

The Roles of Creative Intermediaries in an Emerging Field of Fashion

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ABSTRACT

This paper adopts a sociological perspective to study the emergence of the Rwandan field of fashion, focusing on the roles of creative intermediaries in shaping the symbolic and material production of “Made In Rwanda” fashion. Drawing on field theory (Bourdieu, 1993) and the Ubuntu research paradigm (Seehawer *et al.*, 2022), it presents an ethnographic case study of Kuza Africa, a Kigali-based fashion hub supporting designers in acquiring skills, accessing infrastructure, and securing funding (Kuza Africa, 2024).

Bourdieu (1984, p. 365) conceptualised cultural intermediaries as “tastemakers” mediating between producers and consumers. These intermediaries in the global fashion system have been studied as bloggers, international fashion buyers, and factory middle managers (Skov, 2002; Entwistle, 2006; Rocamora, 2006). Other research revealed generational differences where younger intermediaries challenge Western orthodoxy (Buchholz, 2022) and adopt entrepreneurial approaches to build creative careers (Skov, 2002). Comunian *et al.* (2021) expand on Bourdieu's concept by introducing the term “creative intermediaries,” referring to individuals and organisations that bridge gaps in resources, policy, and market access in African cities. Drawing on these perspectives, the paper explores how Kuza Africa functions as a creative intermediary, contributing to the legitimisation of Rwanda’s fashion sector while balancing collaboration with developmental partners.

The research involved five months of ethnographic fieldwork in Kigali. Guided by the African-based paradigm of Ubuntu, which prioritises relational and participatory methods (Chilisa, 2017; Seehawer, 2018), the researcher was affiliated with Kuza Africa to facilitate knowledge exchange between the researcher and the hub. Additional methods included focus groups with the hub’s founders, participant and non-participant observations, and desk-based research.

This paper contributes to the conference theme *Forming Futures*, particularly the subtheme of communities, by demonstrating how creative intermediaries in the emerging field of fashion support designers through strategic partnerships. These intermediaries connect designers with national, regional, and global networks. They learn the best practices of the global fashion industry while remaining rooted in their

African identity.

Keywords: Creative Intermediaries, African fashion, Participative Methods, Ubuntu Research Methods, Field Theory

INTRODUCTION

Previously dominated by the second-hand clothing market, the Rwandan textile and clothing sector saw the subfield of fashion emerge in the early 2000s. It slowly became institutionalised around 2012 with events such as Kigali Fashion Week and organisations like Collective RW. Government policies, such as the increased tariffs on second-hand clothing imports and the "Made in Rwanda" policy, further legitimised the sector (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2016, 2017). In this evolving field, Kuza Africa, a hub established in 2022 by Rwandan and Kenyan founders, aims to "empower African fashion entrepreneurs with the skills, infrastructure, and funding they need to build impactful, sustainable businesses" (Kuza Africa, 2024). Kuza Africa illustrates the role of intermediaries in nascent fields of fashion, which are significant yet unexplored.

This paper critically appropriates Bourdieu's Field theory (Bourdieu, 1993). It is guided by the Ubuntu Research paradigm (Seehawer *et al.*, 2022) to study the role of Kuza Africa in the Rwandan fashion sector. Through an ethnographic case study approach (Schwandt and Gates, 2018), it highlights the hub's strategic approach of creating partnerships and learning from established fashion systems while staying committed to African vision and identity. This paper aligns with the conference theme, "Forming Futures," by examining the roles of creative intermediaries in an emerging fashion field. It contributes to the subtheme of communities by demonstrating how the Ubuntu research paradigm facilitates knowledge co-creation through participatory and relational methods.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Field theory and the roles of intermediaries.

A field is a socially structured space where agents and institutions strategically deploy their forms of capital, economic, cultural, social, and symbolic, to improve their positions (Bourdieu and Delsaut, 1975; Bourdieu, 1993, 2020; Entwistle and Rocamora, 2006). Bourdieu (1993) highlighted that collective beliefs also shape cultural products. Therefore, studying cultural production involves analysing both material and symbolic aspects, including the roles of producers and intermediaries. Building on this concept, Entwistle and Rocamora (2006) analyse London Fashion Week as a distinct social space with its own dynamics and power relations. They introduce the concept of "fashion capital" as a combination of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capitals specific to the field of fashion (Entwistle and Rocamora,

2006, p. 740). Their studies highlight the role of intermediaries like fashion buyers and journalists who operate at the intersection of production and consumption, influencing aesthetic and market preferences (Entwistle, 2006, 2009; Rocamora, 2016).

