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The Perception of Indigenous Fabrics as Office Wear Among Young Adults in Nigeria: A Narrative Review

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ABSTRACT

This narrative review synthesizes empirical research, industry reports, and sociocultural analysis to examine how young adults in contemporary Nigeria perceive indigenous Nigerian textiles specifically Aso Oke, Adire, and Ankara as acceptable professional attire. The review identifies a gradual incorporation of traditional textiles into formal corporate settings, driven by designer-led innovation, governmental cultural policies, generational identity shifts, and digital media influence. However, adoption remains contested by colonial legacies associating professionalism with Western dress. A threefold conceptual framework is proposed to understand how young professionals negotiate business propriety with cultural authenticity. The review distinguishes between peer-reviewed empirical evidence and media-based observations, and explicitly addresses methodological limitations, including small sample sizes, regional variation, and the non-representative nature of descriptive percentages. The study concludes that the legitimation of indigenous textiles as office wear is an unfinished negotiation, whose advancement depends on the coordinated effects of policy reform, investment in design education, and restructuring of supply-chain costs. Recommendations for policy reform, designer training, affordability initiatives, and institutional support are linked to specific findings and identified gaps in the literature.

1 Introduction

Western-style suits, skirts, and blouses have historically dominated the Nigerian professional landscape from Monday through Thursday, while traditional attire such as Ankara, Aso Oke, or Adire has been largely reserved for Fridays, celebrations, and cultural ceremonies. This temporal segregation reflects deeper sociocultural hierarchies wherein Western clothing has been implicitly privileged as the marker of professionalism, competence, and modernity (Onitsha, 2025). However, observations from Lagos, Abuja, and other urban centers indicate that this binary is becoming less rigid.

Ankara print fabrics are produced using a wax-resist dyeing technique called batik, which is also widely used to make Adire, a common fabric of the Egbapopole of Abeokuta (Adejumoh, 2017; Dee, 2020). Various techniques are employed to "resist" dye from reaching the entire fabric, thereby creating patterns. The Ankara fabric has played a significant role in the global fashion scene over the past decade, with designers and celebrities showcasing their

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inventiveness. It is appropriate for both formal ceremonies and everyday events. In Africa, particularly in Nigeria, every ceremony birthday, marriages, graduations offers guests the chance to display various Ankara textiles in diverse styles. This review addresses three main research questions through a broader literature-based investigation:

1. What are the prevailing attitudes toward indigenous fabrics as professional attire among young Nigerian adults?
2. What factors facilitate or impede their adoption in corporate settings?
3. How do young professionals balance career aspirations with cultural identity expression through dress?

2 Methodology

2.1 Review Design

This study is designed as a narrative review, also referred to in the literature as a traditional or critical review. Narrative reviews are appropriate for synthesizing diverse evidence types which including peer-reviewed empirical studies, industry reports, and journalistic sources to provide a comprehensive overview of a developing field (Green et al., 2006). Unlike systematic reviews, narrative reviews do not claim exhaustive coverage and are explicitly interpretive in their synthesis approach.

2.2 Search Strategy

A systematic search strategy was employed to identify relevant sources, though the review does not claim systematic review status. Searches were conducted in the following databases and repositories:

i. Academic databases: Google Scholar, JSTOR, and African Journals Online (AJOL)
ii. Institutional repositories: Nigerian university repositories and polytechnic digital archives
iii. Industry and media sources: BusinessDay Nigeria, The Guardian Nigeria, Vanguard, Independent Newspaper Nigeria, Marie Claire Nigeria, Pulse Nigeria, Tribune Online, Punch Newspapers, and Refined NG

2.3 Search Terms and Boolean Logic

Search terms were combined using Boolean operators:

i. Primary textile terms: "Aso Oke" or "Adire" or "Ankara" or "indigenous fabrics"
ii. Contextual terms: "office wear" or "professional dress" or "workplace attire" or "corporate dress code"
iii. Population terms: "young adults" or "young professionals" or "millennials" or "Gen Z"
iv. Geographic qualifier: "Nigeria" or "Nigerian"
v. Conceptual terms: "cultural identity" or "postcolonial" or "cultural authenticity"

