



ISSN: 2278 – 0211 (Online)

Foreign Fashion Influence On The Ghanaian Youth And Its Impact On The Local Fashion Industry

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Abstract:

Looking good generally is an area of great interest to many, especially the youth. Over the years the youth have tried to be fashionable and have exhibited clothing which is influenced to a large extent by foreign fashion in the wake of globalization. The extent of this influence affects the youth and the local fashion industry positively and negatively. This paper examines the history of fashion in Ghana, the level of foreign influence and how it affects the local fashion industry. A descriptive survey approach was employed based on qualitative and quantitative research methodologies in accessing data from a number of sources including secondary literature, archival materials, questionnaire and in-depth interviews with key fashion designers in examining the impact of foreign influence on the youth and the local fashion industry. Findings revealed that there were some forms of fashion in terms of clothing, present among Ghanaians before Europeans arrived on the coast. Ghanaian fashion and the youth are being influenced by foreign factors with a mixture of both traditional and foreign design concepts to meet international standards. This paper brings to the fore the effect of foreign fashion and the responsiveness of local fashion designers to turn the rather seeming challenge into an opportunity to develop and project the fashion industry in Ghana. The paper however recommends that local fashion designers should attempt to carve a distinctive look that is Ghanaian to project their presence on the international fashion map.

Keywords: Foreign Fashion; Ghanaian Fashion; Distinctive Style; Youth.

1.Introduction

Ghana, like many other developing countries, is suffering economically due to lack of development of her local fashion industry. The country in the past had a booming local fashion industry but the itsactivitieshave declined due to stiff poor finishing and non-conformance to standards(Friedrich, B and Stiffing E., 2006; Quartey, 2007).

According to Herman (2002) although there is no shortage of talent, textile tradition or even industrial textiles, what is lacking in Africa and Ghana for that matter, is a policy direction dealing with fashion as a sector. In effect, Ghana cannot pride itself of a strong and vibrant fashion industry as can be seen in most developed economies.

Ghana as a country is made up of different ethnic groups with different cultures, beliefs and societal norms which are believed to influence the trend of fashion in Ghana. The communal and cultural ethics of people change with time throughout the world as well as in Ghana, so do the fashion and other aesthetics of their arts also change throughout the ages. These changes come about from both internal and external influences as far as clothing and fashion are concerned. Some of these factors include the media which gives instant access to happenings around the world, increased international travel and sophisticated communication technologies. This has led to blurring of cultures. The fusion of culture becomes the order of the day, which includes the merger of clothing and fashion styles of various ethnicities into one another. Again, according to Hines and Bruce (2007), the shift in production poles to developing and emerging economies like China has made it possible for high end brands to be easily copied at affordable prices for fashion conscious youth across the globe, who want to be at speed with fashion trends and yet have poor buying power especially in third world countries.

As regards issues including forms of fashion and clothing that existed in the past were historically accounted for in verbal forms; therefore the authenticity of information of such nature was usually debatable. Nevertheless, European travelers along the coast of West Africa between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries had written accounts of some of this verbal information on fashion and clothing among the Ghanaians in the past. The writings give an account on fashion and clothing as practical among the local people at that time (Bubolz, 1973).

1.1.Brief Historical Account On Fashion And Clothing In Ghana

An account on clothing in Ghana within the 1700s in terms of styles and mode of dressing the clothing used by the local people were possibly devoid of western

influences. The nature of clothing worn from that time was elaborate and complex. It was based on rank and status of the individual within the community. It was more often than not, wraparound without stitches, so that it hangs from the navel downwards, covering half of the legs and at times, wrapped around the neck and shoulders (Owusu, 1999). During the eighteenth century the Gas wore a loincloth between their legs and looped over leather bead belt. Usually the back end hung lower than the front and this description is similar to “danta” waist-girdle which was worn among the Akans some years ago. Seiber (1974) states that, the Gaments were larger cloths which served as blankets at night and as a lounge dress in the morning usually worn by wrapping it round the body so that one arm was left uncovered. This description is also similar to men’s traditional clothing styles among the Akans, which uses about ten (10) yards of fabric wrapped around the body and hanged on one shoulder, particularly the left arm. This description of men’s clothing is rather popular among most men in the southern part of Ghana which has largely become national attire among Ghanaian men in general today. Those from the North were reported to wear several layers of clothes, five to six wrapped around their body in a decent manner (Gadzekpo, 2005). The youth on the other hand did not dress so pompously, but wore only a good paan, a cap made of hart’s skin upon their heads, and a staff in their hands. Also a string or chain of coral, about their heads; and this is the dress they appear in daily.

