

Indigenous Fashion Entrepreneurship and Cultural Sustainability in Benin Kingdom: A Study of Joy AG Fashion Style

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Abstract

Traditional Benin dress and accessories constitute one of West Africa's most layered and historically significant systems of cultural expression. Each element of Benin dress - from the coral bead regalia of the Oba to the ceremonial wrappers of titled chiefs and the wedding attire of Benin brides - carries encoded meanings that communicate identity, authority, spirituality, and social hierarchy. The emergence of a vibrant commercial fashion industry in contemporary Nigeria has opened new possibilities for these cultural traditions, but has simultaneously introduced tensions around authenticity, symbolic misrepresentation, and cultural sustainability. Despite growing scholarship on African fashion and cultural heritage, limited attention has been given to how indigenous fashion enterprises in Nigeria negotiate the demands of commercialisation while sustaining cultural values and heritage, particularly within specific semiotic and historical contexts of the Benin Kingdom. This study addresses this gap by investigating the ways in which contemporary Benin-inspired fashion entrepreneurship negotiates the relationship between commercialisation and cultural sustainability from the perspective of Joy AG Fashion Style. Drawing on interview data, visual analysis, and relevant scholarship in African fashion and cultural studies, the article demonstrates that culturally grounded commercialisation can contribute positively to heritage sustainability when it is guided by cultural literacy, ethical commitment, and ongoing engagement with indigenous custodians. The study also identifies key challenges such as loss of symbolism, market pressure, imitation, and the high cost of authentic production that must be actively managed if commercial fashion is to promote rather than taint Benin cultural heritage. The article employs the Semiotics of Dress as its theoretical anchor, arguing that the commercial deployment of Benin cultural signs requires a semiotic responsibility that many current fashion actors have yet to fully demonstrate. The study recommends a more impactful collaboration among fashion entrepreneurs, cultural institutions, and policymakers to promote indigenous fashion practices, preserve cultural heritage, and support sustainable cultural entrepreneurship.

Keywords: Contemporary African fashion; cultural sustainability; entrepreneurship; indigenous fashion.

Introduction

The relationship between cultural heritage and commercial fashion is rarely straightforward. When traditional dress practices enter the market, they gain visibility, economic value, and relevance to younger generations. They also risk losing the specific cultural meanings that made them significant in the first place. Nowhere is this tension more actively felt than in the contemporary Nigerian fashion scene where designers across ethnic traditions are negotiating between the pull of cultural authenticity and the pressures of an increasingly globalised market. The Benin Kingdom in present-day Edo State, Nigeria, offers one of the most compelling contexts for examining this dynamism.

Benin dress and accessories - coral bead regalia, royal wrappers, ceremonial headgear, and the elaborate attire of the Oba, chiefs, and queens - are not merely items of dress. They constitute a visual language in which authority, spiritual power, ancestral continuity, and social hierarchy are encoded, read and interpreted. The increasing commercialisation of these cultural symbols has attracted both celebration and concern, particularly from the Benin royal family and cultural custodians who have publicly denounced the misuse of sacred dress elements in contemporary fashion.

This article investigates the challenges and possibilities of commercialising contemporary Benin dress and accessories regarding cultural sustainability. It does so through a qualitative case study of Joy AG Fashion Style (a luxury Benin-inspired fashion brand), which offers a helpful site for examining how cultural symbols are mobilised, adapted, and communicated in the contemporary fashion market. The central questions guiding the study are: What challenges does the commercialisation of Benin dress and accessories pose to cultural sustainability? How does Joy AG Fashion Style navigate those challenges in its design practice? and What conditions guarantee that commercial fashion genuinely promote the cultural heritage it draws upon rather than undermine it?

This study contributes to scholarship on African costume studies, cultural sustainability, heritage entrepreneurship, and indigenous fashion systems by demonstrating how culturally informed commercialisation can function as a mechanism for preserving and transmitting Benin cultural knowledge within contemporary creative industries. Beyond documenting a fashion enterprise, the article offers a framework for understanding how commercial fashion can operate as a site of cultural continuity in the prevention of cultural erosion.

