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# "Looking Good is Good Business": The Social Milieu of Fashion in Lagos, Nigeria

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# "Looking Good is Good Business": The Social Milieu of Fashion in Lagos, Nigeria

Adwoa Owusuaa Bobie

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## I. Introduction

"The truth is you are received the way you are dressed; it is just natural, it is a Nigerian thing. We learned that looking good is good business".

Stephanie

Lagos is inhabited mostly by the Yoruba ethnic group. However, the establishment of the State as the first capital of Nigeria after independence brought about massive internal and external migration; people from different ethnic backgrounds within the country and others from neighboring countries. Thus, the city has witnessed integration and cultural reconfiguration over the years. However, people are socialized to accept some cultures of the Yoruba, especially regarding dressing and fashion. The culture and values of the Yoruba play a role in the lives of the participants of the study, even with people who are from different ethnic backgrounds but live in Lagos. Engaging in fashion in Lagos is guided by conventional, unspoken social norms which guides almost everybody's appearance regardless of class, religion, age, and ethnic background. Taking roots from the Yoruba culture, the cosmopolitan city of Lagos has evolved with these cultural tenets in addition to "foreign fashion" tastes such as brand to create contemporary fashion that resonates with the indigenous people as well as foreigners. The paper, therefore, teases out this local culture and foreign adaptations that characterizes the daily lives of Lagosians[1].

Fashion in the Nigerian society is a complex interplay of culture, individual taste, social and\or economic status. Lagosians' fashion does not toll the line of any particular social fashion or lifestyle theory because it is a contextual construct of the local with the foreign to project a lifestyle of indigenous culture amidst a 'modern' global outlook. Sociological theories of Thorstein Veblen (1899), Georg Simmel (1904), and, more recently, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) have guided discourses on fashion display, diffusion, and consumption in society. Veblen (1899) writes on the conspicuous consumption of the leisure class, which is the highest class in the class structure of society. For members of the upper class, conspicuous consumption in the society is imperative for impressing their reputability as men of leisure which draws from the social and economic position in the social structure. The men of the leisure class engage in the consumption of economically high dietary and beverage, sometimes, in their extreme, as an expression of purchasing power which affirms their economic position. The vicarious class has restricted access to such goods due to their lower economic position. However, when it comes to the conspicuous consumption of other goods, especially household and fashion, the wives of both men of the leisure and the vicarious class engage in the consumption. This is to affirm the reputability of the head of the household, and it is conventionality for wives of men of both the leisure and vicarious class to engage in the wasteful use of these goods to mark their husband's social reputation. Women of both classes engage in ostentatious fashion and other household spending since such spending add to the comfort and the honor of the head the household and also attract for them social respectability. In a similar regard, Simmel (1904) also believes fashion operates as the "other forms, [of social elements] honors, especially" a mark of class distinction. It serves the double function of uniformity and distinction by revolving within a given circle and, at the same time, emphasizing it as separate from others" (pp133). Thus, fashion emanates from the upper class of the society, by which uniformity is required for members of the class by adhering to what is in vogue, while this uniformity also serves as a mark of distinction of the upper class from the lower class (es). In situations where the lower-classes adopt the fashion of the upper-class, the latter abandons the adopted fashion to create a new trend since the old trend is compromised by the low-classes. Therefore, conventionally, the upper-class is the leader of society's fashion, and they are identified through their uniform engagement and display while at the same time

[1] Local slang used for people who live in Lagos.

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distinguishing themselves from the other classes whose clothes are different.

Veblen (1899) and Simmel's (1904) fashion theories emerged at the early epoch of the 20th century to explain the class structure, and within this perspective, lifestyle was featured as the by-product of class structure and not a basis for class stratification. However, by the 1980s, at the bubbling stage of the consumer capitalism era (Sulkenen, 2009), lifestyle consumption could not be ignored any further. The world witnessed a new social order based on consumerism, where consumption drives the economic and social functioning of the society. Bourdieu (1984) propounded a theory of social distinction around this period, and for the first time, in a more significant way, lifestyle was a feature of class stratification. Bourdieu (1984) argues on taste as a mark of distinction. To Bourdieu, taste evolves from cultural consumption which, is closely tied one's social capital (upbringing/ social origin and education), a crucial source for class distinction in the society; therefore, the taste is a marker of class. Thus, the different social classes exhibit different tastes[2] in their consumption which, reflects their level of social capital and economic capital in society (Bourdieu, 1984: 15). Fashion, which is an expression of taste in consumption, became an integral component of mapping out the class distinction. People from affluent cultural backgrounds acquire a taste for high-end products such as fashion, and with the necessary economic power, they indulge their taste by engaging in fashion. Here too, Bourdieu also affirms the relationship between taste (fashion) and class structure, where the taste for fashion is exhibited mostly by the affluent who have the economic power and the cultural background-social capital- to consume fashion. The application of these sociological theories to contemporary fashion and more so Nigerian fashion will run into a difficulty not because of the time (epoch) differences but also due to Eurocentric context of the analysis and the rigorous, almost neat, class distinction of the societies in which they are analysed.

