

Exploring the Suitability of Blangidi Fabrics for Making Dresses for Children

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Abstract

The use of blangidi in making dresses for the girl child is a critical path to transmitting the cultural values of the Ijaw tribe to the next generation and the global scene. It gives the contemporary African fashion designer an unmatched opportunity to explore the balance of creativity and modernity. This study explores the suitability of the blangidi in making dresses for the girl child. Blangidi fabric is a woollen flannel material common among Niger Delta natives of Nigeria. An assortment of motifs and designs are printed on the flannel to represent the cultural symbols of the people. The Isi-agu (lion head) print, commonly used by the Igbos in the Southeastern region, has gained mainstream attention. However, there are numerous other blangidi prints. The study adopted a multi-method approach, using participant observation, interviews and studio-based design to achieve the research aim. The result indicates that blangidi fabrics meet the requirements set by scholars for fabrics suitable for making dresses for baby girls. Blangidi is revealed to be a close substitute for cotton and silk, as such, its incorporation into making dresses is appropriate.

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Background to the Study

Several fabrics are utilised in making dresses for the girl child, such as cotton, silk, and polyester. Fashion designers and parents have expressed their opinions on the relevance of choosing the right fabric in making dresses for children (Dogbey et al., 2015; Osei et al., 2023; Ofori et al., 2014). It has been revealed by another study that the characteristics of these fabrics are essential in determining their suitability for making clothing for children (Burks et al., 2021).

Children are playful and always in motion (Hewes, 2014). Therefore, there is a need to select fabrics that can easily adapt to these characteristics. This includes fabrics that are resistant to stains and do not fade easily due to constant washing. Appropriate fabrics for making dresses for the child are durable and easy to wash. Moreover, care must be given to the consideration of the tenderness of the fabric to the skin of the child. Therefore, it becomes expedient to examine the unique characteristics of fabrics used in making dresses for the girl child given the unique behaviour and activities children often exhibit.

One characteristic of contemporary African fashion is the increasing incorporation of African textiles and culturally relevant elements into making fashion trends (Debeli et al., 2013). Blangidi fabric has gained prominence among the Ijaw tribe located in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria (Daly et al., 1984). It is a woollen flannel printed with various forms of designs and motifs, this includes a lion/leopard head, elephant tusk, flying birds, jumping antelopes, geometric shapes, and other elements which have cultural significance. Of these various prints, the lion and leopard head, and the elephant tusk prints have become widely used among the Igbos of the south-eastern region of Nigeria (Ibemisi, 2014; Madukasi, 2018). The lion head motif is popularly called the Isi-Agu and has received the most public acclaim and mainstream adoption in the Nigerian fashion industry (Ajinginmi, 2020).

This study aims to examine the suitability of this fabric for making dresses for the girl child. Using the fabric to make dresses for the girl child allows contemporary fashion designers to further explore the evolution of the blangidi fabric. Also, this study provides an avenue to examine the specific features of the blangidi fabric that make it suitable for making dresses for the girl child. Furthermore, the cultural relevance of incorporating blangidi in making dresses for the baby girl is examined in this paper. This stems from the need to preserve cultural values and the uniqueness of traditional values alongside the associated aesthetics.

Literature Review

Dress: An evaluation of numerous scholarly publications reveals that providing an accurate and universal definition of the concept of "dress" is challenging. Given that dress has an intuitive meaning that is commonly understood by people in different locations and contexts, it becomes challenging for scholars to mark out a clear scope for the concept (Hester & Hehman, 2023).

Drawing from years of observing and studying the dress culture of African societies, Eicher & Roach-Higgins (1992) posit that, in the African context, dresses are used for more than the conventional value of body covering and beauty. Rather, to the natives, represents an effective means of non-verbal communication. The authors proffer the definition of dress, based on their observation: "as a comprehensive term to identify both direct body changes and items added to the body." They further expound on the socio-cultural aspect of dress in African traditional societies as "an assemblage of body modifications and/or supplements displayed by a person in communicating with other human beings.

