



Emergent Trends in Nigeria's Popular Entertainment: Cross-Dressing and Blurred Identity in Social Media Skits

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between mass media and its audience, specifically in Nigeria where this field is under-studied. Since its debut in 1959 as a medium of domestic entertainment, television in Nigeria has been a wonderland for new vistas and foreign and strange concepts that became trendsetters for viewers' astonishment and enthusiastic lifestyle emulation. This study uses qualitative methods, including Key Informant Interviews and secondary analysis, to explore cross-dressing as a cultural phenomenon. The theoretical framework is based on the gratification and technological determinism theories. The study examines how technological advancements have enabled the normalization of "sophisticated, imported" options in entertainment culture. The paper explores gender fluidity and identity blurring in the artist's perception. The findings showed that the incursion of technology, especially television and its more sophisticated variant, social media, are the purveyors of democratized ideas of individual identity and blurred sexuality profiling that disrupted existentialist binary notions. The study results also showed that cross-dressing, as employed in skit-making, has earned respect on the employment index of the creative sector and art community. Tech shapes youth culture, paving way for new norms in human relationships and personal expression.

Keywords: cross-dressing, identity, skits, gender swap, technological determinism.

Paper type: Research paper

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INTRODUCTION

Gender Swap in the beginning and now. It is not for nothing that television, as popular culture, is often described as the ubiquitous magic box that serves as a gateway to other cultures, foreign and wonderful, amazing in their difference and strange in their accepted practices. One of the `strange` phenomena that made entertainment content for early television viewers and later day social media content developers and their fan base is gender swap manifesting in cross-dressing. Cross-dressing in its mythical past and modern entertainment history has often been viewed as evidence of disruption of existentialist binary sexuality and considered a reprehensible blurring of identity. Anti-cross-dressing laws were common in Medieval Europe and colonial North America, where the laws were meant to regulate public dressing to conform to one's occupation, class, and gender. In modern Africa, stakeholders. Mindful of upholding conventional morality status quo, have unleashed a barrage of media warfare and legislative arsenal to contain the malaise of "indecent or immoral dressing". In Nigeria, an amendment of the extant Same Sex Prohibition Act to include a six-month jail term for cross-dressing has been proposed. In Sudan, the anti-cross-dressing law also aims to punish men who wear women's clothes, women who wear trousers as well as males who wear makeup. Yet, television and the internet continue to expand the frontiers of audience taste and thirst for cross-dressing-themed entertainment.

Cross-dressing, which can be defined in its simplest form as the act of wearing items of clothing not commonly associated with one's sex, has an extensive history in entertainment and popular culture. Conceptually, a cross-dresser is anyone of a particular gender who is reputed for putting on the dressing of the opposite gender. Oluka (2022) views a crossdresser as someone who intentionally embraces the dressing of the opposite gender, thus portraying him/herself to look like, by virtue of dressing, the opposite gender. Iwalaiye (2022) views cross-dressing as using clothing patterns to gain status to which an individual does not originally belong. Ogunlowo (2017) opines that the idea of a man wearing women's clothing tends to create a bad impression, though he is quick to clarify that a cross-dresser differs from a transgender who is a person convinced that their gender is different from their biological sex and have mediated on their biologically assigned sex to acquire their preferred gender through surgical intervention, hormonal medications alongside transitioning psychological support.

Deductively, therefore, cross-dressing is to be seen as a form of fluid identity and gender expression rather than a sexual orientation. In the context of this paper, a crossdresser (specifically referencing the social media skit content developer) is a person who is gender fluid and may identify as male one day, female the next, both male and female or neither, seeing that the artists in focus in this study project the blurring of these individual personal sex through fictional characters biological sex and/or gender identity different from the canonical norm, their creative enterprise is to be located within the nexus of gender swapping as a fandom slang within popular cultural practice.

METHODS

Deriving from this and within the broad context of available literature and key informant data on the relationship between mass media (television/social media specifically) and its audience, this paper, which finds anchorage on gratification theory and the technological determinism theory examines the unprecedented surge in the practice and social acceptance of gender swapping/identity blurring as an entertainment trend in Nigeria. Since the paper is media-related, the components of the gratification theory, as propounded by Blumler and Katz (1974), are directly pivotal to the paper as it shows that people selectively utilize media for certain gratification (McQuail, 2010). In the same vein, the technological determinism theory, as propounded by Marshal McLuhan, is pivotal to the paper as it holds that the media not only alters their environment but the very message they convey. The theory states that technology, especially new media with its variants such as social media, decisively shapes how individuals think, feel, and act and how societies organize themselves. (Hossain 2019, Rauschnabel 2018, Vinney 2022 & Iwilade 2010).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of Myth, Traditional Masking Conventions, Orompotoniyun's Masculinity Disruption, and Shakespeare's London Stage.

