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User-Generated Content (UGC) and Fashion Media: A Study of *Asoebibella* in Nigeria

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Abstract

The process of news and media consumption is changing. Digitization has led to the restructuring of traditional journalism at every stage of the information exchange process, and the traditional process of information consumption and the role of the audience is evolving. Online lifestyle and fashion platforms such as *Bella Naija* are currently shaping the fashion journalism landscape in Nigeria. User-Generated Content (UGC), which is a feature of modern-day journalism that affords users the liberty to assume roles as information producers, is one of the tools employed by *Bella Naija* in generating content and attracting its audience. A fashion segment on the *Bella Naija*'s platform, *AsoEbiBella*, has developed into an online fashion lookbook with the content produced mainly by users. Leveraging participatory theory of communication, this paper investigates the involvement of the audience in the process of information gathering, publishing, and media platform sustainability. Using content analysis, this research analyzes the role of the audience using a sample size of fifty-five volumes of the *AsoEbiBella* digital platform. Findings show that whereas the role of the audience is crucial, evolving, and influential, the administrators of online media platforms still wield considerable authority and play a critical role in the publishing process.

INTRODUCTION

Fashion journalism in Nigeria is dominant in the style columns of newspapers, lifestyle, and fashion magazines but is also expanding to other forms of media such as fashion commentaries on television shows, online blogs, and influencer marketing. Prominent magazines such as *Genevieve Magazine*, *Today's Woman*, *Glam Africa*, and *Exquisite Magazine* have been classified as “fashion magazines” (Olanrewaju, 2018), but a closer look reveals that these magazines are not solely focused on fashion topics, but touch on lifestyle and societal issues as well. Traditional newspapers such as *The Guardian Nigeria*, *Vanguard Nigeria*, and *Thisday Nigeria* are principally news-centred, but include fashion columns and glossy insets during the weekends. Content usually includes fashion tips, interviews with prominent personalities with emphasis on their fashion preferences, and commentaries on fashion weeks, styles, and trends observed home and abroad. Increasingly, the fashion journalism landscape in Nigeria seems to be riding on the strength of User Generated Content (UGC), which Carpentier (2011) describes as website content created by the audience or user of online platforms. This trend has changed the way information flows within the fashion sphere creating an environment that depends heavily on not just the editors but also the audience. The content shared on *AsoEbiBella*, an online fashion lookbook section on the fashion and lifestyle blog, *BellaNaija* is a good example of a fashion-centric publication that incorporates user generated content in Nigeria.

Kperogi (2012) notes that the journalistic sphere in Nigeria has undergone changes since the late 1990s. Adapting to a dynamic and digital landscape, traditional Nigerian newspapers have launched online versions of their print copies. There are also transnational online media by Nigerian citizens in the diaspora that have attracted readers from both home and abroad. Such platforms include *Sahara Reporters*, *The Times of Nigeria*, *The Nigerian Village Square*, and *PointBlankNews*.

Nonetheless, the local online media platforms have also carved a niche for themselves using different strategies. One of the popular online media platforms in Nigeria is *Bella Naija* (Morlin-Yron, 2016; Soetan, 2013), an online news and information site that focuses on fashion and lifestyle content. The website was founded by Uche Pedro as a personal blog in 2006 (Matazu, 2018) with content centered on Nigerian fashion and celebrities. The blog later transformed into the website *BellaNaija.com*, attracting over one million visitors monthly and expanding as an entertainment, lifestyle, and fashion platform (Lionesses of Africa, 2014). The key sections covered on the website include weddings, news, events, comedy, music, features, movies and TV, beauty, and relationships.

One of the feature pages dedicated to style on *BellaNaija* is *AsoEbiBella*, which is a platform that showcases pictures of individuals and groups at various events. Pictures are mostly submitted by the users of the platform and are selected by the website administrator for online publishing — a form of UGC that will be explored in greater depth later in this article. In order to understand how and why the *AsoEbiBella* platform encourages UGC, it may be useful to present some facts about the name and its appeal to popular culture in Nigeria, especially the south-west region of the country.



