DRESS CULTURE, DIGITAL FASHION CULTURE AND THE GIRL-CHILD IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN SOCIETY: NAVIGATING IDENTITY, SELF-PRESENTATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE

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Abstract

Dress culture has predictably functioned as indicators of cultural identity, decency, and social communication for both individuals and communities in Nigeria. In recent times, debates surrounding the superficial contemporary dress pattern of young girls have remained contentious. Perceptibly, the emergence of digital media has contributed immensely to the drift from traditional dress culture to digital fashion culture; making appearance an important aspect of online identity construction, exhibition and affirmation. Using Social Learning and Agenda Setting Theories as analytical frameworks, and qualitative research design as methodology, it examines the glorification of some perceived ‘’outlandish’’ fashion trends on select social media platforms; where children have unrestricted access to. This goes to substantiate how popular culture, celebrity lifestyle, online communities and the desire for social acceptance steer fashion choices of young girls in Nigeria. The study opines that online perception of beauty, lifestyle presentation, and appreciation, and the confidence media personalities exude before the camera, could be considered an aberration or moral deception to growing children. Hence, protecting the girl-child in highly technological environment requires a balanced understanding of the supposed effects of the ever evolving technological devices at their disposal. However, it asserts that digital fashion culture has directly or indirectly revolutionized and complicated the dress culture of the girl-child in Nigeria. On this light, the paper recommends a strategic approach towards moral restrictions, education, media literacy, responsible parenting and cultural sensitive guidance, to redirect and support the social and moral development of the girl-child in the digital era.

Keywords: *Digital era, Girl child, Social media, Fashion culture, Dress culture and Media influence.*

Introduction

Nigerian dress culture has remained an important expression of cultural heritage, social background and interaction of individuals. This is because they were patterned to depict great moral values, as they communicate extreme reverence for diverse indigenous cultures. The dress pattern of individuals has always carried meaning beyond physical appearance. Dress culture has historically reflected the richness of different cultures and traditions; with clothing patterns serving as symbols of respect, maturity and communal identity. Naturally, clothing communicates identity, social status, cultural belongings and personal values at a glance. Over centuries, dress culture has remained a distinguishing symbol between one country and another. Okpo observes that

> Indeed, at the peak of many traditional occasions, these various forms of dress styles have continued to capture the admiration of both indigenous and foreign observers. Such a favourable development has

> given rise to the continuing survival, and indeed, enduring vitality of many textiles and clothing in the country. (87)

Apparently, the rapid expansion of digital media has significantly transformed the way people encounter, interact, and interpret dress culture, identity construction, and social expectations in recent times. While dressing has always been a means of cultural expression, contemporary digital media platforms such as; Tik Tok, Facebook, Instagram and Whatsapp have intensified the relationship between appearance and social recognition; a situation where young girls are increasingly exposed to global fashion trends, celebrity lifestyles and online representations of beauty. These ideas influence how young adults perceive their personalities and their engagement with trends in fashion.

While earlier discussions on dress culture among young girls largely focus on the perspective of morality, acculturation, family values and cultural decline, current realities reveal a more complex relationship between dressing, technology, identity, self-presentation and acceptance. The paper believes that there is need to understand how digital environments shape the choices and development of the girl-child. Obviously, these young girls are not only consumers of fashion trends, but active participants in viewing, accepting, creating and sharing visual identities. This present realities have created complexities for young girls, who are negotiating their identities in a highly technological environment; a place where visibility, popularity and acceptance are the basic considerations of socialization.

In other words, the discussion of dressing among young girls has moved beyond the traditional question of what should be worn, to broader questions about identity formation, self-expression, and social approval. These young girls increasingly encounter fashion trends on various digital platforms; where popularity is often measured through visibility, engagement and public approval. In effect, the digital environments create both opportunities for creativity, and also the challenges of relating to supposed phony beauty standards. This is heightened by peer pressure and the requisite commercialization of personal identity, superimposed by the media.

