role should sociology play in the training and practice of fashion designers?

A note on terminology is necessary at the outset. The article uses 'fashion' to refer to the socially patterned and changing styles of dress that are adopted by groups over time, and 'fashion designing' to refer to the conceptual, creative and technical process through which garments and accessories are conceived, developed and produced for wearers and markets. Following Kawamura (2005), the article distinguishes between clothing as material objects and fashion as a social and symbolic system that confers value on some objects rather than others. 'Dress' is used in the broad sense proposed by Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992) to include garments, accessories, hairstyles and other modifications of the body. 'Sociology' refers to the systematic study of social relationships, institutions, meanings and inequalities.

There is a dearth of integrated scholarship that examines the relationship between sociology and fashion designing in Africa. The sociology of fashion has developed largely with reference to Europe and North America, while studies of African fashion have been concentrated in history, anthropology and art history. Studies that bring sociological theory to bear on the practice of fashion design in Africa, rather than on fashion consumption alone, are limited. The article addresses the gap. It pursues three objectives: to examine how sociological theory illuminates the practice of fashion designing; to analyse the social, economic and cultural forces that shape fashion designing in Africa in the 21st century; and to assess, from an Afrocentric standpoint, the implications of these forces for African cultural values, design education and industrial development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Classical sociological approaches to fashion

The sociology of fashion has its roots in the work of classical theorists who sought to explain why styles change and why people follow them. Veblen (1899) argued that the leisure class displays its wealth through conspicuous consumption and conspicuous waste, and that fashionable dress, by being expensive, impractical and quickly outdated, demonstrates the wearer's freedom from productive labour. Simmel (1957), in an essay first published in 1904, proposed that fashion satisfies two contradictory needs at once: the need for social adaptation and belonging, and the need for differentiation and individuality. In his account, elites adopt new styles to distinguish themselves, lower classes imitate them, and the elites then move on to new styles, producing a continuous cycle that has become known as the trickle-down theory.

Later sociologists challenged and refined this model. Blumer (1969) argued that fashion is not driven primarily by class imitation but by a process of collective selection, in which designers, buyers and consumers sense and respond to emerging collective tastes. Designers, in this account, are not dictators of taste but interpreters of the spirit of the times. Bourdieu (1984) reconnected fashion to class by showing that taste is an expression of habitus, the durable dispositions acquired through social upbringing, and that aesthetic preferences function as markers of distinction that legitimate social hierarchies. Bourdieu (1993) further analysed cultural production as a field in which producers compete for symbolic as well as economic capital, a framework that has been widely applied to the fashion industry, in which designers' reputations depend on recognition by critics, editors and prestigious institutions.

Contemporary sociology of fashion and the production of culture

Contemporary scholarship has moved from explaining fashion consumption towards analysing fashion as an institutional system. Kawamura (2005) proposes 'fashion-ology', a sociological approach that treats fashion as

a system of institutions, organisations and individuals that collectively produce the belief in fashion, rather than as a property of clothes themselves. Becker's (1982) concept of art worlds, which emphasises that artistic works are produced through networks of cooperation among many actors, has been influential in showing that a collection attributed to a single designer is in fact the product of pattern cutters, machinists, fabric suppliers, stylists, photographers, models, buyers and media. The production of culture perspective (Peterson & Anand, 2004) similarly directs attention to the laws, technologies, industry structures, organisational forms, occupational careers and markets that shape cultural products.

Crane (2000) shows that fashion in late modernity has shifted from a class-based system, in which a small number of Parisian couturiers set styles for the elite, towards a consumer-driven system characterised by multiple centres, subcultures and lifestyles. Aspers and Godart (2013), in a review of the field, argue that the sociology of fashion is fundamentally concerned with the tension between order and change, and that fashion provides an ideal case for studying how social orders are reproduced and transformed. Entwistle (2000) contributes an emphasis on the body, arguing that dress is a situated bodily practice through which individuals present themselves within specific social contexts, while Wilson (1985) and Lipovetsky (1994) link fashion to the emergence of modernity, individualism and democratic culture. These perspectives together suggest that fashion designing is embedded in social structures that extend far beyond the designer's studio.

Fashion, colonialism and African design

A substantial body of historical and anthropological work shows that the fashion system was shaped by colonialism. Comaroff and Comaroff (1997) describe how missionaries in Southern Africa sought to remake African persons through Western dress. Jansen (2020) argues that the modern fashion system has been constructed around a Eurocentric narrative in which fashion is associated with Western modernity and non-Western dress is relegated to the category of static 'costume' or 'tradition'. This narrative denies the creativity and historical dynamism of non-Western design traditions and positions Paris, Milan, London and New York as the centres from which fashion radiates outwards.