FIGURE 1 A FAMILY PICTURE SHOWING A MOTHER AND HER DAUGHTERS ACCOMPANIED BY THE MALE GRAND-CHILD DRESSED IN BLUE LACE ASO EBI (SIMILAR COLORS AND PATTERNS) WITH MATCHING HEADGEAR. THE DAUGHTERS ARE WEARING A SKIRT AND BLOUSE STYLE PAIRED WITH A HEADGEAR KNOWN AS THE GELE, WHILE THE MOTHER IS DRESSED IN THE TRADITIONAL YORUBA CLOTHING KNOWN AS IRO, BUBA AND GELE, WHILE THE MALE CHILD IS DRESSED IN TRADITIONAL YORUBA MALE ATTIRE KNOWN AS AGBADA, SOKOTO AND BUBA, PAIRED WITH THE TRADITIONAL CAP KNOWN AS FILA.

The term *AsoEbiBella* is derived from the word *Aso-Ebi* in Yoruba, which means family clothing amongst the Yoruba ethnic group in Nigeria, and *Bella* — an Italian word meaning beautiful.

The *Aso-Ebi* culture was made popular by the Yorubas, who are considered one of the three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria. The practice has been described as a “communal adornment of identical attires, symbolizing distinct categories of social relations” (Tade & Aiyebo, 2014). This type of clothing is usually worn for outings such as weddings, birthday parties, or funerals. Typically, people are given a uniform dress code to comply with, while they adapt their personal styles to suit the occasion. This uniform dress code can be reflected in colors, styles, or the type of fabric used. Although its historical origin can be traced to traditional native wear, the *Aso Ebi* culture has evolved to incorporate a hybrid of traditional and modern styles (Tade & Aiyebo, 2014). The popularity of the practice amongst the Yorubas and other cultures in Nigeria perhaps explains why the *AsoEbiBella* platform can spur UGC.

Globally, journalism is experiencing a paradigm shift and fashion journalism is not excepted. Digital technology features enable comments, sharing, and contribution amongst various users (Deuze, 2001; Kperogi, 2012; Taylor & Francis, 2016). In Nigeria, the digital evolution has opened more channels for individuals, fashion influencers and existing media houses to run online fashion blogs and platforms that are focused on the African fashion industry. Previously, there seemed to be a heavy reliance on content from the Western fashion media but there is now a growing increase in local fashion content. Opportunities abound to investigate changing media climates as traditional roles of news processing evolve. This study using the participation theory of communication as a theoretical construct, examines the changing role of users in the information exchange process as it relates to fashion media. *AsoEbiBella*, a fashion features section on *Bella Naija* was analyzed. This paper addresses three major details: first, the role of the user in content gathering and dissemination on online platforms; secondly, the various categories of users that converge on online platforms; thirdly, the role of the media owner in the publishing of user-generated content available on online platforms.

ONLINE JOURNALISM: THE RISE OF UGC

While acknowledging that there is no universally accepted definition for UGC, Carpentier (2011) describes UGC as website content produced by users. Bruns (2016), defines UGC as an umbrella term for a wide range of media and content categories that are solely created or co-created by its audience referred to as “users”. Thus, consumers of information become the creators of media content. The content includes text, photos, audio-visuals, educational content, movie content, and virtual content (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2007). In the past, UGC has also been labelled User-Created Content (UCC). Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2007) defines UGC using three features: public content available on the internet; some requirement

of creativity in content development; and content creation void of professional practices. However, these features may not apply across all UGC platforms. For news platforms such as CNN and Nigerian-run Channels television, where citizens can submit newstories, there is still a degree of “external” influence exercised by the media organization in news selection (Palmer, 2012), which is part of their gatekeeping function.

As digital technology advances, traditional practices and processes of content generation and dissemination have evolved. From production to dissemination, the audience have become more involved in professional media practices, which include news selection, news gathering and coverage, news editing, and dissemination (Franklin, 2014). This trend has been able to survive and thrive in the environment of “participatory culture” which Jenkins (1992) describes as the evolving flow and process of information that has resulted in the way content is created and shared amongst the producers and consumers of information. The strict barriers for content production, dissemination and contribution is getting low with the help of digital platforms. Social media influencers and bloggers are becoming experts. Even for media channels that seem “traditional”, user generated content is seeping into their content production and dissemination process. Nowadays, it is not unusual for CNN correspondents to discuss tweets and posts gathered online. Same goes for the fashion sphere, where sometimes fashion journalists discuss and review fashion elements posted on Instagram or Facebook. They even go further to discuss the comments of followers under such posts, hence incorporating the opinions and content from the users of those platforms into the journalistic process.

