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# Global China and everyday mediation in the Global South: Selling Chinese fashion in Mozambique via WhatsApp

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## Abstract

Combining online and offline data collection during six months of ethnographic fieldwork in Southern Mozambique in early 2021, this paper explores how media and its everyday use in the Global South are impacting on, and are in turn being transformed by China. It specifically looks into the creative and personalised ways in which Chinese-made garments are sold and promoted in Mozambique via the messenger service WhatsApp. Examining how Mozambican and West African traders use WhatsApp groups and status updates to mediate the fashionability of these Chinese goods, this paper shows that the consequences of Chinese interactions with the Global South on the global media landscape transcend the mere spread of Chinese hardware and software. Going beyond dominant, state-centred narratives of Chinese influence abroad, this paper demonstrates the key role of individuals and their agency in shaping the digital impact of Global China. By doing so, it also highlights the importance of analysing media practices in their specific local contexts.

## Keywords

Global China, Chinese-African trade, fashion mediation, WhatsApp, Global South

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## Introduction

As part of the much-discussed Belt and Road Initiative (Etzioni, 2020; Liu, 2022), Chinese companies are heavily involved in building up African digital infrastructures. Launched in 2015, the Digital Silk Road (DSR) combines a range of different Chinese public and private sector activities that aim to improve digital connectivity worldwide (Ghiassy & Krishnamurthy, 2021). Rather ‘amorphous’ (Ghiassy & Krishnamurthy, 2021) in nature, it includes not only the expansion of 5G networks and Chinese surveillance technology, as often criticised by Western observers. Instead, it also includes hardware development and a variety of projects in the areas of e-governance, e-commerce, fintech, digital education and public health. Focussed on nurturing local innovation and known for delivering affordable information and communications technology (ICT) quickly, the Chinese initiatives under the DSR often position themselves as serving local needs better than Western alternatives (Arcesati, 2020).

This unprecedented global ICT infrastructure investment drive has not only opened digital opportunities to many African users and enabled the market expansion of Chinese tech companies but naturally also serves many economic, security, and diplomatic objectives of the Chinese government (Arcesati, 2020). Ghiassy and Krishnamurthy (2021) state that ‘for China, the DSR is a solution that engenders a less U.S.-centric and a more Sino-centric Asian and global digital order’, as the country increasingly aims to set global standards in the digital sphere in line with longstanding Chinese techno-nationalist ambitions (Qiu, 2010; see also, He, 2022).

Yet, as with all Chinese foreign policy strategies, it is important to note that the intentions behind the DSR and the reality on the ground might be very different from each other and even divergent. Tudoroiu and Kuteleva (2022), for example, stress the importance of non-state and sub-state actors in the Global South, who are not passive recipients but are often complicating China’s involvement in the economic, political, and social realities of foreign countries. In the Sino–African context, this has been confirmed by, among others, Bunkenborg et al. (2022), Carmony and Kragelund (2016), Corkin (2015), Sautman and Yan (2009), van Staden et al. (2018), and Mohan and Lampert (2012).

Nevertheless, most current analysis of the role of media and digital affordances in China–Africa relations is still focused on state-level collaborations, official soft power initiatives, and the activities of large, often state-backed corporations (Batchelor & Zhang, 2017; Gagliardone, 2021; Madrid-Morales, 2021; Wasserman, 2018; Zhang et al., 2016). Lee (2016) and Flew (2016), for example, have looked at the ways China is striving for discursive power worldwide to cultivate its soft power. Their focus, however, does not go beyond the level of nation states, which they apparently assume to still be central to the structuring of global media flows. Other scholars have examined the issue of nation branding and the involvement of large Chinese brands in this (often unsuccessful) endeavour (Chen et al., 2020; He et al., 2020).

With a rare focus on individual agency, Li and Feng (2022) have explored how Chinese social media influencers participate in nation branding while balancing their followers’ demands for authenticity. Through content and social network analysis, they were able to show that the influencers’ grassroots depictions of the ‘China brand’ often divert from official narratives promoted by state-owned media outlets. Albeit not directly related to China’s impact on digital practices abroad, this demonstrates that even in authoritarian contexts, it is not only corporations or governments but also people who shape the digital landscape. Another example of the importance of a bottom-up perspective has been provided by Bao (2020) in his paper on transnational video activism between Chinese and Ghanaian and Zimbabwean filmmakers. He describes these emerging people-to-people exchanges among the Global South as ‘minor transnationalism’ (Bao, 2020). According

to him, this type of transnationalism is able to move away from the Global North as centre of global processes while creating new social connections at a grassroots level.

