Sexuality and Fashion Designing in the 21st Century - Culture and Dating Patterns in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Fashion is one of the most visible features of social life, and in Africa dress has long been woven into the cultural rules that govern sexuality, courtship and marriage. In the twenty-first century, these rules are being reshaped by urbanisation, mobile phones, social media, global fashion markets and changing understandings of gender and sexuality, so that the ways in which young Africans dress, meet, court and form relationships are changing rapidly. Yet fashion design education and professional practice in Africa have tended to treat design as a matter of creativity, technique and commerce, with limited engagement with the sociological and anthropological knowledge that explains why people dress as they do. There is a dearth of integrated scholarship that examines sexuality, fashion designing, culture and dating patterns in Africa. The article draws on secondary data analysis of peer-reviewed journal articles, books, ethnographies, policy documents and legal instruments. Symbolic interactionism provides the theoretical lens of the article. The analysis reveals five themes: dress as a cultural language of sexuality and courtship in African societies; the shift from kin-mediated courtship to urban and digital dating; the moral regulation of bodies, especially women's bodies, through dress; money, material exchange and the commodification of sexuality in fashion and dating; and shifting gender and sexual identities and the design response. Drawing from symbolic interactionism, the article argues that clothing is a medium through which sexual and romantic identities are proposed, read and negotiated. The negotiation takes place within African cultural systems and within structures of gender, class, religion, law and global markets that shape who may dress how, and at what cost.

Keywords: Fashion design; sexuality; dating patterns; courtship; African culture; dress and identity; symbolic interactionism.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Fashion is one of the most visible features of social life. What people wear communicates who they are, where they belong, what they believe and what they aspire to become, often before a word is spoken (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992; Entwistle, 2000). Behind every garment lies a chain of decisions made by designers, tailors, manufacturers, traders, buyers and wearers. Fashion designing is the point in this chain where ideas about the body, beauty, identity and value are translated into material form. For this reason, sociologists have long regarded fashion as a privileged window into society. Simmel (1957) analysed fashion as an expression of the tension between imitation and distinction, Veblen (1899) treated it as a form of conspicuous consumption, and Bourdieu (1984) showed how taste in dress reproduces class differences. Yet in practice, fashion design education and professional practice, particularly in Africa, have tended to treat design as a matter of creativity, technique and commerce, with limited engagement with the sociological knowledge that explains why people dress as they do. Among the most powerful, and least openly discussed, of the reasons why people dress as they do is sexuality. Clothing has always been involved in the display and concealment of the body, in the signalling of gender and marital status, and in the rituals of courtship through which partners are found (Flügel, 1930; Steele, 1985).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualising fashion, dress and the body

Fashion and dress are related but distinct concepts. Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992) define dress broadly as an assemblage of modifications of the body and supplements to the body including garments, jewellery, hairstyles, cosmetics and body marks. They argue that dress is a system of non-verbal communication through which identities are established. Fashion, by contrast, refers to a system of continual change in dress styles, which Kawamura (2005) describes as an institutionalised system involving designers, manufacturers, media, retailers and consumers who together produce the belief that some styles are new and desirable. Aspers and Godart (2013) characterise fashion as an unplanned process of recurrent change against a backdrop of order, a definition that captures both the creativity of the industry and its dependence on social structures.

Entwistle (2000) argues that dress must be understood as a 'situated bodily practice', that is, as something done by and to bodies in particular social settings. This perspective is significant for the present article, since sexuality and dating are fundamentally concerned with bodies, with how they are seen, desired, approached and judged. Barthes (1983) showed that fashion operates as a system of signs, in which garments acquire meanings through the language and images that surround them, while Davis (1992) argued that fashion thrives on identity ambivalences, including tensions between masculinity and femininity, youth and age, and the erotic and the chaste. Wilson (1985) and Crane (2000) emphasised that clothing is central to the formation of modern identities, and that the meanings of particular garments are never fixed but are constantly contested by different social groups.