2.4 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria:

i. Sources published between 2017 and 2026
ii. Empirical studies on Nigerian textile adoption, perception, or usage
iii. Peer-reviewed journal articles on Nigerian fashion, dress, or cultural identity
iv. Industry reports and media coverage addressing indigenous fabric use in professional contexts
v. Sources addressing Nigerian governmental dress policies

Exclusion criteria:

i. Sources focused exclusively on non-Nigerian African textiles without Nigerian relevance
ii. Purely commercial promotional content without substantive information
iii. Sources predating 2017 unless foundational to historical context

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2.5 Method of Synthesis

Sources were synthesized using thematic analysis following the approach outlined by Braun & Clarke, (2006). Key themes were identified iteratively from the literature and organized into three analytical categories: (1) colonial legacies and professional dress codes, (2) empirical evidence on perceptions and acceptability, and (3) drivers of change and persistent barriers. Where quantitative data were available, descriptive statistics were reported with explicit caveats regarding their limitations. Author interpretation is clearly distinguished from documented evidence throughout.

2.6 Limitations of the Review Methodology

This narrative review has several limitations. First, the absence of formal quality appraisal tools means that sources of varying methodological rigor are synthesized together. Second, publication bias may favor positive reports of traditional textile adoption, as unsuccessful or contested cases are less likely to be documented. Third, the reliance on English-language sources may exclude relevant research published in Nigerian languages or French. Fourth, the temporal scope means that rapidly evolving fashion trends may date quickly.

3 Key Terminology

For consistency throughout this review, the following definitions are employed:

a. **Aso Oke:** A handwoven Yoruba textile traditionally produced in Iseyin and Ilorin, historically reserved for ceremonies, title celebrations, and formal gatherings. Contemporary designers have adapted it into office garments through controlled tailoring and lighter weaves.
b. **Adire:** An indigo-dyed fabric created through resist-dyeing techniques closely associated with Yoruba cultural practice, particularly the Egbapopole of Abeokuta (Adejumoh, 2017). Modern applications favor restrained color balance for professional environments.
c. **Ankara:** A wax-resist print fabric (also known as Dutch wax or wax print) that, while historically originating from European colonial production for West African markets, has been thoroughly adopted into Nigerian fashion and cultural identity (Dee, 2020). In this review, Ankara is treated as a commercially produced print fabric that has been indigenised into Nigerian fashion practice, rather than a strictly indigenous handcrafted textile. This distinction is maintained to avoid conflating Ankara with Aso Oke and Adire, which have distinct production histories and cultural associations.
d. **Indigenous fabrics:** For this review, this term refers to Aso Oke and Adire as handcrafted Nigerian textiles with deep Yoruba cultural roots, while acknowledging Ankara's indigenised status in Nigerian fashion.
e. **Young adults:** Individuals aged approximately 18–35, encompassing the millennial and Gen Z cohorts.

4 Conceptual and Historical Context

4.1 Colonial Legacies and the Professional Dress Code

The association of Western clothing with professionalism in Nigeria is a direct legacy of colonial governance. Dress restrictions that confine indigenous textiles to Fridays reinforce what Onitsha, (2025) describes as "the same colonial stereotype that European suits are the true symbols of professionalism." This phenomenon was termed "colonial mentality" which manifests as an unconscious conviction that Western aesthetics are fundamentally superior, a way of thinking institutionalized through government and corporate dress codes.

Nigerian professional culture places considerable value on appearing "put-together," and office dress rules "tend to be formal" in banking, legal, and government sectors (Guardian Nigeria, 2026). However, Western norms play a major role in defining this formality, resulting in a cultural hierarchy that positions indigenous textiles as intrinsically less formal.

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4.2 The "Friday Only" Syndrome

The restriction of traditional clothing to Fridays were frequently presented as a "dress down" policy that is a recurrent issue in the literature. According to Adebiyi, (2025) we have confined Ankara, our most expressive fabric, to the 'weekend only' corner. This temporal division has economic ramifications beyond the symbolic: it reduces demand for locally made textiles and increases reliance on imported fabrics.