Furthermore, Johnson et al. (2014) add that the diverse body modifications mentioned by Eicher and Roach-Higgins include "cosmetic use, piercing, tattooing, dieting, exercising, and cosmetic surgery" among other supplements and accessories. In Western cultures, elements such as shirts and pants are usually associated with dresses, however, it becomes difficult to yet adopt other elements such as hair, makeup, tattoos, and purses as part of the concept (Hester & Hehman, 2023). This is not the case in African cultures.

Furthermore, Hendrickson (1995) highlights the significance of the dress as a "social skin" through which societal values and meanings are physically imposed on the body. Several researchers indicate a strong association between dresses and perception. Dresses are recognised as elements of social communication, as it has been utilised by revolutionaries to pass the message of change. Additionally, dresses are perceived as a means of personal and social identity. Researchers have also demonstrated that the use of dresses can be used to determine the feelings, mood and personality of the wearer. These indicate the critical role dresses play in society.

In addition, the concept of dress provides an effective avenue for influencing and inculcating the values of gender roles in the girl child (Arvanitidou & Gasouka, 2013). From birth, the girl-child is exposed to the non-verbal communication of societal expectations of their gender roles, and how they can attain these expectations (Eicher & Roach-Higgins 1992). In addition, the girl child learns to differentiate between the male and female genders.

Evolution of Children's Clothing:

Historians note that children's clothing, before the twentieth century, did not distinguish between genders (Ashelford, 1996; Callahan & Paoletti, 1999). However, by the eighteenth century, the practice of swaddling children with linen wrappings began to decline due to the medical beliefs of how this clothing style affected the development of children. John Locke is noted for his influential works which advocated for the development of light pieces of clothing for children, further leading to the end of the swaddling style (Buck, 1996). With the end of the swaddling, the use of "long clothes" began to gain prominence, and gradually transitioned to frocks that usually got to the ankles of the children as they crawled (Calvert, 1992). Various kinds of clothing such as skeleton suits and layettes began to emerge after this, as parents and fashion designers

began to explore clothing that gave children easier mobility. With the advent of the 19th Century, there began to emerge a difference between boys' and girls' clothing. Trousers became common as they replaced breeches, while the girls continued to wear skirts from infancy to adulthood. With the rise of the sex revolution, it became increasingly popular for women, as well as girls, to wear trousers. The use of blue jeans, which had been considered masculine, became increasingly adopted by both genders. It must be noted, however, that this account is peculiar to the European and other Western cultures.

Colour Preferences

Before the 1900s, the association of the male and female genders to the colours blue and pink had not become popular. It is worthy of note that until the 1930s, the blue colour was associated with girls and women, while the pink was associated with the boys and men. Previous scholars in the 1990s highlighted that there is no remarkable preference for either the blue or pink colours among boys and girls (Schaefer, 1993; Smith, 1998; Goldberg, 1999; Robinson, 2001). Instead, children generally preferred primary colours such as blue and red – as against secondary colours such as pink and orange. However, more recent studies indicate that there is an observed preference for pink colours among girls, and blue colours among boys (LoBue & DeLoache, 2011). Also, Boyatzis & Varghese (1994) highlight that boys are more likely to associate positive emotions with the use of positive colours. However, the study highlights that most children who participated in the study attach positive emotions to bright colours such as blue, red and pink.

LoBue & DeLoache (2011), through a cross-sectional study of kids aged between seven months and five years. The result of the research indicates a noticeable trend: at the ages of 2 and above, girls have developed a remarkable preference for the colour pink, while boys prefer blue. However, below the age of two, children's choices based on colours did not exhibit a regular pattern. Furthermore, Halim et al. (2013) add that between ages three and five, Therefore, it can be inferred that children's selection of colours is a societal construct acquired as an essential component of socialisation whereby the preference of parents, influenced by societal norms, are transmitted to newborn babies. As children grow, advertising and media agents further influence them through colour-stereotyped advertisements. The persuasive association of some kinds of colours and shapes to certain genders is responsible for the children's colour preferences, and not the difference in cognitive development between the two genders.

