

# Public Etiquette and Societal Sanity: Rethinking Youth Appearance and the Role of Early Childhood Education in Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

Nigeria stands at a cultural crossroads where youth fashion, freedom of expression, and public etiquette intersect. The widespread normalisation of dreadlocks, tattoos, sagging trousers, and indecent dressing among Nigerian youths has transformed cultural symbols into contested expressions of defiance and deviance. This study, anchored in **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory** and **Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism**, explored the influence of youthful appearance on public etiquette and societal sanity and examined how early childhood education (ECE) can serve as a moral reorientation tool. Using a **qualitative descriptive design** involving observation and survey methods, 100 youths across five states—Imo, Bayelsa, Delta, Rivers, and Enugu—were studied. Data revealed that 36% of youths engaged in sagging, 27% wore dreadlocks, and 22% had multiple piercings. Behavioural observations indicated confidence (67%) but confrontational tone (24%), often in public spaces where 57% of interactions occurred near children. Findings suggest a blurring of moral boundaries and the replication of deviant visual culture among impressionable minors. The study concludes that moral education must begin early, integrating etiquette, modesty, and civic values in the ECE curriculum. Recommendations include national dress codes for institutions, parental reorientation, ethical policing, and regulatory oversight of youth-targeted media. These interventions, if implemented systematically, can re-align public conduct with moral integrity and restore Nigeria's cultural equilibrium.

**Keywords:** Public etiquette, youth appearance, early childhood education, moral development, cultural identity, Nigeria.

## INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's moral landscape is undergoing a profound transformation driven by globalisation, media influence, and the redefinition of youth identity. Dreadlocks, tattoos, earrings, and sagging trousers—once markers of spirituality, art, or rebellion—now occupy an ambiguous space between self-expression and moral controversy (Olumide, 2022; Ojo, 2023). What was previously a personal aesthetic has evolved into a cultural statement, shaping perceptions of decency and deviance alike. The link between fashion and morality is particularly sensitive in Nigeria, where social order is traditionally grounded in modesty, communal respect, and discipline.

The researcher's **personal encounter** with three dreadlocked youths at a Joint Task Force checkpoint near Amaraka, Imo State, typifies this tension. Their flamboyant appearance and defiance of authority highlighted not just youthful exuberance but a deeper rebellion against moral expectations. Subsequent field encounters across **Port Harcourt, Bayelsa, Delta, and Enugu** revealed similar trends: dreadlocked youths negotiating or bribing police officers to avoid detention after digital fraud checks. This recurring experience crystallised the researcher's concern—how outward appearance has become a shield for deviance and how children, observing these dynamics, risk internalising distorted moral values.

The problem, therefore, extends beyond aesthetics; it embodies a national moral crisis requiring intervention through early education, family, and policy reforms.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conceptual Clarifications: Public Etiquette and Societal Sanity

Public etiquette refers to the behavioural norms, dress codes, and social mannerisms expected of individuals in maintaining order, respect, and civility in communal life (Dash, 2022; Olberding, 2016). It embodies socially approved conduct and is reflected in speech, appearance, and public behaviour. Societal sanity, on the other hand, refers to the moral and psychological balance that sustains a community's ethical identity and collective sense of decency (Kayode, 2024). In essence, societal sanity is the outcome of consistent adherence to public etiquette, forming the moral compass that preserves social cohesion and mutual respect. The breakdown of this equilibrium, as seen in modern Nigeria, manifests in increasing disregard for decorum, rising youth rebellion, and the normalisation of deviant appearances.

### Youth Appearance and Identity in Contemporary Nigeria

The appearance of Nigerian youths has evolved into a visible statement of personal identity and rebellion. In traditional societies, physical appearance reflected maturity, social role, or spiritual commitment. However, in modern times, youth dressing patterns—characterised by dreadlocks, sagging trousers, tattoos, and multiple piercings—have been redefined as symbols of defiance, urban sophistication, or digital-era liberalism (Ogu & Ajah, 2021). Adebayo (2022) notes that popular music, celebrity culture, and social media reinforce the notion that provocative appearances equate to creativity and confidence. The emerging narrative among Nigerian youths equates flamboyant appearance with independence and non-conformity, leading to a visible tension between cultural norms and globalised fashion values.