1.2.The Beginning Of Foreign Fashion Influence On Ghanaian Clothing Styles

According to Bosmas (1967) there was gradual influence on the clothing styles along the coastal lands which came about with the arrival of the Portuguese and other foreign travelers through the trading in of European clothes and other goods for gold. Although loincloths were used in both the coastal and central parts of the country their use were largely and more influenced when the Europeans gained access to the hinterlands. Since then the Ghanaian clothing style has become an adaptation of western fashion trends. European influence has become so rampant and so invasive across almost every activity; from education, religion, politics, social change, and fashion is no exception. The foreign influence has robbed us as a nation and especially the youth of our identity as a people. This is not the case in most developed countries whose clothing has had so much impact on how the youth clothe themselves presently. This paper primarily examines the impact of foreign fashion on the youth of Ghana and how local fashion designers are responding

to this influence in the face of globalization, in an attempt to establish a local fashion industry.

2. Methodology

To ensure accurate, objective, valid and reliable findings, the study employs descriptive survey approach based on qualitative research methodology and made use of purposive and simple random sampling techniques. Data gathering instruments used were questionnaire, personal interviews and observation. The use of these three research instruments in the study enabled the research team to make a comparative analysis of primary data collected from the selected respondents to draw conclusions and recommendations. Only information from those sources confirmed, analyzed and evaluated by the research team was accepted and used in the research. To ensure anonymity of the respondents, interview respondents are represented with letters. The study focused on respondents within Accra and Kumasi. A sample size of 30, made up of fifteen fashion students, four second-hand clothe dealers, five boutique owners, one seamstress, two elders and three media men were chosen for the study. Out of the 30 respondents who answered the questions, 15 of them were between the ages of 15 and 25, five respondents were between the ages of 26 and 35, five respondents were between the ages of 36 and 45 years, three were between the ages of 46 and 55, and two respondents were above 55 years of age.

Ages of respondents (Years)	Frequency	Percentage(%)
15-25	15	50
26-35	5	16.66
36-45	5	16.66
46-55	3	10
above 55	2	6.6
Total	30	100

Table 1: Ages of respondents

Source: Field Research (2011)

Out of these respondents, 12 were males while 18 were females constituting 40% and 60% respectively. Besides the above respondents, five selected renowned local fashion designers were interviewed. The personal details of respondents indicated in Table 1

revealed that more than half of the sets of questionnaire were administered to the youth groups between the ages of 15 and 35. This is because issues of fashion and its trends with regards to western influences are mostly associated with the youth within these age groups, and this enabled the research team to assess the true reflection of situations on the ground. In a similar instance, fashion is associated with the female society more than male and turns to prevail more among the elite society. This to some extent justified the reason for more female respondents responding to the questionnaire. Besides the fact that university and post-secondary respondents form the majority of the elite groups, they are also best placed to answer the questionnaire.

3.Results And Discussion

The results of the study were assembled and discussed based on the research questions formulated to guide the study and research instruments used. Table 2 shows multiple responses derived from questionnaire administered.