The above three theories subscribe to the top-down approach of fashion diffusion, where fashion starts with the upper class and trickle down to the lower classes. Consumerism has expanded the argument on fashion diffusion and consumption as manufacturers respond to consumer demands through fast fashion, and technology makes information dissemination faster than ever before. There are increasingly complex diffusion patterns along a continuum of top-down, trickle-across, bottom-up, and various permutations in between in fashion consumption and diffusion (Tjäder, 2013). What this means for fashion consumption is that people from all social and economic structures, are likely to engage in fashion at the same time or the upper adopting to lower class fashion and vice versa. These adoptions are so rapid that most times, the class structure of lead sources of fashion is blurred. This current complexity of fashion consumption and diffusion characterize Lagos fashion milieu.

Historically, like most societies, clothes served as a marker of class, and the Yoruba society of Lagos is no different. Two prominent cloths produced and used by the Yoruba are the Aso eke and the Adire cloths. Akinbileje (2014) argues that the Aso eke cloth was worn mostly by the royals and affluent in the society while Adire was accessible to the lower classes (Oyeniyi, 2012). However, years of foreign contacts and change in indigenous sartorial traditions have altered significantly class-clothes consumption relationship as the society has progressed towards a more opened social engagement in fashion. Historical factors such as the East trade (Arabs), Transatlantic Trade, and subsequent colonialism (Europeans) witnessed the adaptation of cloths, clothes, and fashion opened to the wider society who have the social capital (Bourdieu, 1984)-converts, traders and civil servants-to engage. The wax print textiles and other foreign fabrics (materials) were adapted as local cloths used for the foreign acquired designs of *iro* (wrapper) and *buba* (blouse) and gowns. Pre and post-independence era awoke the need to build nationhood, a crucial tenet for liberation and progress. There was strong nationalism euphoria around fashion where locally produced cloths became the preference for clothes, and the wax print cloth was formally adapted as a local cloth. According to Oyeniyi (2012), women, men, youth, old, the upper-class, and the lower classes, elites, non-elites, all engaged in nationalist fashion. Vlisco, the Dutch produced version of the wax print was relatively costly, therefore, to ensure the engagement of all people regardless of economic status in this nationalist movement, cheaper versions of the wax print were introduced (Ankara) (ibid). There have been other antecedents such as the economic crisis of1970 through to 1990, the importation of second-hand clothing, trade liberalization through structural adjustment program and other nationalist policies on cloth and clothing that has shaped the current sartorial acumen of Lagos. However, there are some traditional conventions that underpin fashion in Lagos, which goes beyond the Yoruba traditions, to assume traditions that border on the cosmopolitan city of Lagos. These conventions are a mix of indigenous cultures (Yoruba (majorly) and other ethnic groups residents in Lagos) and foreign elements that span from the continent to the rest of the world. These social and cultural conventions

[2] Based on the three major classes in society, Bourdieu gave three categories of tastes that reflect the different classes and their consumption taste. The first is the Legitimate taste, which is among the dominant class, the middle-brow taste for the middle-class and popular taste for the lower-class.

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which have become fashion lingual expression among the people are the focus of this paper.

The paper is part of a Ph.D. dissertation, which explored the roles of emerging in designers in the production of aesthetic cosmopolitanism fashion in Lagos. The paper describes the social conventions and contextual setting in which contemporary fashion thrives in Lagos; therefore, three thematic topics are discussed bordering on appearance, uniformity and uniqueness, and self-presentation. It draws on responses from a focus group discussion made of nine women and interviews with eighteen fashion designers in Lagos. The study employed purposive sampling technique and snowballing technique in sample selection. It is a qualitative research aimed at understanding the cultural and social milieu of fashion production in the city of Lagos.

## II. You are Addressed based on How You are Dressed

The importance of fashion in Yoruba culture is evident in two different adages "*aso la nki, ki a to kieniyan,* meaning "it is the cloth we should greet before greeting the wearer" and *eniyanlasoo mi*, that is "people are my cloth" (Idowu, 2010: 35). Clothes define one's personality. Clothing confers respect on the individual. In Lagos society, "you are addressed based on how you are dressed" (Uche). Appearance determines social respect. The first impression one is likely to make in any encounter is through clothes; therefore, it is socially necessary to be well dressed always as one cannot perceive the importance of acquaintances made throughout the day. To command respect in society, paying attention to appearance is important. Appearance is not just in wearing clothes but also making sure the clothes are "fashionable," that is, "the person dresses according to the trend of that time, she goes with what is in vogue" Stephanie comments. Thus, people are expected to be abreast of the changing patterns in fashion and align their dressing along. Engaging in what is in vogue creates fashion uniformity among the people. However, this fashion uniformity the individual is required show personal distinction by "building up her taste, looking good, looking exceptional and looking presentable, looking your best, like when you are there people will know that yes, you are there, being yourself and being beautiful" as expressed by Helen.