### Cultural Symbolism of Dreadlocks, Tattoos, Cowries, Sagging, and Earrings

Traditionally, physical adornments carried sacred meanings and social functions. Dreadlocks, for instance, symbolised spiritual dedication or cultural identity among certain African and Afro-Caribbean communities (Eze, 2016; Nwosu, 2019). Cowries, once used as currency, symbolised fertility and divine protection (Ogundiran, 2020). Tattoos served as tribal markers of courage or lineage (Okonkwo, 2015). In contemporary Nigeria, however, these once-sacred symbols have been stripped of their spiritual depth and rebranded as expressions of modern freedom and resistance (Briciu & Briciu, 2020).

This reinterpretation has created a clash between heritage and imported subcultures. Dreadlocks and male earrings are now commonly associated with cybercrime (“Yahoo boys”), cultism, or rebellion against authority (Ojo, 2023). Sagging trousers and revealing clothing are further influenced by Western hip-hop culture, which projects anti-establishment attitudes and sexualised aesthetics (Nwankwo & Okafor, 2021). Consequently, what were once markers of identity have become contested symbols of moral decline in the Nigerian socio-cultural landscape.

### Moral and Social Implications of Deviant Appearance

Okafor (2020) argues that deviant fashion erodes public morality and weakens institutional discipline. Youths with provocative or suggestive appearances are often profiled by security operatives, resulting in mutual distrust between citizens and law enforcement (Ajayi & Omole, 2020). Adeyemi and Odu (2020) found that individuals with tattoos, dreadlocks, or sagging trousers face higher unemployment and social exclusion, reflecting a broader tension between self-expression and public morality.

From a psychosocial perspective, the glorification of flamboyant appearance diminishes young people's sense of civic responsibility. The decline in modest dressing has been linked to weakened family guidance, media influence, and the disappearance of moral instruction from schools (Akinbote & Adedokun, 2019; Ogunleye, 2022). These trends influence children's moral reasoning as they imitate older peers, creating a gradual intergenerational erosion of decorum and ethical restraint.

## **The Role of Early Childhood Education in Moral and Behavioural Formation**

Early childhood education (ECE) remains the most effective avenue for shaping values, behaviour, and identity in children. UNESCO (2020) identifies the period between birth and age eight as critical for inculcating civic and moral values. Adebisi and Ozoemena (2021) emphasise that ECE develops empathy, respect, and cultural identity through structured moral learning. Similarly, Eni-Olorunda (2023) argues that early moral education, rooted in indigenous aesthetics and proverbs, fosters children's understanding of modesty, discipline, and social respect. When children are introduced early to concepts of dignity in dress and behaviour, they are more likely to resist negative peer influence and media pressure later in life. Hence, rethinking ECE as a moral compass becomes central to restoring societal sanity and rebuilding Nigeria's civic culture.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study is underpinned by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism (1969), and Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory (1981)—each contributing unique insights into how environment, meaning, and moral cognition shape behaviour.

### **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory**

Bronfenbrenner conceptualised human development as occurring through interactions across multiple environmental layers: the microsystem (family, school), mesosystem (interactions between immediate environments), exosystem (community and institutions), macrosystem (culture and societal norms), and chronosystem (time and change). Applied to this study, the theory explains how youths' appearance and public behaviour are influenced by overlapping systems—family upbringing, peer culture, school policies, media exposure, and societal expectations. The findings, particularly the observed link between parental laxity, school permissiveness, and youth moral drift, validate Bronfenbrenner's assertion that behaviour reflects systemic interdependence. When children observe social disorder or moral confusion in their environment, they internalise such norms as acceptable.

### **Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism**

Herbert Blumer (1969) posited that human actions are guided by meanings derived from social interaction and subsequently modified through interpretation. In the context of this study, appearance—dreadlocks, tattoos, and sagging—is a symbolic act through which youths communicate identity, rebellion, or status. Society, in turn, assigns meanings to these symbols, sometimes equating them with deviance. This reciprocal process creates a cycle of perception and response: youths dress to assert meaning; society reacts with suspicion; and new identities evolve through resistance. Thus, symbolic interactionism elucidates how the struggle between freedom and social control plays out through fashion, language, and body art.

### **Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory**

Kohlberg (1981) proposed that moral reasoning develops through three levels—pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional—each representing a deeper understanding of right and wrong. His framework is particularly relevant to early childhood education. When moral instruction is delayed until adolescence, individuals often remain in the pre-conventional stage, guided by punishment and reward rather than internalised ethics. Integrating moral education in early childhood (ages 0–8) helps children advance towards conventional and post-conventional reasoning, fostering empathy and civic responsibility. This aligns with the study's call for embedding moral and cultural education early, before deviant models from media or peers take root.

