Exploring the Novelty, Benefits and Challenges of Fashion and Technology in Ashanti Funeral Practices

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Abstract:
This paper investigates the integration of fashion and technology in Ashanti funeral practices, aiming to explore its novelty, benefits, and challenges. It, however, addresses the need to understand how traditional funeral rituals are evolving in response to contemporary influences, such as fashion trends and technological innovations. The study seeks to examine the impact of fashion on Ashanti funeral practices, explore the role of technology in the organization of funerals, and identify the implications and challenges associated with the integration of fashion and technology in funeral ceremonies. Using qualitative research methods, including semi-structured interviews and participant observations, data were collected from bereaved family members, community leaders and funeral service providers. While participants expressed enthusiasm for personalized mourning rituals and enhanced communication facilitated by fashion and technology, concerns about cultural authenticity, privacy issues, and ethical considerations were also highlighted. Based on the findings, the study recommends that funeral practitioners and policymakers are to develop guidelines and protocols that promote respectful and inclusive funeral practices, balancing innovation with tradition. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the evolving nature of funeral rituals and cultural traditions in contemporary societies, emphasizing the importance of cultural sensitivity and community engagement in funeral planning.

Keywords: Ashanti culture, funeral rituals, fashion integration, technological innovations and cultural authenticity

1. Introduction

Funerals hold profound significance within the Ashanti community, serving as occasions to honour departed loved ones, celebrate their lives, and facilitate the transition to the afterlife. Rooted in tradition and cultural norms, Ashanti funeral rites have undergone transformations over time, influenced by social, economic, and technological advancements (Hesse, 2023; Adjei et al., 2024). Shan (2024) believes that among these influences, the roles of fashion and technology have emerged as significant drivers of change, reshaping the organization and conduct of funeral ceremonies

Fashion has long been intertwined with cultural expressions and societal rituals, reflecting individual and collective identities. Among the Ashanti, attire plays a pivotal role in funeral ceremonies, symbolizing respect for the deceased and their family and conveying social status and lineage. Traditional funeral garments, characterized by intricate patterns, vibrant colours, and symbolic motifs, hold deep cultural meanings, serving as visual markers of mourning and remembrance (Anderson, 2024; Mateo, 2024; Bass-Krueger, 2023).

However, the influence of contemporary fashion trends has begun to permeate Ashanti funeral attire, introducing new styles, materials, and aesthetics. The adoption of Western clothing styles alongside traditional garments reflects shifting cultural dynamics and globalized influences. Additionally, the emergence of fashion designers specializing in funeral attire has further diversified choices for bereaved families, presenting opportunities for personalization and self-expression during mourning (Anderson, 2024; Mateo, 2024).

In parallel with advancements in fashion, technology has been progressively integrated into Ashanti funeral practices, reforming various aspects of ceremony organization and commemoration. The escalation of communication

technologies involving mobile phones and social media platforms has promoted the efficient dissemination of funeral information, enabling widespread participation and support from distant relatives and friends (Ehondor, 2021).

Furthermore, technological innovations have enhanced the memorialization process, with digital platforms offering avenues for creating virtual memorials, sharing memories, and preserving legacies. Multimedia presentations, online obituaries, and live-streamed funeral services have extended the reach of Ashanti funerals beyond physical boundaries, accommodating diasporic communities and facilitating cultural continuity amidst globalization (Ehondor, 2021; Nansen et al., 2017).

The convergence of fashion and technology in Ashanti funeral practices represents a novel yet pertinent phenomenon emblematic of the cultural adaptability and resilience of the Ashanti people in the face of modernization. While rooted in tradition, the incorporation of contemporary elements reflects a dynamic cultural landscape wherein age-old customs coexist with evolving societal norms and technological advancements (Nawaz (2023).

Moreover, Asante (2023) and Nawaz (2023) argue that the growing prevalence of fashion and technology in Ashanti funerals underscores their intrinsic relevance in facilitating meaningful commemorations and fostering community cohesion. By embracing innovative approaches to ceremony organization and memorialization, the Ashanti community reaffirms the enduring significance of funeral rituals in honouring the departed and supporting the bereaved amidst changing times.