Helen has used several adjectives to describe the fashionable appearance. However, the underlining idea is to shape your fashion along with the social requirement of the period while your "individual" fashion taste confers uniqueness on your appearance. Being fashionable is basically uniqueness in uniformity. One's unique style in the lot is key, and they do not shy short of expressing this convention, as though they want to move with the trend, many are quick to express that "what this person is wearing I am not supposed to wear it, they want to look at a trend and convert it and make it their own…[they] need to inject your 'own' signature into whatever look". Though we witness Simmel's (1904) duality fashion theory in this case of fashion display, the reality in this context is not strictly on a class basis. Nigerian fashion duality does not apply to just the upper classes in the society, as Simmel (1904) argues but is an implicit requirement for all members of the society, regardless of economic background. In Nigeria, uniformity, predominantly, is opened to the entire society, and not just among social classes (Simmel, 1904), while uniqueness plays out more on an individual level. Fashion trends can emerge from anywhere ranging from international fashion scenes, the internet, which is sourced by both fashion producers and consumers, the customer, the tailor, or seamstress or the Nigerian designer. The situation is more complex in a cosmopolitan society like Lagos, compared to Simmel's (1904) society where class distinction is almost neat, and fashion is the reserve of the upper classes. Lagos is fashion consciousness, and all members engage in fashion.

However, it does not limit the relevance of social and economic influence on fashion consumption in Lagos. Sometimes, the socio-economic status can make a significant difference in fashion consumption. It is acknowledged that economic capital can influence fashion greatly, especially during celebrations. At such occasions, economic capital's influence is manifested mostly through the quality of fabric people use for the clothing, rather than outfit designs. Some of the fabrics are expensive and can be purchased mostly, by the upper classes. However, some of these high-end cloths have their cheaper versions which the lower classes patronize. As much as Ankara is accounted as the reigning fabric of the moment, there are levels of quality with the different types on the market, even though designs or patterns of the cloth may be the same. Vlisco, which is the Dutch produced version of the Ankara, is the highest in quality commanding high social respect, used mostly by the economically affluent. However, most of the patterns of Vlisco are replicated by Chinese producers of Ankara, whose cloths are of lesser quality. The same situation applies to lace, George, and other fabrics on the market. Therefore, making the distinction with the quality of fabric from afar can be deceptive. The difference can be blurry from afar since patterns and sharpness of designs are almost the same.

However, when it comes to designs of outfits, there is no difference between the lower-class, middle class, and the upper class. The class system collapses, giving a horizontal or flat form of participation by any who wishes to engage. According to Happiness, "everybody [from] the pepper seller, Agege bread seller, fish seller, everybody wears" designs in vogue. Fashion



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diffusion is explained to mean no formal account but the overwhelming intertwin of all three theories: top-down, bottom-up, and the trickle across (Tjäder, 2013). The speed of diffusion is rapid, therefore, hardly can one account for the source of a trend unless it is initiated by a social or political event or personality. Embroidery, which is an integral part of outfit designing in Nigeria and is patronized by all people regardless of class. However, it can sometimes mark class distinction among the people. The more elaborate an embroidery design, the more expensive the cost. If a customer requires stones (blinks) or beads all over the outfit, it will be more expensive than the one who requests for a small pattern of embroidery. The study introduced me to the different ways in which the stoning embroidery can be done, and how each technique comes at a different cost. There is the iron technique, that is putting the stones on the patterns, covering it with a cloth and ironing over the cloth with sprinkled water to make them stick. Then there is the single-hand method by which each stone is carefully placed and glued to stick manually. The final technique is the machine method, which is the use of stoning machine by filling machine with the stones and working out a pattern on the outfit. According to designer respondents, the durability of the embroidery depends on the technique used, and it follows the order I have discussed with the iron method less durable and the machine method most durable. Costs are associated with durability. The more elaborate your embroidery, the more attention you receive at functions.

However, I am also told not to be deceived by who can afford and who cannot afford high-end fashion because people of lower income wear expensive fabric sometimes, depending on the occasion. The perceived economic or social status of the hosts of an event can influence the taste of attendants who, at this point, might choose outfits and accessories that are not commensurate with their economic status.