To further reveal how media and its use in the Global South are impacting on, and are in turn being transformed by China, it is necessary to go beyond policy slogans, such as those used in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. A focus on the actual and often indirect and uncontrolled impact of those policies is needed instead. This includes the large amounts of Chinese-made products that are arriving in African countries in immense and constantly changing variety (Khan-Mohammad & Kernen, 2023; von Pezold, 2022) as well as the people who import and sell these goods. This paper is specifically looking into the ways in which Chinese-made garments are sold and promoted in Mozambique via the messenger service WhatsApp.

Initially released in 2009 and now owned by US tech conglomerate Meta, the application has more than two billion users in more than 180 countries (WhatsApp, 2023), which makes it the most-used messenger service in the world. Yet, its download and use are blocked in China since 2017 (Mozur, 2017). By zooming in on how Chinese goods, their producers and traders impact the global use of this well-known platform, this paper aims to elucidate the multifaceted and creative ways in which Western technology is used and repurposed in a completely non-Western context. It shows that the consequences of Chinese interactions with the Global South on the global media landscape transcend the mere spread of Chinese hard- and software such as Transsion, Huawei, Xiaomi, TikTok/Douyin, and Alibaba. Thereby, it confirms that it is not only government agencies and corporations that shape the everyday impact of China on media practices around the world but also people and their individual actions, which are largely uncontrolled and undirected by any state entities. Furthermore, it makes clear that China not only impacts but is also impacted by what is going on in the rest of the world. Only by analysing China in relation to and connection with both the Global North and Global South, it is possible to grasp the complexity of social and cultural dynamics within China's global expansion.

To do so, this paper first gives an overview of non-conventional uses of Western technologies and platforms, especially WhatsApp, in the Global South. It then explains why taking 'Global China as method' is best suited to approach the growing Chinese engagement abroad and its manifestations in media and cultural mediation, before elaborating on the methodology employed for this research. This includes ethnographic fieldwork including participant observation, interviews, as well as textual and visual analysis of WhatsApp content and interactions. Next, this paper provides an overview of the use of WhatsApp in Chinese–Mozambican trade, also introducing the people involved in it. Finally, it analyses the specific ways in which Chinese-made garments in Mozambique are mediated as fashionable via WhatsApp. The paper ends with a discussion and conclusion.

## **WhatsApp in the Global South: Technology of life and relational affordance**

Since the 1980s, scholars and policymakers alike have put high hopes in the use of information and communication technology for socio-economic development, particularly in the Global South (Unwin, 2009; Walsham, 2017). Often called ICT4D (ICT for development), this concept or movement is now seen more critically. In Mozambique, for example, Archambault (2017) has shown that better access to information is not always desirable and that the widespread use of mobile communication has not automatically improved entrepreneurialism, democratisation, or service delivery. Instead, young Mozambicans often use mobile phones to produce and sustain uncertainty in interpersonal relationships, according to her research. More recently, the use of WhatsApp and

Facebook to spread misinformation in countries such as Brazil and India, with often fatal consequences, has been harshly criticised (Banaji & Bhat, 2019; Rossini et al., 2021). For better or worse, messenger services such as WhatsApp have become a central part of the daily life of millions of people all over the world (Miller et al., 2021).

Especially WhatsApp plays an important role in many countries across the Global South, where data plans often allow users to use the app for free, making it an affordable alternative to SMS and voice calls (Baulch et al., 2020). Critics point to the problematic accumulation of power in the hands of specific platforms as a consequence of such infrastructuralisation: 'For hundreds of millions of people accessing the Internet through their relatively inexpensive mobile phones, such strategies create a "walled garden" and an exceedingly narrow view of being online and indeed, what the Internet is.' (Plantin & Punathambekar, 2019, p. 170) Among Brazilians, for instance, WhatsApp is so popular 'because it allows for quick communication, initially via text and photo, using wifi or consuming a reduced level of data. It also permits voice messages, which is a resource often used in Brazil, a reflection of the low education levels of its population', Paiva (2018, p. 104) explains.