Question	Yes	Percentage	No	Percentage
Do you think there is Ghanaian fashion?	21	70%	9	30%
Do you think there is foreign influence on Ghanaian fashion?	28	93.33%	2	6.66%
Do Ghanaians follow any trend?	25	83.33%	5	16.66%
Do you think Ghanaian fashion designers are creative enough?"	10	33.33%	20	66.66%
Do you like the fit and quality of garments made in Ghana?	2	6.66%	28	93.33%
Do Ghanaian fashion designers follow any trend?	26	86.66%	4	13.33%
Do you think Ghanaian fashion designers are able to create trends?	2	6.66%	28	93.33%

Table 2: Multiple responses on the trend and quality of Ghanaian Fashion

Source: Field Research (2011)

From Table 2, it is evident that 21 out of 30 respondents representing 70% acknowledge the existence of Ghanaian fashion. Twenty eight (93.33%) think there is foreign influence on Ghanaian fashion while two (6.66%) think otherwise. Twenty five (83.33%) as against five representing 16.66% responded positively to whether or not Ghanaians follow any trend of fashion. Ten respondents representing 33.33% as against 20

(33.33%) indicated that Ghanaian fashion designers are creative enough with 28 representing 93.33% indicating their dislike to the fit and quality of made in Ghana garments. As to whether or not Ghanaian fashion designers follows any trend, 26, (86.66%) answered yes whereas 28 respondents which represent 93.33% responded that Ghanaian fashion designers are unable to create trends.

3.1. Influence of Foreign fashion

The study reveals that Ghanaians are very much influenced by foreign fashion. This is evident in the responses of respondents with regards to preference of Ghanaian and foreign fashion as shown in the chart in Figure 1.

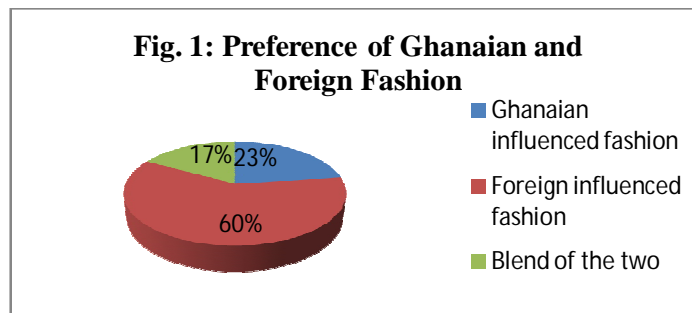


Figure 1

Source: Field research (2011)

Inferring from Figure 1, seven out of the 30 respondents representing 23% prefer locally influenced fashion to Ghanaian type. 18 that is, 60% prefer foreign influenced fashion whereas 5, thus 17% went for a blend of the two. A follow up question as to which type of clothing respondents would buy, 21 chose foreign manufactured clothing with 9 going for locally manufactured clothing representing 70% and 30% respectively as shown in Fig. 2.



Figure 2

Source: Field Research (2011)

With regards to the use of fabric for locally made garments, 12, that is 40% of the respondents stated they buy locally made fabrics while 18 representing 60% said they buy imported fabrics.

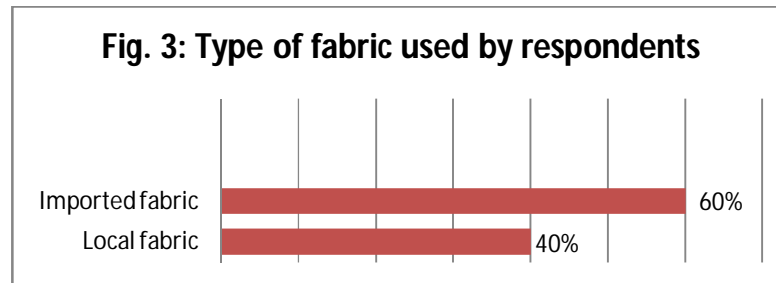


Figure 3

Results in Fig. 1, 2 and 3 clearly show that Ghanaians are highly influenced by foreign fashion. The responses from the questionnaire were corroborated by views expressed by five selected renowned local fashion designers interviewed.

When asked to state specifically what the Ghanaian fashion is, 25 (83.33%) indicated that the use of African prints while 5 (16.66%) referred to the indigenous cloth that is wrappe around the waist and upper bust for women and around the shoulders for men. Also 21 (70%) of respondents were of the view that the local fashion design copy foreign trends while 9 (30%) think the local designers adopt the foreign trends in their designs. With regards to second hand clothing, 20 (66.66%) will rather buy second hand clothing with the assurance of correct fit whereas 10 (33.33) will prefer to sew to have newness.