Appearing fashionable in Lagos is not restricted to clothes. Fashion accessories such as shoes, bags, headgear, and makeup play vital roles in fashion in Nigerian society. In Lagos, you "dress to match" (Helene). Dressing to match is the careful blend of colors of the clothing and accessories to sync in a beautiful pattern. The general rule is to avoid using lots of different colours in one outfit. However, you can creatively combine colors to form a unique pattern. The blend of loud and dim colors or the careful blend of loud colours shows the fashion abilities of a person. The clothing trend may be a long gown with an outstanding bow placed anywhere on the outfit. The colour of the fabric, the careful combination with the colour of shoe, clutch or purse and jewelry speaks a lot about the person's fashion sense even in cases where many are wearing the same design. Therefore, in conforming to current fashion trends, an individual is expected to "dress to match". These accessories must also follow the prevailing trend, even the makeup styles change with time, and one must be abreast with current trends. When planning an appearance at a function:

> The average Nigerian woman…from the eyelid to the nails, she will just package N10,000 [$29] for it, just for the nails o, to get a makeup artist to give her the best, now people are making a lot of money out of makeup, it is a good business….When you [get] into a party setting and you are well packaged, the way they will treat you is different from somebody who just entered anyhow [poorly dressed].
>
> Tina

The makeup does not apply to appearances to social events or functions only but, on a daily basis, the average Nigerian engage in high fashion. What may pertain in some societies as high fashion is the regular fashion display in Lagos, because "even if there is a normal trend abroad, once it enters Nigeria, we take it to the next, next level" Rhoda explains. Nigerians are flamboyant in their appearance; each appearance must make a fashion statement about the person which they believe affect their daily interactions. Being well dressed and fashionable in Lagos society accrue to the individual significant social status in the society with or without relevant social capital as argued by Bourdieu (1984).

## III. We are ASO EBI People

Lagosians are very social people. Every stage in life is celebrated in grand style; childbirth, school graduation, employment, marriage, successful career, and death. These celebrations are called *Owambe*. Owambe refers to social gatherings in Yoruba. Owambe has become more of a Lagos term than a Yoruba term because even non-Yoruba respondents use the term. In Lagos, Rhoda informs me that "every weekend we have parties in…every weekend is for parties, Owambe". I observed during my stay in Lagos that Owambe is a common social feature and even had the opportunity to attend a naming ceremony. It was a naming ceremony of a church member of my host. A naming ceremony is normally on the eighth day after the birth of the child according to the Yoruba culture. Both family members and friends were nicely dressed for the occasion, even though it was a weekday. The predominant cloth used for the outfits were lace and Ankara. The woman who delivered, together with her husband and some close family members wore lace, but it was not uniform lace cloth. Friends wore Ankara, and the children who attended wore either Ankara sewed into dresses or clothes made out of Western fabric. The style of the adults was mostly *iro* and *buba* design (the traditional long sleeve, round neck, loose blouse, and wrapper of the fabric for a skirt). The *iro* and *buba* style was preferred because it is deemed a traditional outfit, and a



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naming ceremony is a cultural celebration, therefore the cloth and design for the occasion should be traditional. I was told that it is always not the case to have everyone wear the traditional *iro* and *buba* design but, in most cases, people use the local cloths of lace, Ankara or *Aso eke* for such events. Ankara is appropriated wax print (African print); the *Aso eke* is indigenous woven fabric while the lace is imported from countries like Switzerland, Austria and Belgium and a few other places. Lace is also appropriated local cloth. Over the years, Nigerian society has come to accept all these three fabrics as local fabrics. The latter two fabrics are expensive compared to the Ankara.

These cloths can be sewn in Western designs, aside from the *iro* and *buba* style. The frequency of migration and increased cross-border interrelation has ushered in various form of foreign adaptation is the use of these local cloths for appropriated designs of neighboring countries. Nigerians are adopting the *kaba* and slit or trois pagne design (three pieces of clothes of a blouse, sewn skirt, and the third piece for head tie) of Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire respectively and bubuu from Senegal. These designs are traditional designs in their respective countries, and Nigerian's adaptation of them is to use them similarly for traditional purposes. Thus, though Nigerian society is opening up for foreign appropriation of designs, they are mindful of the cultural implications of the borrowed culture on their indigenous culture. Within the traditional sphere, they adopt what is traditional to the borrowed society and fuse it with their cultural elements for traditional purposes. These are also possible designs that can feature at social and cultural occasions. I was made to understand that the ceremony we witnessed was not the standard pageantry of such celebrations; this celebration was low key. These occasions are often highly organized depending on the birth order of the baby or the economic status of the parents. The ceremony we attended was for the fourth child of the couple. First born children's celebrations are bigger than subsequent ones, and thus, expensive clothes are displayed.