Other key functions of WhatsApp are group messaging and message forwarding, turning it into a convenient yet largely unmoderated news channel for many people (Baulch et al., 2020) and an easy tool to organise daily work, and to discuss and formulate policies (Timcke, 2022). It can even be used to run a whole (albeit internationally unrecognised) government (Goldbaum & Padshah, 2023). As it is shaping and sustaining a wide range of daily activities in the Global South, mediating almost all aspects of social life, 'from personal to economic, from spiritual to political', Cruz and Harindranath (2020) have described WhatsApp as a 'technology of life'. They call for a stronger academic focus on the application's use in non-Western countries, as 'it shapes and is shaped by specific forms of mediations and practices that reinforce it as a central platform of the everyday, outside the Global North' (Cruz & Harindranath, 2020). Moreover, WhatsApp is a prominent part of 'enabling particular responses to everyday challenges in the Global South', they make clear.

One of these challenges is navigating the widespread informality of business and trade in developing countries. Lacking access to specialised e-commerce platforms, many small-scale traders across the Global South have turned to WhatsApp to market their goods to their contacts. In recent years and particularly since the outbreak of COVID-19 and the ensuing widespread restrictions on in-person trade, this phenomenon has, inter alia, been observed in Zimbabwe (Kabonga et al., 2021; Nyanga et al., 2020; Tsarwe & Mare, 2021), Cuba (Köhn & Siré, 2022), Saudi Arabia (Abed, 2021; Bellaaj, 2021), the United Arab Emirates (Jose, 2018), Sudan (Steel, 2021), Malaysia (Abdul Rashid et al., 2020), Indonesia (Sugiyantoro et al., 2022), India (Bagdare, 2021; Sathya & Prabhakar, 2018), and among Tanzanian car traders in Hong Kong (Ogawa, 2021). From these studies emerges that WhatsApp is especially helpful for sharing market intelligence among peers and finding support in times of scarcity. Enabling trading from the comfort and security of one's home, using WhatsApp to trade goods also makes it possible for many women to overcome traditional gender norms and economic restrictions (Steel, 2021). Different from Europe and North America, where the feature is barely known, WhatsApp Status plays an important role in these business endeavours in many African, Asian, and South American countries. Similar to Instagram Stories, the status updates posted to one's WhatsApp account are normally used to share personal images, selfies, and memes, and automatically disappear after 24 hours (Pathak, 2023).

Returning to the idea of WhatsApp as a 'technology of life', Cruz and Harindranath (2020) point out that it is its bridging capability that makes WhatsApp such an essential mediation tool in the Global South. According to them, the collectivity created through WhatsApp (and especially WhatsApp groups) 'includes not just online practices in WhatsApp, it traverses different platforms and, importantly, it is constructed by a combination of online and off-line

connections' (Cruz & Harindranath, 2020). This mirrors the standpoint of Daniel Miller et al. (2019), who have shown through their large-scale 'Why We Post' research project that online and offline spaces are no different worlds and are closely connected in the context of social media. As a consequence of this, specific platforms themselves and their affordances are not that important for the content and user behaviour, they hold. This is why any analysis that wants to understand social media use should be shifted from platforms to genres of content (Miller et al., 2019). As content, genres of communications, and other user behaviour migrates between platforms, 'the study of social media needs to be through the appreciation of content rather than of platforms' (Miller et al., 2019, p. 297). Therefore, WhatsApp use should as well always be analysed in its larger context, taking into account locally different sociocultural, political, historical, and economic circumstances. Cruz and Harindranath (2020) agree that 'the adoption of technologies involves them being adjusted in particular ways by different groups for locally relevant reasons'. This paper concurs with Willems (2021) that far from so-called 'digital universalism', technological affordances such as WhatsApp take on different shapes across the world. For this reason, 'relational affordances' is a more suitable way to describe them, highlighting 'the interplay between technology, users and their varied contexts' (Willems, 2021, p. 1678).

Following this notion, this paper looks at the use of WhatsApp in the specific context of Chinese–Mozambican trade, factoring in the variety of people involved in its commercial use, their motivations, as well as sociocultural, economic, and political circumstances. This also means going beyond the application itself and examining how its content is shaped by and travels across not only different continents but also other platforms. Thereby, it is possible to explore WhatsApp as a relational affordance that despite its development and origin in the Global North, is repurposed and adjusted for everyday mediations by people in the Global South. These people creatively enact the potentials of this tool according to their specific needs and circumstances.