3.2. Usage of locally made fabrics and fashion style by Ghanaian fashion designers

Responding to the question of challenges faced by the fashion industry with regard to the use of locally made fabrics, Fashion designer A (Personal communication, 4th March, 2011) indicated that the Ghanaian Fashion Industry has experienced its fair share of challenges, but has remained consistent to deliver the designs that we see on runways and fashion events. The Ghanaian textile industry has provided some of the most influential fabrics that are sold around the world adding that, with African prints fabric getting all the exposure around the world we have seen the rise in more Ghanaian designers bringing a flare of eclectic and fresh designs to the fashion industry. This assertion was collaborated by all the fashion designers. Never in the history of the country have we seen clothes made in our local fabrics than it is presently. The trend has

been to use the fabrics for 'slit and kaba' but recently fabrics are transformed into fashionable dress that could be worn anywhere. He further expressed that he sells his own designs - vibrant cocktail dresses in bold beautiful colours made with African fabrics. He concluded that he sews local fabrics into Western-style garments as shown in Fig 4.

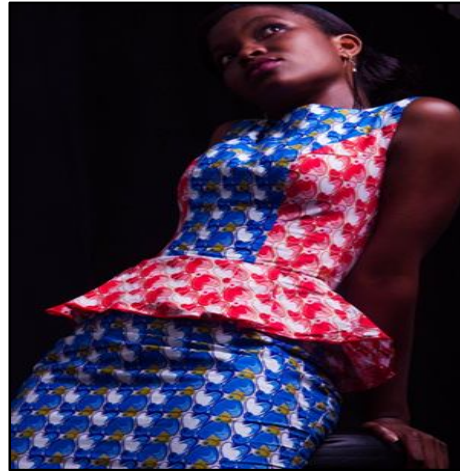


Figure 4: Local print sewn in Western garment style
Source: Field Survey (2011)-Sample garment from Designer A

Fashion designer B (Personal communication, 5TH March, 2011) disclosed that his clothes have "slight ethnic accents." He blends synthetic materials and sometimes with traditional woven cloth, using the African prints as inserts or facings. The whole purpose is to make designs that appeals to everybody which even foreigners can wear outside Ghana and not feel awkward when they go back to their home countries.

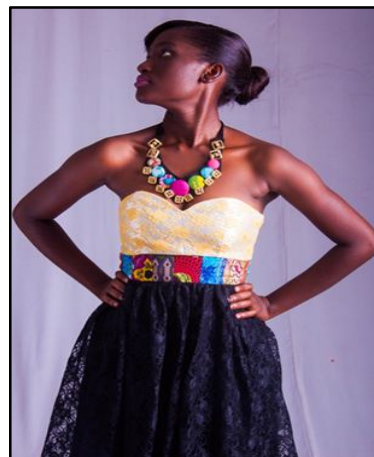


Figure 5: Blends of synthetic materials and local print
Source: Field Survey (2011)-Sample garment from Designer B

Fashion designer C (Personal communication, 7th March, 2011) emphasized that, designing successfully with African prints demonstrates the creativity and attractiveness of the local prints. He stressed the need to show the world the usage of our prints, in order to be profitable internationally.

From the interaction of Designers A, B and C, the focus was on the use of the local fabrics translated into western clothing styles that appeal to the youth. When asked whether there is a Ghanaian fashion, they all stated there was no define Ghanaian fashion apart from the use of African prints. This goes to confirm the responds of the respondents of the questionnaire, their desire to buy imported garments rather than those made locally. There is indeed no point in buying a garment with poor fit when there are alternatives. The target for these local designers is the youth. It is not enough to simply use a different fabric for a style that is in transit. Although it is not a bad idea to be influenced positively, the designers must understand the dynamics that drive the trends they either copy or adopt. Established industries in other parts of the world are guided by sets of trends partly due to seasonal changes and also due to the fact that there is pleasure and novelty in new looks that make people crave for such items.