While the subject matter of colour preference between children of both genders has been extensively researched in the Western world, there is a notable lack of research on this phenomenon in Africa, and about African fabrics. Given that African traditional fabrics are rich in colours and patterns, the lack of literature on colour psychology in the African context is perplexing. Therefore, future research can further is needed to fill this gap and explore the interplay of colour, gender and cultural identity in Africa.

Contemporary African Design

The goal of the study is to evaluate the suitability of the blangidi fabric in making contemporary dresses for the girl child. Contemporary African designs is a term used to

illustrate African style and cultures via fabrics and fashion styles that are either of African or Western origin, which has become accepted as African style (Utoh-Ezeajugh, 2021). This indicates that African fashion or designs do not necessarily mean styles and fabrics that originate from Africa. Akinwumi (2021) notes that a vast majority of the fabrics and styles known as “African” were produced neither by nor in Africa. This is true of the blangidi fabric. Blangidi fabrics are still largely produced in England, from where it is being imported to Nigeria (Michelman & Eicher, 2016). Contemporary African designs, therefore, integrate fashion elements with culturally relevant outcomes.

Fabrics for Making Dresses for the Girl Child

The need to consider the characteristics and safety of the various fabrics used in making dresses for children has been explored by scholars (Burks et al., 2021; Forsberg & Mansdorf, 2007; Ross, 2008; Dogbey et al., 2015). This indicates that considerations for selecting suitable fabrics for making dresses for the girl child should exceed considerations of beauty and appeal. Rather, priority should be given to the child's comfort and health (Forsberg & Mansdorf, 2007).

The study undertaken by Dogbey et al. (2015), which samples the opinions of 100 designers and parents reveals that the primary consideration in choosing fabrics is the comfort and safety of the child. Burks et al. (2021) highlight that natural fabrics instead of synthetic fabrics. This involves paying careful attention to the chemical compositions used to make the fabrics. Given that the child's skin is delicate, tender and thinner, it is prone to absorb excess chemicals present in certain fabrics. Additionally, Ross (2008) highlights that clothes used in making dresses for the baby girl should be resistant to fading and, as such, should be made of natural and low-impact dyes that do not wash off easily. Lack of due consideration to these factors, Burks et al. (2021) note, might result in complications in the child's developmental process such as; hormone imbalance, soreness of cheeks and ears, hyperactivity etc.

Role of Contemporary Fashion Designer in Dressing the Baby Girl

Fashion design, from time immemorial, has played a critical role in socialisation and acculturation (Crane & Bovone, 2006). Fashion artists, through their unique skills, have perpetuated and reinforced societal preferences, as well as mapped out the course of several revolutions. Dresses serve as the easiest visible reference to society's notion of masculinity and femininity (Badaoui et al., 2016). In traditional African society, the child learns how to dress from observing the mother and other older females from an early age (Daly et al., 1984). Through the socialisation process, the child is exposed to societal norms and values and is allowed to ask questions about the dress culture. The use of blangidi fabrics for making dresses for the baby girl helps to preserve the cultural heritage of the Kalabari people (Ike & Obi, 2018).

Benefits of Using Blangidi in Dressmaking for the Girl Child

In the contemporary fashion scene, the use of African traditional fabrics provides fashion designers the opportunity to explore a broader creative horizon through the

incorporation of African values and style into modern fashion. However, in incorporating the fabrics with making dresses for the girl child, attention has to be given to the suitability of the fabric for this use. The blangidi fabric is acknowledged to be suitable for making dresses for both official and informal purposes (Chukwuemeka & Okafor, 2019), its suitability in making dresses for girls needs to also be ascertained.