Fashion, gender and sexuality

A long tradition of scholarship has examined the relationship between fashion and sexuality. Flügel (1930) argued that clothing serves the competing purposes of decoration, modesty and protection. He coined the phrase 'the great masculine renunciation' to describe the abandonment of colourful and decorative dress by European men from the late eighteenth century, which left display and adornment largely to women. Laver (1969) proposed the theory of the 'shifting erogenous zone', according to which fashion repeatedly redirects erotic attention from one part of the female body to another, for example from the waist to the legs or the back. Steele (1985, 1996) documented the erotic dimensions of fashion from the Victorian period to the late twentieth century, including the corset, the high heel and the incorporation of fetish styles into mainstream fashion. She argued that the relationship between fashion and sexuality is far more complex than a simple story of repression and liberation.

Feminist scholarship has drawn attention to the power relations embedded in fashion's representation of sexuality. Mulvey (1975) introduced the concept of the 'male gaze' to describe how visual culture positions women as objects to be looked at and men as active lookers, and the concept has been widely applied to fashion imagery. Goffman (1979), in his study of gender advertisements, showed how commercial images ritualise gender differences through posture, touch and positioning. Wolf (1991) argued that the 'beauty myth' imposes impossible standards on women, while Bordo (1993) showed how cultural ideals of slenderness are inscribed on women's bodies. Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) developed objectification theory to explain how women come to internalise an observer's perspective on their own bodies. Other feminist scholars have resisted the view that fashion is simply oppressive. Tseëlon (1995) and Entwistle (2000) argued that women use dress actively to manage their identities, while Gill (2007) analysed a 'postfeminist sensibility' in media culture, in which women are presented as freely choosing to present themselves as sexual subjects, a framing that she argued can obscure continuing pressures. Butler (1990) argued that gender is performative, produced through repeated acts, including acts of dress, rather than expressing a pre-existing essence, while West and Zimmerman (1987) showed how gender is 'done' in everyday interaction. Connell (1995) drew attention to plural masculinities and to the dominance of hegemonic masculinity, which helps to explain why men's departures from conventional dress norms are often policed severely.

Dating, intimacy and the digital transformation of courtship

Sociologists have argued that intimate relationships have been transformed in late modernity. Giddens (1992) described the emergence of the 'pure relationship', entered into for its own sake and sustained only as long as both partners derive satisfaction from it, as well as 'plastic sexuality', freed from its traditional link to reproduction. Bauman (2003) offered a more pessimistic account of 'liquid love', in which relationships become fragile and disposable in a consumer society. Illouz (2007, 2012) showed how romantic choice has been reshaped by the logic of markets and by therapeutic and economic languages of self-presentation and evaluation. Green (2008) proposed the concept of 'sexual fields', in which actors compete for partners according to hierarchies of desirability that are shaped by race, class, age and style, while Hakim (2010) argued that 'erotic capital', a combination of beauty, sexual attractiveness, social skills, liveliness, social presentation and sexuality, functions as a distinct asset alongside economic, social and cultural capital. Notably, Hakim (2010) included dress, grooming and style within erotic capital, making fashion an explicit component of the resources people bring to the dating market.

Research on online dating has highlighted the centrality of self-presentation. Ellison et al. (2006) found that online daters seek to balance the desire to present an attractive self with the need for authenticity, since a relationship that begins online may eventually move offline. Toma et al. (2008) found that deception in online dating profiles was frequent but usually small in magnitude, involving slight adjustments to weight, height and age. Ward (2017) showed how Tinder users engage in careful impression management, selecting photographs that convey attractiveness, lifestyle and personality. Hobbs et al. (2017) found that, contrary to fears of 'liquid love', many dating app users continued to seek committed relationships. Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012) and Rosenfeld et al. (2019) documented the rise of the internet as a social intermediary in partnership formation, which has reduced the role of family, friends and community in introducing partners.