In the ancient myths of most African communities re-enacted in their masquerade and masking performances, cross-dressing is a ritualized convention

that reinforces the exclusion of women from the cult secrets and male-dominated processes of historicizing and validating patriarchy.

Consequently, masquerade cults in several sub-Saharan African countries feature representational actors in feminine outfits symbolic of the female spirits and goddesses as communities re-enact their history or myths of creation.

Many of these masquerade figures, like the *Agbogho nwanwu* of many Igbo communities of South-East Nigeria, are of extremely stylized feminine beauty; others are parodies of female features with exaggerated buttocks and/or breasts. Since many indigenous traditions prohibit female membership of the cults, though paradoxically needing women to reinforce, intensify, and maintain the secrecy of the masquerades, males carry the female masks and play the associated roles and gestures reinforcing their femininity with female costumes.

Away from the rarified sanctuary of myths, the first historical narrative of masculinity disruption through gender swapping is traced to the ancient Oyo Empire with the emergence of Princess Orompotoniyun as an outlier defying patriarchal leadership to become the first and only female Alaafin who reigned between 1554-1562. The untimely death of her brother, Prince Egugoku (who had succeeded their father), without an heir, and her other surviving brothers being minors forced the decision to ascend the throne upon Orompoto. This was met with resistance as it had never been known that a female could be Alaafin. The chiefs sneered at her and dared her to show proof that she was a man as final evidence of her qualification to the throne within a week.

“Princess Orompoto started wearing male items of clothing after this meeting, and on D-day, she mounted the podium and removed her cap to reveal her hair, which had been cut low. She also went ahead to show her chest, and still, the elders were not impressed. She finally removed her trousers, and according to oral history, the chiefs not only saw a penis, but they also saw a scrotum sac drooping with two scrotum eggs in the sack. At this point, everyone dropped on their chest in prostration, and she got enthroned as Alaafin Orompotoniyun. Orompotoniyun came to be popularly known as Ajiun, the custodian of The Vagina that Kills evil plots”. (Ugobude, 2019).

From our foregoing discussion, the concept of cross-dressing was purposive as the cross-dressers were carrying out social roles that prevailing political circumstances and social dynamics had thrust on them. Within the traditional

African template, neither the masquerades nor the Orompoto were acting out personal individuality perception, nor were they giving expression to personal identity preference.

Cross-dressing as a heterosexual woman in these instances is not seen from the prism of an exercise in androgynous fashion revelry (Hao and Zi 2019). Rather, it provides a possible case study for the use of cross-dressing as a tool for political survival and lineage perpetuation. Olugbile pursues this perspective in Sanya (2022), where she imploded the red skirt aesthetic fashion identifier of Sango, the Yoruba god of thunder, and iconic hairstyle, not as an individuality trait but as evidence of masking the biological sex as a woman. By extension, therefore, cross-dressing in traditional codes is a form of disruption at the peril of discovery, exposure to ridicule, and extermination. Beyond merely coping through cross-dressing as style, fashion, and textile preferences (Christel et al. 2016), cross-dressing as an incidence of gender swap was considered socially abhorrent.

Cross-dressing in modern entertainment has a long history as part of the cultural baggage of colonialism and the extensive/contact with British stage history dating back to the Shakespearean period and the exclusion of women from theatre and stage appearances. Frazer (2022) notes:

“During the late 16th century to early 17th century, when many of English playwright William Shakespeare’s plays were at the height of popularity, the English crown of Queen Elizabeth I and King James I decided that women were no longer allowed to perform on the stage, as well as have many other privileges men were freely given. Many of the themes displayed in the popular plays of the time included prostitution, sexual incontinence, and lasciviousness. The royal court, fearing that having women portray these types of characters would reflect upon their self-image, decided to ban women from performing in all commercial acting companies until 1661. On the other hand, allowing men to portray the female characters did not pose a threat to their gender hierarchy, and therefore were able to carry out the productions featuring an all-male cast. The actors who performed the female roles were some of the most respected in the cast. It took a special type of actor to be able to perform the mannerisms and vocal delivery of a woman. Most companies opted for pre-pubescent boys to perform roles such as Juliet due to their naturally higher voices and smaller frames, or soprano men for older, more mature roles such as Juliet’s Nurse. Before anyone asks, yes, the boys and men featured as the female roles performed in makeup, wigs, and dresses. Anything for the audience”.