Youtube has been identified as a major site for sharing user-generated video content, receiving over a hundred hours of videos in a minute. The platform also shares a percentage of its advertising profits with some of its content creator partners (Bruns A. , 2016). Owing to the widespread collaboration and involvement of the audience in information gathering, creation, and dissemination on the internet, *Time* magazine named “You” as person of the year 2006 (Rich, 2006; Waxman, 2016). This is a tribute to the ubiquitous role of the consumers of online content who also double as the producers of content in some instances.

There are various types of ways the audience participate within the media sphere. Kammer (2013) highlights four categories of audience participation — sharing of information; conversation; meta-communication; and collaboration. Information sharing presupposes that the audience assumes the role of the source. Prior to the emergence of online platforms, the practice of information sharing already existed in traditional media through opinion polls and interviews. In the digital era, the audience share their images and videos with media agencies on happenings within their environment (Robinson, 2009). Usually, the gatekeeper function is evident here, as the editors select which information is posted or shared with the public.

Conversation is another type of audience participation. For online platforms, this means engagement between the news platform and their audience. It is not uncommon to find news platforms replying comments posted by the audience and having conversations on information shared on their site. The third type of audience participation is meta-communication, which explains how information is exchanged between the journalist and the audience. This interaction addresses the journalistic processes and the coverage of the news being presented. In other words, the audience interrogate the practice of the journalist. The fourth type of audience participation is collaboration. In such contexts, the journalist and the audience form an alliance that allows the audience to share information with the journalist. For example, a New York-based fashion journalist may gather additional information about Lagos Fashion Week from participants and attendees at the event through their live coverage on social media such as Twitter and Instagram. This material can be used in addition to the information garnered from their news representative in Nigeria. Sometimes, the audience also corrects the information that the journalist may have otherwise overlooked. The type of audience participation applicable to this study is *collaboration*, as it captures the symbiotic interaction between the audience and the journalist. The journalist provides the public platform for exchange, while the audience supplies the journalist with information that usually goes through gatekeeping before publication. Here, the audience assumes the role of *producer* as described by Bruns (2005), as a hybrid of *producer* and *user*. Hence, the user of the platform becomes the producer of information.

THE EVOLVING LANDSCAPE OF FASHION JOURNALISM IN NIGERIA

Roy (2011) defines fashion journalism as an all-encompassing term that includes the elements of “published fashion media” in both print and electronic forms with the aim of disseminating information on happenings in the fashion industry such as trends, innovations, fashion designers, and the entirety of the fashion business. A variety of roles exist within fashion journalism: fashion critics, fashion reporters, fashion writers, and editors. Bradford (2015) explains that fashion journalism is a combination of two areas — writing and fashion styling. Hence, the profession usually features individuals versed in the field of writing or fashion styling which is more inclined to fashion photo shoots. The author notes that the definition and qualification of fashion journalists vary depending on the kind of publication. For newspapers such as Nigerian-based *The Guardian* or *This day*, fashion journalists can be categorized more as writers who work in conjunction with stylists. Fashion journalists that work on general interest magazines targeted at women such as Nigerian-run *Genevieve Magazine* or international *Marie Claire* seem to have a bias for fashion styling (Bradford, 2015). Journalists that work for more fashion-driven magazines such as *Vogue*, *Elle*, and *New Look* seem to have more specific roles as fashion writers, focusing on fashion news and features. But

fashion influencers are fast breaking the traditional mold of what a “fashion journalist” should be, developing content based on their personal style and growing an online community through their videos, pictures, and blogs.

Just as much as the audience, users are breaking the mold and restructuring the traditional model of content production, dissemination and feedback in the fashion sphere.

Atkinson (2017) notes that the fashion press originated through the celebration, promotion, and the sale of fashion products, hence it is a type of journalism that benefits from and relies on the relationship between the press and the fashion industry. In the digital age, fashion shows that were once covert and restricted are streamed live on social media platforms (Hope, How social media is transforming the fashion industry, 2016). Personal opinions and cultural commentaries are also more featured in fashion journalism, aside from professional fashion criticism. Suddenly, the previously exclusive discourse of fashion which was solely determined by “fashion experts” is now open for debate and reconstruction by the general public, when previously traditional media and channels such as magazines and television programs were the principal mediums of communicating fashion and feedback was received via letters and emails. Now, blogs and social networks, especially Instagram, have become vital to fashion brands and magazines (Mohr, 2013). Their features include a pictorial format and functionalities such as liking, commenting, shopping, sharing, reposting, and story making. The audience is more active now, demanding for offensive posts to be deleted or suggesting topics in real time (Boyd, 2015; Maares & Hanusch, 2018; Moatti & Abecassis-Moedas, 2018; Odorume, 2012). The end user of the content rather than the model or the fashion editor is fast becoming king in the fashion industry now.