One's attention is easily drawn to the many big event centers in the various communities in Lagos city as you journey along the roads. One can count five to ten event centers over a mile stretch of road. Parties spring up every weekend, which could be the case in many societies across the world; however, what makes Nigeria different is the importance they attach to such social events. The events are avenues for the display of wealth, social status, and profound beauty, even at funerals. In all, clothes are the means of expression. Organizers of the events are expected to create a clothing uniform for relatives and guests as a form of identity, Asoebi. According to Zena, people of Lagos "are Asoebi people and you realize that at every event there is Asoebi, people buy fabrics and they share, and everybody has to wear it"

Aso Ebi literally means family cloth as *Aso* stands for cloth, and *Ebi* family (Orimolade, 2014). There is contestation on the origin of Asoebi as William Bascom (1951) traces it to the age grade of Yoruba where they used uniform cloth to mark fraternal bonds while Ayodeji Olukoju (1992) believes Asoebi started only after World War I when there was unparalleled accumulation that came with the post-war boom which developed the culture of conspicuous consumption (cited in Nwafor, 2011:47). I am informed the practice of Aso ebi has been replicated in almost all Nigerian societies across the country. Aso Ebi is worn basically to prove alliance with and support for the hosts of an event. Uniformity of fashion is thus expressed through kinship and friendship ties as the prescribed cloth by the host is worn by their close associates to communicate their love and support for the program. Oyeniyi (2012) distinguishes between Aso ebi and Aso Egbe Jo'Da. While Aso ebi is prescribed uniform cloth for kin, Aso Egbe Jo'Da is prescribed uniform cloth for friends of the host of the event.

Respondents use the marriage ceremony to explain these two forms of uniform cloth and how the couple identifies with them. As stated, couple's relatives will be in the Aso ebi, which are mostly sewn with lace fabric or Aso eke cloth or a mix of the two chosen by the couple. Aso ebi is expensive because lace fabrics and Aso eke cloth are more expensive than most other fabrics. The quality of the lace or Aso eke speaks to the social and economic status of the families of the couple. However, when it comes to weddings and other celebrations, even the low-income earners go all out for quality clothes. It is an avenue for a family to affirm their social status and whether they are economically advantaged or not; they use the best of the traditional cloths. Aso Egbe Jo'Da is for friends of the couple, the cloth mostly used is Ankara. Thus, at the wedding event, the couple can change their outfits three times, with the first being the couple's unique clothes which is not made from the fabric of either the Aso ebi or the Aso Egbe Jo'Da. They will later change into clothes made from the fabric of Aso ebi and as time goes on, getting to the end of the ceremony, they change into clothes sewn with the cloth of the Aso Egbe Jo'Da. The changing of clothes is to acknowledge and appreciate the efforts of family and friends who showed solidarity with them at the event.

Events are so frequent that one can be attending a function every weekend of the year. Invitations come from church members, association members, community members, and work colleagues aside family members. According to the women in the focus group, you buy the Aso ebi fabric from the hosts and not from the market. The host buys from the market and sells at a higher price than the market price; it could be double the market price. People are aware of the difference in prices, but they believe buying the cloth at



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a higher price is their financial contribution to the event. As indicated earlier, the uniform cloth is not limited to the close family members of the organizers of an event; it is open to whoever is willing to buy. To be in uniform cloth has its benefits at the event; it sometimes serves as the invitation for the event, people in the Aso ebi or Aso Egbe Jo'Da are treated with preference at the event in terms of a place to sit, serving of food and the sharing of event souvenirs. The support of an event through the Aso ebi or Aso Egbe Jo'Da is a guarantee for support from others in the latter's celebrations. Amaka summarises Aso ebi and its importance in a profound way:

> So, when you are given an invitation for a party, the first thing is that you are given the Aso ebi, that is the cloth, even if it is N10,000 [$28], you have to buy it because it is seen as you are identifying with the people organizing the party. So, it goes to translate that when you get to that party setting, and you are not wearing the Aso ebi, you will be served last, you will be given drinks last, you will be given souvenirs last. Those people that sewed will be treated first, and sometimes your Aso ebi is your invitation to the party.