The roles of intermediaries have evolved with globalisation and digital economies. Initially described by Bourdieu as “tastemakers”,(Bourdieu, 1984, p. 365) their roles now extend beyond traditional cultural mediation (Maguire and Matthews, 2010; Maguire Smith, 2014; Jansson and Hracs, 2018). However, Hesmondhalgh (2006) cautioned against a broad application of “cultural intermediaries,” stressing the need for precision in understanding the diverse roles involved in mediating production and consumption. Molloy and Larner (2010) critique this narrow focus on the division of labour, highlighting the fluid nature of cultural mediation across networks of economic and cultural activities. For instance, in the New Zealand fashion sector, cultural intermediaries include designers, who act as marketers, PR firms, lawyers, and government officials. Additionally, Women play a significant role in these interconnected activities as they reshape traditional gender dynamics (Molloy and Larner, 2010).

Intermediaries in the global field of cultural production.

Buchholz (2022) applies field theory to the global field of art, highlighting the roles of intermediaries in facilitating connections at national, regional, and global levels through platforms such as biennales. She notes that formerly Western-centric institutions have shifted their discourse to engage with intermediaries and cultural producers from around the world. However, symbolic power remains concentrated in the West, as biennales in “peripheral” regions invite Western intermediaries to enhance the prestige of these biennales. Moreover, Buchholz (2022) highlights generational shifts in the global field of art as younger intermediaries are more likely to challenge Western orthodoxy by collaborating with artists across the globe.

Scholars have also discussed the unequal dynamics within global fashion value chains, with symbolic production concentrated in the Global North and material production in the Global South (Crane and Bovone, 2006; Gopura, Payne and Buys, 2016; England *et al.*, 2021). Aspers and Skov (2006) highlight the growing role of intermediaries in linking production and consumption across global fashion value chains (Gereffi, 2018). They include intermediaries as middle managers in emerging markets and designers balancing international buyers’ expectations with local manufacturing(Aspers and Skov, 2006; Skov, 2014). Skov (2002, 2014) describes Hong Kong fashion designers as cultural intermediaries facing challenges in gaining recognition in an industry that values manufacturing efficiency over creative innovation; many never get the artist's status (Aspers and Skov, 2006). While globalisation offers opportunities for international exposure, it also reinforces inequalities. Skov (2002;2014) showed how young designers adopt entrepreneurial approaches by building brands in countries dominated by manufacturing, choosing

creativity over short-term profits.

Intermediaries in African cities

In African contexts, intermediaries play a vital role in supporting designers who face challenges such as limited resources, informal markets, and economic volatility (England *et al.*, 2021). Comunian *et al.* (2021) redefine Bourdieu's (1984) "cultural intermediaries" as "creative intermediaries" to better reflect their diverse roles in bridging gaps between policy frameworks, creatives, and international markets. These intermediaries provide business development, skills training, infrastructure, and market access, helping to overcome systemic barriers in regions with limited formal support (Comunian, England and Hracs, 2021).

In Cape Town, Lagos, and Nairobi, intermediaries provide soft infrastructure (training, networking) and hard infrastructure (spaces, funding). Their organisation models vary from community-driven non-profits to commercial enterprises that combine philanthropy with business (Comunian, England and Hracs, 2021). For example, in Cape Town, intermediaries support marginalised craft makers and market South African crafts globally while offering free skills training. These initiatives promote economic sustainability and challenge the stigma surrounding crafts (Comunian and England, 2022). However, intermediaries face challenges such as inadequate policy support, financial constraints, and limited infrastructure (Comunian, England and Hracs, 2021; Comunian and England, 2022). They also navigate tensions between preserving cultural authenticity and meeting commercial demands in global markets as systemic inequalities and hierarchical perceptions of cultural value persist (England *et al.*, 2021; Comunian and England, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

This paper employs an ethnographic case study to examine the role of Kuza Africa as an intermediary in Rwanda's emerging fashion sector. Fieldwork was conducted in Kigali, Rwanda, between April and September 2024 as part of the ongoing doctoral thesis titled "*The Rwandan Field of Fashion*". The research applies Bourdieu's Field theory (Bourdieu, 1993; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2008) to analyse the Rwandan fashion sector and integrates Ubuntu, a Southern African research paradigm emphasising humanity, mutual respect, and reciprocity. Ubuntu promotes relational methodology, ensures research is collaborative, and benefits the community it investigates (Seehawer, 2018; Chilisa, 2020; Seehawer *et al.*, 2022).

Ethnographic case studies integrate detailed case reconstruction (Baxter and Jack, 2015) with methods such as participant observation and unstructured interviews (Fusch, Fusch and Ness, 2017) to explore cultural phenomena within specific sociocultural contexts (Schwandt and Gates, 2018; Armstrong *et al.*, 2019). Ethnography is effective for investigating micro-level dynamics in fashion

systems(Jenss, 2016; Moon, 2016) and provides insights into creative networks and intermediaries(Aspers and Skov, 2006; Entwistle and Rocamora, 2006).