Digitization is bridging the gap across cultures and countries and redefining fashion from various cultural perspectives. Lagos city has been viewed as the style and fashion capital of Nigeria owing to its budding creative industry and its annual fashion weeks. Aside from the popular fashion talents emerging from this city, the media has also been largely responsible for this positioning of Lagos city as a fashion capital, as well as other emerging African fashion cities (Oberhofer, 2012). The fashion media landscape in Lagos and in Nigeria in general is burgeoning (Emina & Freeman, 2018).



FIGURE 2 A PICTURE OF TWO LADIES (FRIENDS OF THE BRIDE) AT A NIGERIAN WEDDING WEARING WINE-COLORED ASO-EBI MADE FROM LACE FABRIC. THE FABRIC AND HEAD GEAR IS THE OFFICIAL FABRIC CHOSEN BY THE BRIDE AS THE OFFICIAL WEDDING CLOTH FOR THE BRIDE'S FRIENDS.

FIGURE 3 A PICTURE OF A YOUNG LADY WEARING AN OFF-SHOULDER GOWN MADE FROM A PINK LACE FABRIC THAT IS THE OFFICIAL ASO EBI FOR A WEDDING. SHE HAS PAIRED IT WITH A MATCHING HEADGEAR, KNOWN AS GELE.



In Nigeria, fashion journalism can be traced to the evolution of traditional newspapers. The launch of the Nigerian edition of *Drum Magazine* in 1953 — a Pan-African magazine focused on lifestyle — marked the beginning of diversion from newspapers focused on news (Nwafor, 2011; Odorume, 2012). Years later, soft sell magazines such as *Ovation*, *City People*, and *Encomium* came onboard in the early 1990s, featuring more pictures from social events. These pictures presented people dressed in local and high fashion brands. Following the success of these magazines, glossy fashion pictorial magazines such as *Today's Fashion*, *Top Style*, and *Style Royale* were introduced to fashion journalism, displaying more pictures and less text. These “fashion pictorials” have been used by local tailors as a visual repository and catalog of traditional and trendy styles for their clientele (Nwafor, 2011; Odorume, 2012). Since then, fashion-oriented magazines in Nigeria such as *Genevieve magazine*, *Today's Woman*, *Glam Africa*, and *Exquisite Magazine* have expanded their distribution to reach other countries in both print and digital versions (Olanrewaju, 2018).

The modern and digital representation of these “fashion pictorials” are what can be described as “digital fashion pictorials.” *AsoEbiBella* is a typical example, as it adopts a digital approach, aggregating pictures from various individuals into a digital fashion lookbook that allows users interact with the information and also other users on the platform. However, it is important to emphasize that a significant percentage of the content on *AsoEbiBella* is user generated.

Social media and the rise of influencer marketing has also resulted in more fashion influencers and accounts that are focused on local fashion news and the promotion of Nigerian fashion. Influencers such as Derin Odugbesan (also known as Derin from Isale Eko), Noble Igwe, and Denola Grey are reconstructing the fashion journalism landscape through their Instagram pages and personal blogs. Rather than rely on the weekend news for updates and fashion highlights from Lagos fashion week or the AMVCAs, these fashion personas stream the event live, give their critique, and collate feedback on the outfits and collections from their social media audience/followers.

THE PARTICIPATORY CULTURE OF NEW MEDIA

The participatory theory of communication is derived from the concept of participatory journalism, which speaks to the collaboration between journalists and audiences in information gathering and dissemination (Karlsson, Bergstrom, Clerwall, & Fast, 2015; Pasquali, Noguera-Vivo, & Bourdaa, 2013; Picone, Courtois, & Paulussen, 2015; Plenkovic & Mustic, 2016). The concept of “participatory culture” is attributed to Henry Jenkins, who describes this theory as a situation where novices take part in the creative process previously assigned to only experts (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2009). Communities are borne from such cultures and these individuals collaborate and are active in the creative process otherwise regarded as sacred by the professionals involved. Participatory culture is defined by five features: low entry barrier to engagement; strong support for creators and collaborators amongst “community members”; a communal feeling that the contributions of participants are valuable; an informal mentorship system that allows the flow of knowledge from experts to novices; and social connection amongst these “community members” that reinforces the value of their output and contributions. This scenario particularly applies to online platforms such as *AsoEbiBella* which is the case in point for this article. Currently, the content on the platform is generated mostly from the audience who send in their pictures to be published on the platform. This same community of audience is also in charge of commenting and reviewing the content posted, adopting the role of fashion editor and content producer.