Despite the evident influence of fashion and technology on Ashanti funeral practices, a comprehensive understanding of their practical implications and potential challenges remains elusive. Existing scholarship predominantly focuses on traditional aspects of Ashanti funerals, overlooking the dynamic interplay between cultural tradition and modern influences.

This study aims to examine the multifaceted roles of fashion and technology in the organization of funerals among the Ashanti in Ghana. In order to address this issue, it seeks to examine the influence of fashion on Ashanti funeral practices, explore the role of technology in the organization of funerals, and identify the practical implications and potential challenges associated with the integration of fashion and technology in funeral ceremonies. However, the following questions were formulated to guide the study:

- How has fashion influenced Ashanti's funeral practices?
- What role does technology play in the organization of funerals?
- What are the practical implications and potential challenges associated with the integration of fashion and technology in funeral ceremonies?

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Art and Culture of the Ashanti People

The Ashanti people of Ghana, renowned for their rich cultural heritage and vibrant artistic traditions, have captivated scholars and enthusiasts alike with their intricate rituals, expressive arts, and dynamic social structures. Ingrained in centuries-old traditions and historical legacies, Ashanti art and culture reflect a tapestry of beliefs, values, and practices that continue to shape contemporary Ghanaian society.

The history of the Ashanti people from the perspective of Parker (2023) is intertwined with the rise and fall of one of West Africa's most powerful kingdoms, the Ashanti Empire. Emerging in the late 17th century under the leadership of King Osei Tutu, the Ashanti Empire expanded through military conquests and strategic alliances, establishing its dominance over vast territories in present-day Ghana and parts of the Ivory Coast. Central to the empire's strength was its sophisticated political organization, intricate social hierarchies, and a thriving economy based on gold trade.

Central to Ashanti culture are their religious and spiritual beliefs, which encompass a blend of indigenous animism, ancestor veneration, and reverence for natural forces. Traditional religious practices revolve around the worship of ancestral spirits and deities, with rituals and ceremonies conducted to seek guidance, protection, and blessings from the spiritual realm. The Ashanti pantheon includes a diverse array of gods and spirits, each associated with specific domains such as fertility, agriculture, and warfare (Hiebert & Tienou, 2024).

Baah et al. (2023) write that Ashanti art is characterized by its exquisite craftsmanship, symbolic motifs, and creative designs, reflecting the cultural values and aesthetic sensibilities of the Ashanti people. Among the most celebrated forms of Ashanti art are their woodcarvings, including intricately carved stools, ceremonial masks, and figurative sculptures. These artistic creations serve diverse functions, ranging from ceremonial objects used in rituals and festivals to status symbols denoting social rank and authority.

Inkingi (2024) believes that music and dance are integral components of Ashanti cultural expression, representing as vehicles for storytelling, communal bonding, and spiritual connection. Traditional Ashanti music features a diverse ensemble of instruments, including drums, bells, xylophones, and flutes, each with its own unique rhythms and melodies. Dance forms such as *Adowa* and *Kete* are performed on various occasions, from royal ceremonies and religious festivals to social gatherings and rites of passage.

The social organization of the Ashanti people is characterized by a complex system of kinship ties, age-grade associations, and hierarchical structures. At the apex of Ashanti society is the Asantehene, or king, who serves as the paramount ruler and spiritual leader of the Ashanti people. Under the king is a network of chiefs, nobles, and lineage heads, each responsible for governing their respective territories and upholding traditional customs and laws (Kquofi et al., 2023).

2.2. Technologies Employed in the Organization of Modern Funerals

Technology in the sphere of social media plays a significant role in the planning and organization of programmes in the 21st century. Human effort in some activities, such as marketing, business meetings, merry events, and most especially funerals, has become less due to the advent of social media (Opoku & Baiden, 2023).

In contemporary societies, the organization of funerals has been significantly influenced by technological advancements, transforming traditional practices and introducing innovative approaches to commemorating the deceased (Nansen et al., 2017).

Digital communication platforms, including social media, email, and messaging apps, have revolutionized how funeral information is disseminated and shared among bereaved families and their social networks. Gulotta et al. (2016) are of the view that social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter serve as virtual spaces for announcing funeral details, sharing obituaries, and expressing condolences, thereby extending the reach of funeral invitations and facilitating community engagement.