(Kehinde, 2025; Shobiye, 2025) opined that recent policy developments illustrate this tension, the Delta State government's 2025 dress code review explicitly permits traditional attire "only on Fridays and special occasions" while mandating complete suits for senior officers (Grade Level 13 and above) on other workdays. Critics have characterized this as colonial mentality masquerading as reform (Onitsha, 2025). Conversely, Oyo State's directive requiring civil servants to wear Aso Oke on Thursdays represents an alternative policy approach explicitly designed to boost the local textile economy and promote Yoruba cultural heritage Ajibola, (2025).

5 Empirical Evidence on Perceptions and Acceptability

5.1 Quantitative Findings on Aso Oke Adoption

Fadipe et al., (2023) provide important empirical data on the acceptability of Aso Oke as work and casual wear among female tertiary institution workers in Damaturu, Yobe State. The study surveyed 100 female participants using a structured questionnaire. This sample size and the homogeneity of the population (female tertiary institution staff in a single northeastern state) substantially limit generalizability.

Table 1: Awareness and Usage of Aso Oke Among Respondents

Item	Yes (%)	No (%)
Awareness of Aso Oke fabric	62	38
Have worn Aso Oke for ceremonial/casual/work	75	25
Aso Oke can be used as work wear if well designed	65	35
Aso Oke can be used as casual wear if well designed	80	20

Source: Adapted from Fadipe et al. (2023)

Table 2: Key Factors Influencing the Adoption of Indigenous Fabrics as Office Wear

Factor	Yes (%)	No (%)
Aso Oke is comfortable for work wear	58	42
Aso Oke drapes well on the body	49	51
Aso Oke is heavy on the body	56	44

Source: Adapted from Fadipe et al. (2023)

The findings present a complex picture: only 49% of respondents stated that Aso Oke draped well on the body, and 56% found it heavy, despite 75% having worn it and 65% believing it could be used as work wear if adequately made. These results demonstrate the critical importance of design and tailoring quality to acceptability. Furthermore, the study indicated that 87% of respondents believed fashion designers required more training in sewing Aso Oke, and 58% felt that designers in Yobe State lacked adequate skills. This alludes to a supply-side constraint: even where demand exists, the technical capacity to produce office-appropriate garments may be insufficient.

Methodological limitations: These descriptive percentages are based on a small, geographically specific sample and should not be interpreted as nationally representative evidence. The survey instrument's reliability and validity are not reported, and the possibility of social desirability bias (respondents overreporting positive attitudes toward indigenous

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fabrics) cannot be excluded. The absence of inferential statistics means that subgroup differences (by age, education, or occupation) cannot be assessed.

5.2 Contrasting Findings: FUNAAB Study

A study by Gabriel et al., (2023) on the usage of Aso Oke and Adire as formal wear among workers at the Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta (FUNAAB) produced more conservative results. The study indicated that 45% of respondents rejected the proposition that Aso Oke and Adire are formally worn to occasions, and 53% strongly disagreed that these textiles are inexpensive. Only 30% strongly agreed that wearing traditional textiles made them feel confident and comfortable.

These divergent findings from the Damaturu study indicate that regional and institutional factors substantially influence perceptions. The Damaturu study (northeast) suggested greater openness to Aso Oke adoption, while the Abeokuta study (southwest, the fabric's place of origin) revealed more opposition with a paradoxical finding requiring further exploration. Possible explanations include differences in the occupational composition of the samples, institutional dress norms, socioeconomic status, and the measurement approaches employed. The FUNAAB study's use of "strongly disagree" response categories suggests a different attitudinal scaling than the Damaturu study's binary yes/no format, which may partly account for divergent findings.

5.3 Industry and Market Trends

Despite varied scholarly findings, industry sources indicate substantial development in the utilization of indigenous fabrics. Onuh (2025) claims that "young professionals are showing up to work in pieces made from Aso Oke and Adire, wearing it like a badge of honour". Similarly, Falade, (2025) reports that Aso Oke is "shaking off its 'for special occasions only' reputation and stepping boldly into everyday fashion."