This culture of participation can take various forms (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2009). From the perspective of affiliation, fashion communities can be formed on an informal or formal basis using forms of media such as Facebook and Instagram. Another type of participation is expression, where individuals express themselves through the production of new creative outlets such as digital sampling and fan fiction writing. Participation can also take the approach of providing solutions collaboratively, by working in teams to solve problems and develop new knowledge, as is achieved through platforms such as Wikipedia and online community gaming. Another form of participation is circulations, where individuals can shape the flow of media through media such as podcasts and blogs. Circulations mostly applies to this case study, as the users on the *AsoEbiBella* platform determine the content on the platform.

All of these forms of participatory culture currently exist within the fashion journalism sphere. Instagram is a key part of the fashion space especially since it is focused mostly on videos and pictures.

While fashion magazines were previously the previous channels to disseminate information, blogs and social media are fast replacing this format and the audience is more involved in the creation and critique process that was formerly assigned to editors. Online real-time feedback has also greatly influenced the fashion production process.

During fashion shows (now mostly streamed live on Instagram for even luxury brands) the audience can drop their comments throughout the show, which is sometimes included in the articles of the fashion journalists to measure the reception of a fashion collection. There is also more collaboration from consumers especially when it comes to fashion sustainability with more users demanding better production processes and better working conditions for factory labor.

Prior to the digital age, the communication process was significantly inflexible with the source holding the ultimate position of sending information down to the receiver especially within the journalistic context. Unitary representations are evident in Harold Lasswell's communication model where feedback

and collaboration are absent (Servaes & Malikhao, 2008). This inflexible communication process was also reflected in fashion journalism, where trends and lifestyles were constructed and pushed to the audience to drive consumerism (Boyd, 2015). Now, fashion content is produced and curated in conjunction with its users and fashion blogs such as *Fashion Bomb Daily* (established in 2006, when the digital era was still in its early days) has over 2.4 million monthly visits from its audience. The blog has been described as the *web's number one destination for multicultural fashion*, and is often referenced in traditional fashion magazines (BOF Team; Galasso, 2017; Givhan, 2018; Harris, 2016; Hope, 2016; McKinsey & Company, 2018; Titus, 2017). Pasquali Noguera-Vivo & Bourdaa (2013) describe this flexible communication process as a *convergence of participations*, a merge between the media and audience practices that includes UGC. However, Jonsson and Ornebring (2010) note that audience participation in the news process is still limited. The medium administrator still has the ultimate control to publish, especially when they are the gatekeepers of a news platform. This rigidity may not last as the user dynamics of digital technologies and the media continue to merge and evolve.

The evolving communication process also shows that the role of the user is not stagnant or limited to a unitary function. Plenkovic & Mustic (2016) suggest a circular model of information to depict the multiplicity of roles evident in the communication process. The model explains that the positions of users and creators are constantly interchanged, as each assume various roles that include gatekeepers, motivators, mobilizers, and spokespersons. In this instance, the “producers” and “consumers” of the news and information seem to have merged to become prosumers (Plenkovic & Mustic, 2016). Correspondingly, Carpentier (2011) notes that audience participation can either be passive or active. He further highlights two categories of audience participation: *participation in the media* and *participation through media*. Participation in the media explains involvement of the user in the news production process and decision making. Participation through media describes a situation where users communicate in public discourse in public spheres through mediated engagement. Here, the audience is active and interacts with other users within the media sphere. Of the two categories proposed by Carpentier (2011), participation in media is more relevant to this study as it explains the collaborative engagement between the media platform and its users. For instance, on *AsoEbiBella* the audience is constantly engaged in collaborative activities to produce the content on the platform. Images shared by the audience become the content published by the administrator. In essence, *AsoEbiBella* thrives primarily on the photos produced through the collaborative engagement between the producers and users. The pictures published on the platform affirm the proposition that images are a key element of fashion journalism (Boyd, 2015; Phelps, 2019; Picone, Courtois, & Paulussen, 2015).