While several studies have examined African fashion, cultural heritage, and entrepreneurship independently (Rovine, 2015; Throsby, 2001), there remains limited scholarly attention to how indigenous fashion enterprises simultaneously function as commercial ventures and mechanisms for cultural sustainability within the Benin Kingdom. Existing literature has not sufficiently explored the tensions, negotiations, and opportunities that arise when cultural symbols are transformed into marketable fashion products within this specific cultural context. This study, therefore, investigates how Joy AG Fashion Style navigates these dynamics and

contributes to discussions on indigenous fashion entrepreneurship and cultural sustainability.

Theoretical Framework: Semiotics of Dress

This article employs the Semiotics of Dress as its theoretical framework. Barthes'(1983, p.11) foundational argument, which reveals that fashion does not merely clothe the body but dignifies it with garments forming a system of signs whose meanings are culturally constructed and socially interpreted, constitutes the analytical core of the study. The semiotic approach enables a researcher to examine not simply what Benin-inspired fashion looks like but what meanings it carries, how those meanings relate to the original cultural semiotic system from which they are drawn, and whether the commercial deployment of Benin cultural signs preserves, transforms, or displaces their original significance.

The Semiotics of Dress is particularly appropriate for this study because the central problem being investigated, which has to do with signs in indigenous Benin costume, is fundamentally semiotic. What happens to the cultural meanings of Benin costume when those signs enter the commercial fashion market? Barnard's (2002, p.17) observation that the meanings of dress are culturally constructed and socially reinforced rather than naturally given implies that when costume signs are extracted from their original social contexts and placed in a commercial context, their meanings cannot be assumed to travel without distortions. The semiotic framework directs attention to the conditions under which cultural meanings are preserved, the mechanisms by which they are distorted, and the responsibilities that fall on designers who work with culturally charged symbolic systems.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case-study research design. The case-study approach was selected because it enables in-depth, contextually grounded analysis of a specific phenomenon in this instance, the negotiation between cultural heritage and commercial fashion practice within its real-world setting (Yin, 2018, p.15). Fieldwork was conducted between May 2026 and June 2026 via personal semi-structured interview with Joy Agbonifo, the founder and creative director of Joy AG Fashion Style in Benin City. The interview schedule was designed to explore the brand's design philosophy, commercialisation strategies, the cultural influences that inform its creative practice, and the challenges the designer faces in maintaining cultural integrity within a commercial context. Purposive sampling was employed to select the owner of Joy AG Fashion Style as a participant who possesses direct knowledge of the fashion enterprise and Benin cultural practices. This sampling strategy was appropriate given the study's focus on one specific enterprise and the need for depth of insight rather than breadth of representation.

The research further employed visual analysis of selected garments, accessories, promotional photographs, branding materials, and design outputs produced by the fashion house. These visual materials were examined as cultural texts through the lens of the Semiotics of Dress, with particular attention paid to colour symbolism,

coral bead aesthetics, silhouette adaptation, embroidery motifs, and the communication of Benin cultural meanings.

Secondary data were obtained from peer-reviewed scholarly literature on African dress, fashion studies, Benin cultural heritage, and cultural sustainability. Data obtained from interviews and visual observations were transcribed and analysed thematically. Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.79), was employed as a qualitative procedure in which patterns of meaning are systematically identified across the data set and interpreted in relation to the study's theoretical framework.

Literature Review

Cultural Sustainability

Cultural sustainability has emerged as an important dimension of sustainable development, emphasising the preservation, transmission, and revitalisation of cultural values, practices, symbols, and heritage across generations. Unlike conventional approaches to sustainability that focus primarily on economic growth and environmental conservation, cultural sustainability recognises culture as a fundamental resource that contributes to social cohesion, identity formation, and community resilience. Throsby (1995) argues that cultural sustainability involves maintaining and enhancing both the tangible and intangible elements of culture while ensuring their continued relevance in contemporary society, noting that cultural resources should be preserved not merely as historical artefacts but as living systems that contribute to present and future well-being (p. 202). Soini and Birkeland (2014) similarly identify cultural sustainability as a distinct pillar of sustainable development, arguing that cultural vitality is not merely a by-product of social and economic development but a prerequisite for it (p. 294).