Table 3: Key Factors Influencing the Adoption of Indigenous Fabrics as Office Wear (Synthesized from Multiple Sources)

Factor	Influence	Evidence Type	Source
Designer innovation	Positive	Media/Industry	
Government policy	Positive	Documented policy	
Social media and influencers	Positive	Media observation	
Affordability	Negative	Empirical (FUNAAB)	Gabriel et al., (2023)
Tailoring skill	Negative	Empirical (Damaturu)	Fadipe et al., (2023)
Fabric weight	Mixed	Empirical (Damaturu)	Fadipe et al., (2023)

6 Drivers of Change: The Youth Factor

6.1 The Role of Design Innovation

Nigerian designers' adaptation of indigenous materials has been a major force behind transformation. Kenneth Ize has showcased Aso Oke on international runways, dressing celebrities such as Beyoncé and Naomi Campbell. Young Nigerians now view the fabric as aspirational due to this global validation. Designers are producing "lighter, more breathable weaves of Aso Oke" for corporate blouses, shift dresses, and two-piece sets.

Similarly, Agbonkhese, (2026) documents the return of Adire, noting that "contemporary designers continue to lean towards fluid, breathable pieces suited to today's fast-paced lifestyles." The Adire co-ord set has emerged as "a 2026 wardrobe hero," paired with heels for the evening or white sneakers for the day.

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6.2 Sustainability and Cultural Authenticity

For reasons beyond fashion, young Nigerians are becoming increasingly interested in home-grown textiles Falade, (2025) states that the shift represents a growing love for locally made fabrics and a push for sustainability, as supporting indigenous weavers helps preserve traditional craftsmanship while reducing reliance on imported materials. This sustainability narrative presents traditional textiles as morally and environmentally sound options while aligning with global trends.

6.3 Digital Media and Influencer Culture

Social media has greatly aided the normalization of indigenous textiles as everyday clothing. According to Onuh, (2025) people are flaunting Adire dresses and Aso Oke bucket hats on social media. Influencers and content producers combine these items with leather bags, jackets, and sneakers in innovative ways. The aspirational imagery created by digital visibility challenges the perception that these materials are exclusively ceremonial.

7 Persistent Barriers and Challenges

7.1 The Colonial Mentality

The firmly rooted belief that Western clothing equates to professionalism remains the most significant barrier to acceptance. According to Adebiyi, (2025) We inherited the idea that to appear 'proper' is to appear Western, appropriate, and professional. Seriousness comes in subdued colors, and competence is to wears a tie. Despite formal independence, this internalized hierarchy persists.

Institutional reinforcement of this mindset is evident in Delta State's 2025 dress code policy, which confined traditional clothing to Fridays. Onitsha, (2025) criticizes this approach as an insult not only to our culture but to our history of resilience, arguing that it effectively reminds workers that African fabrics are inferior to European ones.

7.2 Economic Constraints

The cost of home-grown textiles remains a major issue. According to the FUNAAB study, 53% of participants strongly disagreed that Adire and Aso Oke are reasonably priced (Gabriel et al., 2023). Because they require substantial labor, high-quality Aso Oke and Adire are frequently more costly than mass-produced imported textiles. This creates a paradox: many young professionals may be unable to afford the very textiles praised for their cultural authenticity.

7.3 Technical and Quality Issues

Valid quality concerns contribute to the perception that indigenous materials are inappropriate for office wear. According to Fadipe et al., (2023) respondents reported that Aso Oke did not drape well on the body. Similarly, 87% of respondents demanded that fashion designers receive further instruction in the specialized techniques of cutting, connecting, and stitching these materials. This finding points to a supply-side gap in technical education that cannot be resolved through demand-side interventions alone.

8 A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Perceptions

This review proposes a threefold framework for comprehending young Nigerian adults' perceptions of indigenous fabrics as office attire, synthesized from the evidence reviewed above.