By mapping the Rwandan fashion sector and guided by the Ubuntu principles, I identified and established an affiliation with Kuza Africa before travelling to Kigali in April 2024. The affiliation facilitated access to Rwanda's fashion community while I supported the hub's activities. Data collection included a focus group with four founders of Kuza Africa, participant observations in two activities and non-participant observations in three activities as an audience member. Additional data sources, such as Kuza Africa's Instagram and website, media coverage of Rwandan fashion, and policy reports, provided a broader context. This qualitative mixed-methods approach offered a nuanced understanding of Kuza Africa's intermediary role in Rwanda's fashion sector.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Kuza Africa: emergence in the Rwandan field of fashion.

Kuza Africa was established in 2022 through the Jasiri Incubation program by Allan & Gill Gray Philanthropies (Jasiri, 2024) and represents a significant case of a newcomer intermediary (Bourdieu, 1993). It positions itself as a hub that empowers aspiring fashion entrepreneurs by providing skills, infrastructure, and funding (Kuza Africa, 2024). Its four founders, initially strangers and outsiders to the fashion industry, were paired based on personality and psychometric tests during the Jasiri program. They launched the hub after a year of intensive training and securing \$10,000 in seed funding for their idea. When asked why they chose the fashion industry despite being outsiders, one founder answered:

“The idea evolved into now what we're doing here. We also saw that Rwanda had banned the importation of second-hand clothing. And so, it meant that local production was being encouraged”.

Despite their lack of fashion expertise, the founders used their entrepreneurial skills to identify opportunities in local manufacturing, which were promoted by government policies like the “Made in Rwanda” policy (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2016, 2017). Intermediaries in African cities examined by Comunian et al. (2021) lacked policy support. In Contrast, Kuza Africa's concept emerged from Rwanda's strong policy framework.

Kuza Africa used its seed funding to establish the hub, providing both soft and hard infrastructure for designers(Comunian, England and Hracs, 2021).

“We set up a hub where we were renting... equipping it with machines and tailors so that these fashion entrepreneurs can work from the space...And we also set up a retail store so that we could market their finished goods”.

The founders emphasised a centralised approach to address accessibility challenges and allow designers to focus on creativity. However, after 18 months, Kuza Africa faced operational difficulties, leading to the closure of its physical hub and disappointment among brands. The team’s lack of “fashion capital” (Entwistle and Rocamora, 2006), knowledge and network in the fashion sector became a critical limitation. A restructuring in May 2024 brought two new members with fashion experience, including a former designer and a fashion design graduate, bringing essential capital to the team (Bourdieu, 1993).

Partnership and collaboration in national, regional and global Networks.

Following the closure of the physical hub, Kuza Africa shifted its focus to collaboration and partnerships, enhancing its role as a “creative intermediary” connecting designers to national and international networks (Comunian and England, 2022). A key partnership is with APEFE Rwanda, a Belgian agency working with Rwandan institutions (APEFE, 2023) to support technical and vocational training (MIFOTRA, 2021). APEFE played a crucial role in establishing Rwanda’s first fashion design department at Rwanda Polytechnic (RP) in 2021 (IPRC- Kigali, 2020). APEFE connected Kuza Africa with Argile, a Belgian-based hub that supports creative entrepreneurs in the region. This collaboration led to the development of the “Business of Fashion Week,” a programme where 15 selected designers were trained in creating mood boards, pitching ideas, and understanding the global fashion industry structure.

During the focus groups, one founder highlighted the importance of a balanced partnership in Africa’s creative sector, which often relies on development agencies from Western nations.

“Africa has an identity...We also have a vision where we want to be...Both sides have to make sure that one side is not taking advantage of the other side... No man is an island, so we need to work together.”

This mindset alludes to the generational shift in intermediaries described by Buchholz (2022) and Skov (2002; 2014). However, Kuza Africa’s approach does not subvert Western orthodoxy; it engages in strategic collaborations with European partners. They emphasise learning best practices while avoiding perpetuating environmental and labour exploitation, advocating for sustainable growth without compromising Africa’s vision and identity.

In May 2024, Kuza Africa travelled to Senegal as part of the tour organised by APEFE to explore the fashion ecosystem and connect with the Dakar Design Hub (APEFE

Rwanda, 2024). Later in the year, with continued support from APEFE, Kuza Africa returned to Dakar with three Rwandan brands that showcased their work for FIDAK 2024, the International Dakar Fair (RCFS, 2024). FIDAK represents a “materialised field” (Entwistle and Rocamora, 2006) where Kuza’s role as a creative intermediary becomes evident, linking Rwandan designers to regional networks while enabling them to build their fashion capital (Comunian, England and Hracs, 2021; Buchholz, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Established in 2022, Kuza Africa has positioned itself as a significant creative intermediary in Rwanda’s emerging fashion sector, connecting designers with national, regional, and global networks. By overcoming initial challenges and creating partnerships with APEFE, Kuza Africa has shown its potential to contribute to the sector’s development.

This ethnographic case study, part of the ongoing doctoral research “*The Rwandan Field of Fashion*,” provides insights into the roles of creative intermediaries. Further research is required to evaluate the long-term impact of such initiatives and compare Kuza Africa’s approach with that of other fashion hubs supported by diverse developmental partners.

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