In the context of fashion, cultural sustainability extends beyond the preservation of garments and textiles to include the protection of indigenous knowledge systems, traditional craftsmanship, symbolic meanings, and cultural identities embedded within dress practices. Brown and Vacca (2022) contend that cultural sustainability in fashion requires the conservation and regeneration of cultural beliefs and symbolic meanings embedded in traditional craft processes, arguing that local knowledge and traditional craftsmanship constitute important repositories of cultural heritage that must be safeguarded against the homogenising effects of globalisation (p. 593). Applied to African fashion, this concept directs attention to the conditions under which traditional dress practices are reproduced or eroded as they enter commercial circulation. Dress in African societies functions as a communicative system rather than a merely functional covering. Eicher and Roach-Higgins (1992) describe dress as a coded sensory system of nonverbal communication through which identity and social relationships are constructed across time and space (p. 15).

Within the Benin Kingdom, indigenous fashion entrepreneurship represents a contemporary mechanism for sustaining cultural heritage. Traditional symbols such as coral beads, royal insignia, ceremonial patterns, and indigenous textile designs

continue to find expression in modern fashion production. By incorporating these cultural elements into commercially viable fashion products, entrepreneurs facilitate the transmission of cultural knowledge while simultaneously generating economic opportunities. Cultural sustainability, therefore, becomes a dynamic process of adaptation rather than mere preservation, allowing cultural traditions to evolve without losing their essential meanings.

Heritage Entrepreneurship

Heritage entrepreneurship refers to commercial activity that is explicitly grounded in the mobilisation of cultural heritage as a productive resource. It involves transforming cultural traditions, historical knowledge, artistic expressions, and indigenous practices into sustainable economic activities while maintaining their cultural significance. Heritage entrepreneurship recognises that heritage is not simply a relic of the past but a valuable resource capable of generating contemporary social and economic value.

Recent scholarship has highlighted the growing importance of heritage entrepreneurship in creative economies, particularly within developing societies where cultural resources constitute significant economic assets. Heritage entrepreneurs draw upon local traditions, indigenous knowledge, and cultural identities to create products and services that appeal to both local and global markets, contributing to cultural preservation by creating incentives for communities to maintain and transmit traditional/indigenous knowledge systems. Throsby (2001) argues that the cultural industries - those enterprises whose primary output is symbolic rather than physical - play a uniquely important role in sustaining cultural heritage, because they translate living cultural knowledge into forms that can circulate beyond the communities that originally produced them (p. 112).

Fashion entrepreneurship represents one of the most visible forms of heritage entrepreneurship. Fashion designers frequently transform traditional symbols, textiles, and aesthetic principles into contemporary fashion products, participating in what may be described as the commercialisation of heritage. When managed responsibly, commercialisation can enhance cultural visibility and ensure the continued relevance of cultural traditions within changing social contexts.

Indigenous Creative Industries

Indigenous creative industries are economic activities that derive value from indigenous knowledge, artistic traditions, cultural expressions, and local creative practices. These industries encompass various sectors including fashion, crafts, performance, visual arts, music, and cultural tourism, playing a critical role in preserving cultural diversity while fostering economic empowerment and social development.

Contemporary scholarship emphasises that indigenous creative industries contribute significantly to cultural resilience because they create spaces in which cultural knowledge can be practised, transmitted, and reinterpreted. Rather than viewing tradition and modernity as opposing forces, indigenous creative industries

demonstrate how traditional cultural resources can be adapted to contemporary realities. In many African societies, creative industries have become important mechanisms for cultural revitalisation, enabling indigenous cultures to remain dynamic and relevant rather than static and museumised.