Scholarship on contemporary African fashion contests this narrative. Rovine (2015) documents the long history of innovation in African dress and the work of contemporary designers who combine local materials, techniques and motifs with global forms. Jennings (2011) and the contributors to Hansen and Madison (2013) highlight the emergence of a new generation of African designers who address global markets while drawing on African aesthetics. Sylvanus (2016) and Akinwumi (2008) show, however, that the wax-print cloth widely regarded as authentically African has a complex history of European and Asian manufacture, raising questions about authenticity, ownership and value. Gondola (1999) shows how the sapeurs of Brazzaville and Kinshasa used European designer fashion to perform aspiration and contest marginalisation, demonstrating that the consumption of Western fashion in Africa cannot be reduced to imitation.

Gaps in the literature

Literature demonstrates that the sociology of fashion is a well-developed field, and that African dress and fashion have attracted significant historical and anthropological scholarship. However, three gaps are evident. First, the sociology of fashion has been developed largely from European and North American cases. Its concepts have rarely been tested against African realities in which kinship, communal obligation, informality and postcolonial economic structures play a central role. Second, studies of African fashion have focused more on consumption and dress than on the practice of designing and the social organisation of design work. Third, there is little scholarship that explicitly connects sociological knowledge to fashion design education and practice that interprets this relationship through an African-centred theoretical framework. The article seeks to address the gaps.

Theoretical framework - Afrocentricity

The article is anchored in Afrocentricity, a theoretical paradigm associated principally with Molefi Kete Asante. Asante (2003) defines Afrocentricity as a mode of thought and action in which African interests,

values and perspectives predominate, and in which African people are treated as subjects and agents of their own history rather than as objects on the margins of European experience. Mazama (2001) describes the Afrocentric paradigm as one that places African experience at the centre of analysis and rejects the assumption that European cultural standards constitute a universal measure of value. Central to the paradigm is the concept of location, which refers to the cultural, historical and psychological place from which a person or a phenomenon is viewed. Applied to fashion, the problem is that African dress has frequently been viewed from a dislocated position, in which Euro-American fashion is treated as the universal measure of style and modernity, and African design is valued mainly when it is validated by Western markets and institutions.

Afrocentricity resonates with a wider body of African decolonial thought. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) argued that colonialism operated through the colonisation of the mind, and the internalised belief that imported fashion is superior to locally designed clothing is one expression of that process. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, 2018) describes the persistence of the coloniality of power and knowledge after formal independence and calls for epistemic freedom. In fashion, coloniality is visible in design curricula that teach European fashion history as the history of fashion, in sizing systems and body ideals derived from Western populations (Jansen, 2020; UNESCO, 2023).

Afrocentricity is particularly appropriate for this article for three reasons. First, it provides a basis for treating African textile and dress traditions as sophisticated systems of design knowledge rather than as folklore or raw material for global brands. Second, its concept of location provides an analytical tool for assessing contemporary African fashion: the question is not whether African designers should engage with global trends, since African dress has always been dynamic and open to external influences, but whether they do so from an African-centred location in which African meanings, needs and interests remain central. Third, Afrocentricity foregrounds agency, directing attention to the ways in which African designers, tailors and wearers actively create fashion rather than passively receive it.

To give Afrocentricity analytical precision in relation to fashion designing, the article places it in dialogue with three sociological concepts. The first is Bourdieu's (1984, 1993) theory of fields, habitus and capital, which explains how designers acquire legitimacy and how taste reproduces social hierarchy. The second is the production of culture perspective (Peterson & Anand, 2004), which shows how laws, technologies, markets and industry structures shape what designers are able to produce. The third is Nyamnjoh's (2017) concept of conviviality, which describes the African capacity to combine apparently incompatible influences and to live with incompleteness. Together with Afrocentricity, these concepts allow the article to move beyond a simple opposition between 'African tradition' and 'Western fashion' and to analyse fashion designing as a social practice situated within structures of power.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

The article adopted a qualitative research approach based on secondary data analysis. Secondary data analysis involves the analysis of data that were collected by other researchers or institutions (Johnston, 2014). Heaton (2008) notes that the secondary analysis of qualitative material allows researchers to address new questions using existing data, to synthesise findings across studies and settings, and to study phenomena that would be difficult or costly to investigate through primary fieldwork. The approach was considered appropriate for the article sought to integrate scholarship that has developed in separate disciplinary traditions, including sociology, fashion studies, anthropology, history, economics and design, and to examine fashion designing across a wide geographical area. The approach aligns with Afrocentric methodology, which encourages researchers to re-read existing knowledge from an African-centred location (Mkabela, 2005).