Study Area

The study area for this research is Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. Within the study area, a significant number of Kalabari, Okrika and other Ijaw subethnic groups are located. As such, the city is often considered a commercial and cultural hub for the various locations and tribes in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The capital of Rivers State, Port Harcourt is a fast-growing and vibrant city with a growing population of 3,480,000 based on the United Nation's estimation (UN, 2023). The UN report indicates that the city is growing at a 4.7% annual rate and is likely to continue. Based on another report, the population of Port Harcourt is projected to surpass the four million mark by 2025 (Macrotrends, 2023). This is a remarkable feat for a city with a population of just 1.1 million in the year 2000 and 2.5 million in 2016, at an annual growth rate of 5.1 per cent. The city's significance in Nigeria, as highlighted by its population, indicates that it represents 1.3 per cent of Nigeria's total population and 2.7 per cent of towns and cities in Nigeria. This rate of growth is projected to continue into the foreseeable future.

Additionally, the study area is a renowned commercial centre for sales of various articles, including fabrics such as *George*, *Akwa Ocha*, *Blangidi*, etc. Given that numerous traders and users of traditional fabrics are also located within the study area, conducting the research within this location gives the researcher access to key informants for the research. Furthermore, within the Port Harcourt, study area, several contemporary African fashion designers are located at various places in the study area. This ensures that the researcher has generous access to experts, professionals, and traders who have attained mastery of the use of the blangidi fabric. This is necessary for expert consultation in the process of designing the dresses in the study's studio-based research and an opportunity to gain in-depth insight into the research methodology. Some of the respondents in the interview were located on the outskirts of some villages around the study area. Insight from these respondents is necessary to highlight the cultural significance associated with the use of blangidi fabrics in making dresses for the girl child. These, and many more, make the study area a cultural and professional hub for effective conduction of the study's aims and objectives.

Geography of Study Area

Port Harcourt metropolis is located at Longitude 6°55'E and Longitude 7°05'E and Latitude 4°55'N, and Longitude 6°55'E (Okunola et al., 2021). The city lies between 9 and 12 meters above sea level (Igwe et al., 2021; Okunola et al., 2021). Administratively, the city is divided into Local Government Areas, namely, Port Harcourt and Obio/Akpor (Okunola et al., 2021).

Similar to other towns and cities in the Niger Delta region, Port Harcourt is characterised by the presence of extensive river networks and creeks which carry water and debris southward to the Atlantic Ocean (Igwe et al., 2021). In addition to the complex river channels in the city, there are social issues of poor urban planning, ineffective means of waste disposal, and poor drainage systems. As such, the city witnesses multiple flooding events annually alongside air, land and water pollution (Izeogu, 1989). The city of Port Harcourt is rich in crude oil deposits. Oil exploration commenced in the city in 1937 and has grown to become the primary source of oil for the entire country. Both oil extraction and refining are simultaneously carried out in the study area within two oil refineries located within the city (Ogbuigwe, 2018).

Methodology

This study adopted a multi-method approach to the research topic. This involved the use of qualitative, descriptive and studio-based research methods. The choice of multi-method to explore the suitability of the blangidi fabric in making dresses for the baby girl. For the qualitative approach, the study utilised key-informant interviews to sample the opinion of blangidi fabric stakeholders within the study area. The purposive sampling method was used to select key persons from the population who will help the researcher achieve the objectives of the study. Fabric artisans, fabric dealers, fashion designers, the elderly and some custom custodians of the people were the target key participants. In all, thirty participants were selected for this study; five traditional chiefs, five blangidi fabric dealers, five fashion designers, and 15 users, including children. A semi-structured, face-to-face interview for each of the participants was conducted to obtain reliable responses. The questions were translated and restructured for interviewees who were unable to communicate in English.

On the other hand, the use of descriptive research involved the adoption of participant observation, which allows the researcher to both observe how the locals use the blangidi fabric in their local events and to be a part of these ceremonies. This method requires that the researcher becomes an active member of the phenomena or community he wants to study. In addition, the researcher conducted careful observation of the activities of fabric sellers, designers and custodians of the Ijaw cultures. The observations made were captured in field notes and subsequently included in the report writing process. Finally, the findings from the interview and observations made in the field were creatively explored by the researcher to create seven contemporary dresses for baby girl dress models aged between one and seven years. The insight gained from the field was incorporated into making dresses in a way that upholds the cultural heritage of the people while introducing novel design styles that deviate from conventional styles.