Courtship and dating patterns in African cultures

Love affairs have been entangled with material exchange and social obligation in precolonial and colonial Africa (Cole and Thomas, 2009). Colonialism, Christianity, wage labour and consumer culture have reshaped how love is expressed and pursued. Morris and Preston-Whyte (1994) documented how Zulu beadwork served as a medium of communication between young lovers, while Powell (1995) showed how Ndebele beadwork marked the stages of a woman's life from girlhood to marriage. Nwafor (2021) analysed aso ebi, the practice of wearing coordinated cloth at Yoruba weddings and other celebrations in Lagos, as a means through which social relationships, belonging and status are displayed. Archambault (2017) found that among young people in southern Mozambique, mobile phones have created new possibilities for secret relationships, flirtation and the management of multiple partners, as well as new forms of suspicion and pretence. Smith (2017) showed that in Nigeria, men's ability to attract and keep partners has become closely tied to money and consumption. In South Africa, the 'blesser' phenomenon, in which older and wealthier men provide young women with money, clothing and lifestyles in exchange for intimacy, has attracted considerable public and scholarly attention (Mampane, 2018).

Dress, sexuality and intimacy in Africa

Dress has long been central to the politics of gender, sexuality and power on the African continent. Comaroff and Comaroff (1997) described how missionaries in Southern Africa sought to 'clothe the native' in European garments as part of a broader project of moral and religious transformation. Ivaska (2011) analysed how the miniskirt became a symbol of contested modernity in postcolonial Tanzania. In Zimbabwe, Masvawure (2010) found that some female university students engaged in transactional relationships in order to be 'flashy' on campus, acquiring fashionable clothes, phones and lifestyles. Mate (2002) demonstrated how Pentecostal discourses in Zimbabwe prescribed particular forms of feminine dress and behaviour as markers of a godly womanhood.

Gaps in the literature

There is dearth of scholarship that examines sexuality, fashion designing, culture and dating patterns in Africa together as interconnected social processes. Existing studies tend to treat fashion as the province of design, art history and business studies, sexuality as the province of public health and gender studies, courtship and marriage as the province of anthropology, and dating as the province of psychology and media studies. This article addresses that gap by drawing on secondary data to examine how fashion mediates sexuality, culture and dating patterns in Africa in the twenty-first century.

Theoretical framework - Symbolic interactionism and the presentation of self

The article is anchored in symbolic interactionism, a theoretical tradition rooted in the work of George Herbert Mead and developed by Herbert Blumer. Blumer (1969) summarised the perspective in three premises: that human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings those things have for them; that these meanings arise out of social interaction; and that meanings are handled and modified through an interpretive process. Mead (1934) emphasised that the self is a social product, formed through the capacity to see oneself from the perspective of others. From this standpoint, clothing has no fixed meaning in itself. A short skirt, a fitted suit or a headwrap acquires meaning through the ways in which it is interpreted by wearers and observers in particular social situations.

Stone (1962) applied symbolic interactionism directly to dress, arguing that appearance is a crucial dimension of social interaction because it establishes identity before speech occurs. He distinguished between the 'programme', the meanings that a wearer intends to communicate through their appearance, and the 'reviews', the meanings that others attribute to that appearance. Where programme and review coincide, the wearer's identity is validated; where they diverge, the identity is challenged. This distinction is particularly useful for the analysis of sexuality and dating, in which the gap between what a person intends to signal and what others read into their dress can have serious consequences, ranging from romantic misunderstanding to harassment and violence.

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory extends this insight. Goffman argued that social life can be understood as a performance in which individuals engage in 'impression management', seeking to control the impressions others form of them. Clothing forms part of what he called the 'personal front', the expressive equipment through which a performer presents a self to an audience. Goffman distinguished between the 'front stage', where performances are given before audiences, and the 'back stage', where performers can relax, prepare and step out of character. Dating is a quintessential front-stage performance, and the dating profile photograph, the first-date outfit and the wedding dress are all carefully prepared props. Goffman's (1979) later work on gender advertisements showed how such performances are shaped by cultural scripts of masculinity and femininity.