Fashion constitutes a particularly influential component of indigenous creative industries because of its visibility and accessibility. Fashion products circulate widely across social, economic, and geographical boundaries, allowing cultural symbols to reach diverse audiences. Within the Benin cultural context, fashion enterprises that incorporate traditional motifs, royal iconography, and indigenous aesthetics contribute to the broader development of indigenous creative industries, generating employment, stimulating cultural tourism, and promoting awareness of Benin cultural heritage both locally and internationally.

African Fashion Studies

African fashion studies have emerged as a significant interdisciplinary field that challenges long-standing assumptions regarding the marginality of African fashion within global fashion discourse. Earlier scholarship often treated African dress primarily as ethnographic artefacts or traditional costumes. Contemporary scholars, however, recognise African fashion as a dynamic field characterised by creativity, innovation, and global influence. Rovine (2015) demonstrates that dress styles associated with indigenous cultures can carry all the hallmarks of high fashion when designers consciously engage with the cultural histories embedded in those styles (p. 6), arguing that African fashion designers actively reshape cultural references to produce new forms of expression that speak simultaneously to local and global audiences.

African fashion scholars further emphasise that contemporary African fashion cannot be understood solely through the lens of tradition. Instead, it reflects complex interactions among history, identity, globalisation, modernity, and cultural heritage. Designers frequently combine indigenous cultural symbols with contemporary design techniques, producing hybrid forms that challenge simplistic distinctions between traditional and modern fashion. Okonkwo (2007) observes that brand identity in the luxury fashion sector is most durable and distinctive when it is grounded in a coherent cultural narrative rather than purely in aesthetic novelty (p. 147). These findings are directly relevant to the Benin context, where the specific symbolic depth of royal and ceremonial dress provides contemporary designers with a particularly rich heritage vocabulary but also a particularly high standard of cultural accountability.

Cultural Commodification

Cultural commodification is the process through which cultural symbols, traditions, practices, and artefacts are transformed into marketable commodities. Within cultural studies, commodification has generated extensive debate regarding its implications for cultural authenticity and heritage preservation. Critics argue that commodification may lead to the simplification or distortion of cultural meanings as cultural elements are adapted to suit commercial interests. When cultural symbols are

detached from their original contexts and marketed primarily for economic gain, there is a risk that their historical and symbolic significance may be diminished.

However, contemporary scholarship suggests that commodification should not always be viewed negatively. Under appropriate conditions, commodification can contribute to cultural visibility, economic empowerment, and heritage preservation. Barnard (2002) argues that the meanings of dress are culturally constructed and socially reinforced rather than naturally given (p. 17), which means that when dress signs are extracted from their original social context and placed within a commercial one, their meanings cannot be assumed to travel intact. The risk is not simply aesthetic it is semiotic: the sign is retained while its meaning is lost or replaced. In indigenous fashion entrepreneurship, commodification often involves a process of cultural translation whereby traditional symbols are adapted for contemporary consumers, potentially altering certain aspects of meaning while simultaneously extending the cultural reach of indigenous traditions. This complexity requires that commodification be evaluated not in principle but in practice through examination of the specific conditions under which it occurs.

Fashion and Identity

Fashion has long been recognised as a powerful medium for the construction and communication of identity. Through clothing, individuals and communities express social status, gender, ethnicity, cultural affiliation, and personal values. Barthes (1983) argues that garments form a system of signs whose meanings are culturally determined and socially interpreted, making fashion a primary medium through which individuals and communities construct and communicate their identities (p. 11). In postcolonial African contexts, this identity-constructing function of fashion takes on particular political and cultural significance, as dress becomes a site through which the legacies of colonialism, cultural disruption, and indigenous cultural resilience are negotiated.

Within African societies, clothing has historically played a significant role in communicating cultural meanings. Traditional attire often reflects social hierarchies, religious beliefs, political authority, and communal values. For the Benin people specifically, dress has historically been a medium through which political authority, spiritual power, and communal identity are asserted and maintained. Nevadomsky (2001) documents the intricate semiotic system through which Benin royal and ceremonial dress communicates hierarchy, loyalty, and ancestral connection (p. 214). Contemporary Benin-inspired fashion engages this semiotic system while operating in a different social context and in doing so, it participates in an ongoing negotiation over who controls the meanings of Benin cultural identity and how those meanings are transmitted across generations.