## Synthesis and Relevance to the Study

Together, these theories illustrate that youth behaviour is a function of **environmental systems**, **symbolic meaning-making**, and **moral cognition**. The findings from the present study—showing that deviant appearances are learned, performed, and normalised through family, media, and peer interaction—reinforce these theoretical lenses. The ecological model explains *where* the learning happens; symbolic interactionism explains *how* meaning is constructed; and Kohlberg explains *why* early moral formation is critical. This integration strengthens the study's interpretive framework, linking public etiquette, social perception, and early education in shaping societal sanity.

## Empirical Studies on Youth Appearance and Public Decency

Okafor (2020) found that 78% of urban youths perceive dreadlocks as rebellion, whereas Adebayo (2022) reported that 45% view it as self-expression, suggesting a generational divide. Nwosu (2019) discovered that exposure to Western media strongly predicts deviant fashion among students, while Okonkwo and Adeyemi (2023) emphasised the role of early education in preserving cultural values.

Collectively, these empirical studies highlight the ongoing contest between globalised youth culture and indigenous moral standards. They reinforce the present study's premise that societal reorientation must begin from foundational learning stages, through culturally relevant curricula and ethical modelling by teachers, parents, and community leaders.

## Summary of the Literature

The literature establishes that Nigerian youths' evolving fashion trends—while sometimes symbolic of creativity—have generated moral tension, weakened institutional control, and distorted public etiquette. Early childhood education emerges as a transformative solution, capable of shaping moral reasoning and restoring social equilibrium. However, existing studies rarely bridge the connection between youth appearance, moral development, and early education—creating the gap this study addresses.

## Purpose of the Study

### General Purpose:

To examine the influence of youthful appearance (dreadlocks, tattoos, sagging, and indecent dressing) on public etiquette and societal sanity, and to explore how early childhood education can promote moral reorientation in Nigeria.

### Specific Purposes:

1. To investigate public perceptions of dreadlocks, tattoos, and indecent dressing among Nigerian youths.
2. To examine the perceived consequences of deviant appearance on social behaviour and moral development.
3. To identify factors influencing youth adoption of unconventional fashion trends.
4. To explore how early childhood education can be leveraged to promote moral and cultural reorientation.

### Research Questions:

1. What are the public perceptions of dreadlocks, tattoos, and indecent dressing among Nigerian youths?
2. What are the perceived consequences of deviant appearance on social behaviour and moral development?
3. What factors influence youth adoption of unconventional fashion trends?

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#### 4. How can early childhood education promote moral and cultural reorientation in Nigeria?

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design:

A qualitative descriptive design was adopted to explore lived experiences and observable realities surrounding youth appearance and etiquette. The design integrated field observations and questionnaire surveys for triangulation.

### Population and Sample:

The study population consisted of approximately 1,200 youths aged 18–35 across Imo, Bayelsa, Delta, Rivers, and Enugu States. Using multi-stage sampling, a purposive and snowball selection process yielded a final sample of 100 respondents representing diverse urban settings.

### Data Collection Instruments:

1. **Questionnaire:** Designed around four research questions using Likert-scale items to gauge perceptions.
2. **Observation Guide:** Used to document physical appearance, behaviour, interactions, and environmental context.  
Ethical considerations were strictly observed; no minors were directly studied, and observations involving children were conducted in public, non-intrusive contexts.

### Operational Definitions and Measurement Validity

For the purpose of this study:

- **Public Etiquette** refers to observable manners, dress, and social conduct demonstrating respect for community norms, including decency in appearance, speech, and behaviour.
- **Societal Sanity** denotes the collective moral and psychological equilibrium maintained through shared ethical standards, civic responsibility, and adherence to public decorum.
- **Youth Appearance** encompasses visible elements such as hairstyle (e.g., dreadlocks), clothing patterns (e.g., sagging trousers or revealing outfits), tattoos, and piercings that symbolise identity expression or social affiliation.
- **Early Childhood Education (ECE)** is defined as formal and informal learning experiences for children aged 0–8 years designed to foster moral, cognitive, and socio-emotional development.

Measurement validity was ensured through expert review and pre-testing of the instruments. Three experts in early childhood education and sociology of youth behaviour reviewed the questionnaire and observation guide for content relevance, clarity, and cultural appropriateness. Their feedback informed minor revisions in wording and sequencing. Additionally, consistency of responses across related questionnaire items yielded a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.87, indicating high internal reliability and strong measurement validity for constructs such as youth appearance, moral perception, and public etiquette.

