



Crossdressing in the Digital Age: An Exploration of Social media's Impact on Identity, Community and practice

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Abstract— Crossdressing, a multifaceted and complex phenomenon, has long been a site of fascination and contestation. This paper sets out to investigate social media's influence on crossdressing identities and expressions. The study thus intends to answer the following research questions; how do crossdressers navigate binary gender norms in everyday life? What role does drag culture play in shaping crossdressing identities and practices? And how do online communities support or challenge crossdressing individuals' identity formation? By examining the motivations and reasons for crossdressing, the study seeks to present the effects of the practice of transvestism in the Cameroonian and Nigerian media space in particular, and Africa in general from a neutral perspective. The research problem is centered on the negotiation and construction of identity within societal norms by individuals who engage in crossdressing. The paper employs postmodernism and queer theory to deconstruct crossdressing, challenging traditional notions of identity, power and performance. By examining the fluidity of gender and sexuality, this study reveals crossdressing as a submersive practice that disrupts traditional notions of masculinity and femininity.



Keywords— Crossdressing, social media, identity, community and practice.

I. INTRODUCTION

Crossdressing simply put, refers to the act of wearing clothes that are usually reserved for the opposite gender. Contextually, it is most often used to refer to male dressing in female clothing. However, in the Cameroonian and Nigerian media space, it is arguably seen as an identity and a practice. More often than not, crossdressing and transvestism are used as synonyms. Transvestism as introduced by Hirschfeld (1910) refers to “the practice of dressing in clothing traditionally associated with the opposite sex, often for personal satisfaction, relaxation or sexual arousal” (p.11). Crossdressing individuals may be homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual. Though wearing the clothing of a different sex is part of the behavior of many transgender individuals, it is not necessarily the same as crossdressing. “Transgender describes people who feel that their gender identity is different from their biological sex” Pillai (2019). It should be noted that, dressing according to gender identity as a transgender, is not necessarily the same as cross dressing. However, some

of these aspects can be relative and might not apply in certain societies. This paper deals primarily with males dressing as females because it is a practice and an identity that is gaining audience, fascination and contestation in the Cameroon and Nigerian online community. The paper has as case study, three content creators from Cameroon and Nigeria who identify as crossdressers on social media with the names; Auntie Felicia, Dorcas Comedy World and Bobrisky.

Character profile of crossdressers understudy

Dorcas Comedy World



Dorcas “no bobi” as “she” is popularly known is a Cameroonian content creator and comedian, based in the town of Buea in the South West Region of Cameroon. She gained fame and stardom in 2021 with her creative and hilarious niche of content as a crossdressing comedian. She is identified with her trademark/brand which is a combination of an average height dark woman in a royal-blue gown with sky-blue markings, white socks in blue sandals, yellow flask (cooler), long hair and headscarf, a handbag and exaggerated makeup. Her character traits centers around a mixture of a comic traditional and modern African woman who finds pleasure in gossiping about her fellow female folks and is always ready to be aggressive if provoked. She has collaborated severally on comedy skits with Capees and her fellow crossdresser colleague, Auntie Felicia. Dorcas has mastered the art of crossdressing content which has amassed her huge following across social media and an international performance in Europe and America.

Auntie Felicia



Popularly known for referring to her fans as “my wuru wuru people”, Auntie Felicia is that comic African woman who gossips about anything she finds worth talking about. She is a Cameroonian content creator and comedian with a unique visual presentation. She is dark in complexion, slim and tall. She is often in a royal-blue loin cloth tied round her waist, a lemon-green blouse, a leopard skin-like muffler wrapped round her neck, an old brown handbag she matches with some old brown shoes and a bright multi-colored Igbo-like headscarf she wears as crown. She is very versatile in her gossiping job such that she always outsmarts her partners in gossiping. She has also collaborated on comedy skits with her fellow crossdresser colleague, Dorcas and other Cameroonian comedians like Senior Pastor, Richard and Capees. Her dedication to her craft has earned her international recognition as she performed in Europe and America.

Bobrisky



Also known as mommy of Lagos, Bobrisky is a famous Nigerian fashion model, social media personality, LGBTQ activist and an entrepreneur. When it comes to crossdressing in Africa, Bobrisky is second to none. She is famous for her flamboyant and androgynous appearance, juxtaposed with her social enticement lifestyle which most often than not has always been a topic of controversy. She gained fame on social media, particularly snapchat and instagram and became known as a crossdresser for her bold feminine appearance and unapologetic attitude. With this rise to fame, she began sharing makeup tutorials and fashion content on social media which saw her gain more followers within a short period of time. As a crossdresser and fashion model, she has openly identified as a trans woman which has left many people with diverse opinions as to whether she is telling the truth or just catching cruise. A critical analysis of her alleged transgender journey from her pictures before and after the process (present appearance), seem to prove her right. In addition, she has admitted to have undergone liposuction surgeries to achieve her feminine figure. As testament to her influence and dedication to her craft, she has won a series of awards with the most recent being the best dressed “Female” at a movie premier.