Symbolic interactionism is particularly appropriate for this article for three reasons. First, it explains how fashion functions as a language through which sexual and romantic identities are proposed and negotiated, rather than simply as a commodity or an aesthetic object. Second, its emphasis on the audience and on the 'review' allows the article to analyse how dress is interpreted, including by those who seek to regulate or punish the dress of others. Third, it is well suited to analysing the digital transformation of dating, since dating applications and social media platforms are, in effect, new stages on which people perform carefully managed selves for imagined audiences (Ellison et al., 2006; Ward, 2017). The perspective also has practical relevance for fashion designers, since it implies that designers are, in effect, the makers of the props and costumes with which social actors perform their identities.

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 for purposes other than the current study (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. This approach was considered appropriate for the article sought to integrate scholarship that has developed in separate disciplinary traditions, including fashion studies, sociology, anthropology, gender studies and media studies, and to examine developments across a wide geographical area. The approach was considered appropriate given the sensitivity of research on sexuality, in which primary data collection raises significant ethical challenges.

Data sources and selection

Data were drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books and book chapters, legal instruments and national policy documents. Sources were identified through searches of databases and repositories including Taylor & Francis Online, JSTOR, SAGE Journals, African Journals Online (AJOL), Sabinet and Google Scholar, as well as institutional repositories of African universities. Search terms included combinations of 'fashion and sexuality', 'dress and identity', 'erotic capital', 'online dating self-presentation', 'dating apps', 'African fashion', 'dress Africa gender', 'African sexualities', 'transactional sex', 'miniskirt Africa' and 'fashion design education'.

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. Codes were generated inductively from the documents and then interpreted through the lens of symbolic interactionism. Five themes emerged from the process.

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. Much of the research on online dating and on the sexual meanings of fashion was conducted in Western societies, and its findings cannot be assumed to apply directly to African contexts. The researcher sought to treat questions of sexuality with sensitivity and to avoid reproducing stereotypes about African sexualities.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Out of data analysis emerged five interrelated themes. Each theme is presented below, compared across the literature and interpreted through the lens of symbolic interactionism.

Dress as a cultural language of sexuality and courtship in Africa

In African societies, dress has long functioned as a cultural language through which sexuality, availability for marriage and marital status were communicated within a shared community of meaning. Hendrickson (1996) and Allman (2004) show that dress marked age, gender, marital status and ritual condition, so that a person's sexual and social position was legible to the community. Among the Zulu, beadwork served as a medium of courtship, with young women creating beaded panels, often described as love letters, whose colours and arrangements carried messages to suitors that could be read by those who knew the code (Morris & Preston-Whyte, 1994). Among the Ndebele, beaded aprons marked the progression from girlhood through initiation to marriage, with married women wearing distinctive aprons and blankets that announced their new status (Powell, 1995). Among the Shona, clothing formed part of the exchanges that accompanied roora, including garments for the bride's father and the mbereko cloth for her mother, so that cloth materially expressed the alliance between two families (Bourdillon, 1987). In West Africa, the aso ebi tradition, in which relatives and friends of a couple wear cloth of the same design at a wedding, displays the networks of kinship and friendship that surround a marriage (Nwafor, 2021). Weiner and Schneider (1989) argue more generally that cloth has served across many societies as a medium for creating and binding social relationships.

The examples above show that, in African cultures, the sexual meanings of dress were not primarily a matter of individual attraction but of communal regulation and social alliance. Dress told the community who was available for courtship, who was promised, who was married and who was in mourning, and it structured how men and women could approach one another. More broadly, the literature shows that fashion operates as a language through which sexual identity, availability and desire are communicated, concealed and negotiated. Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992) argue that dress communicates identity before verbal interaction begins. Davis (1992) argued that fashion feeds on ambivalence, playing continuously with the boundary between the erotic and the chaste, and this play is visible in garments ranging from the slit skirt to the sheer fabric, the low neckline and the tailored trouser that emphasises the shape of the body.