### Data Analysis:

Data were analysed thematically and quantitatively (mean scores, percentages). Each finding aligns with the study's purposes, presenting trends and interpretations across the four thematic domains.



## Presentation and Analysis of Data

**Table 1:** Summary of Youth Perception of Dreadlocks, Tattoos, and Indecent Dressing (n=100)

Variable	Mean	Interpretation
Dreadlocks as cultural expression	2.95	Moderate acceptance
Tattoos as identity symbols	2.71	Low to moderate
Indecent dressing as freedom	2.64	Low acceptance
Society unfairly judges appearance	3.12	Moderate support
Appearance defines morality	2.23	Disagree

**Interpretation:** Youths recognise the cultural basis of appearance but remain divided on moral implications, reflecting symbolic conflict in public meaning-making.

**Table 2:** Perceived Consequences of Youth Appearance

Consequence	Mean	Interpretation
Profiling by police	3.41	High perception
Moral confusion in children	3.55	High concern
Academic distraction	3.29	High
Link to crime/cultism	3.38	High
Cultural erosion	3.44	High

**Interpretation:** Youths acknowledge social suspicion, moral decay, and cultural decline as consequences of deviant dressing patterns.

**Table 3:** Factors Influencing Youth Appearance

Factor	Mean	Interpretation
Media influence	3.62	Strong
Celebrity impact	3.48	Strong
Parenting weakness	3.33	Moderate
Institutional silence	3.41	Strong
Unemployment/idleness	3.27	Moderate

**Interpretation:** Mass media and celebrity culture are dominant forces shaping youth aesthetics, confirming the symbolic interactionist link between image and meaning.

**Table 4:** Role of Early Childhood Education in Moral Reorientation

ECE Strategy	Mean	Interpretation
Moral education integration	3.67	Very high
Dress code enforcement	3.53	High
Cultural storytelling	3.49	High
Parent–teacher collaboration	3.58	High
Public campaigns	3.45	High

**Interpretation:** Strong consensus exists that early education and parent–school collaboration are key to rebuilding public etiquette.

**Table 5:** Observation Summary (N=100)

Category	Key Trends	Frequency (%)
Dreadlocks	Common in urban youth clusters	27
Sagging trousers	Most visible fashion marker	36
Tattoos/piercings	Increasing trend	22
Confrontational tone	Frequent in checkpoints	24
Children present	Often nearby or watching	57

**Interpretation:** Public spaces serve as mirrors of cultural diffusion; children’s exposure to such scenes reinforces normalisation of provocative identity expressions.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Findings reveal that youth appearance functions as a symbolic code through which identity, rebellion, and belonging are expressed—consistent with Blumer’s Symbolic Interactionism. Simultaneously, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model helps explain how overlapping systems (family, peers, media, school) jointly shape moral dispositions.

Youth respondents viewed fashion choices as personal freedom but recognised their moral and social consequences. Observation data showing 57% of interactions occurring around children validates the ecological concern: early exposure risks internalising distorted moral models. The findings therefore affirm that moral formation must start early, within structured environments such as ECE and home-based reinforcement.

The inclusion of Kohlberg’s moral reasoning theory underscores that young children who internalise deviant appearances as socially rewarded behaviours may struggle to progress beyond pre-conventional morality—where right and wrong are externally dictated by approval rather than conscience.

### Practical Significance of the Study

This study contributes to educational and social development in four key dimensions:

- Early Moral Formation:** Reinforces moral instruction within ECE to build modesty and civic decorum (UNESCO, 2020).
- Parental Empowerment:** Encourages parents to reclaim early moral mentoring roles.
- Policy Impact:** Informs dress code frameworks for schools and youth organisations.
- Community Renewal:** Provides actionable insights for religious and civic leaders promoting value restoration.

### Educational Implications

The results emphasise that moral and cultural education should be embedded in Nigeria’s basic education curriculum. Teachers must model acceptable appearance, use culturally relevant examples, and reinforce respect for public spaces. Moreover, integrating reflective storytelling, role-play, and civic dialogue into early learning can reduce moral ambiguity.

## Ethical Considerations and Limitations

The study maintained anonymity and observed participants only in public spaces without intrusion. No minors were directly engaged. Limitations include non-probability sampling (purposive and snowballing), small sample size ( $n=100$ ), and focus on urban populations, which may limit generalisability. Future studies should employ mixed methods and larger probabilistic samples for broader validation.