African fashion scholars argue that contemporary fashion provides a platform through which African identities are continually reimagined and reconstructed. Rather than reproducing fixed notions of culture, fashion enables dynamic engagements with heritage, modernity, and globalisation. Individuals who wear culturally inspired fashion participate in processes of identity negotiation that

connect personal expression with broader cultural histories. In the Benin Kingdom, indigenous fashion enterprises contribute to identity formation by incorporating cultural symbols associated with Benin history, royalty, and artistic traditions, functioning as visual markers of cultural affiliation while simultaneously affirming the relevance of Benin cultural heritage in contemporary society.

Contemporary Benin Dress: Continuity and Adaptation

Benin dress is best understood as a structured semiotic system rather than a collection of individual garments. Each element - the coral bead, the wrapper, the embroidered fabric, the ceremonial staff, the headpiece - occupies a defined position within a hierarchy of meanings that maps onto the social and spiritual organisation of Benin society. Nevadomsky (2001) emphasises that coral beads (*ivie*), historically introduced through Portuguese trade in the fifteenth century and subsequently controlled by the Oba, are embedded in Benin conceptions of political legitimacy and spiritual power to an extent that makes their unauthorised reproduction a genuinely significant cultural breach (p. 214). Plankensteiner (2007) similarly establishes that ivory ornaments and ceremonial regalia carry connotations of purity, ancestral authority, and royal dominion that are not reducible to their material or aesthetic properties (p. 64).

Contemporary Benin dress reflects a productive but sometimes uneasy encounter between historical semiotic conventions and the demands of modern fashion. Modern brides continue to wear the *okuku* head crown, coral bead adornments, and wrapper-based silhouettes but these are now realised in luxury materials including embroidered velvet, lace, and George fabric, often fashioned into structured, corseted gowns that reflect both Benin cultural identity and contemporary bridal fashion expectations. Contemporary grooms similarly combine the traditional coral-beaded cap, wrapper, and *buba* shirt with modern tailoring. The social media visibility of these contemporary adaptations has expanded the appeal of Benin-inspired fashion, particularly among younger Nigerians in diaspora communities who use dress as a primary medium of cultural identification. Yet this expansion carries semiotic risks.

When elements of royal or sacred Benin dress are adapted for commercial fashion without adequate cultural framing, the meanings those elements carry within Benin's original semiotic system may be displaced by purely aesthetic ones. The Benin royal family's public declarations regarding the misuse of certain dress elements including the *okuku* hairstyle and the coral regalia of chiefs reflect a recognition that the semiotic integrity of the tradition is actively at stake in contemporary fashion practice.

Background and Design Philosophy of Joy Agbaonifo Fashion

Joy AG Fashion Style was founded in 2020 by Joy Agbonifo, a Benin-born designer whose creative practice is organised around the reinterpretation of Benin cultural heritage within the framework of contemporary luxury fashion. The brand has developed a growing presence within the Nigerian luxury fashion market, distinguished by its consistent engagement with Benin cultural aesthetics and its commitment to what the designer describes as cultural storytelling through fashion.

Agbonifo's design philosophy centres on culturally conscious modernisation, the transformation of traditional Benin dress elements into contemporary wearable forms without sacrificing the cultural depth of those elements. In the interview conducted for this study, she articulated this philosophy in terms of respect for roots: her designs are not reproductions of traditional dress but creative translations of it, guided by an understanding of what the original elements mean and why they matter. As Rovine (2015) observes, the most meaningful contemporary African fashion draws its authority not from the surface appearance of tradition but from a creative immersion in the histories and values that those traditions embody (p. 14). This is precisely the orientation that may distinguish Joy AG from brands that use Benin aesthetics as decorative inspiration without genuine cultural engagement.