Data sources and selection

Data were drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books and book chapters, doctoral theses, industry and international organisation reports, national and continental policy documents and international

conventions. Sources were identified through searches of databases and repositories including Taylor & Francis Online, JSTOR, African Journals Online (AJOL), Sabinet, Project MUSE, SAGE Journals and Google Scholar, as well as institutional repositories of African universities. In addition, document repositories of UNESCO, UNCTAD and the African Union provided data.

Data analysis

The selected documents were analysed using document analysis and thematic analysis. Bowen (2009) describes document analysis as a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating documents, which involves skimming, reading and interpretation in order to elicit meaning and develop empirical knowledge. Thematic analysis followed the six phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. To strengthen the analytical depth of the study, an additional comparative step was introduced. Each relevant finding was mapped in an analytical matrix according to the stage of the fashion process it concerned (conception, production, distribution or consumption), the level of analysis (individual, organisational, national or global), the social relation involved (class, gender, generation, ethnicity or global power) and the sociological theory that best explained it. This matrix made it possible to identify not only recurring themes but also the links between micro-level design decisions and macro-level social structures. Codes were generated inductively and then interpreted through the lens of Afrocentricity. Some themes and a cross-cutting analytical model emerged from this process, and they are presented and discussed together in the following section.

Trustworthiness and limitations

Trustworthiness was enhanced by drawing on multiple types of sources, which allowed for the triangulation of evidence (Bowen, 2009), and by prioritising peer-reviewed and institutional sources. The use of secondary data nonetheless has limitations. The researcher was dependent on the questions, contexts and interpretations of the original authors. The sociology of fashion literature is heavily weighted towards Europe and North America, while the literature on African fashion is weighted towards West Africa and South Africa. This imbalance is itself treated as a finding about the marginal position of African fashion design in scholarship. Industry statistics on African fashion are incomplete because much of the sector is informal.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The secondary data analysis generated some interrelated themes. Each theme is presented below, compared across the literature and interpreted through the lens of Afrocentricity. A subsection to draw the themes together into an analytical model of the fashion designer as a social mediator is presented, which constitutes the central analytical contribution of the article.

Fashion designing as a collective social practice

The first theme is that fashion designing is a collective social practice rather than the act of an isolated creative genius. The popular image of the designer, reinforced by fashion media, presents the designer as an individual visionary whose collections spring from personal inspiration. The sociological literature consistently challenges this image. Becker (1982) shows that all artistic works are produced through networks of cooperation, and Kawamura (2005) shows that the status of a designer and the value of a design are conferred by a system of institutions, including fashion schools, fashion weeks, editors, buyers and consumers. Bourdieu (1993) adds that designers compete within a field for symbolic capital, so that the meaning of a design depends on the designer's position within that field.

African literature confirms and extends this insight. In much of Africa, fashion design has historically been inseparable from tailoring and dressmaking, in which the designer works directly with the client to create garments for specific occasions such as weddings, funerals, church events and festivals (Hansen & Madison, 2013; Rovine, 2015). In this model, which remains widespread in Zimbabwe and across the continent, design is co-created through negotiation between tailor and client, and is shaped by communal expectations about

what is appropriate for particular gatherings. Blumer's (1969) concept of collective selection is particularly apt here: the African tailor does not dictate taste but interprets and gives material form to the collective preferences of a community.

From an Afrocentric standpoint, this finding is significant because it challenges the Eurocentric hierarchy that treats the couturier of the global fashion capitals as the model of the 'real' designer and the African tailor as a mere artisan. The collaborative, client-centred and community-oriented model of African tailoring embodies values of relationship and mutual responsibility that resonate with unhu/ubuntu (Samkange & Samkange, 1980). Rather than abandoning this model in pursuit of the star-designer system, African fashion education and industry could recognise it as a distinctive and valuable form of design practice.

Fashion design as a mechanism of social differentiation and identity formation

The second theme is that fashion design is a powerful mechanism through which social differences are expressed, reproduced and contested. The classical theories of Veblen (1899) and Simmel (1957) remain relevant in Africa, where expensive designer clothing, imported brands and elaborate occasion wear function as markers of wealth and status. Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of distinction is visible in the way that urban elites in African cities signal their cultural capital through preferences for particular designers, fabrics and styles. At the same time, Crane's (2000) account of a shift towards lifestyle-based and subcultural fashion is reflected in the diversity of youth styles in African cities, influenced by hip-hop, Afrobeats, amapiano, religious movements and social media.