This idea could be a recognizable threat to young girls who are biologically immature to understand social cultural boundaries. There is no gainsaying the fact that the girl-child occupies a critical position in societal development because; her experiences, education and social environment contribute to the future of the family and the community at large. Therefore, understanding how digital fashion culture influences her advancement requires a balanced approach that recognizes both social cultural values, and the actual existence of contemporary communication technologies. Thus, the study stresses the need to redirect the focus of the girl-child towards ethical and moral values as they explore their potentials in the digital age. It is on this light that Rotshak posits that

> A young girl grows into a young woman, then becomes a woman and a mother, and a mother to the nation…Educating the girl child translates into educating the community, society, and the nation. In

> the same vein, destroying the girl child through immorality translates into destroying a nation. (43)

Consequently, while digital fashion trends may encourage creativity and confidence, they also expose children to unhealthy habits of social comparisons, pressure to conform to the trends and dependence on external validation. Therefore, the problem of the study is not the style of clothing adopted by young girls, but rather the broader social, cultural and technological forces shaping their understanding of beauty, identity, and self-worth. It is on this light that the study addresses digital fashion culture as a contemporary phenomenon affecting the development and social experiences of Nigerian girl-child.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Albert Bandura's social learning theory to lay credence to the concept of socialization in children through imitation of older adults in a given environment. Social learning therefore is the totality of all the ways children have learnt to act, think and feel. The fact that children learn by imitation affirms this theory as a complete social learning theory. This theory has its root in the cognitive view of children's learning. The cognitivists argue that personality is no more than learned behaviour, and through the process of learning, a personality is developed. The key concept in the study of personality from the view point of social learning theory is basically modeling. Baran, opines that

> Children model behaviours they see, and that the modeling happens in two ways. The first is imitation, the direct replication of an observed behaviour… The second form of modeling is identification, a special form of imitation in which observers do not copy exactly what they have seen, but make a generalized but related response. (425)

Based on this exposition, social learning is seen as a powerful mechanism of socialization. The child identifies with a person whose lifestyle functions as a model, and then proceeds to imitate him. According to Mwanwenda (2009, p. 29) ''Social learning is facilitated by a number of factors which include; attention, memory, motor skills, reinforcement and identification.'' In effect, children's behaviours are gotten through observation, retention, motivation and reciprocation. Thus, when certain behaviours are observed, retained and reproduced as a consequence of likeness the viewer has attached to the model, it is then capable of stimulating new style of behaviour in the child. The study believes that media messages are contrived to manipulate the psyche of the masses, and persuade them into changing their attitudes, or following the current trends. Krama views that

> Through the contrived social wisdom of the media, it influences the socialization processes by mediating in the masses consciousness, and supplants associated images to the

> extent that no desired taste is entirely private to the masses. (27)

In addition to Social learning theory is the Agenda setting theory. This theory lays credence to the influence of media on its audience. According to Lippman, (cited in Okunna, 2002, p. 21) the media helps to ‘’put pictures in our heads’’ This idea explains the power of the mass media to set agenda and raise issues of public importance. McCombs and Shaw (1972) opine that the audience does not only absorb public issues through the media, they also learn how prominence is ascribed to a subject or phenomenon from the highlight of the mass media.

Therefore, Agenda setting theory argues that the media may not tell us what to think, but certainly tells us what to think about. It could then be said that the ultimate power of media resides in the amount of space or time devoted to a story, and its placement in the broadcast, or on the pages of newspapers and magazines. This consistency and repetition signal to people the relevance of the issue or event. The central proposition of Agenda Setting Theory is that those who spend more time with the media, are more likely to perceive the real world in ways that reflect the most common and recurrent messages of the world. This idea is in opposition to people who pay less attention to them. In essence, this theory regards audience as passive and irresistible to the ideas and pictures presented in their minds.