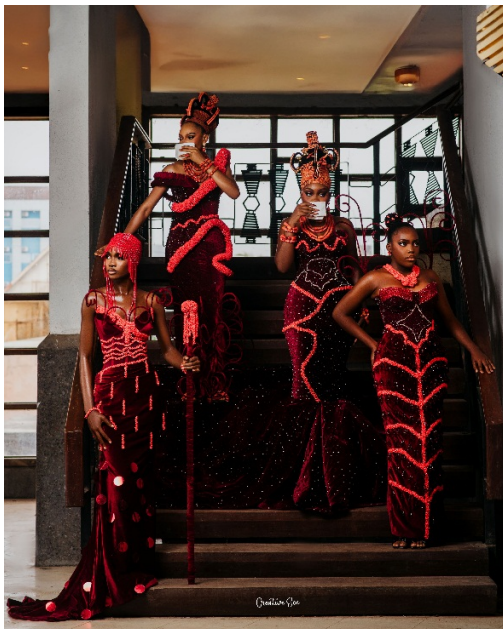


Fig.1. Benin contemporary inspired design by Joy AG fashion
Source: Joy collections. Field Report

Cultural Elements in Design Practice

An analysis of Joy AG's design output reveals a consistent and identifiable semiotic strategy. The brand deploys a set of Benin cultural signs - coral bead aesthetics at necklines and cuffs, embroidered patterns drawn from royal motif traditions, wrapper-inspired silhouettes, and structured headpiece forms echoing the ceremonial crowns of Benin royalty - within the formal vocabulary of contemporary luxury fashion as seen in Fig 1 above. The incorporation of coral motifs, for instance, represents a semiotic transformation in which symbols traditionally associated with Benin royalty and sacred kingship are recontextualised within contemporary fashion markets. While the symbols retain aspects of their cultural significance, commercialisation simultaneously broadens their accessibility and alters their social meaning: the coral bead necklace that once exclusively signified proximity to the Oba becomes, in a Joy AG garment, a signifier of cultural pride available to a wider

audience. According to her, the Star Line Motif “Is my own personal creation but it’s has a meaning, it symbolises brightness, hope, and a beautiful future. It represents our wish for every, bride to shine confidently and begin her new journey with joy, love, and success” (Joy Agbonifo, 2026.)

From a semiotic perspective, the positioning of these signs within the garment retains their cultural legibility - a consumer with knowledge of Benin royal tradition would recognise in a Joy AG neckline design the visual reference to coral regalia, even in its modernised form. The brand's signature "star line" motif is a particularly instructive example of semiotic layering. In Barthes' (1983) terms, this motif functions as a secondary sign that takes the cultural sign of Benin heritage and overlays it with a commercial sign of brand identity, creating a new composite meaning that is simultaneously cultural and commercial (p. 115).

This is the kind of semiotic layering that Rovine (2015) identifies as characteristic of the most sophisticated contemporary African fashion (p. 8): meaning is not erased but multiplied, enabling the garment to communicate to audiences with different levels of cultural knowledge.



*Fig.2. Benin contemporary inspired design
by Joy AG fashion
Source: Joy collections. Field Report*



*Fig.3. Benin contemporary inspired design
by Joy AG fashion
Source: Joy collections. Field Report*

Commercialisation Strategies

Joy AG employs several interlocking commercialisation strategies that align cultural value with market positioning. The primary strategy is cultural storytelling: each garment is positioned as a cultural artefact that carries the history, identity, and heritage of the Benin people. This narrative framing increases the perceived value of the designs and attracts a consumer segment interested in heritage fashion a growing market both domestically and internationally within diaspora communities. In terms

of heritage entrepreneurship, this strategy represents what Throsby (2001) describes as the conversion of cultural capital into economic capital while seeking to preserve the cultural value from which economic value is derived (p. 54).