The dynamics of female representation by men on stage introduced new features in the analysis of purposive gender swap. The most obvious is the need for verisimilitude, as noted by Thomas (2017).

“The practice of cross-dressing appears to be part of an effort to add to the amazement of the performance, with no hints given that the performer was really a man. However, for some performers, this practice and the illusion of gender became a more central part of the performance..... Thus, in this way, cross-dressing was incorporated as a key element of circus performances and added to the amazement of the acts being performed, whether the audience was aware of it or not”.

Soon enough, even though the art of all-male cast had fizzled out by the 17th century upon women’s permitted entry into the acting profession, cross-dressing evolved as an art form used in low-level burlesque and theatrical pieces that parody women, class, and social mannerisms.

“In most comedy shows, when male characters dress up as women, they present themselves with some dramatic differences, such as unwaxed legs, very wide hips, or large busts. Such appearances only reinforce the stereotypical notions of beauty in our culture. Also, the attire of a woman in revealing clothes is used mainly to titillate the opposite sex. Disguised

humor is used as an instrument to assert the notion of beauty without brains". Gala (2020)

Some salient issues raised by Frazier and Gala suggest that culture producers use cross-dressing as a way for many men and women, especially entertainers, to explore their freedom and self-expression. Thus, cross-dressing becomes not only an escape mechanism but also a surreptitious identity reinforcement code that allows the cross-dresser to enter other gender-prohibited areas. Further, the link between cross-dressing as popular entertainment and the big bucks is especially propelled by advanced technology and instant celebrity, self-referencing visibility status. Cross-dressing in advanced nations and imported into the contemporary Nigerian entertainment industry, therefore, is predominantly used for comedic purposes and for reflecting prevailing social attitudes relating to gender and sexuality.

Cross-Dressing Comes to Nigeria Entertainment.

Cultural historians, especially entertainment writers in Nigeria, are fairly unanimous that cross-dressing as a form of comic entertainment is a post-civil war phenomenon traceable to the beaming of the folklore performance of a local musician, Uzo Odimara, who went by the stage name Area Scatter, on the Nigerian Television Authority Channel 6, Aba's very popular showbiz program, Ukonu's Club.

Nwigwe (2019) argues that cross-dressing in Nigeria's theatrical experience dates back to the precolonial era when women in Southeast Nigeria were prohibited from wearing bifurcated clothing customarily reserved for men, a consequence of which saw some itinerant performers who went about performing in female dressing for jest. Uduma (2022) avers that this was not a culturally common disposition for the moral code of Igbos of Eastern Nigeria, who considered a man who dresses like a woman an *fufu* (an emasculated male), a *work/nwanyi* (a man/woman but not in the sense of a hermaphrodite), etc. and the act of cross-dressing morally reprehensible, causing cultural anxiety and a rude shock on the masculinity scale.

Uduma found a correlation between the economic hardship occasioned by the Nigeria-Biafra civil war, the post-civil war relaxing of moral codes, and the positive acceptance of the sartorial code among several communities, especially in the commercial centers of war-torn Igboland seeking to bounce back to survival. Locating his analysis within Aba and its environs, Uduma avers that cross-dressing was essentially a survival hack primarily for a people long defined by their entrepreneurial “can do” spirit that never stays down beyond the moment.

“It was during this period that we started seeing men dressed up like women. These cross-dressers (Nwoke/Nwanyi) were seen following vehicles to sell drugs to people. They used their cross-dressing outlook to attract buyers. Cross-dressing was strictly for economic reasons. Nobody cross-dressed for fun”. (p.2)

It was within this post-war disruption of the (sound) representation of ancient male masculine codes and the dynamics of lessening criticism of cross-dressing that Area Scatter erupted to mass applause and social accommodation. Even so, Dawuta, cited in Louis (2017), frames his emergence in folkloric mystique and also his eventual disappearance from public eyes in mythological inexactitude probably to justify the novelty and the unprecedented social receptibility to his demystification of fixed, binary conventions of gender identity:

“He is said to have disappeared into the wilderness at some point during the years of the war, only to emerge seven months and seven days later, as a beautifully adorned woman. He claimed that during this period, *the gods endowed him with supernatural powers, which he used to enhance his musical talent and become more feminine*. Strikingly, though, he was widely accepted at the time in the deeply wounded country, which was still fresh out of a deadly civil war..... The rumor mongers claim he died in an auto crash on the Port Harcourt – Owerri express road many years ago, but nobody seems to know exactly when”.