Conceptual Clarification on Dress Culture and Digital Fashion Culture

Dress culture could be described as the total way a society chooses to use clothing, accessories, hairstyles, and mentoring to express cultural meanings. It could also be seen as a system of belief, values, traditions, and practices that influence how people dress within a particular society or community. Dress culture reflects cultural identity, religion, occupation, social status, gender roles, age, and historical traditions of a people. It helps to communicate who people are, where they come from, and the value they uphold. The concept of dress culture is not about fashion or beauty, but rather a form of non-verbal communication, through which people show their identities, beliefs, values and social positions. In other words, dress culture is that symbol that one puts on basically for reverence and visible identity. Uto-Ezeajugh posits that

> In everyday life, people are often judged by what they are wearing because that is the first obvious attribute of that person. An observer may give a rating immediately based on a person’s appearance. Most often, the first impression sticks and becomes a basis for judging and assessing the person. (67)

On the other hand, digital fashion culture involves the creation, display, sharing and consumption of fashion through digital technologies or online platforms. Unlike traditional fashion systems, that were controlled mainly by cultural dictates of designers, magazines and physical communities, digital fashion allows ordinary users, influencers and online communities to participate in shaping the trends. Again, digital fashion provides opportunities for ingenuity and

self-expression, and also introduces new pressures through constant exposure to the global images and lifestyles. According to Bandura

> The more the child identifies with the observed people, the more the child is likely to encode the behavioural script the people are using to adopt the schemas about the world. The more the observed scripts for behaviours are rewarded and portrayed as appropriate, the more likely it is general believed that such behaviours will be extracted and encoded. (93)

Digital fashion culture extends beyond physical clothing to include virtual outfits, digital fashion shows, with online fashion influencers displaying on various social media platforms. These acts of the celebrities shape public opinion, habits, imposes mass culture and manipulates the will power of the people in the society. (Krama, 2016)

Nigerian Dress Culture and Digital Fashion Culture

Nigeria as a country is made of three major ethnic groups, namely; Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba. Each ethnic group distinguishes itself with stipulated norms and values that guide its members. Dress pattern is one of such norms used to define a person and the society he or she belongs. Suffice it to say that, Nigerian's dress culture is embedded with moral values, highly commended and admired by other countries. As a symbol of identity, it binds its citizens together. On the contrary, some contemporary digital fashion cultures, especially the female clothing styles could be said to be provocative, with stimulating messages, capable of influencing the young viewers. Most of the dress patterns reveal human anatomy, and other sensitive parts of the body such as; the breast, buttocks, armpit, pubic hair, and under wears. This unusual exposure could be said to be a deliberate act by some of the wearers to look sensuous, inviting and stimulating to the opposite sex. These manners of dressing could be regarded as awkward, improper and unacceptable by unbiased individuals in a society. These are the factors that have characterized most media personalities, Nollywood stars, and other influencers on social media that young girl's model. Uto-Ezeajugh opines that

> Nigerian female stars are consciously and unconsciously revolutionizing the dress culture of youths and even some adults by bringing in vogue, dress codes that operate outside the boundaries of decency, these dress codes more often than not conflict with the periods, settings and concepts of the productions. They make non-verbal but effective visual communication and therefore could become instruments of moral or immoral propagation as the case may be. (67)

Nollywood industry has continued to influence the social imagination of humans through its representation of lifestyles, relationships and socialization. Contemporary actors and

entertainers are not only performers, but also digital personalities whose fashion choices influence followers. In effect, the relationship between entertainment and fashion has become stronger because; celebrities now directly communicate with audiences through social media. Their clothing styles, brand partnerships and public appearances contribute to the formation of new fashion identities among young girls in Nigeria.