A second strategy is the commitment to luxury craftsmanship. By incorporating hand embellishments, coral-inspired accessories, and carefully structured tailoring. Fig 2 and Fig 3 indicate how Joy AG positions her products within the luxury fashion segment, justifying premium pricing and creating a clear distinction from mass-produced cultural fashion. Okonkwo (2007) argues that sustained brand identity in the luxury sector depends on a coherent cultural narrative that consumers identify with, and Joy AG's explicit engagement with Benin heritage provides precisely this kind of narrative anchor (p. 147). A third strategy is youth engagement: by rendering traditional Benin aesthetics in contemporary silhouettes, the brand makes cultural heritage aspirational for younger consumers who might otherwise perceive traditional dress as outdated or inaccessible. The designer's stated ambition of placing Benin-inspired fashion on international runways reflects a long-term strategy of global cultural positioning. According to Joy, "These symbols help us celebrate Benin heritage while presenting it in forms that appeal to modern audience. However, because some symbols have sacred or royal significance, we often try to balance innovation with respect for their cultural meanings. (Agbonifo, 2026).

Discussion

The study identified semiotic displacement as the central challenge of commercialising Benin dress. The findings demonstrate that Joy AG Fashion Style serves as a medium through which Benin cultural signs are preserved and reintroduced to contemporary audiences, yet the very process of commercial circulation creates conditions under which those signs may be detached from their original meanings. This finding directly supports the theoretical position established by Barthes (1983), who argues that signs operate within systems of meaning that are culturally specific and socially regulated (p. 11). When Benin dress elements enter the commercial fashion market, they enter a semiotic context governed by different rules: the coral bead that signifies sacred kingship within the Benin court becomes, in a commercial fashion context, primarily a signifier of aesthetic luxury. The original cultural meaning is not necessarily destroyed, but it is made invisible to audiences who lack the cultural literacy to read it. This is consistent with Throsby's (1995) argument that cultural sustainability requires maintaining both the tangible and intangible elements of cultural resources - the sign and its meaning must travel together if cultural sustainability is to be achieved (p. 202).

This process of semiotic displacement is compounded by market pressure and the proliferation of imitation. Barnard (2002) warns that a sign system is undermined when counterfeit signs proliferate within it, because the relationship between sign and meaning is maintained through social convention rather than through any intrinsic property of the sign itself (p. 19). When imitators reproduce the surface aesthetics of Benin dress without the cultural knowledge that should govern its use, they introduce counterfeit signs into the Benin fashion semiotic field, progressively weakening the capacity of authentic cultural signs to carry their original meanings.

The designer confirmed this concern directly in the interview, noting that imitation damages not only commercial interests but the cultural integrity of the designs themselves an observation that aligns closely with Brown & Vacca's (2022) finding that cultural sustainability in fashion requires active protection of the symbolic meanings embedded in traditional craft processes, not merely the preservation of their visual appearance (p. 593).

Conditions for Culturally Sustainable Fashion Entrepreneurship

Against the challenges identified above, this study identifies three conditions that, when present, enable commercial fashion to contribute positively to cultural sustainability. These conditions were derived inductively from the case study data and interpreted through the Semiotics of Dress framework.

The first condition is cultural literacy on the part of the designer. The findings demonstrate that Joy Agbonifo's demonstrated knowledge of the meanings behind the Benin dress elements she deploys her awareness of the specific significance of coral beads, wrapper forms, and royal motifs is the most fundamental enabler of culturally sustainable practice. From a semiotic perspective, cultural literacy is the condition that makes informed transformation possible: without it, the designer cannot distinguish between transformations that preserve the cultural integrity of signs and those that constitute semiotic displacement. This finding is consistent with Rovine's (2015) observation that the most productive engagements between contemporary fashion and African cultural heritage are distinguished by depth of cultural knowledge rather than breadth of visual borrowing (p. 21).

The second condition is semiotic visibility the active communication of cultural meanings to consumers and audiences through cultural storytelling, labelling, and educational promotion. When fashion promotion communicates the cultural meanings behind design elements, it transforms commercial transactions into cultural encounters, enabling consumers to develop appreciation for the heritage they engage with rather than simply consuming its surface aesthetics. This strategy supports cultural sustainability in the sense articulated by Throsby (2001): it creates conditions under which the cultural value embedded in fashion products is actively transmitted rather than passively consumed (p. 54).