II. METHODOLOGY

The methodology used for data collection and analysis in this paper is a combination of digital ethnography and exploratory interviews. The former is in turn, made up of various qualitative methods such as participant observation, the study of a particular online community: the users of a social media platform oriented towards (but not limited to) the crossdresser community. If ethnography is a research process characterized by the close observation and engagement in the daily life of another culture (Marcus & Fischer, 1999), digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2016)—also referred to as virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000) or netnography (Kozinets, 2010)—is a research process focused on studying the ways in which individuals navigate the Internet and the ways in which social practices are articulated online (Mason, 1999) by

observing and engaging in cyber cultures. Online communities exist as “villages of activity within the larger cultures of computing” (Laurel, 1990, 93). Through this method of digital ethnography, I was able to identify and classify the various opinions of social media users in the Cameroonian and Nigerian media space on how online communities support or challenge crossdressing individuals’ identity formation. With the recent increase in online bullying, harassment and violence, particularly directed to vulnerable groups, I was conscious that participants’ privacy and confidentiality should be central to my ethical decision-making as an online researcher (Linabary & Corple, 2018). This was done with the purpose of fulfilling ethical consideration which is a necessity in research.

Types of crossdressing

Crossdressing as a concept has several ways in which it can be expressed by those who engage in its activities. This includes but is not limited to heterosexual crossdressing, homosexual crossdressing, transgender crossdressing and drag culture.

1. **Heterosexual crossdressing:** this type of crossdressing refers to the practice of an individual, typically a man, dressing in clothing traditionally associated with the opposite sex, mostly for personal or sexual gratification. This can be done as a means of personal expressing of creativity, sexual arousal, relaxation and exploration of femininity. Heterosexual crossdressing can be done as occasional crossdressing, regular crossdressing, private crossdressing or public crossdressing.
2. **Homosexual crossdressing:** according to Ekins and Kings (2006), Bullough and Bullough (1993), Stryker and Whittle (2006), Homosexual crossdressing refers to the practice individuals who identify as gay or homosexuals dressing in clothing traditionally associated with a different sex or gender, often as a form of self-expression, identity or eroticism. Homosexual crossdressers, crossdress for reasons of self-expression, eroticism and attraction, community-belonging and exploration of gender and sexuality. Among homosexual crossdressers are drags and activist (LGBTQ+ individuals).
3. **Transgender crossdressing:** transgender crossdressing refers to the practice by individuals who identify themselves as transgender or non binary, dressing in clothes traditionally associated with people of the opposite sex or gender. Transgender individuals do so for reasons

included but not limited to gender identity-expression, seeking confidence, social transition and self-discovery. In relation to types of transgender crossdressing, there exist part-time, full-time, private and public crossdressing for transgender individuals.

4. **Drag culture:** drag culture refers to the practice and performance art by individuals who dress as exaggerated versions of men and women known as drag queens and kings, often for the purpose of entertainment. Drag culture dates back to the 19th and 20th centuries, having its roots in the theatre and vaudeville traditions where men will dress up as women, while women will dress up as men for comic performances. As a rising practice, drag culture gained mainstream attention in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly with the release of films like “Paris is Burning” (1990) and “To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everthing! Julie Newmar: (1995). In terms of performance and artistry, drag culture is characterized by drag shows, lip syncing and dancing, mimicry, comedy and improvisation. Drag culture identifies with identity and self-expression, drag houses and families and LGBTQ+ communities. It is a movement having a high influence and impact on pop culture, fashion and beauty, social justice and activism.

It should be noted that regardless of which type of practice, crossdressers in general, face challenges which includes but is not limited to social isolation, harassment and violence, discrimination, low self-esteem, relationship challenges and mental health concerns.

Contextualizing crossdressing

In terms of contextualizing crossdressing, we are going to pay attention to two categories of crossdressing that is; crossdressing as a practice and crossdressing as an identity.

Crossdressing as a practice

Crossdressing as a practice constitutes the wearing of dresses and accessories generally associated with the opposite sex or gender, without necessarily identifying as a different gender. In terms of characteristics, crossdressing as a practice may be done occasionally or recreationally, publicly or privately and may not involve a shift in gender identity. Therefore, it can be argued that crossdressing as a practice is a form of drag culture. Butler (1993) argues that “drag and crossdressing reveal the performative nature of gender by exposing its artificiality” (Butler, p.125). In this regard, it is also arguable that from the three crossdressers under study, two of them

crossdress as a practice that is; Auntie Felicia and Dorcas Comedy world. This is because they identify as content creators in their crossdressing in general, and as comedians in particular. This also accounts for why they are booked occasionally to perform and entertain their audience. Therefore, in this research, Dorcas comedy world and Auntie Felicia are identified as drag queens.