By invoking the gods and their peculiar gifting, Area Scatter assuaged the conservative spirits ruffled by his unusual yet fascinating appearance. Civil servant and called by his given name, Uzo Odimara, in his regular life, he morphed into (possibly) the first of very few Nigerian transexuals to appear in mainstream media ⁽¹⁾. His gender-blurring stage appearance won him celebrity status, invitation, and patronage by the cream of South-East society, and eventually, the klieg lights shone

on him through his gig with Ukonu's Club, where his performance enamored viewers and blew his cross-dressing persona into national cultural discourse.

Feminisms, Emasculated Masculinities, and Technological Advancement: Theoretical Explanations for Gender-Swap Skits in Nigeria Entertainment.

In an interview with the authors of this article, Kenzy Udosen, content developer, skit artist, and creator of the character, Madam Theresa Omegbeojiso, admitted:

"I grew up as an effeminate boy, and simply by being that, that would always attract a couple of negative statements. I grew up in Anambra State, and I was bullied. Onitsha is a very crude city. A lot of people said a lot of things. Growing up, it was not peachy. Although I didn't experience anything drastic, it was not normal. So I was afraid of dressing up in women's attire to create that video because that would give validation to whatever they might have been saying about me being effeminate".

The impetus of radical feminism, especially its insistence on androgynous dressing and the incursions of strident LGBT marches with accompanying demands for queer rights, alongside technological advances in mass media, especially the age of cyberculture/social media, made for a heady combination in the upsurge of gender swap in the Nigerian entertainment consciousness.

Social media refers to interactive, computer-mediated technologies that facilitate the creation and sharing of information, ideas, interests, and other forms of expression via virtual communities and networks. Social media has become integrated into our daily routine by democratizing fields of human interaction with the screen by creating response fields like comment sections, hashtags, emojis, etc. Popular social media applications used on a daily basis, especially by the younger generation, include Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, Tik Tok and Snapchat. Social media skits are an evolving form of entertainment that is powered by the development of modern technology, especially the internet and its related diversity. It is favored by comedians who often churn out skits to test new materials and gauge social response to new ideas. Consequently, audience engagement and artist gratification are major features of social media skits as the audience, mostly made

up of youths, tends to binge on the quick thrill and new twists to old narratives, thus extending the frontiers of entertainment.

As a form of technological determinism and as opposed to the traditional broadcast experience where the audience is distinct from the production crew/actors, the audience engages with social media skits, owns them, and often determines content and demands new production through instant feedback in the comment sections and artist solicited response. There is, therefore, a blurred line between the audience and content developers as the audience response/feedback helps determine and redefine entertainment.

Sophisticated technological breakthroughs and relatively affordable devices such as smartphones, a wide range of available tech options, and network carriers have also continued to extend the frontier of entertainment, especially one that gives consumers a sense of empowered involvement and valued opinion within the shared creative hub and in determining/creating trends for this generation. Thus, the use of this medium will continue to signal a shift in entertainment-based mass media to an entertainment and gratification medium welded to the continuing evolution of technology and the adventurous artists committed to pushing the envelope further, as Ojom and Shodeinde (2012) have argued.

With internet-enabled devices, information acquisition, and transfer readily available to every user, especially youths, McLuhan's technological determinism theory, which is a technology-led theory of social change, strives to explain the relationship between a society's technological environment and social consequences. McLuhan argues that all technology is communication and, invariably, an extension of ourselves. Consequently, technology and its availability become a prime antecedent cause of changes in society; the media becomes the fundamental condition underlying the pattern of social organization. Hence, society is influenced and shaped by technological development, and as applicable to the context of this paper, the medium (social media and its variants) propelled the broadcasting of cross-dressing among male comedians as influencers and youth lifestyle molders. Our argument in this paper is that the acceptance of the art and act of cross-dressing in Nigeria is largely driven by technology, which has and continues to determine, modify, and transform how content is created and distributed and which has, in turn, spawned a wide range of phenomena including cross-dressing in comic social media skits (Ayomide et al. 2023).

The Economics of Cross Dressing in Nigeria.

If Uzo Odimara is reputed to have pioneered cross-dressing as a popular art in Nigeria back in the 70s, the phenomenon has gained street credibility among Nigerian youths five decades later. Using the sophisticated technologies of their time, they have found cross-dressing and skit-making on diverse social media handles a veritable platform for instant celebrity status going by their incredible number of followers. Celebrity translates to recognition, product endorsement, and the big bucks in their bank account. As Kenzy Udosen disclosed:

“Well, when I started, my bank account was zero. It does pay. By the time you get to a certain level where your presence cannot be overlooked, then it starts to pay. Thanks to what I do on social media, I get gigs to host events, I get brands to come along and say, “Okay, we want you to advertise these products.. thanks to technology, you put your work out there, you’re able to monetize your content, and you’re able to earn monthly”.