FIGURE 4 A PICTURE OF A MOTHER AND DAUGHTER DRESSED IN GOWNS MADE FROM THE SAME WHITE LACE FABRIC FOR A BIRTHDAY PARTY WITH HEADGEAR.

METHODOLOGY

Content analysis was adopted to investigate the material on *AsoEbiBella*. Krippendorff (2004) defines content analysis as a research method that “makes replicable” and “valid inferences” from various channels and media texts within the context of its usage. Downe-Wambolt (1992) describes this approach as a method that provides “systematic and objective means to make valid inferences from verbal, visual or written data in order to describe and quantify specific phenomena.” Hence, the researcher analyzes constructs from the medium vis-à-vis contexts in order to draw conclusions. A major advantage of content analysis is that it allows for replication of study (Bengtsson, 2016). The qualitative approach was adopted for this study as it involved reading through the content and identifying the various roles played by the community members on the *AsoEbiBella* platform. The analysis was conducted by coding all the posts authored by the publisher of the *AsoEbiBella* platform and the comments included by the users of the platform (for all the chosen volumes used in this study). The coding was conducted and reviewed by a single researcher. The codes were developed based on two categories of the community participants identified, administrator and user of the platform. Themes were developed and similar codes for the identified categories were mapped out. For example, sub-themes under the administrator category included “engagement in comment section by admin” and “platform updates,” while those from the platform user category featured sub-themes such as “request for fashion tutorials,” “enquiries on picture shortlisting,” and “appreciation comments for images posted.” These sub-themes were then further categorised under overarching themes that revealed the various functions (editorial, critiquing, contribution, etc.) performed by the administrator and the user of the platform.

As of February 20, 2019, *AsoEbiBella* had published 275 articles. In exploring sampling methods for news magazines that could be employed in arriving at inferences for a year, Riffe, Lacy, & Drager (1996) suggest that a monthly stratified sample of twelve issues would be more effective. Adopting this sampling method ensures that publications from each year since the inception of *AsoEbiBella* is duly represented. Randomness of the samples was determined using the *Kth* element, selecting the odd number five as the first count for the 275 population size. Hence, fifty-five editions (Every fifth count from Vol.5 to Vol. 275) were selected for analysis. However, only fifty volumes of *AsoEbiBella* were analyzed, as five volumes of the *AsoEbiBella* column were not available on the *Bella Naija* platform at the time of the analysis (Vol. 240, Vol 245, Vol 250, Vol 255, Vol 260), it seems they had been removed from the *Bella Naija* platform as at the date of this study with no explanation given. Fifty volumes were therefore analyzed in total with emphasis on the number of pictures submitted and the interaction between the audience and the platform administrator.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Each volume from the 50 editions chosen were analyzed using the exact comments (none of the user comments were edited for this study) and descriptions of the pictures that include tags detailing the information of those who have submitted their pictures. All pictures analyzed were watermarked with *AsoEbiBella*. Findings from the analysis are presented in the subsequent sections.

THE ROLE OF THE USER ON THE *ASOEBIBELLA* PLATFORM

Findings reveal that the user plays multiple roles. In traditional news process, only the producers played the “news producer” and “editorial” roles.

However, in the online sphere the user also doubles as a news producer and editor.

On the *AsoEbiBella* platform, users submit their images for publication thereby producing most of the content consumed on the platform by other users. In addition, users on *AsoEbiBella* make suggestions on the content published. For instance, in relation to submission guidelines, one of the users *Sparkle* (November 15, 2013 at 9:13 pm) comments;

The purpose of having *AsoEbiBella* section on your blog is to showcase the *Aso Ebi* itself, the material, the style and the person wearing it, I personally think any picture not showcasing the fabric or style very well shouldn't be posted, some pictures are showcasing the makeover not the *aso ebi*, some are taken in a car or sitting down so you really can't see the *Aso Ebi* well, I think BN needs to set rules and regulations about pictures that are allowed (just my opinion).