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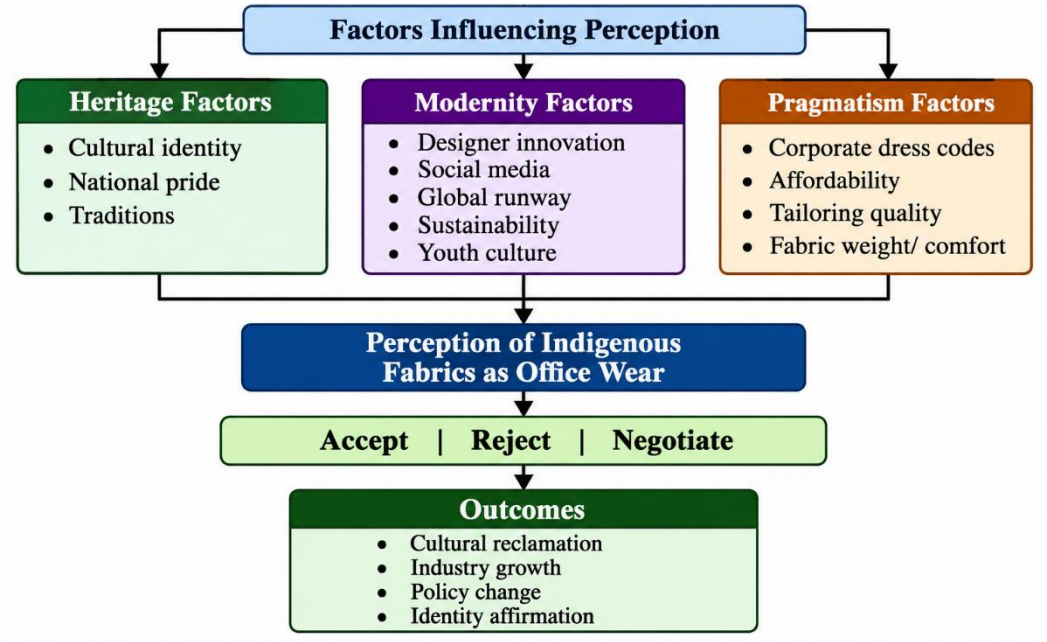


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework: The Negotiation of Professional Attire in Nigeria

Explanatory Notes:

The framework posits that perception is not binary but negotiated through the interaction of three factor domains:

1. Heritage factors (cultural identity, national pride, postcolonial consciousness) exert upward pressure toward acceptance but are insufficient alone to overcome institutional barriers.
2. Modernity factors (designer innovation, social media, global exposure, sustainability narratives) provide the mechanisms through which indigenous fabrics are reframed as contemporary and aspirational.
3. Pragmatism factors (corporate dress codes, affordability, tailoring quality, fabric comfort) can either facilitate or impede adoption depending on context.

The directional relationships indicated by arrows suggest that the three factor domains interact dynamically rather than independently. For example, designer innovation (modernity) can partially compensate for fabric weight concerns (pragmatism) by producing lighter weaves. Government policy (pragmatism/institutional) can either reinforce colonial hierarchies or actively promote indigenous fabrics.

The most common outcome is negotiation with young professionals selectively incorporate indigenous elements into otherwise Western professional wardrobes, rather than wholesale acceptance or rejection of either tradition.

9 Discussion

9.1 Synthesis of Evidence Types

This review has distinguished between three evidence types:

Empirical evidence (Fadipe et al., 2023; Gabriel et al., 2023) provides quantitative data on perceptions but is limited by small, non-representative samples, varying measurement approaches, and the absence of reliability and validity reporting. The divergent findings between these two studies were greater openness in Damaturu versus more opposition in Abeokuta which underscore the importance of geographic, occupational, and institutional context in shaping perceptions.

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Media observations (BusinessDay, Guardian, Independent, Vanguard) document industry trends and cultural shifts but are subject to editorial selection bias and commercial interests. These sources should be treated as evidence of discourse and visibility rather than prevalence.

Author interpretation (the conceptual framework, recommendations) synthesizes evidence but represents analytical judgment rather than established fact.