Aso ebi culture also depicts the duality of fashion (Simmel, 1904), where uniformity and distinction are required. Even though the Aso ebi or Aso Egbe Jo'Da is to portray uniformity, the uniformity lies mostly in the same fabric and not the design. It is required that each one sews the fabric in a way that will make him or her unique and stand out in the crowd. No two or three people sew the same design; everyone's style must be different. Individuals show their distinction in uniformity through designs of their clothes. On the macro level, class distinction in Aso ebi can be attained through the quality of the fabric used. While the people of the lower class will opt for a cheaper version of lace and Ankara (wax print cloth) for Aso ebi and Aso Egbe Jo'Da respectively, the upper classes are likely to use Aso eke or lace for both or in cases of Ankara; they will use the high-end. High profile events are likely to use lace or Aso eke, however, with a fashion-conscious society like Nigeria, respondents made me aware that depending on the type of celebration, example, wedding of first or only daughter, people of lower economic class may also use lace or Aso eke for the Aso ebi and Aso Egbe Jo'Da. Nwafor (2011) discloses, "being well dressed played a significant role in the Yoruba class system with much importance being attached to the size, colour, quality and quantity of fabric" (pp 46). While many try to display their wealth at such events, it is difficult to differentiate the quality of fabric now due to imitation from China. People thus now use designs to achieve uniqueness. People are ready to pay money for uniqueness regardless of income status.

My observation at the Oshodi market, arguably the biggest fabric market in Lagos, reveals the many big shops that sell fabrics in large quantities. Unlike the usual display of a few of the fabrics for advertisement, while the bulk is stored at the wholesale for bulk purchase, the bulk of fabrics are displayed in shops to inform customers of their availability for Aso ebi. Such shops do not sell the regular pieces of yards of fabrics; they sell in bulk only. Thus, organizers of events go to this market to buy in bulk, be it lace or Ankara fabrics, and share it among the people they intend to invite. Asking of the Aso ebi cloth is the first question most people are expected to ask the moment they are informed of an upcoming event. If you want to be received and acknowledged at the ceremony you must wear an Aso ebi or Aso Egbe Jo'Da. Not with standing the importance of these fabrics, people can wear other clothes to events if they do not mind the neglect they might face. Another feature of Aso ebi and Aso Egbe Jo'Da is that, be it a local or borrowed design, the outfit must be locally sewn by Nigerians. The individual respondents and members of the focus group discussion all unanimously agree that locally sewn clothes are more costly compared to imported clothes if the cost of sewing is added to the cost of buying the fabric. However, they prefer the former to the latter because Nigerian designers or tailors and seamstresses understand the fashion sense of their consumers, designing outfits that add value (economic status) to one's personality. Thus, if you show up at an event in a well-designed outfit in local cloth it increases one's social respect.

All participants of the study express a preference for local fabrics over Western fabrics for special occasions. They believe imported clothes do not befit such important traditional occasions and therefore should be worn casually for everyday activities irrespective of the price. On special occasions, they would rather be in clothes made from local fabrics and sewn by a Nigerian instead of imported clothes.

These social events also serve as an avenue for picking up current trends in fashion. Respondents indicated that some of their designs come from observing others at social events. They pick up designs from one event and sew it for another event. The event becomes an avenue for picking styles because it is perceived that everyone puts on their best. At such events, as Helen, a member of the focus group puts it, "Nigerians dress to Kill!" The Nigerian fashion culture thrives on a system of flamboyance. The Nigerian must be noticed by his or her appearance wherever s/he goes. This is expressed in the colors of their garments and the designs of their outfits. Though Nigerians follow international fashion trends, especially for everyday and work clothes, their taste for high fashion as a daily requirement pushes the designers to add a lot of accessories such as stones and blinks to embellish outfits. The Nigerian is loud in fashion, seeks attention with his or her appearance, and, therefore, will spend a



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lot and beyond his or her means to achieve such flamboyance. According to Sola, "the average Nigerian woman wants to enter somewhere [sic], and people will say "ah!" being the jewelry, being the shoe, being it everything." Such flamboyance is expected more at social gatherings. Nigerians go all out on conspicuous consumption and display of fashion during social events. This, Simmel (1904) argues in his work when he talks about the individual distinction in the social class unity when it comes to fashion among the upper classes. He comes up with the concept of the "dude" to refer to persons who are fashion-forward and always seek to be different, though conforming to the social class. He or she can be a fashion gatekeeper, initiating designs within the scope of uniformity. Among Nigerians, everyone seeks to be a "dude" at any social gathering. People from all social classes engage in conspicuous consumption of fashion during social events (Veblen, 1899. They must stand out in their outfit, unique and flamboyant, to attract an audience-the phenomenon cuts across age, sex, social class and economic class of the people.



*Source: Instagram@Envogue_Naija*

*Figure 1:* Aso ebi at a wedding celebration.