Literature shows that the sexual meanings of dress are deeply gendered. Flügel's (1930) concept of the great masculine renunciation explains why, in much of the modern world, decorative and revealing dress has been coded as feminine, while men have been expected to signal sexual attractiveness through markers of status, strength and wealth, such as the suit, the watch or the car. Analysis of gender advertisements show how fashion imagery has historically positioned women as objects of sexual looking. Hakim (2010) argues that dress, grooming and style form part of erotic capital, while Green (2008) shows that the value of such capital depends on the particular sexual field in which a person is situated, so that the same outfit may be highly valued in one setting and devalued in another.

From kin-mediated courtship to urban and digital dating

The second theme concerns the transformation of dating patterns in Africa, from courtship mediated and supervised by kin to dating that is individually initiated and increasingly conducted through digital technologies. In Shona tradition, a young man's approach to a young woman was subject to rules of respect, the involvement of the vatete guided young women's conduct, and the munyai negotiated between families once a couple decided to marry (Bourdillon, 1987). Mbiti (1969) emphasised that marriage was understood as a communal obligation rather than a private choice. The literature shows that urbanisation, labour migration, formal education and Christianity have progressively loosened these structures. Cole and Thomas (2009) document how colonial wage labour and missionary teaching introduced new ideals of companionate, romantic love, while Spronk (2012) shows how young Nairobi professionals came to regard self-chosen relationships as markers of modernity. Today, young people in Zimbabwe and across Africa meet partners on university campuses, at work, in church and at social events, and increasingly through WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and dating applications. Archambault (2017) found that among young Mozambicans, the mobile phone had become central to the initiation and management of relationships, allowing flirtation and secrecy beyond the gaze of parents and neighbours. Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012) similarly found that the internet reduces the role of family and friends as intermediaries in partner choice, a finding of special significance in African societies where those intermediaries were historically central.

Within the new dating patterns, dress has become central to the self-presentation through which people pursue romantic and sexual partners, and the digital transformation of dating has intensified its importance. Goffman (1959) described the personal front as the expressive equipment through which individuals present themselves, and the literature shows that dating is a context in which this equipment is managed with particular care. The first-date outfit, like the dating profile photograph, is a prop through which people seek to convey attractiveness, personality, social class and seriousness of intention. Illouz (2007, 2012) shows that modern romantic choice increasingly resembles a market in which individuals evaluate potential partners across a range of attributes, while Hakim (2010) and Green (2008) show that style and appearance are important resources in these evaluations.

The rise of online dating has made the visual presentation of the dressed body more important than ever. Rosenfeld et al. (2019) found that meeting online had become the most common way for heterosexual couples in the United States to meet, and although comparable large-scale data for Africa are scarce, the rapid spread of smartphones and social media suggests a similar, if uneven, direction of change. In this context, the profile photograph becomes the decisive first impression. Ellison et al. (2006) found that online daters seek to present an idealised but credible self, while Toma et al. (2008) found that small exaggerations were common. Ward (2017) showed that Tinder users carefully select photographs to signal attractiveness, lifestyle and personality,

with clothing, setting and pose all forming part of the performance. On swipe-based applications, decisions are often made within seconds on the basis of a small number of images, which means that clothing and grooming carry an unusually heavy communicative burden. Hobbs et al. (2017) caution, however, that dating apps have not simply produced the disposable 'liquid love' feared by Bauman (2003), since many users continue to seek committed relationships.

Moral regulation of bodies through dress

The third theme concerns the regulation of sexuality through the control of dress, a regulation that falls most heavily on women. Foucault (1978) argued that modern societies do not simply repress sexuality but produce and regulate it through discourses of morality, medicine, religion and law. Literature shows that dress has been one of the most important sites of such regulation. In colonial Southern Africa, missionaries sought to clothe African converts in European garments as a sign of Christian respectability, treating indigenous forms of dress and undress as evidence of moral deficiency (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1997). Burke (1996) shows that in colonial Zimbabwe, ideas of bodily propriety and cleanliness were promoted through the marketing of commodities, linking consumer goods to moral and racial hierarchies.