Crossdressing as an identity

Crossdressing as an identity refers to an individual's personal sense of self, and expression of gender through clothing and other forms of presentation. In terms of characteristics, crossdressing as an identity involves a person wearing clothing traditionally associated with the opposite sex or gender, and identifying as that sex or gender different from the one that was assigned at birth. Therefore, crossdressing as an identity involves a gender nonconformity identity. At this juncture, it can be fair to say that transgender is a product of crossdressing as an identity. This is because transgender individuals refer to gender dysphoria, body modification, mental health concerns and social transitions as some of their reasons for identifying as a gender nonconformity persons. It can therefore be argued that as opposed to Auntie Felicia and Dorcas comedy world, Bobrisky is a transgender. Bobrisky has always identified as a transgender female and she has recently been advocating for the rights of LGBTQ+ community as an activist in the LGBTQ+ online community.

The reception of crossdressing in the Cameroonian and Nigerian media space

As earlier mentioned, the aim of this article is not to accept or reject transvestism, but to examine the role it plays and the influence it has since its emergence in the world of popular culture in general and the Cameroonian and Nigerian media space in particular. This is to say that, the reception of crossdressing varies among societies and is greatly influenced by the cultures of these societies. While crossdressing seem to have been generally accepted in the Nigerian society, on the other hand, the scenario in Cameroon is a sharp contrast as even the most popular crossdressers suffer from perpetual backlashes from the online community. These instances of Cameroon's rejection and Nigeria's acceptance are evident from the comments made under the post of the crossdressers understudy. Auntie Felicia and Dorcas for example will have more of negative reactions on their post (content) whereas Bobrisky on the other hand will receive more praises, admiration, approval and shares on her post despite finding herself in the same nitch as her Cameroonian colleagues. It is important to note that both Nigerian and Cameroonian crossdressers suffer from

criticism from the online community but at different degrees based on cultural and religious orientations. From a postmodern point of view, the situation looks normal based on the concepts of relativism. Furthermore, the penal code of Cameroon and Nigeria doesn't criminalise crossdressing therefore; crossdressing in these countries is not an offense or crime against the state.

On the 24/03/2024, Nigerian cross-dresser Okuneye Idris popularly known as Bobrisky, wins award of best dressed female for the movie premiere night of *Ajanaku Beasts of Two World* (2024). He/she's announcement as winner has left a great majority of Nigerians in general and women in particular questioning the situation and criteria under which a male cross-dresser is declared winner in a female category award. In reaction to the award, some Nigerian celebrities have questioned the credibility of the event organizers towards the integrity of women in general and the female gender in particular. An example of such celebrities is veteran Nollywood actor, Ugezu J. Ugezu who used his social media handle, Ugezu J. Ugezu to express his thoughts as he says:

So many people have lost it. How can a man win a price for the 'Best Dressed Female' in an event organized by human beings? Is this not a slap on the face of our women who are working hard every day to be the best of themselves? Sometimes, I pause and ponder, where are we headed in this country? (Ugezu J. Ugezu)

Most of the celebrities are of the opinion that given the fact that he is not a female by sex but rather trying to mimic females through cross dressing, the award is void and illegal unless the cross-dresser can publicly proof to poses all the attributes of a female. However, with postmodernism as a theory having relativism as one of its major characteristics, there seem to be an unending debate of individual's choices and their effects on the society. This is so because postmodernism has as one of its main objectives to break away from the metanarratives of modernism such as universalism, which advocates for a common standard and belief system for all mankind and give man the freedom of choice in every aspect of life regardless of what was formerly practiced. Therefore going by postmodernism, it is not a taboo or wrong practice to cross-dress and why not win awards while doing so. Postmodernism through relativism therefore comes as a vindication to cross-dressers of their rights and privileges that were caged by modernism and the eras before it. In addition, when discussing about gender as performativity, Butler (1990) opines that "gender is not an innate identity but rather a series of social performances dictated by social norms" (Butler, p.125). this is to say that

Bobrisky should not be judged based on her gender because no one was born with a particular gender but rather people choose to perform a particular gender based on societal constraints.

In a related development, in an interview with *Diaries Africa*, Dorcas had this to say in response to rumors of him allegedly being gay

People don't understand my character "Dorcas", because if you understand the character, you won't be criticizing Dorcas. Dorcas is a loose woman. That's the character I portray, the character of a loose woman. So when they see this and consider the fact that it's a guy behind this, they turn to pay more attention to the gender-person, person behind the character, than the character itself. So that's where they get the misconception and tend to criticize and call me gay. (Tardine Celestine)

From the above quotation, it was observed through engagements on the post that despite coming out to categorically insist that his sexual orientation is a straight; Dorcas still witnessed a lot of backlashes from the media which arguably seems not to be ending anytime soon. He even attested that some of these criticisms base on a misinterpretation of his character affects his mental health.