The advent of live-streaming and video conferencing technologies has facilitated virtual participation in funeral ceremonies, allowing distant relatives, friends, and acquaintances to attend memorial services remotely. A study by Rawlings and Tieman (2022) suggests that live-streamed funerals provide a sense of inclusion and closure for individuals unable to attend in person, enabling them to participate in rituals of mourning and commemoration from afar. Online memorialization platforms, such as memorial websites, virtual tribute walls, and digital guest books, offer bereaved families personalized spaces to honour and immortalize their loved ones. These digital platforms provide opportunities for sharing memories, photos, and videos, creating lasting tributes that transcend geographical boundaries and temporal limitations (MacNeil et al., 2023; Kwadzie, 2019).

Funeral planning apps and websites have emerged as valuable resources for organizing funeral arrangements, managing logistics, and coordinating with funeral service providers. Rainsford et al. (2017) highlight the convenience and efficiency of digital tools in facilitating end-of-life planning, enabling individuals to document preferences, select funeral merchandise, and communicate wishes to family members and caregivers.

The immersive experiences provided by virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technology improve the memorialization process and enable the creation of interactive tributes to the departed. VR and AR applications enable users to explore virtual commemoration, visit simulated grave sites, and interact with digital avatars representing the deceased, fostering novel forms of remembrance and connection (Lo, 2023).

2.3. The Influences of Fashion on Funeral Practices

Fashion plays an important role in shaping cultural practices and rituals, including those associated with death and mourning. Throughout history, clothing has served as a means of signaling social status, religious beliefs, and cultural identities in funeral rituals. Ikram (2015) and Bass-Kruejer believe that ancient civilizations such as the Egyptians and Romans adorned the deceased with elaborate garments, jewelry, and accessories to prepare them for the afterlife, reflecting cultural beliefs about death and the transition to the next realm.

The attire worn by mourners and the deceased often carries deep symbolic significance, conveying messages of respect, mourning, and commemoration. As noted by Adamson and Holloway (2013) and Davey (2020), black attire has long been associated with mourning in African cultures, symbolizing grief, solemnity, and piety. Similarly, specific colors, fabrics, and accessories may hold cultural or religious significance in funeral rituals, representing traditions and customs passed down through generations.

Funeral fashion is not static but changes over time in response to changing social norms, cultural values, and fashion trends. A study carried out by Johnson (2014) showcases the influence of contemporary fashion on funeral attire, with mourners increasingly opting for personalized, non-traditional clothing choices that reflect individual style and expression. This shift towards more casual or eclectic funeral fashion depicts broader societal changes in attitudes towards death and mourning.

Gender norms and expectations also shape funeral fashion, influencing the types of attire deemed appropriate or respectful for mourners of different genders. Johnson (2014) reveals how gendered clothing expectations persist in funeral rituals, with men often expected to wear traditional wrappers or casual attire, while women may face greater scrutiny over their clothing choices, balancing expressions of grief with societal standards of modesty and decorum.

The rapid increase of social media platforms has introduced new dynamics to funeral fashion, with mourners sharing photos and memories of the deceased online, affecting perceptions of grief and mourning. Social media platforms such as Instagram and Pinterest have become virtual spaces for documenting funeral attire, exhibiting personal style, and seeking validation or support from online communities (Greenfield, 2021).

2.4. Practical Implications and Challenges of Incorporating Fashion and Technology into Funeral Ceremonies

The integration of fashion and technology into funeral ceremonies represents a contemporary phenomenon that has changed traditional practices and introduced innovative approaches to commemorating the deceased. Fashion plays a pivotal role in funeral ceremonies, serving as a means of expressing respect, grief, and cultural identity. Traditional funeral attire often adheres to cultural norms and customs, with mourners wearing somber colours and conservative styles to signify mourning and solemnity (Johnson, 2014). However, modern trends in funeral fashion have diversified clothing choices, allowing mourners to express personal style and individuality while honouring the deceased.