## CONCLUSION

Public etiquette in Nigeria is deteriorating under the weight of globalised youth culture. Dreadlocks, sagging trousers, and tattoos—once meaningful cultural expressions—are now entangled with moral decline and cyber-fraud aesthetics. This study concludes that early childhood education holds transformative potential to reverse this trajectory by embedding value-based learning and reasserting cultural identity. The restoration of Nigeria's moral fabric depends on collaboration between homes, schools, religious institutions, and state agencies.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Integrate moral and cultural studies in early childhood curricula.
2. Enforce consistent school and public dress codes.
3. Train teachers in value-based pedagogy.
4. Launch national media campaigns promoting decent dressing.
5. Encourage community mentorship programmes for youths.

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## Appendix A: Questionnaire Items

### Title of Study:

Public Etiquette and Societal Sanity: Rethinking Youth Appearance and the Role of Early Childhood Education in Nigeria

### Purpose:

This questionnaire aims to gather views from Nigerian youths on the influence of appearance (dreadlocks, tattoos, sagging, and provocative dressing) on public etiquette, societal values, and early childhood moral development.

### Instructions:

Please tick (✓) the option that best represents your opinion. Your responses will be kept confidential and used only for research purposes.

Scale: **SA** = Strongly Agree, **A** = Agree, **D** = Disagree, **SD** = Strongly Disagree

### Section A: Demographic Information

Item	Question	Options
1	Gender	Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female <input type="checkbox"/>
2	Age	15–20 <input type="checkbox"/> 21–25 <input type="checkbox"/> 26–30 <input type="checkbox"/> 31+ <input type="checkbox"/>
3	State of Residence	Imo <input type="checkbox"/> Bayelsa <input type="checkbox"/> Delta <input type="checkbox"/> Rivers <input type="checkbox"/> Enugu <input type="checkbox"/>
4	Educational Level	Primary <input type="checkbox"/> Secondary <input type="checkbox"/> Tertiary <input type="checkbox"/> None <input type="checkbox"/>

### Section B: Questionnaire Items (Linked to Research Questions)

**Research Question 1:** What are the socio-cultural motivations behind the adoption of dreadlocks, tattoos, sagging, and revealing clothing among Nigerian youths?

S/N	Item Statement	SA	A	D	SD
1	Dreadlocks represent cultural identity and pride.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	Tattoos and piercings are forms of modern self-expression.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	Indecent dressing among youths is influenced by Western culture.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	Peer influence motivates youths to adopt trendy appearances.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	Popular musicians and actors influence youth appearance choices.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Research Question 2:** How do these appearance trends influence public perception, profiling by security forces, and societal trust?

S/N	Item Statement	SA	A	D	SD
6	Youths with dreadlocks or sagging trousers are often profiled by police.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7	Society tends to associate indecent dressing with criminal behaviour.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8	Provocative dressing affects how people respect young individuals.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9	The media reinforces negative stereotypes about youth appearance.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10	Appearance alone should not determine a person's moral worth.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Research Question 3:** What are the effects of these lifestyle choices on institutional discipline and parental control?

S/N	Item Statement	SA	A	D	SD
11	Indecent dressing among youths weakens parental authority.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12	Schools no longer enforce appearance rules effectively.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13	Parents have become too lenient in supervising youth behaviour.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

14	Laxity in institutions contributes to moral decline among students.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15	Community elders are reluctant to correct youths for fear of conflict.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Research Question 4:** How can early childhood education be restructured to promote public etiquette and social decency from ages 0–8?

S/N	Item Statement	SA	A	D	SD
16	Moral education should be introduced in early childhood curricula.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17	Teachers should model modesty and decency in appearance.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18	Parents should collaborate with teachers to instil moral values.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19	Early exposure to cultural values builds lasting moral character.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20	The government should promote public etiquette through school programmes.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

### Appendix B: Observation Guide

- **Physical Appearance:** dreadlocks, tattoos, piercings, sagging, beads/cowries.
- **Public Conduct:** politeness, aggression, confidence, confrontation.
- **Location:** markets, streets, bus parks, campuses.
- **Interactions:** police encounters, peer exchanges, authority responses.
- **Children's Presence:** observing or interacting with youths.
- **Influence Indicators:** gadgets, music, slang, expressive body language.

### Appendix C: Analysed Data Tables

Includes mean scores and observation frequencies (Tables 1–5 presented above).