Users also play a role in the type of content displayed on the platform as evident in their feedback. One of the users requested for more fashion DIY (Do It Yourself) content to be featured on the platform. *Iya* (April 30, 2014 at 1:52 pm) mentioned;

BN! Please, please, it's time for a turban tutorial like so – http://www.bellanaija.com/wpcontent/uploads/2014/04/@iamart_prinmia.jpg Ejo, please, biko! Thank you!

Another comment from a user reflected a clamor to include a page focused only on fashion content showing kids in their *Aso Ebi* attire. *VeryAngryNigerian* (November 26, 2014 at 2:47 pm) stated:

BN.....STOPPPPPP EEEEEEEETTTTTTTT..... You need to have an Aso-ebi bella kids page.....It's unfair to merge adorable kids pictures with adults. No matter how good an adult looks immediately I see those kids, it erases any thoughts/comments I have of any adult person I have seen. Biko some of these girls (sometimes guys) have spent a fortune and lotsa time to make the Aso-ebi page, no take attention away from dem na.... e no easy na.....before you lay weave, contour face, position push up bra....then find perfect posing....filtering.....then deciding which one out of your 1000 pics to send out to BN.....ahhhhhh BN now.... haff merci..... 😊. Those kids...gorg!!!”

Users also celebrate the achievements of the *AsoEbiBella* platform, assuming a sense of joint ownership of the medium. This is captured in one of the expressions of some users. *Adetutu* (August 14, 2014 at 6:40 pm) mentioned: “Wow 50 volumes already! It's been fun all along. Golden indeed.” Another user *Favor* (July 30, 2015 at 11:32 am) commented: “Volume 100????? Wowwwwwww! This calls for celebration. You guys are doing a nice job, keep it up 🙌?”

DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF USERS ON THE *ASOEBIBELLA* PLATFORM

The analysis of the various volumes from the online edition of *AsoEbiBella* showed that there are different types of users with different motives. Content is generated by a variety of users, as the picture tags reveal names of individuals and business pages that included photographers, fashion designers, make up artists, fabric merchandisers, and jewellers.

The first category of users who submit their pictures to be uploaded can be classified as the *producers* in this case. They are non-experts within the fashion ecosystem contributing their pictures to the *AsoEbiBella* platform and perhaps only submit pictures just for the attention they are likely to get from other users of the platform. The second category of users are people that can be described as *specialist users*. They include fashion designers, tailors, fabric merchandisers, makeup artists, jewellers, photographers, and stylists. They submit pictures to promote their products and services. The third category are the *analyst users*. Users in this category function mainly as receivers of information and they interact with the information through their comments. An example of such an interaction can be found in the comment by *Horlatanwa* (February 23, 2014 at 12:39 pm) stating, “Thanks a bunch for featuring my niece @horlatanwa. @rihanna.” The user expresses her sense of belonging with a relative, whose picture was featured on the page.

The fourth category observed in this study is the *advertiser user*. These are individuals who visit the page for perceived audience attention and they advertise products. These comments, like the one highlighted below, reveals that the platform is a channel to connect to other stakeholders within the user ecosystem. *Tess (November 28, 2014 at 6:10 am)* states:

Thank you so much bellanija for featuring me nd recognising to d public for me that I made my dress my self God bless u big for this. I just need one more favour from you, am about to start up my fashion company nd I would be my greatest pleasure to make something beautiful for you. Please grant me this awesome opportunity. All I need is ur entire body measurements emailed to me nd I will surprise u with a design dat is very gorgeous with a very beautiful fabric. Thanks and God bless you. Anxiously waiting for d email.

THE ROLE OF THE PRODUCER ON THE ASOEBIBELLA PLATFORM

The producer in this case is the owner of the platform and also doubles as the aggregator of information. In the analysis, the producer is represented by the administrator of the page. Findings show that the producer, in addition to other roles, plays the traditional role of gatekeeper, deciding the images that eventually get published on the platform. In essence, the producer functions as the editor in manner that is similar to what obtains in traditional media, providing the editorial direction. Additionally, the producer actively engages users by responding to their enquiries. For example, the editor appealed to users on *October 2, 2013* for more content featuring pictures of stylish males and pregnant women stating:

Please send us more hot **male** and styles for **pregnant ladies!!!** Use the hash tag on Instagram or e-mail us weddings “at” bellanaija.com. If you didn’t see your pic here, no worries — tag a couple more — make sure they’re clear! See you next week! Xoxo.