Fashion design also shapes and is shaped by gender. Designers make assumptions about male and female bodies, about modesty and display, and about appropriate roles, and these assumptions are embedded in the garments they produce (Entwistle, 2000). In Africa, debates over women's dress, including controversies over miniskirts and trousers, show that fashion design is entangled with contested ideas about morality, culture and women's autonomy (Tamale, 2016, 2020). Designers who create clothing for women therefore operate within a field of competing expectations from religious communities, families, the state and the women themselves.

The finding reveals that fashion design is a resource for identity formation and political expression. Gondola (1999) shows that the sapeurs used fashion to assert dignity in conditions of poverty and political marginalisation, while the global popularity of African-inspired design has enabled diaspora communities to express pride in African heritage (Hall, 1990; Rovine, 2015). Designers such as Laduma Ngxokolo, whose MaXhosa knitwear translates Xhosa beadwork patterns into contemporary garments, demonstrate how fashion design can reconnect young people with cultural heritage. From an Afrocentric standpoint, this theme shows that fashion design is never neutral: it either reinforces the association of status with imported styles or helps to build pride in African cultural identity.

The colonial foundations of the fashion system and the rise of decolonial design

The third theme is that the global fashion system has colonial foundations that continue to shape fashion designing in Africa. Jansen (2020) argues that fashion has been defined in Eurocentric terms as a product of Western modernity, while non-Western dress has been categorised as static tradition. This narrative was reinforced by missionary and colonial projects that associated Western dress with civilisation and African dress with backwardness (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1997). Its legacy persists in fashion education, where curricula teach European fashion history, Western pattern-cutting systems and Western body standards as universal knowledge, and in the global hierarchy of fashion weeks, in which recognition in Paris, Milan, London or New York remains the ultimate measure of success.

The ethics of cultural appropriation

Cultural appropriation raises related ethical questions. Vézina (2019) documents how global fashion brands have used the designs, motifs and cultural expressions of Indigenous and local communities without consent, attribution or compensation. African examples include the commercial use of Maasai cultural imagery by international companies, which prompted the Maasai Intellectual Property Initiative to seek greater control

over the use of Maasai cultural heritage. Such cases show that fashion design involves power relations over the ownership of culture. The analysis also reveals ethical tensions within Africa, including questions about whether designers from one community may use the motifs of another and how sacred or ceremonial symbols should be treated in commercial design.

Interpreted through Afrocentricity, this theme points to a convergence between African values and contemporary ethical design. Many African textile traditions are based on durable materials, repair, reuse and the transmission of garments across generations, practices that embody the principles of slow and circular fashion (Fletcher, 2008). The communal ownership of cultural knowledge in many African societies, and the obligation to respect the sacred, provide an ethical foundation for resisting appropriation. Rather than importing sustainability and ethics as external standards, African designers can draw on indigenous values that already emphasise respect, stewardship and communal responsibility.

The fashion designer as a social mediator: an analytical model

Read together, the themes suggest that the fashion designer is best understood sociologically as a mediator who occupies a position between social forces that pull in different directions. This conception builds on Bourdieu's (1984) notion of cultural intermediaries, who mediate between production and consumption, and on Blumer's (1969) view of designers as interpreters of collective taste. The analytical matrix developed for this study identified four axes of mediation that are particularly significant for African designers.

The first axis is between the individual and the collective. Designers must balance personal creative expression and the client's desire for individuality against communal expectations of appropriate dress, especially for gatherings and ceremonies. The second axis is between the local and the global. Designers draw on local materials, motifs and meanings while engaging with global trends, markets and technologies, a process that Robertson (1995) describes as glocalisation and that Appadurai (1996) situates within global flows of media, people and capital. The third axis is between culture and market. Designers must translate cultural meanings into commercially viable products without reducing culture to a commodity or exoticised brand. The fourth axis is between heritage and innovation. Designers must decide how to preserve, reinterpret or depart from inherited design traditions, a tension that Gyekye (1997) frames as the critical appropriation of tradition.