The influence of Nigerian movies and social platforms on young people has expanded through streaming platforms, celebrity endorsements amidst other media interactions. Actors, musicians and online personalities now function as fashion influencers. Their clothing choices, lifestyles and public images have become reference points for young audiences. Nevertheless, media representation plays a major role in shaping ideas about beauty, success and identity. This has prompted Nzekwe quoted by Uto-Ezeajugh to submit that:

> The media affects the dress sense, hairdo, makeup, love and choice of music, walk, talk, and thought. It is sad to note that Nigerian youths have been much given to slavish copying of society. Instead of positively altering these negative stereotypes, the media has rather reinforced these negative stereotypes. (66)

Regardless, Nollywood industry has contributed immensely to the economic advancement of the country, employment opportunities and cultural communication. Apparently, the contemporary Nigerian fashion environment is a mixture of traditional aesthetics and western influences projected via digital media. This transformation has affected how young girls understand appearance, beauty and social acceptance. The pressures to imitate media personalities enable them to create and adopt idealistic representations for mere online approval. This is the standpoint of both social learning and Agenda setting theories.

Digital Fashion Culture and the Girl-Childs Identity Construction

The girl child refers to a female child within the developmental stage, requiring protection, education and social support for healthy transition to adulthood. Beyond biological development, the girl-child is shaped by family, culture, education, media and social environment. Her proficiencies within the contemporary society are molded by the emerging digital realities that determine and shape her technological know-hows. Therefore, her quest for identity construction and self-presentation expands beyond physical interaction. This heightens the intricacies and pressures she encounters while negotiating her identity through digital spaces.

Obviously, Nigerian girl-child is contemporarily existing within tripod interconnected worlds; the physical, the social and the digital environments. Consequently, her understanding of beauty, confidence and acceptance is molded by the interactions in these spaces. Perceptibly, as digital fashion culture has become a way of communicating personality, creativity and belongings, young girls are socialized into experimenting with its trends and participate in conversations about appearance. This makes fashion not merely a question of clothing, but a process of identity

construction. The fact that online engagement and measurement of self-worth subsists with external approval of contents, makes it highly perplexing for a girl-child.

Peer influence has also contributed to the rapid spread of the trend of participating in popular fashion styles and behaviours as young girls engage mostly with their peers. The desire for acceptance and recognition influence their personal choices. In other words, elements such as likes, comments and share of online messages by their peers and communities have involuntary made young users to present themselves according to popular opinion and expectations, rather than personal confidence and convictions.

Social Media and the Transformation of Fashion Culture

The emergence of social media has changed fashion from a private choice into a public performance. Platforms such as Tik Tok, Instagram, Facebook, Whatsaap, and You tube create spaces where individuals display personal styles, and receive immediate social commendations. Unlike previous generations; where young girls mainly obtain fashion influences from families and communities. Today's girl-child encounters multiple sources from online fashion trends; celebrity lifestyles and influencer culture. The characteristic nature of social media, as motion pictures are projected into series of images into the screen to create illusions of reality, make them more believable to young minds. This idea corroborates with the position of social learning and Agenda setting theories, as they emphasize that excessive exposure to media could create pressure on children to conform to particular social trend, beauty and fashion standards.

The purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to examine the intersection between dress culture and digital fashion culture, and their influences on the identity formation and self-presentation of the girl-child in contemporary Nigerian society.

The specific objectives seek to:

- Investigate how social media platforms projects digital fashion to the level of influencing the choices and dress patterns of the girl-child.
- Explore how the girl-child uses dress and fashion culture as means of social self-presentation, and identity construction.
- Suggest ways of promoting positive digital engagement among young girls in Nigeria.

Research Questions

1. How do social media platforms and digital fashion influence the choices and dress pattern of the girl-child?
2. How do young girls use dress and digital fashion culture as means of self-presentation, and identity construction?
3. In what ways can the media be used to promote positive engagement among young girls?

Research Design and Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research approach. This is basically the use of observation, and semi-structured questionnaire items to analyze how people perceive, behave, think, interact, live and create meaning within a particular cultural setting or social phenomenon.