3.3. Influence Of Imported Clothing

The fashion designer D (Personal communication, 8th March, 2011) who specializes in urban African clothing, bemoan that while Ghana's fashion industry is gaining international recognition, it imports far more clothing than it exports. He estimated that about 60 percent of Ghanaians wear second-hand clothes imported from Europe and the United States. This confirms earlier opinion by respondents who stated categorically that they will rather buy second hand clothing than make do with garments with poor fit. Poor fitting and quality of clothing made locally are among the major issues bedeviling the local fashion industry (Fianu and Zentey, 2000). Clothing has always been a non-verbal communicator of mood, wealth and status etc, consciously and unconsciously. According to Seiber (1974) the difference in the mode of dressing between the rich and the poor is in the quality and amount of fabric used. Till date, clothing as a mean of class distinction has not changed. Society thrives on fashion as a form of identity and expression and a source of progression. The emergence of Young Wealthy Adults (YWA) and Urban Young Professionals (UYP) has given impetus to clothing more than ever before. To them, dressing and appearance is one of their major priorities and it is used as an indicator of wealth and status (Okonkwo, 2007). They must therefore look for the finest

and trendy garments with proper fit that project their status which unfortunately, majority of these young adults turn to western brands. Like the other designer, he hinted the use of traditional batik and wax print fabrics to create ready-to-wear pieces in thoroughly Western silhouettes in his designs.



Figure 6: African print in Western silhouette

Source: Field Survey (2011)-Sample garment from Designer D

The research team observed that, the design in Fig 6 is a copy of an original design made with an African Print which the designer could have played around it to make it different from the original instead of copying the design in an African print fabric. This affirms the view that most of the local fashion design copy rather than create trends. But the fashion designers responsibility is to create trends therefore their ability to create will be a compelling motivation to drive the youth into patronizing locally produced garments.

3.4.Fashion Trends

Fashion designer E (Personal communication, 10th March, 2011)stressed on the fact that Ghanaians are not very trendy and when they adopt a trend they stick to it for so many years before they change. Talking about the fact that fashion designers incorporate a lot of foreign influences into their designs, the designersaid, being a Ghanaian fashion designer does not mean everything you design must be totally Ghanaian.To get an international recognition as a fashion designer your designs must be comfortable to both Ghanaians and foreigners. The designer also highlighted that, Ghanaians don't follow fashion much,and believes Ghanaians cannot claim to have certain trends they follow in

fashion. Most of the fashion we do in Ghana is what is passed down from Europe and America. However, there is now a bold and harmonious mixture of colours, materials and cuts, drawing inspiration from the West, East, and from Africa itself.

Okonkwo (2007) mentioned that, in the eighteenth century, a lot of nations including Germany, Spain, and Portugal were influenced by the French style and had French undertone in fashion, lifestyle and appearance. Even England, known for simple clothing, acknowledges the elegance and sophistication of French fashion.

Despite the attraction of western brands, greater numbers of young Africans are dressing in their own style (Herman, 2002). With the introduction of Friday wear in Ghana in 2004 by the Ministry of Trade and Industry, with the idea to both celebrate African tradition and also to boost the local textile industry, one can easily observe that clothes have more local content in terms of fabric and accessories with international appeal. Thanks to the ingenuity of local fashion designers who are fearlessly fashioning African fabrics in western styles, so the clothes have a broader and more importantly, an international appeal. The youth are gradually warming up to wearing their own.

But the Ghanaian dress is simply western style translated in African print. It is worth noting that there is no identifiable fashion trend that is Ghanaian. And like Designer E put it, "I don't believe Ghanaians can claim to have certain trends they follow in fashion. Most of the fashion we do in Ghana is what is passed down from Europe and America". It is for this reason that, the need for fashioning the Ghanaian look is of paramount importance if local fashion products especially clothing, will make meaningful presence on the international scene. This is because, major fashion cities like, Paris, New York, London, Milan and Tokyo have distinctive style that have visual signatures of these cities. Foley (1998) made an observation that, 'while some of the traditional roots of fashion are still visible in the collections shown in Paris, London, Milan and New York, the design world is much more complex these days'. The complexity lies in the fact that, designers from London for instance work in other fashion cities like Milan; they move their seasonal shows from one city to the other; they design their own collections aside the fashion houses they work for and can even change houses. But more importantly, clients and others in the business who come to watch their shows, come with the expectation based on the visual signature of each capital. This, Brannon (2006) affirms, does not matter where they show their collection; creative origin is one major ingredient that is used to categorize designers.