J.F Lyotard in "The Postmodern Condition" makes it known that postmodernists believe man shouldn't be subjected to living by conventions but should rather be given the right to choose how they want to live their lives (Lyotard, p. 150).

It is important to highlight that most of the conventional practices in the society originated from religious beliefs. Every religion encourages procreation and there is none that encourages homosexuality for example. Postmodernists however believe that the world is an existentialist place where God has given mankind the right to choose the way of live and be responsible for the consequences of the choices made. This is the same with the cross-dressers understudy as they live in a postmodern society and therefore have the right to choose the way the want to express their gender and sexuality with the consciousness of bearing the consequences of their choices. This is in line with why J.F Lyotard in "The Postmodern Condition" quotes Boyne who opines that

Social philosophy must continue to address the rights of the others. It must continue to address those political practices which exclude the others in a multitude of subtle and not so subtle ways [...] and agitate for the many subordinate voices, such as: prisoners, homosexuals, the mentally ill,

the unemployed, children, ethnic minorities, unbelievers, and believers [...] (p.153)

From the above quotation, Boyne is of the premise that human beings are free to express themselves as they wish. Therefore they may choose to adhere to the laws of the society or choose not to adhere to it knowing fully well that life depends on the choices they make. Therefore to postmodernists, if a person is born female and choses to behave as male and vice versa, such a person is not to be judged by his/her peers in the communities in which they live because it is his/her choice and he/she will bear the consequences of such behaviors and not them. This means that to postmodernists, Auntie Felicia, Dorcas Comedy World and Bobrisky, should not be judged by their peers because of their choices as they all bear the responsibilities that come with their choices.

The use of the word postmodern can be traced as far back as the 1870s. However, it is only in the 1960s that it began to acquire popularity among literary critics. In the 1970s and 80s, it spread to other fields of studies, such as architecture, philosophy, politics and sociology. The proponent of postmodernism include Jean Francois Lyotard, Charles Olsen, Richard Rorty, Willard Van Orman Truth: De-confusing and Re-constructing the postmodern World makes us to understand that postmodernism is a reaction against modernism. He says that while modernism was based on idealism and reason, postmodernism is based on skepticism and a suspicion of reasons (4).

Therefore, postmodernism is a philosophical movement that revolts against modernist grand narrative. One of this modernist grand narrative is the modernist believe in the notion of universalism. That is, the idea of having unique standard of beliefs that should be suitable for all mankind. For example, heterosexuality is considered to be a grand narrative of postmodernists. Postmodernists believe that people should be given the right to choose the way they want to live their lives.

It can be argued that most religions in the world see crossdressing as a sin before God who is the creator of the universe and a supreme being. This is particularly the case in Africa. This paper limits its analysis to Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion (A.T.R). According to the Bible, which is the written word of God and representative Christianity, "The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God" (Deuteronomy 22: 5 K.J.V). Christianity, through the Bible makes it categorically clear that crossdressing is a sin and it is an abomination before God. Therefore, any Christian

practicing crossdressing cannot find favor in God's eyes unless they repent from practicing such sinful acts. This means that in terms of Religion, crossdressing is a taboo act.

On the other hand, Jean-Paul Sartre through Existentialism emphasized human freedom and choice, stating, "Man is condemned to be free." This assertion by Sartre has been used by crossdressing individuals to justify their deviation from binary gender norms and that people should be free to express themselves as they choose. It can be argued that Sartre's "freedom as a fundamental condition" is both a liberating and burdensome assertion because it refutes any external justifications such as (tradition, religion or biology) that can influence how we live. If this premise is accepted, then it means all forms of gender expression including crossdressing is not something that can be said to be naturally "right" or "wrong"; it is rather a personal choice that individuals make to define themselves (22). This is to say that Auntie Felicia, Dorcas Comedy World and Bobrisky are expressing their sexuality in a manner that is neither right nor wrong thereby making it normal social practice. Sartrean existentialism through his *Existentialism is Humanism* therefore argues that personal identity is not dictated by external forces but is rather fluid and self-determined. If existence precedes essence, then no rigid gender norms can prescribe how one should dress or express themselves. From this premise, crossdressing is an assertion of personal freedom and authentic rejection of "Bad Faith" (Mauvaise Foi) (24). It is a direct expression of the radical responsibility that comes with being human: the necessity to choose and define oneself rather than confirm to socially imposed illusions.

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