Demographic Characteristics of 75 Respondents

Age of Respondents

15 - 25 years = 40

25 - 35 years = 35 = 75 Respondents

Gender of Respondents

Male – 25

Female – 50= 75

Level of Education

Secondary Level – 47

Graduate Level – 28 =75

Data Presentation and Discussion

The instrument used for the study was titled: **The Influence of Digital Fashion on the Dress Culture of Contemporary Nigerian girl-child**. Simple percentages were used in analyzing the 75 responses from the ten questionnaire items below.

1. The use of technological devices such as phones, ipads, tablets etcetera are necessary for children's interaction and learning.
   Yes – 75%
   No – 25%
2. Many children have unrestricted access to their various devices.
   Yes – 55%
   No – 45%
3. Children spend reasonable amount of their time on social media platforms.
   Yes – 60%
   No – 40%
4. Children are often times distracted by their engagement with their phones.
   Yes – 85%
   No – 15%
5. Children are usually influenced by the behaviours displayed on the media.
   Yes – 80%
   No – 20%
6. The behaviours that children imitate on social media affect their social interactions.
   Yes – 67%

No – 33%

7. Social media such as Tik Tok, Instagram, Whatsaap and Facebook flaunt digital fashion cultures.
   Yes – 78%
   No – 22%
8. Children view media celebrities as models, and imitate their fashion culture and perceive their lifestyles as contemporary representativeness.
   Yes – 81%
   No – 29%
9. Children struggle to adapt to online fashion trend for acceptability and sense of belonging.
   Yes – 75%
   No – 25%
10. The Digital fashion culture has corrupted the indigenous dress culture in Nigeria
    Yes – 90%
    No – 10%

Discussion of Findings

The above results have shown beyond reasonable doubt that, digital fashion culture has significantly influenced the dress patterns, identity formation, and self-presentation of the girl-child in contemporary Nigerian society. Indeed, social media platforms have become important spaces through which young girls encounter, learn, imitate, negotiate, and sometimes challenge contemporary fashion trends.

Findings also reveal that social media influencers, celebrities, and online fashion communities play significant roles in shaping the girl child's perceptions of fashion and socially acceptable dress culture. This is because the platforms expose young girls to diverse global clothing styles; thereby encouraging experimentation and creativity. Suffice it to say that the girl-child occupies a negotiating space between tradition and modernity, local identity and global influence, cultural expectations and personal expression. Consequently, the challenge is not to prevent girls from engaging with digital fashion, but to promote critical digital literacy, cultural consciousness, and healthy self-expression, that will enable them to participate in contemporary fashion, without losing their cultural identity.

Conclusion

The study has established that dress culture provides the cultural foundation on how people present themselves, while digital fashion culture offers modern technological spaces where those expressions are created, shared and transformed. The study equally espouses that digital fashion culture has a profound influence on the dress pattern of the girl-child; as it shapes her perceptions of beauty, identity, and sense of fashion through exposure to online contents on social media. It is also the opinion of the study that dress and fashion cultures form personal identity, influence

choices, and contribute to the evolving relationship between technology and the society. The study believes that while digital fashion culture fosters creativity, confidence, and global cultural awareness, it also encourages excessive trend-following, consumerism, and idealistic beauty standard of the girl-child.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this paper, it recommends that:

- Schools should introduce programs that help young people to understand digital contents, online influences, and the realities behind social media representations.
- Parents should engage children in open discussions about fashion, culture identity, online behaviour and social pressure, rather than relying only on punishment or restrictions.
- Young people should be encouraged to appreciate Nigerian cultural heritage, while also understanding modern fashion trends.
- Media producers and influencers should promote responsible representations to its viewers, and avoid contents that place unhealthy pressure on appearance.
- Educational and social institutions should develop balanced approaches that protect children, while recognizing creativity, confidence and self-expression.

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