The postcolonial period has seen the regulation of dress take new forms. Ivaska (2011) showed that in 1960s Tanzania, the miniskirt was banned as a symbol of decadent Western culture that threatened national identity, and that the campaign against it was bound up with anxieties about urban young women's independence. In Malawi, dress codes under the Banda government prohibited women from wearing miniskirts and trousers in public until they were relaxed in the 1990s. In Zimbabwe, the 1983 'Operation Clean-Up' saw women who were found in public spaces at night detained on the assumption that they were sex workers, illustrating how women's presence and appearance in public could be read as signs of sexual immorality (Jacobs & Howard, 1987). In the twenty-first century, Uganda's Anti-Pornography Act of 2014 was popularly described as the 'miniskirt law' and was followed by reports of women being harassed in public, while in Kenya, the public stripping of women for their dress prompted the #MyDressMyChoice protests in the same year (Republic of Uganda, 2014; Tamale, 2020). Religious institutions have been influential. Mate (2002) showed how Pentecostal discourses in Zimbabwe presented modest dress as a marker of godly womanhood and respectable marriage.

Money, material exchange and the commodification of sexuality in fashion and dating

The fourth theme concerns the commodification of sexuality within the fashion industry and its intensification by digital platforms. Literature shows that the fashion industry has long used sexuality to sell clothing, through advertising imagery, celebrity endorsement and the eroticisation of models (Goffman, 1979; Steele, 1996). Mears (2011) showed how the value of fashion models is produced by networks of agents, clients and photographers who define desirable looks, often in ways that reproduce narrow ideals of body size, age and race. Wolf (1991) and Bordo (1993) argued that such ideals impose damaging standards on women, while Gill (2007) analysed how contemporary media present women's sexual self-display as a matter of empowered choice, even as the standards to which they are expected to conform remain narrow.

The commodification of sexuality has consequences for intimate relationships and dating patterns. Cole and Thomas (2009) caution against the Western assumption that love and material exchange are opposites, noting that in many African cultures the giving of gifts, including cloth and clothing, has long been a recognised expression of care and commitment, as the exchanges surrounding roora illustrate (Bourdillon, 1987). What has changed is the scale and the source of the goods exchanged, and the extent to which they are linked to global consumer fashion. Smith (2017) found that in Nigeria, young men feel intense pressure to spend money on girlfriends in order to be recognised as men and as desirable partners, while in South Africa, the 'blesser' phenomenon has drawn attention to relationships in which older, wealthier men provide young women with money, clothing, hair and lifestyle goods (Mampane, 2018). The research on transactional relationships in Southern Africa shows that the desire for fashionable clothes and lifestyles can be an important motivation for entering relationships with wealthier partners (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; Hunter, 2002). Masvawure (2010) found that some Zimbabwean university students engaged in such relationships in order to maintain a fashionable appearance on campus, illustrating how the pressures of display, intensified by peer comparison and social media, can shape sexual decision-making and expose young people to risks of exploitation and ill-health. The

literature also raises concerns about the marketing of sexualised clothing and imagery to children, which the American Psychological Association (2007) identified as harmful to girls' self-image and well-being. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, this theme shows that the audiences for fashion performances have multiplied and become commercialised. The 'review' of a person's appearance is now delivered through likes, comments and followers, and it can be converted into economic value. For fashion designers, this theme raises important ethical questions about the images they use to sell garments and the bodies they choose to design for.