Advancements in technology have transformed various aspects of funeral ceremonies, offering new tools and platforms for organizing, documenting, and memorializing the deceased. The integration of fashion and technology into funeral ceremonies offers several practical benefits for bereaved families, funeral organizers, and mourners. Digital

commemoration platforms provide personalized spaces for sharing memories, photos, and condolences, fostering a sense of community and support. Funeral planning apps and websites streamline logistical tasks, such as arranging transportation, selecting burial plots, and coordinating with service providers, reducing the burden on grieving families during a challenging time (Beard & Burger, 2017).

Despite the potential benefits, the incorporation of fashion and technology into funeral ceremonies also presents challenges and ethical considerations. Cultural sensitivity is paramount when introducing new technologies or clothing styles that may conflict with traditional customs and beliefs. Privacy concerns arise regarding the digital documentation and dissemination of funeral proceedings, raising questions about consent, ownership, and appropriate use of personal data. Additionally, disparities in access to technology may exacerbate inequalities in funeral participation and memorialization, particularly among marginalized communities (Beebeejaun et al., 2021).

3. Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the novelty, benefits, and challenges associated with the role of fashion and technology in Ashanti funeral practices. Qualitative methods are well-suited for capturing the nuanced perspectives and experiences of participants regarding cultural practices and social phenomena (Tracy, 2019; Stutterheim & Ratcliffe, 2021). The participants in this study consist of members of the Ashanti community residing in Ghana, specifically individuals who have been directly involved in organizing or participating in funeral ceremonies. Participants include bereaved family members, community leaders, funeral service providers, and individuals with expertise in Ashanti culture and traditions. Purposive sampling was utilized to ensure diversity in experiences and perspectives. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and participant observations. Semi-structured interviews permit in-depth exploration of participants' attitudes, beliefs, and experiences related to fashion and technology in Ashanti funeral practices. Interviews were conducted in person or via video conferencing, depending on participants' preferences and logistical considerations. Participant observations supplemented interview data by providing insights into the practical dynamics of funeral ceremonies, including clothing choices, technological usage, and social interactions.

On the other hand, thematic analysis was used to analyze interview transcripts and observational notes. This approach involves identifying patterns, themes, and categories within the data to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' perceptions and experiences. The analysis process entailed several iterative steps, including data familiarization, coding, theme development, and interpretation. NVivo qualitative analysis software was employed to facilitate data organization and coding.

Ethical considerations are crucial in conducting research involving human participants, particularly in sensitive cultural contexts such as funeral practices. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board or ethics committee. Additionally, informed consent was solicited from all participants, ensuring voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time. To respect cultural protocols and customs, the researchers engaged in cultural sensitivity training and established rapport with participants prior to conducting interviews or observations. Pseudonyms were utilized to anonymize participant identities when reporting findings.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Presentation of Results

The study involved thirty (30) participants, comprising bereaved family members (n = 10), community leaders (n = 8), funeral service providers (n = 8), and individuals with expertise in Ashanti culture and traditions (n = 4). The participants were between 25 and 65 years old, and they were diversely represented across gender and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Many participants expressed enthusiasm for the incorporation of fashion and technology into Ashanti funeral practices, viewing it as a means of modernizing traditional rituals and preserving cultural heritage. Bereaved family members appreciated the opportunity to personalize funeral ceremonies through clothing choices and digital memorialization platforms, enhancing the sense of connection and individuality in honoring the deceased. Fashion innovations, such as contemporary funeral attire and custom-made mourning garments, were considered beneficial for expressing grief and identity while adhering to cultural norms.

Technology facilitated communication and coordination during funeral planning, with participants highlighting the convenience of digital platforms for disseminating funeral information, coordinating logistics, and connecting with distant relatives and friends.

Despite the perceived benefits, participants identified several challenges associated with the integration of fashion and technology into Ashanti funeral practices. Cultural sensitivity appeared as a primary concern, with participants showing apprehension about the possible erosion of traditional customs and values in favor of Westernized influences. Privacy and consent issues were raised regarding the digital documentation and dissemination of funeral proceedings, prompting discussions about ethical guidelines and the responsible use of technology in mourning rituals.

Community leaders emphasized the importance of maintaining cultural authenticity and inclusivity in funeral practices, advocating for a balance between innovation and tradition to ensure the meaningfulness of ceremonies. Funeral service providers emphasized the role of technology in enhancing service delivery and accessibility while also acknowledging the need for cultural responsiveness and flexibility in accommodating diverse mourning practices.