9.2 Contextual Factors Influencing Perceptions

The literature suggests several factors that may account for variability in perceptions:

i. **Geographic location:** The Damaturu/Abeokuta divergence suggests that proximity to textile production origins does not straightforwardly predict acceptance, and that regional cultural dynamics require further study.
ii. **Occupational context:** Civil service, banking, and legal sectors maintain more formal dress codes than creative or technology sectors.
iii. **Gender:** Fadipe et al., (2023) all-female sample and the gendered dimensions of traditional attire (Aso Oke weaving is traditionally male-dominated) warrant attention in future research.
iv. **Institutional culture:** Universities, government ministries, and private corporations each maintain distinct dress norms.
v. **Socioeconomic status:** Affordability concerns identified in the FUNAAB study suggest that class mediates access to the very textiles valorized as culturally authentic.
vi. **Textile familiarity:** Prior exposure and family connections to textile production may shape comfort and competence in wearing indigenous fabrics.

9.3 Limitations of the Available Evidence

The available evidence base has several significant limitations:

a. **Small sample sizes:** The two empirical studies identified surveyed 100 participants each, precluding generalizability to national populations.
b. **Geographic concentration:** Both studies were conducted in specific states (Yobe and Ogun), with no data from major urban centers like Lagos or Abuja where industry trends are most visible.
c. **Cross-sectional design:** No longitudinal data exist to track changing perceptions over time.
d. **Measurement inconsistency:** The studies employed different response formats (binary versus Likert-type), complicating comparison.
e. **Publication bias:** Positive findings about indigenous fabric adoption may be more likely to be published or reported than negative findings.
f. **Media evidence quality:** Industry reports and fashion journalism do not employ systematic methodologies and may overrepresent elite or aspirational practices.

10 Conclusion

The perceptions of Nigerian young adults regarding indigenous materials as office dress are evolving significantly. Dress codes remain influenced by colonial legacies, but an increasing number of young professionals are challenging them due to concerns about sustainability, design innovation, and cultural pride. However, obstacles persist, including cost, quality concerns, and institutional rules that marginalize traditional clothing.

The moderate conclusion of this review is: conditional acceptance is growing, but this growth is uneven, unstable, and highly dependent on institutional signals and material conditions. There is a tension worth heeding between industry narratives describing indigenous fabrics as "conquering the office" and empirical evidence showing significant regional variation and persistent economic barriers. Transforming indigenous fabrics from "Friday-only" into everyday office-

wear options requires not only heightened cultural pride but also substantive revision of dress codes, targeted investment in design education systems, and restructuring of cost structures in the indigenous textile supply chain.

11 Recommendations

The following recommendations are linked explicitly to findings and identified gaps in the literature:

1. **Policy Reform:** Government and corporate bodies should revise dress regulations to recognize well-tailored indigenous materials as appropriate formal attire across all workdays. This recommendation addresses the institutional barrier documented in the Delta State dress code analysis and responds to Onitsha, (2025) critique of the "Friday Only" syndrome.
2. **Designer Training:** Investments in design education should prioritize training in the specialized processes needed for indigenous fabrics. This recommendation directly addresses the finding that 87% of respondents demanded further instruction in cutting, connecting, and stitching these materials (Fadipe et al., 2023) and the 58% who doubted local tailors' competence.
3. **Affordability Initiatives:** Techniques to lower production costs, such as joint weaving and dyeing cooperatives which could make these textiles more affordable for young professionals. This recommendation responds to the FUNAAB study finding that 53% of participants strongly disagreed that Aso Oke and Adire are reasonably priced (Gabriel et al., 2023).
4. **Institutional Support:** Cultural organizations such as the National Institute for Cultural Orientation should move beyond symbolic campaigns to provide designers and producers with hands-on assistance. This recommendation addresses the gap between policy rhetoric and practical implementation identified in the analysis of government initiatives.
5. **Further Research:** Future studies should employ larger, regionally diverse samples, validated measurement instruments, and longitudinal designs to track changing perceptions over time. This recommendation addresses the methodological limitations explicitly identified in this review.

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