Sociological underpinnings

A sociological reading directs attention to modernity, power and social change. Giddens (1991) argues that in late modernity individuals construct their identities reflexively through lifestyle choices, and fashion is one of the most important arenas of this reflexive project of the self. Lipovetsky (1994) links fashion to the rise of individualism and democratic culture. Yet the African evidence suggests that these theories must be qualified. Fashion choices in Africa remain embedded in kinship obligations, communal expectations and religious commitments, and individual expression is negotiated within, rather than against, the collective. Moreover, the global political economy of fashion constrains the choices available to African designers and consumers, so that the reflexive self of late modernity is shaped by structural inequalities between the global North and South (Gereffi, 1999; Brooks, 2015).

Sociologically, the findings show that fashion design functions as a social institution that both reflects and constructs social order. Durkheim (1912/1995) argued that collective representations express and reinforce the moral unity of groups, and shared styles of dress at gatherings, in churches and in youth subcultures can be read as such representations. Simmel's (1957) dialectic of imitation and distinction explains why fashion simultaneously unites people within groups and separates groups from one another, while Bourdieu's (1984) concepts of habitus and cultural capital explain why tastes in fashion are socially patterned and why they legitimate inequality. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective shows that clothing is a central element of the 'front' through which individuals perform social roles, which explains why design for professional, religious and ceremonial occasions is governed by strong expectations.

Anthropological underpinnings

Anthropologically, the findings indicate that fashion designs are bearers of cultural meaning. Geertz (1973) described culture as webs of significance that must be interpreted, and the colours, motifs, materials and forms of African dress carry meanings related to status, kinship, spirituality and history (Picton & Mack, 1989; Renne, 1995). Schneider (1987) and Weiner and Schneider (1989) show that cloth has been used across cultures to bind social relationships, represent continuity and express power, which helps to explain why the design of cloth and garments in Africa has been so closely tied to social organisation. Mauss (1973) reminds us that the ways in which garments are worn, tied and carried are learned techniques of the body, so that designers who ignore local bodily practices risk producing garments that are technically sound but socially inappropriate.

Implications for African cultural values

The findings and the sociological and anthropological underpinnings discussed above carry important implications for African cultural values. Fashion design in Africa has historically embodied values that lie at the heart of unhu/ubuntu, the philosophy which holds that a person is a person through other persons and which emphasises respect, sharing, communal responsibility and solidarity (Samkange & Samkange, 1980). Clothing for ceremonies, the exchange of cloth at weddings and funerals and the collaborative relationship between tailor and client all express these values. When fashion is reduced to individual consumption and fast-changing trends, these relational meanings are weakened, and clothing becomes a vehicle for competition and display rather than for respect and belonging (Veblen, 1899; Bourdieu, 1984).

A second implication concerns identity, dignity and intergenerational transmission. Wa Thiong'o (1986) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) show that the devaluation of African cultural expressions undermines the self-confidence of African people. When young Africans associate style and modernity exclusively with imported fashion, they absorb an implicit message that their own cultural heritage is inferior. Conversely, when African designers produce contemporary fashion grounded in African aesthetics and meanings, they offer young people a way of being both modern and African. At the same time, Wiredu (1996) and Gyekye (1997) remind us that cultural values must be distinguished from particular cultural forms: the value of respect may be preserved even as the forms of dress through which it is expressed change. Fashion designers are among the custodians and renewers of African cultural values.

Relevance of sociology and fashion designing in drawing a framework of Africa's innovation and industrialisation agenda moving forward

The findings carry significant implications for Africa's development agenda. The African Union's Agenda 2063 identifies a strong cultural identity, common heritage, shared values and ethics as one of its aspirations, alongside inclusive growth and industrialisation (African Union, 2015). The Charter for African Cultural Renaissance calls on member states to promote cultural and creative industries (African Union, 2006), and UNCTAD (2022) identifies the creative economy as a growing source of trade, employment and innovation in developing countries. UNESCO (2023) argues that the African fashion sector has the potential to become a major driver of economic growth and youth and women's employment if structural constraints are addressed.

A framework that connects sociology and fashion designing to industrialisation would begin with the recognition that Africa possesses both raw materials and a large and growing domestic market for clothing. The continent produces substantial quantities of cotton, much of which is exported unprocessed, while its population is young and fashion-conscious. The Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area (African Union, 2018) creates opportunities for regional value chains linking cotton farming, spinning, weaving, dyeing, design, garment manufacturing and retail. In Zimbabwe, the National Development Strategy 1 (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020) prioritises value addition, industrial recovery and the creative industries. A revitalised cotton-to-clothing value chain, in which local designers play a central role in adding value, would allow more of the economic benefit of African fashion to remain on the continent.