The findings suggest that the case of Joy AG Fashion Style points toward the potential for culturally informed fashion enterprises to contribute to cultural sustainability in Benin Kingdom. Whether this potential is fully realised depends on the degree to which these conditions are consistently met by the designer, by supporting institutions, and by the broader fashion industry. The study does not claim that Joy AG has fully resolved the tensions it faces; rather, its practice illuminates the conditions under which resolution is possible and offers a basis for developing frameworks applicable to similar enterprises.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the commercialisation of contemporary Benin dress and accessories presents both significant challenges and genuine possibilities for cultural

sustainability. Drawing on the Semiotics of Dress as a theoretical framework and a qualitative case study of Joy AG Fashion Style, it has demonstrated that the central issue is not whether commercialisation is compatible with cultural sustainability but under what conditions it can be.

The case of Joy AG Fashion Style suggests the potential for culturally informed fashion entrepreneurship to contribute positively to the preservation and transmission of Benin cultural heritage. The brand's approach combining cultural storytelling, luxury craftsmanship, and a designer-led commitment to cultural literacy points toward a model of fashion practice in which the semiotic depth of traditional dress can be maintained within a commercial context, making cultural heritage accessible and appealing to contemporary audiences without reducing it to aesthetic decoration. This is consistent with Throsby's (1995) argument that cultural sustainability is achieved not through static preservation but through dynamic processes that keep cultural resources alive and relevant within changing social and economic contexts (p. 202).

However, the structural challenges identified in this study the cost of authentic production, the pressure of market competition, the proliferation of imitation, and the difficulty of maintaining semiotic integrity as cultural signs travel into new contexts cannot be resolved through individual design practice alone. Addressing them requires coordinated action across several domains.

More broadly, this study demonstrates that indigenous fashion enterprises can function as important sites of cultural preservation, education, and identity formation. By documenting the practices of Joy AG Fashion Style, the study expands scholarly understanding of how African fashion entrepreneurs negotiate the demands of commercial viability while safeguarding the symbolic integrity of indigenous cultural traditions. In this regard, Benin-inspired fashion is not merely a commercial product but a medium through which cultural memory, heritage values, and communal identity continue to be transmitted across generations.

The preservation and transmission of Benin cultural heritage is too important for the Benin people, for Nigeria, and for the global understanding of African civilisation to be left to the market alone. When commercial fashion is practiced with the knowledge, respect, and ethical commitment that the tradition demands, it can be a powerful instrument of cultural continuity. The responsibility for ensuring that it is practiced in that way belongs to designers, institutions, communities, and policymakers together.

Recommendations

The study recommends measures that are to be taken by relevant stakeholders to make indigenous fashion entrepreneurship in Nigeria much more viable, which are presented below.

1. Fashion designers should treat cultural literacy as a professional prerequisite for those working with indigenous dress traditions. Genuine, ongoing engagement with cultural custodians should be maintained throughout the

design process, and authentic materials and artisanal craft should be prioritised even where this creates commercial challenges.

2. Government agencies should provide financial support mechanisms including grants, training programmes, and market development initiatives should be developed to support indigenous fashion enterprises. Such support would reduce the cost differential between authentic and imitative cultural fashion production, ensuring that cultural sustainability is economically viable as well as ethically desirable. Intellectual property frameworks should be extended to provide meaningful protection for indigenous cultural dress expressions.
3. Cultural institutions should collaborate actively with fashion entrepreneurs to preserve cultural motifs, semiotic protocols, and indigenous knowledge. Accessible documentation of Benin dress meanings and conventions should be developed and made available to fashion practitioners. Formal frameworks for the authorisation and oversight of the use of Benin cultural elements in commercial fashion should be established, with particular attention to sacred and hierarchically restricted items.
4. Programmes in Theatre Arts and Fashion Design should incorporate dedicated teaching on African dress history, indigenous semiotic systems, and the ethics of cultural fashion entrepreneurship.
5. Future empirical studies should investigate similar indigenous fashion enterprises in other Nigerian cultural contexts to test and extend the framework proposed in this article. Longitudinal research tracking the semiotic evolution of specific cultural signs across multiple seasons of commercial fashion production would significantly advance understanding of how cultural meanings are maintained or lost over time.

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