The youth buy clothes based on brands, quality and origin among other factors. And like Tungate (2005) puts it, 'you don't buy cloths – you buy an identity'. They would want to be associated with products whose origin is deemed to be of high quality but also fashionable with identifiable and recognized style. Designer D highlighted thatGhanaians - like the citizens of nearly every African country - predominantly wear second-hand clothes from Europe and North America. Hip young urbanites who have more money to spend consider the second-hand clothes fashionable simply because they evoke America, London or France. Ghanaian fashion designers are working tirelessly to give the fashion industry a new face lift through their brevity in design approach. However, much more can be done, rather than just copying western styles in African fabrics as is the practice of majority of designers interviewed.

The function of fashion according to Laver (2002) is to change. It must be noted that change comes with recognition, a function that cannot be associated with copying. Attempt to carve the distinctive Ghanaian style in African fabrics is one sure way of asserting their presence in the fashion world. With the convergence of taste, colour, etc. due to globalization, styles from other fashion cites could be adopted but that feel of style of origin coupled with the use of African prints will give local designers the needed international recognition and hence encourage the youth to be dressed in their own. It must also be noted that, other African, especially West African countries also make use of African prints in their clothing. It is imperative for a look to be carved, together with the use of African prints to portray a distinctive Ghanaian look that puts a stamp on the fashion map globally. The other West African countries that use African prints also have fashion designers. The question is how does one distinguishes a product of Nigeria from one which is made by a Ghanaian Designer?.For instance, London is recognized for its street fashion, in other words, youth fashion. Before then, Britain was once influenced by the fashion of France but later managed to create its own distinctive style (Okonkwo 2007). The world look up to London for trends in youth fashion (Jenkyn, 2005) of which the youth of London are aware and therefore feel proud to dress in London style. Although they are influenced by other styles from other cities, the youthful London look is so visible and overrides whatsoever influence, no matter the season and the trend in vogue globally.

3.5. Carving A Look That Is Ghanaian

A distinctive look that is Ghanaian can be carved but before this can be done, Government must be seen to be interested in the operations of the local clothing houses by formulating policies geared at regulating the activities of these clothing houses. The individual

designers and clothing producers must come together as an organized institution with a regulating body that oversees the activities of the established industry. Fashion design institutions at the highest level must be put in place. At the moment, there is not a single public University that runs a degree in Fashion. The highest so far are the Polytechnics and a private University (Radford University College) that is yet to graduate its first batch of students.

The Fashion institutions will then train fashion designers and trend watchers who together can identify a common element in the diverse cultures of the Ghanaian population that could be a unifying factor in designs produced by the individual designers who are also expected to have a signature look that identifies their design houses. This cannot be achieved in day, however with commitment and persistence of key stakeholders especially, government, lecturers, designers and trend watchers, this can be achieved. Once the look is achieved, lecturers should be expected to use it as a guide in training the design student, so that as the student develops a personal style as a designer he has the awareness of what the Ghanaian look. By the time the student is ready to practice as a designer he or she can put the two (Ghanaian look and Personal style) together to make a product that is not only creative but also has an identity.

4. Conclusion

The study reveals that, the local fashion industry is not as vibrant and visible as is seen in other countries. However efforts are being made by local designers to build and project an industry that is hoped to be force to be reckoned with. Difficult as it may seem, foreign influences are not making things easier as the youth who are fashion conscious and can help build the industry are swayed by outside influences. It is however possible that the local fashion industry will flourish to expectation due to efforts being put in by both textile and fashion designers locally and recent observations that see the youth donning fashionabledresses made in the local fabrics. There is the need for government to have a re-look at the textile and fashion industry to initiate policies directed at having a vibrant and sustainable industry because the benefits that the country stands to accrue are huge and enormous. Apart from the revenue it could generate, a well-established fashion industry will have ripple effects that would include addressing graduate unemployment in the country.

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