Data Analysis

The data from the qualitative interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. This involved identifying, analysing, and categorising the various responses received from the interview. Furthermore, narrative analysis were carried out to review the personal experiences of the researcher in conducting the participant observation.

Results

The result of the study highlights the aesthetic, social, cultural and spiritual significance of the blangidi fabric among the locals. Together with other fabrics such as George, Akwa Ocha, and Pelebite, blangidi fabrics are widely associated with the socio-cultural identity of the people.

When asked their opinion concerning the researcher's aim to incorporate blangidi fabrics in making contemporary dresses for the girl child, most of the respondents gave positive support. Some participants added that the blangidi fabric is a dynamic fabric that keeps evolving. They referred to the use of Isi-Agu among the Igbo ethnic group. Isi-Agu is a type of blangidi print with a lion-head motif. Given the symbolism of the lion/leopard head in the Igbo culture, it has since become associated with royalty in almost all Igbo cultures. To the interviewees, using the blangidi to make Western-style dresses is an avenue to extend the culture of the Ijaw people to the rest of the world. These responses demonstrate that the use of blangidi fabric for the studio design and creative experimentation with trans-cultural styles did not threaten the meaning or symbolism of the blangidi fabric.

Aside from being a vital aspect of the social life of the Ijaw people, Blangidi fabrics constitute a vital aspect of the local economy for the locals. With the environmental degradation and pollution that has ravaged the agricultural yield of the region, the sales of fabrics have become an essential part of the people's livelihood. Respondents in the interview highlighted that the traditional fabric, haven gained mainstream attention, and has become a business for a lot of Port Harcourt residents.

Before making the dresses, the researcher carefully observed and rated the features of the blangidi fabrics which makes it suitable for making dresses for children, and the girl child in particular. The researcher identified key features of fabrics used for making fabrics for children such as breathability, durability, texture (softness), vibrancy, easy-to-wash, and stain-resistant. Further, the features of cotton, polyester, and blangidi fabrics were rated, on a scale of one to five for each of the identified properties.

Table 1: Comparing the suitability of blangidi fabric alongside cotton and polyester in making dresses for the girl child.

Feature	Cotton	Polyester	Blangidi
Breathability	5 (Excellent)	2 (Low)	4 (Good)
Durability	4 (Good)	3 (Moderate)	4 (Good)
Softness	5 (Excellent)	1 (Poor)	5 (Excellent)
Colours & Designs	4 (Good)	5 (Excellent)	5 (Excellent)
Eye-catching	4 (Good)	5 (Excellent)	5 (Excellent)
Easy to Wash	5 (Excellent)	4 (Good)	3 (Moderate)
Stain-resistant	3 (Moderate)	5 (Excellent)	4 (Good)
TOTAL	30	25	28

Source: Researcher's observation

The result indicates that blangidi fabric is a close substitute to cotton for making dresses for children, and by extension, the girl child. The researcher observed that blangidi fabrics had excellent colour and designs, was appealing to the eyes, and possessed a soft texture. Furthermore, the breathability, durability and stain resistance were rated 4/5 points. However, the fabric has a moderate score (3/5) when it comes to the characteristic of being easy to wash when compared to cotton and polyester which had higher scores. Overall, blangidi fabric has a total score of 28, a close substitute to cotton, which had a rate of 30 points.

Studio-Based Research

For the studio-based design, seven party dresses were crafted for baby girl models who were between the ages of one and seven. The researcher began by making sketches on paper of what the dresses would look like. From the sketches, seven designs were selected and enhanced digitally. The fabrics were cut and arranged according to sketches, ensuring that the orientation of the motifs was maintained. The flat method was used in the sewing phase, followed by final adjustments and reinforcements.