Shifting gender and sexual identities and the design response

The fifth theme concerns the growing plurality of gender and sexual identities and the ways in which fashion design has responded. Butler (1990) argued that gender is produced through repeated performances, including performances of dress, and that subversive performances can expose the constructed nature of gender norms. Literature shows that the twenty-first century has seen increasing visibility for gender-fluid, androgynous and non-binary fashion in global markets, including unisex collections and the adoption of skirts, pearls and other conventionally feminine items by some male celebrities. Paoletti (2012) shows that the gender coding of clothing, including the association of pink with girls and blue with boys, is historically recent and has changed over time, which suggests that today's gendered dress conventions are neither natural nor permanent. Connell (1995) helps to explain why men's departures from conventional dress norms often attract hostility, since they appear to challenge hegemonic masculinity.

Sociological underpinnings

Sociologically, the findings show that fashion, sexuality and dating are social facts that both express and reproduce the structures of the societies in which they occur. Simmel (1957) argued that fashion satisfies two contradictory needs, the need to belong through imitation and the need to stand out through distinction, and this dual logic is clearly visible in dating, in which people seek both to conform to recognised standards of attractiveness and to distinguish themselves from competitors. Veblen (1899) showed that dress serves as a display of wealth and status, and the evidence from transactional relationships in Southern Africa, in which fashionable clothing signals both a woman's desirability and a partner's ability to provide, can be read in these terms (Hunter, 2010; Masvawure, 2010). Bourdieu (1984) demonstrated that taste is a marker of class, and that dispositions towards dress are acquired through upbringing and education. Taste in dress therefore operates in dating as a means of identifying partners of similar social standing, while Hakim's (2010) concept of erotic capital and Green's (2008) concept of sexual fields show that attractiveness is itself a socially structured resource whose value depends on context.

A sociological reading directs attention to power, inequality and social change. Giddens (1992) and Bauman (2003) show that late modern intimacy has become more individualised, while Illouz (2012) shows how romantic choice has come to be organised by market logics of comparison and evaluation. In Africa, urbanisation, education, labour migration and digital technologies have weakened the role of families and communities in arranging and supervising courtship, while increasing the importance of individual self-presentation (Spronk, 2012; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). Foucault (1978) shows that sexuality is regulated through discourses and institutions, and the regulation of women's dress by churches, communities and states illustrates how the body becomes an arena of social control (Mate, 2002; Tamale, 2011). Bourdieu's (2001) analysis of masculine domination adds that gender hierarchies come to appear natural through their inscription on bodies and through everyday practices such as dress. Sociologically, then, the freedom to dress for oneself and the freedom to choose a partner are unevenly distributed. They depend on gender, class, religion, sexual orientation and place, and they are shaped by markets that profit from insecurity about the body. This sociological underpinning complements symbolic interactionism by showing that the negotiation of meaning through dress takes place within structures that privilege some interpretations over others.

Anthropological underpinnings

Anthropologically, the findings indicate that clothing is best understood as part of what Turner (1980) called the 'social skin', the culturally constructed surface through which the individual body is made social and through which social categories are inscribed on the person. Mauss (1973) argued that even the most apparently natural

uses of the body, such as walking, sitting and standing, are learned 'techniques of the body' that vary between societies, and the ways in which people wear clothes, display or conceal the body and perform attractiveness are equally learned. Douglas (1966) showed that societies use the body as a symbol of the social order, so that concerns about bodily boundaries, purity and pollution frequently express concerns about the boundaries of the group. This insight helps to explain why debates about miniskirts, trousers and revealing clothing in Africa are so often framed in terms of threats to national culture or community morality, as in the Tanzanian campaigns analysed by Ivaska (2011). Women's bodies, in these debates, become symbols of the boundaries of the nation and of tradition.

