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Oluwatosin Adelaja  
*Washington State University*

Carol J. Salusso  
*Washington State University, salusso@wsu.edu*

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Designing apparel for Nigerian women: addressing visual appeal, body type and sizing.

Oluwatosin Adelaja, Carol J. Salusso, Washington State University

KEYWORDS: design, culture, sizing, fit

Introduction. Nigerian women usually acquire apparel by visiting a dressmaker to order custom-made garments suitable to their body proportions and style specifications (Iloeje and Anyakoha, 2010). As in most African countries more contemporary Nigerian women are adopting Western style apparel (Baden and Barber, 2005). Nigerian women's desire for Western style apparel is mostly expressed through requisitioning custom-made clothing for upcoming social events where one African textile print is selected for all clothing people wear to the event. With growing demand for Western style apparel, dressmakers have challenges in having the resources or expertise to fit and flatter women of various sizes in western styling. As a result, most dressmakers limit their clients demanding western style apparel to smaller size women.

Method. The purpose of this study was to combine western style apparel with Nigerian fabric called *Ankara* to create designs to fit and flatter Nigerian women attending the same occasion. The *Functional, Expressive and Aesthetic (FEA) Consumer Needs Model* (Lamb & Kallal, 1992) was the conceptual framework for designing and interpreting an online Nigerian Target Market Preference Survey distributed to Nigerian women through women's associations in Nigeria. A total of 113 survey responses were obtained from women ages 18-35. The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to profile experiences with sizing, fit, and access to custom apparel produced by dressmakers. Classification of open-ended qualitative responses to rendered design proposals was coded relative to the FEA Model to identify themes in survey responses.

Results and Discussion. While 34% did not report problems with fit and sizing, 53% had considerable problems with getting a good fit (53%). However, size was not actually the biggest issues; 58% wore sizes 8 through 12, not deemed to be large sizes. Fit problems included areas that were too big or too small and simply not aligning to body proportions.

Only 13% had trouble requisitioning styles; the major issue was finding a dressmaker with the skills to create western styled garments that fit. Respondent's style preferences classified into three types: 1) western style outfits because they were easy to wear and comfortable; classy and smart looking; flattering to their body; and versatile for many occasions. 2) traditionally wrapped outfits because they were comfortable and easily fit their figure; they were easy to make due to low dressmaking expertise was needed; and cheaper than western fitted styles. 3) both western

and traditional style relative to the occasion. Respondents thought western style outfits were more suitable for work while traditionally wrapped styles were more suitable for social occasions. This result also revealed demand for a new fashion trend where many participants requested a hybrid of traditional style and western style.

At the same time, Nigerian women also love to be modest in their appearance out of respect for the culture and tradition of its people. Being modest entailed being uncomfortable with showing off shoulders and wearing garments that are too revealing of bust cleavage or bra straps.

Designing based on consumer research input demonstrated that listening to consumer needs and preferences makes a strong contribution to better understanding of market style preferences. The collective feedback from the survey was input into designing a Nigerian occasion attire collection across six sizes from S to 3XL. The photograph below shows the outcome indeed flatters these women across the three types of style preferences featuring *Ankara* fabric. with This collection was exhibited within African Nights Celebration; in a standing exhibition; and digitally shared with the groups that responded to the online survey.



Front view of all designs as a collection of Nigerian occasion attire.

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