Sociology contributes to this framework in four ways. First, sociological research on consumer identities, tastes and needs informs design that responds to African markets rather than imitating foreign ones. Second, sociological analysis of creative labour informs policies that improve working conditions, access to finance and social protection for designers and tailors. Third, sociological understanding of informality can inform strategies that strengthen rather than displace the informal tailoring sector, which already employs large numbers of people. Fourth, sociological and anthropological knowledge of cultural meanings underpins intellectual property frameworks that protect indigenous designs and ensure benefit-sharing with source communities (Vézina, 2019). The Heritage-Based Curriculum Framework adopted in Zimbabwe (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2024) provides an avenue through which textile heritage, design thinking and entrepreneurship can be taught together, preparing young people to participate in a culturally grounded fashion industry.

Synthesis

Taken together, the findings show that fashion designing is a deeply social practice. It is produced collectively through networks of cooperation; it expresses and reproduces differences of class, gender and generation while also providing resources for identity and resistance; it operates within a global fashion system with colonial foundations. It depends on creative labour that is often precarious and gendered; and it raises ethical questions of cultural ownership. The fashion designer occupies a mediating position between the individual and the collective, the local and the global, culture and market, and heritage and innovation. Interpreted through Afrocentricity, the central challenge for African fashion design is to perform this mediation from an African-centred location, grounding design in African cultural knowledge, values and social realities while engaging confidently with global forms and markets.

CONCLUSION

The article set out to examine the relationship between sociology and fashion designing, with particular reference to Africa in the 21st century. Drawing on secondary data analysis and the theoretical lens of Afrocentricity, it identified some themes: fashion designing as a collective social practice; fashion design as a mechanism of social differentiation and identity formation; the colonial foundations of the fashion system and the rise of decolonial design; the political economy of design under global value chains, creative labour, gender and entrepreneurship; and the ethics of cultural appropriation. The article argued that sociology is not external to fashion designing but describes the very field within which design decisions are made, and that the social effects of fashion depend on the location from which designers mediate the forces acting upon them.

The article makes three principal contributions. First, it brings classical and contemporary sociological theories of fashion into dialogue with the practice of fashion designing in Africa, showing where these theories apply and where they must be qualified in light of African realities. Second, it proposes an analytical model of the fashion designer as a social mediator operating along four axes, which can guide both research and design education. Third, it offers a non-essentialist Afrocentric reading of fashion design that affirms African design knowledge and values while resisting self-exoticisation and acknowledging the diversity and dynamism of African fashion. Further primary research, particularly ethnographic and participatory studies of designers, tailors and consumers in Zimbabwe and Southern Africa, is needed to test and refine these findings.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the findings and on Afrocentricity, the article makes the following recommendations.

1. **Integrate sociology into fashion design education.** Universities, polytechnics and colleges offering fashion design and clothing and textile programmes should include courses in the sociology of fashion, African dress history and research methods such as ethnography and user research, so that designers understand the social meanings and contexts of the garments they create.

2. **Decolonise fashion design curricula.** Fashion education institutions should teach African and other

non-Western design histories alongside European fashion history, develop sizing and pattern-cutting systems based on African body measurements, and treat indigenous textile techniques as legitimate design knowledge.

3. **Strengthen local textile and clothing value chains.** Governments, development agencies and the private sector should invest in cotton processing, textile manufacturing and garment production linked to local design, and use the African Continental Free Trade Area to build regional value chains, in line with Agenda 2063.

4. **Protect indigenous designs and cultural expressions.** Governments and intellectual property authorities should develop legal and institutional mechanisms that protect traditional cultural expressions in fashion, require consent and benefit-sharing for the commercial use of community designs, and support designers in registering and defending their own work.

5. **Support creative workers and informal tailors.** Policy-makers and financial institutions should improve access to finance, workspace, equipment, training and social protection for designers and tailors, with particular attention to women and young people, and should recognise the informal tailoring sector as a foundation for industrial growth.

6. **Promote sustainable and circular fashion design.** Designers, educators and policy-makers should promote the use of local and natural materials, repair, upcycling and the redesign of secondhand garments, drawing on indigenous practices of care and reuse, and should advocate for global responsibility for textile waste exported to Africa.

7. **Promote further research.** Universities and research institutions should prioritise primary, participatory research on fashion designing in Zimbabwe and Southern Africa, including studies of designers' careers, the informal tailoring sector, consumer identities and the social impact of fashion policy, in partnership with the communities concerned.

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