The anthropology of cloth shows that garments carry meanings that go far beyond fashion. Weiner and Schneider (1989) argued that cloth has been central to the creation and maintenance of social relationships across many societies, through gifts, marriage exchanges and rituals. In many African societies, cloth and clothing form part of marriage negotiations and ceremonies, and the exchange of garments between families affirms the alliance created by marriage (Eicher, 1995; Hansen & Madison, 2013). In Zimbabwe, for example, gifts of clothing to in-laws form part of the marriage process, illustrating how links sexuality and courtship to wider kinship obligations dress. The anthropological underpinnings of this article thus combines an appreciation of dress as a meaningful cultural system with a critical awareness of how knowledge about African bodies and sexualities has been produced and used.

Synthesis

Taken together, the five themes show that sexuality, fashion designing, culture and dating patterns in Africa are interconnected social processes. Dress has long served as a cultural language of sexuality and courtship in African societies, embedded in kinship, exchange and community; dating patterns have shifted from kin-mediated courtship towards individually initiated, urban and digital dating, while marriage remains largely a family affair; the dress of women in particular is subject to moral and legal regulation; money, material exchange and global consumer fashion have become deeply entangled with intimacy; and shifting gender and sexual identities are creating new demands on, and opportunities for, designers. Interpreted through symbolic interactionism, these themes show that garments are props in the performance of the self, whose meanings are proposed by wearers and reviewed by audiences. As shared community codes of dress have weakened and new digital audiences have emerged, the gap between programme and review has widened. The sociological and anthropological underpinnings show that these performances take place within African cultural systems and within structures of gender, class, religion, law and global markets that determine whose meanings prevail and at what cost.

CONCLUSION

The article set out to examine sexuality and fashion designing in the twenty-first century, with a focus on culture and dating patterns in Africa, drawing on secondary data with particular reference to Zimbabwe and Southern Africa. The analysis has shown that in African cultures, dress has historically been a language through which sexuality, courtship and marriage were communicated and regulated within the community, as illustrated by Zulu and Ndebele beadwork, the cloth exchanged in Shona roora and the aso ebi of West African weddings. It has shown that dating patterns have shifted from kin-mediated courtship to individually initiated urban and digital dating, producing a hybrid pattern in which dating is personal and often conducted through mobile phones and social media, while marriage remains embedded in family negotiation. It has also shown that women's dress remains subject to regulation by states, churches and communities, that money and global consumer fashion have become entangled with intimacy in ways that can expose young people to exploitation, and that the growing plurality of gender and sexual identities is creating new challenges and opportunities for designers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the findings and on symbolic interactionism, the article makes the following recommendations.

1. **Integrate the sociology and anthropology of dress into fashion design education.** Universities, polytechnics and design colleges should include modules on the social meanings of dress, gender,

sexuality, the body, consumer culture and African traditions of courtship and marriage in fashion and textile design programmes, so that designers understand the social consequences of their design decisions (Kawamura, 2005; Kaiser, 2012).

2. **Develop culturally grounded design for courtship and marriage.** Designers should work with elders, cultural custodians and craftspeople, such as beadworkers and weavers, to create contemporary garments for dating, roora, weddings and other rites of passage that draw on African dress traditions with respect and understanding, ensuring that communities benefit from the commercial use of their heritage (Morris & Preston-Whyte, 1994; Nwafor, 2021).

3. **Promote ethical and inclusive design and marketing.** Designers, brands and retailers should design for the full diversity of African bodies and identities, and should adopt codes of conduct for advertising and social media marketing that avoid the objectification of bodies and the sexualisation of children (American Psychological Association, 2007).

4. **Strengthen intergenerational and community dialogue on courtship and sexuality.** Families, schools, churches and community organisations should create spaces in which elders and young people can discuss dating, dress and sexuality openly and respectfully, drawing on the values of unhu/ubuntu (Samkange & Samkange, 1980; Tamale, 2020).

5. **Support local design and garment industries.** Governments and development agencies should support African designers and garment manufacturers through training, finance and access to markets, in order to strengthen the cultural and economic value of African fashion (Brooks, 2015; Rovine, 2015).

6. **Promote further research.** Universities and research institutions should prioritise primary, participatory research on dress, sexuality and dating in Africa where literature on these topics remains limited.

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