Discussion

This study reveals the various characteristics of blangidi fabrics which make it suitable for making fabrics for the baby girl. The aesthetic features of the blangidi fabric is a feature that makes it a catch choice for making dresses for the baby girl. Studies have shown that children associate colours with emotions. Boyatzis & Varghese (1994) in a study that evaluated the colour-emotion association of children about clothing shows that almost 70 per cent of children who participated in the study indicated that vibrant and bright colours (such as blue, red and pink) made them feel happy. The study reveals that girls are more likely than boys to associate bright colours with happiness. The bright and vibrant colours of the blangidi fabrics, thus make it an aesthetically pleasing choice for making dresses for the girl child.

African fashion and textiles are notable for their distinctive colours (Debeli et al., 2013; Okpu & Abimbola, 2020; Heckspeil, 2007; Cyril-Egware, 2015; Cryil-Egware & Ajiginmi, 2017). There is a vast array of blangidi fabric prints rendered in various catchy patterns and motifs which the children will find attractive. The use of different motifs in blangidi fabrics presents an opportunity to introduce the girl child to the values and norms of the Kalabari society. These lessons can begin through learning the significance of the motifs in their dresses. This will ensure the smooth transmission of the Ijaw culture to the next generation. Additionally, these unique designs and patterns give fashion designers an easy opportunity to blend the fabric easily with other kinds of fabrics.

Another important consideration in the selection of fabrics for making clothing for children is the sensitivity of the children's skin. The texture and material used for making dresses for the baby girl an essential consideration to designers. Dogbey et al. (2015) highlight that designers and parents alike recommend the use of cotton materials or other natural fabrics for making dresses for children. According to the observations of the

researcher, blangidi fabrics possess a soft and tender texture which makes them suitable for making dresses for the baby girl. This softness is because the flannel is made from natural cotton and wool. In addition, blangidi's flannel is made from wool, hence it is natural and suitable for making dresses for children.

The blangidi fabric satisfies the requirement of breathability and durability in making children's clothes. This is an essential feature of fabrics to be used in making dresses for children (Dogbey et al., 2015; Burks et al., 2021, Ross, 2008). Considering the hot and humid climate prevalent in Nigeria, the fabric can absorb the moisture from the child's skin without irritating. However, it was observed that the cut edges of blangidi fabrics easily get loosed if not properly stitched. As such, care must be taken when making dresses for the baby girl with these materials to ensure that loose ends are properly taken care of to preserve their durability. More so, the blangidi fabrics require careful maintenance culture. The fabric must be always hand-washed and low temperatures only be used to iron the fabric.

Promoting African Fabrics

Literature stress the need for unrelenting promotion of African fabrics and fashion elements more to the global scene (Cyril-Egware, 2015; Bawa, 2021; Okpu & Abimbola, 2020; Ajiginmi, 2022). One way to achieve this is through the modelling of African textiles via formal and informal avenues, says Cyril-Egware (2015). The author emphasizes the informal modelling which involves Africans at home and in the diaspora wearing these traditional fabrics to events, including international events. Heckspeil (2007) highlight that there is an increasing trend of African women developing unique fashion styles that simultaneously embrace modern and traditional elements. The dresses made at the end of this study serve to promote the local fabrics to the globe by incorporating the blangidi materials into making international-standard wear. The dresses serve both for official and unofficial modelling functions.

Conclusion

The adoption of African textiles allows designers to make meaningful contributions to contemporary fashion design on the global scene. In addition to aesthetics, the African designer who adopts African fabrics in making contemporary designs infuses meaning and cultural significance into art. This study has revealed that the blangidi prints are apt for making children's dresses. Concerns over the suitability of blangidi in making dresses that will ensure the comfort and safety of the child have been addressed in this study based on scholarly observations. The result of this study justifies the use of the fabric to make dresses for the baby girl. Therefore, this provides an ample opportunity for contemporary fashion designers, parents and modelling firms to pay more attention to promoting traditional cultural values to the world. Further research is necessary to explore other themes related to culturally relevant fashion in the contemporary world, as well as provide empirical justifications for the use of other fabrics in making dresses for children.

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