Even on the international scene, cross-dressing and comedy big bucks make. In *White Chicks*, two FBI agents brothers, Marlon Wayans and Shawn Wayans, go undercover to stop an impending crime as cross-dressed white women grossed over \$ 100 million at the Box Office. Martin Lawrence’s *Big Momma’s House*, where Lawrence, as an FBI agent, disguised himself beyond recognition as an old lady to get hold of a bank robber, expanded the acceptance matrix of cross-dressing though it is Tyler Perry who wears the crown with his *Madea* series where he transforms into a sassy, tough-talking, no-nonsense old lady that takes on the establishment from the Black point of view. As movie-going audiences saw their favorite stars open up to the idea of gender fluidity and go home with the bacon in terms of cash and rating, a larger audience began to understand the concept of gender and sexuality on a new spectrum.

Cross-dressing as a prevalent entertainment mode has offered Nigerian youths a legitimate means of not only self-expression but also business entrepreneurship. We dare say that with the long list that includes iconic names like Steve Chuks (creator of Cleopatra Williams, Madam Gold), Sir One-on-One (Woman Leader), Josh Alfred aka Josh 2 Funny (Madam Felicia) Maryam

Apaokagi aka Taaoma, (creator of Kunle of the three-piece suit and unruly beard), Aloma Isaac Junior with his popular characters: Sister Ekwutosi with her mound-like headgear and hyper religiosity and Mama Desperate, a perpetually pregnant woman forever snacking on meals and gossip; have all become household names and inspired a sudden rise of emulators. Usoro (2022) ranked the entertainment industry, with a net worth of over N50 billion, as the third largest source of revenue in Nigeria. Amid National Bureau of Statistics 2022 statistics, which put the unemployment rate at 33%, Jobberman Nigeria (cited in Usoro) has indicated that the creative sector continues to show significant potential for the employment of young people with skit-making capable of absorbing over four million youths in various capacities: camera, crew, make-up, script writing and many more.

The preponderance of male cross-dressers involved in gender swap skits should also be understood within the economic narrative of the astonishing power of seeing a man in a female dress. Female domestication of taboo dressing has long become a norm in the Nigerian consciousness, not only with trousers, knickers, and other European dress codes, but recently, in Nigerian fashion fads, women have also encroached onto the traditional *Babanriga*, *Konkosa*, and *Agbada*, thought to be the exclusive male sartorial domain. Indeed, the appropriation of hitherto masculine apparel is such a norm in contemporary fashion that the females who dare to lay claim to neither owning nor ever donning any male dress article are often derided as religious fanatics in Nigerian street talk and popular skit images. They are often cast in the mold of extremist and hypocritical soul-winning evangelists and moral police. Therefore, there is nothing exotic nor dissociating in female cross-dressing to warrant an audience paying money to see such an act. Hence, it is the lone voice of Taaoma in the list of iconic Nigerian cross-dressing skit giants.

The economic boom, employment capabilities, and poverty alleviation quotients all contributing to the economics of pleasure production in Nigeria notwithstanding, many fear that the rise in the number of cross-dressers may be a surreptitious running over of the social fabrics of society and cultural values among youths by an army of transexuals, gays and homosexuals hence self-appointed morality police have often embarked on values-cleansing media attacks against some cross-dressers most of whom incidentally are not social media professional skit makers and therefore not covered by the scope of our study. (Adelakun 2019, Ebrim 2019, Gaudio 2009).

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have considered the history of the phenomenon of cross-dressing and its implied gender-swapping and identity blurring in the entertainment industry of Nigeria. We noted that, aside from a few instances in the pre-colonial past of various communities, the incursion of technology, especially television and its more sophisticated variant, social media, are the purveyors of democratized ideas of individual identity and blurred sexuality profiling that disrupted existentialist binary notions. Hence, cross-dressing, as employed in skit making, is often an in-your-face politics that, while disrupting the norm, has earned for itself respect on the employment index of the creative sector and art community. While acknowledging the fears of conservative custodians of social morality, the paper submits that as long as technology continues to be the gateway to new norms that are domesticated in unfettered consumption, new morality and new content hitherto considered strange and foreign would be the response of youths and the future of the human relationship and individual expressions. This study is careful to limit itself away from the problem of homosexuality in Nigeria. It is fully aware of its existence and detailed studies of its prevalence in the Northern part of the country as undertaken by Rudolf Pell Gaudio and published as *Allah Made Us: Sexual Outlaws in An Islamic African City*, 2009. Sussex: Willey-Blackwell, as well as media accusations of crossdressers as closet homosexuals using their celebrity status as skit makers to solicit.

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