4.2. Discussion of Findings

The study explored the novelty, benefits, and challenges associated with the role of fashion and technology in Ashanti funeral practices. The findings indicate the complex interplay between tradition, innovation, and cultural identity in Ashanti funeral practices. While participants expressed appreciation for the benefits of fashion and technology in enhancing mourning rituals and facilitating community engagement, concerns about cultural authenticity, privacy, and ethical considerations underscored the need for thoughtful integration and respectful adaptation of modern practices, and this assertion is in consonance with the concerns of Beebeejaun et al., (2021) on the need to protect and respect the privacy of the deceased as well as the bereaved family.

The results suggest a nuanced approach to navigating the intersection of fashion, technology, and cultural traditions in contemporary funeral ceremonies among the Ashanti community. Community leaders emphasized the importance of balancing innovation with tradition to maintain cultural genuineness, while funeral service providers highlighted the potential of technology to enhance service delivery and accessibility.

The findings align with the initial research objectives by providing insights into the practical implications and challenges of integrating fashion and technology into Ashanti funeral practices. Again, it sheds light on the complex interplay between tradition, innovation, and cultural identity, offering valuable perspectives from diverse stakeholders within the Ashanti community.

Patterns observed in the data include a desire for personalized mourning rituals, the reliance on digital platforms for communication and coordination, and concerns about cultural erosion and privacy issues. These trends highlight the dynamic nature of funeral practices in response to societal changes and technological advancements.

Another profound technology that the study amassed is the introduction of quick response codes (QR codes), which are gradually replacing the printing of brochures, posters, banners, and invitation cards during funerals. This technology is very cost-effective and relieves the bereaved members of the hustles and stress they sometimes go through.

The findings have significant implications for understanding the evolving nature of funeral rituals and cultural traditions in contemporary societies. By acknowledging the benefits and challenges of fashion and technology integration, the study informs discussions on cultural preservation, community cohesion, and ethical considerations in funeral ceremonies.

On the other hand, the findings revealed varying perspectives on the extent of innovation in funeral practices and divergent opinions on the role of technology in preserving cultural authenticity. These findings underscore the complexity of cultural adaptation and the importance of context-specific approaches in funeral planning.

The robustness and reliability of the findings are supported by the use of qualitative research methods, including semi-structured interviews and participant observations, which allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives and experiences. However, the study's generalizability may be limited by the small sample size and the specific context of the Ashanti community in Ghana.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study delved into the integration of fashion and technology in Ashanti funeral practices. The research objectives were to explore the novelty, benefits, and challenges associated with the integration of fashion and technology in Ashanti funeral practices. Based on the analysis and findings, these objectives have been achieved by uncovering stakeholders' perspectives, identifying key themes, and assessing their implications for funeral ceremonies.

Through in-depth discussions with stakeholders from the Ashanti community, significant findings emerged, shedding light on the intricate dynamics of modernizing funeral rituals while honouring cultural traditions. The study revealed a keen interest among participants in embracing fashion and technology to personalize funeral ceremonies and enhance communication. Innovations such as personalized mourning attire and digital memorialization platforms were recognized for their potential to facilitate grieving processes and foster community engagement.   However, concerns regarding cultural authenticity, privacy, and ethical considerations underscored the importance of balancing innovation with tradition in funeral planning.

The study's outcomes have significant implications for understanding the evolving landscape of funeral rituals and cultural practices in contemporary societies. By acknowledging the multifaceted influences of fashion and technology, the study contributes to discussions on cultural preservation and community cohesion in funeral planning. Furthermore, the findings offer practical insights for practitioners and policymakers seeking to develop culturally sensitive approaches to funeral ceremonies. Again, it suggests the need for culturally sensitive approaches to funeral planning that incorporate both traditional customs and modern innovations. Practitioners and policymakers can use these insights to develop guidelines and policies that promote respectful and inclusive funeral practices. Future research could explore alternative approaches to addressing the challenges of cultural adaptation, ethical considerations in funeral ceremonies, and the long-term impacts of fashion and technology integration on bereavement experiences and community cohesion.

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