Other interactions such as the conversation below between a concerned user and the editor reveal active engagement between the different categories of users and producer. *Anne (October 3, 2013 at 3:49 pm)* states, “When you tag them on Instagram with knee length outfits made with other fabrics they don’t even take one glance at you. We all made BN what it is today ooo not only those wearing the velvety stuff.” In response, the administrator replied using *BellaNaija Weddings (October 3, 2013 at 4:22 pm)*:

Hi Anne, Don’t know how you missed it, but we have posted many knee length styles in different fabrics. Even today:

<http://cdn.bellannaija.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/20131002-112238.jpg>

<http://cdn.bellannaija.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/20131002-112113.jpg>

<http://cdn.bellannaija.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/20131002-111550.jpg>

If we didn’t put it here, the account was private, or it probably wasn’t nice. We tried to be accommodating in the beginning, but people ended up insulting outfits and the person wearing it that they didn’t like. e.g. “what is this?”. If it wasn’t you/your friend, would the style still be nice? Is the person’s body — boobs hanging out, stomach protruding? Is it unflattering?

Keep in mind if you post a pic of 3 people and one has their boobs out, all the attention will be on that one even when her friends look decent and nice. As a publication, we have to maintain our standards. Other IG accounts — even for naija girls fashion don’t post all photos they are tagged in so it’s unfair to expect us to do the same. We’re trying to be objective and not have people be insulted after being so kind to share. Hope you understand. Thanks.

In the comments highlighted above, the administrator defended their publishing guidelines, even though the website has no well-defined guideline on the shortlisting process for the final selection of pictures chosen for publishing on the *AsoEbiBella* page. However, from the response of the page administrator, it is obvious that they do have internal guidelines that is not publicly available to their users. It can be deduced from the words “boobs hanging out”, “stomach protruding” and “is it unflattering” that there are certain standards of beauty that have been set for submissions. Standards that do not accommodate certain body types, personal fashion and a certain display of skin and perpetuate an assumed expectation of the “ideal” fashion narrative. These standards can be considered discriminatory especially since there are no clear pre-submission guidelines for their community of users. Noticeably, the administrator responded using the ID, *BellaNaija Weddings*. The *BellaNaija Weddings* is another feature section dedicated to weddings on the *Bella Naija* website. Initially, there was no separate administrator ID dedicated to *AsoEbiBella*, but this administrator ID was later introduced to manage comments subsequently on the *AsoEbiBella* feature page.

In addition to aggregating pictures, the producer also curates pictures. For instance, Volume 215 featured pictures of wedding guests at the celebrity wedding of Nigerian entertainer, *Banky W* and Nollywood actress, *Adesua Etomi* using the hashtag #BAAD2017. Hence, the platform is a combination of user-content and media-platform owned content.

CONCLUSION

As digital technology expands, users on content platforms such as *AsoEbiBella* will continue to define and reconstruct the traditional systems that shape various media interactions.

This study shows that online fashion journalism operates within an ecosystem that involves various stakeholders. While the lines of the producer and users of information seem to be disappearing, there are still defined responsibilities especially for the owner of the platform who has the ultimate power to approve content for publication.

They still play an “enabler” role providing the platform for users to contribute their information. As gatekeepers, they decide the final images uploaded on the platform.

Nonetheless, the user also plays an invaluable role as the audience is central to the survival of *AsoEbiBella*. Beyond serving as the producers, they unconsciously serve as news reporters, contributing to the sustainability of the platform. In the digital age even without media organizations, individuals and social media influencers wield a lot of influence in content creation and dissemination on their personal platforms, mostly social media pages. Therefore, media owners need to be aware of these dynamics and the need for them to be innovative in order to keep their audience interested in their media platforms.

Limitations of this study should be noted. Whereas the creators of the website intended to have only wedding pictures, it was difficult to ascertain that the images submitted are exclusively from wedding ceremonies. This speaks to the lapses of the UGC, as the administrator is unaware of the total adherence to the operational guidelines for the platform. It is also possible for people to upload pictures of others without permission. Likewise, the nature of the contribution of users to *AsoEbiBella* may not be applicable to other platforms since this is primarily a picture curation page.

Future research needs to go beyond content analysis and explore direct engagement with the producers and users in the fashion media space through surveys, interviews, or focused group discussions. This may aid in identifying the motivations for such collaboration on the part of the user, which might be helpful to producers in sustaining momentum and encouraging a participatory culture that is mutually-beneficial to all platform stakeholders.

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