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Fashion consumption in the Nigerian society can also be discussed in terms of preference and expenditure. Women in the FDG acknowledged the revolution of fashion over the years and how their fashion has revolved from wearing imported clothes to locally made clothes. At the meeting, the number of women wearing locally made clothes outnumbered those in imported clothes. The designers also confirmed the gradual shift of the society to the wearing of locally produced clothes even in times perceived as a recession. Thus, the locally produced and appropriated fabrics have become the preference of many Nigerians. On a regular day, Ankara fabric features predominantly among women while at social events, both men and women wear lace, George, or aso eke fabric. As will be discussed in the sixth chapter, men clothes are preferably sewn with imported fabrics while the design is local designs. Women are the opposite: they sew their local fabrics in western designs on regular days, and men will have their imported fabrics in local designs. During occasions, both men and women make their outfits in the traditional designs. Though respondents admit that sometimes imported clothes can be more affordable compared to locally made ones, they still prefer locally made clothes because according to Happiness "it brings out the elegance in women, it brings your shape" and also "no matter how you look and your shape, if you meet a very good seamstress the person will package you well, some of them re-packages you." Thus, they are willing to spend more money to get the value of their fashion taste than to compromise with imported clothes. More on the use of fabrics and the creation of designs will be discussed in chapter six.

When it comes to spending on fashion, people's taste and consumption always exceed their income. It is accounted by Amaka that "the average Nigerian woman will rather starve than not look good, they want to create an impression everywhere they go, they want to be seen, it is something about our culture." None of the respondents could give an estimated amount per month or year allocated to spending on fashion. They have not apportioned a specific amount of their income for clothes or fashion accessories. Hardly can anyone, especially women, plan for clothing or fashion within a period because the need for dressing arises spontaneously.

> In Nigeria, they live beyond their means. They borrow to meet up their means so, you can't say so, so and so is the apportioned money for fashion, you have to be a very conservative person in Nigeria to be able to achieve that, but a typical Nigerian who goes with the trend even borrows. As the occasion calls for it, she will go and borrow it from a shoe seller and will be paying for it just to be part of what is going on.
>
> Stephanie

Due to the various events and the Aso ebi that comes with it, people are always spending on clothes and other fashion items. Not only do they end up spending a lot of money on clothes and accessories within the month but in some situations, they borrow to meet the fashion demands of the time. Fashion takes a larger portion of respondents' income due to the many obligations to attend functions of friends and relatives. One fashion appearance for an event can cost a person a minimum of N35,000 ($100), taking into account the cost of clothes, headgear, makeup, shoe, handbag, and even nail polishing. Some respondents stated that they attend at least one event in a month, and each event must come with a different outfit and accessories. The repetition of clothes for events is an indictment on their reputation and defeats the feature of uniqueness in fashion in society. Christmas, and Easter are the peak periods for events in Lagos, and there could be an occasion every week or every day in the weekend for as long as three to four weeks in a row. In such a situation, they borrow fabrics, shoes and other accessories as well as sewing on credit to meet the fashion demands of the time, all of which they will pay for in installments.

The designers acknowledge this phenomenon as well. They reiterated that Nigerians' expenditure on fashion has no reflection on their income or the economic situation of the country. This study was conducted in a period most respondents expressed economic hardship in the country due to recession. However, almost all designers admitted their sales had not been affected, some were even recording an increase in sales. Joy noted, "you know Nigerians like high fashion; whether there is a recession or not, it will not affect their fashion sense…clothing is like food, clothing, and food are on the same level in the Nigerian context."

Most respondents could not account for the portion of their income allotted for clothing and accessories because spending is spontaneous, and it is tied to the various weekly celebrations, Owambe and daily regular affairs. As frequent as Owambe occurs, Nigerians do not forfeit their Aso ebi because Aso ebi is what makes Owambe and Owambe is the oxygen of the culture of the society.

## IV. Packaging: Original or Good Copy

"Dressing to kill" is a form of "packaging. ""Packaging" is a term to describe how a person dresses up for an occasion or to meet an individual. Happiness reiterates, "in Nigeria, we are so concerned about packaging that sometimes they don't bother about the content but just the packaging, the outward look of any stuff, most especially the fashion industry." Good "packaging" can serve as a conduit of social mobility, though temporarily. How you dress up can make you gain social respect, get accepted into the

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circle of the influential and the wealthy without recourse to your actual social or economic background. Therefore, even the poor in society invests in fashion when they attend functions that require the presence of a high-profile person. At such events, you need to "dress to belong." That is, you do not necessarily have to socially or economically belong to a particular social class, but your dressing, form of packaging, at the function must accord you the respect of the influential. Dressing to belong can also find expression in the quest for a business opportunity or network. If you seek a business contract or acquaintance with a businessman or politician, the utmost way to create a good impression is through dressing. The outfit, shoe, haircut, and even watch must create the impression of a sense of responsibility and adequate abilities for the job. You need to "package" yourself well in a way that fits the social, economic, or political status of the person you are meeting. You package yourself for a job contract because your acceptance does not depend only on your experience or qualification but also on the impression you create through your dressing. To be trusted or entrusted with responsibility can also be determined based on how neatly or shabbily you appear:

> People have regard for the way you package yourself. You want to do business with somebody, you borrow a car, so when they see you they will receive you as somebody who can do the business, that is how the society is. People will borrow things to be received into a particular class. If you say I will go the way I am and I will be received, you may not get that contract, that is how Nigerian society is.
>
> Stephanie

This phenomenon of "dressing to belong" has given rise to high taste for brands in society across all social classes. Consumption of high-end fashion brands like Prada, Gucci, Christian Dior, which is common among the wealthiest class is easily appropriated by everyone regardless of their social class. The Nigerian society's adaptation to foreignness in fashion is seen through their love for renowned international fashion brands. Nigerians would prefer to be seen in an outfit or accessories that bear the brand name of a top fashion house, which can be foreign or local from outfit to accessories like bags, clutches, and shoes. While people who can afford may want to buy the original products of these designers, it is also common knowledge that most of the high brand accessories or even outfits have their counterfeits from China which most Nigerians patroniye. In packaging, the originality matters less compared to the visibility of what is shown: the brand name.

Sonmez, Yang and Fryxell (2013) argue that there are two theories that define consumer relationships with brands; attitude function theory, and cultural authority theory. The attitude function theory argues that "attitudes serve social and psychological functions. Consumers' attitude toward brands is a self-expressive function to reflect status and personality" (Sonmez, et al. 2013: 197). While the cultural authority attitude postulates a more social perspective view to consumer relationships with brand names, therefore, "when social-adjustable attitude dominates, counterfeits with no harmful agents (e.g. handbags) may become a preferred choice. When a value-expressive attitude dominates, consumers may be motivated to emphasize quality and reliability (Sonmez et al. 2013: 197). The Nigerian society depicts a mixture of attitude function and cultural authority function to brand consumption. The upper class may stick to the former theory as they continue daily to negotiate their class distinction from the rest of the population. However, the majority of the people operate using a cultural authority function to brand consumption. The society's emphasis on the use of notable brands in fashion has less regard for the originality of the brand. The visible part of the brand, that is, the shape or fineness of the product, is acknowledged with less attention to the quality of the product. Amaka discloses that, "women are brand women, they like brand names, they will rather carry a cheap China bag, so long as they know it is branded as a Gucci or a Versace, it is fine. It is something with our mindset; we love brands". This phenomenon is not unique to women. In a society with high fashion sense like Nigeria, men will also revere the use of brands for packaging. All the interviewed designers, regardless of the sex of their clientele, have brand names for their products, which they showcase using labels and tags. This is a new phenomenon in the sewing business in Nigeria where previously most seamstress and tailors did not even register their business, let alone provide visible brand names for their products. Now, almost all designers have registered names which also serves as brand names for their products. Though their branding goes beyond tags and labels, having a brand name is the first step in product identification.

It is realized that the brand name, which is tagged outward overshadows the quality of the product, the counterfeit then becomes "the good copy" of the original. In some cases, the names of original brands are twisted in spelling for the fake brands; however, from the first look, without attention to detail, one will be deceived to believe it is original. Thus, whether fake or original, all that is required is proper packaging; how you can 'dress to match' with the outfit and accessories available and then how to carry yourself:

> If what you are wearing fits very well and the face that is carrying it, it is us that is talking about upper class and middle class, nobody will see you and know here you belong; they will think you are one of the ministers in Nigeria because it is about carrying well.
>
> Helen



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Self-expressive branding and social-adjustable branding can overlap in some situations in Nigeria. I was made to understand due to the society's obsession with brands that even low-income earners strive to own at least one original international or locally revered brand fashion item especially accessories such as bag or shoe as a means of dressing to belong within some social circles, while the upper classes also patronize fake brands sometimes for their regular daily use. Thus, the use of brands can sometimes be influenced by individual self-expression and other times by social-adjustable perception regardless of social class.

## V. Conclusion

The Nigerian society expresses social conventions that guide fashion consumption. The society demands uniformity fashion in vogue while emphasising individual uniqueness. From cultural and social events to the daily routine of the people, fashion features predominantly in the lives of Lagosians. What will pass for high fashion in some contexts is the daily lifestyle. They engage in conspicuous consumption irrespective of social and economic background. At Owambe, people are expected to look their best, while daily you are required to dress up as if every day is a day for an important appointment. You never know who you will meet on your way out. The Lagos society has a long-standing culture of fashion, dressing and appearance that is reflected in the daily lives of the people. Among Lagosians, you just do not wear a skirt and a blouse, trouser, and shirt or gowns as you deem fit; there is an unspoken social convention that guards fashion and dressing. Dressing up to meet the occasion is a sure way of getting through the Nigerian society daily. It grants people an extra urge in their interactions, and according to the women who participated in the focus group discussion, dressing well can literally create money for the individual through finding jobs and other economic opportunities. Therefore, the famous slang "looking good is good business."

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