## Global China and mediation

Exploring the multi-dimensional linkages between China and the outside world, the concept of 'Global China' can be a helpful lens. In her seminal book *The Specter of Global China* (2017), CK Lee explains: 'Global China is taking myriad forms, ranging from foreign direct investment, labor export, and multilateral financial institutions for building cross-regional infrastructure to the globalization of Chinese civil society organizations, creation of global media networks, and global joint ventures in higher education, to name just a few examples.' (p. xiv) As many of these developments all over the world are closely connected to developments and pressures on the Chinese national level, she calls for 'reimagining China beyond China, connecting, contextualizing, and comparing "Chinese" development with that in other parts of the world' (Lee, 2017, p. xiv) to gain a proper understanding of contemporary China as a global force.

Drawing on Lee's work and Mizoguchi's (2016) idea of 'China as method', Franceschini and Loubere (2022) propose 'Global China' as 'a broader theoretical approach to the country, its position in the world, and its international engagements.' (p. 7) By taking 'Global China as method', they want to counter the frequent 'othering' of China in Western media and scholarship. Not seeing China as an orientalist, separate external force but an integral part of the global capitalist system, they aim to 'highlight the importance of perceiving China as intimately entangled with global histories, processes, phenomena, and trends'. (Franceschini & Loubere, 2022, p. 6) To understand the impact and manifestations of China in the world, they recommend a 'fundamentally relational perspective' (p. 6) and an analytical approach that pays close attention to the particular historical context of China while also seeing the country as shaping and being shaped by broader dynamics:

‘domestic China should be read as an integral part of the broader global capitalist system and interpreted in this light’. (Franceschini & Loubere, 2022, p. 8)

As part of this conceptual and methodological reorientation, it is again important to go beyond the state level, CK Lee (2017) has made clear. She explains that Global China is not only shaped by its economic boom and imbalances but also by its long history of decentralised improvisation. These undirected and largely uncontrolled grassroots activities make any outcomes (both locally and abroad) chaotic and unpredictable yet are crucial for ‘understanding an increasingly globalized China and its variegated local impacts around the world’. (Lee, 2017, p. 20)

At a first glance, Global China as method seems similar to the concepts of ‘Asia as method’ and ‘trans-Asia as method’. First introduced by Chen (2010), ‘Asia as method’ calls for assessing and undoing the consequences of imperial histories in the area of cultural studies. By taking the specificity of dynamic local histories into consideration and using different Asian societies as each other’s point of reference, Chen strives to internationalise cultural studies, which are largely still very Western-centric. The importance of this ‘inter-referencing’ as a new way to approach Asia and Asian countries as objects of study has also been stressed by Huat (2015) and Iwabuchi (2014). Aware of the inadequacy of Eurocentric models of theorisation, Iwabuchi (2020) has similarly proposed ‘trans-Asia as method’, demanding dewesternised, transnational, and more inclusive modes of knowledge production.

Spearheaded by postcolonial thinkers, such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha in the 1980s, there has been a general awakening in the social sciences and humanities for the need to decolonialise (also ‘dewesternise’ or ‘decentre’) theories, curricula, and approaches for some time now. Following on from longstanding discussions in the Global South (Moosavi, 2020), decolonialisation efforts share the common concern that ‘universalistic claims inferred from geographically circumscribed empirical evidence promote Western ideals as general (hegemonic) sources and mechanisms of knowledge’ (Alacovska & Gill, 2019, p. 196). Acknowledging that colonial power structures, economic inequalities, and racist hierarchies do not expire with the overthrow of colonial administrations (Moosavi, 2020; Quijano, 2007), decolonial research aims to both complement the existing body of knowledge and to question it at the same time. It does so by critically examining the universality of theoretical concepts that originate from the Global North (Connell, 2007).

Building theory on empirical cases that are not located on the margins of the Western world but outside of it (Alacovska & Gill, 2019) and refraining from taking the Global North as the only or only valid reference point (Moosavi, 2020) is certainly crucial for understanding the complexity of social and cultural dynamics across China and the Global South. Yet, these decolonial and ‘(trans-) Asia as method’ approaches also have significant limitations. These limitations make them less suitable for addressing the impact of China on media practices in the Global South than ‘Global China as method’ as presented by Franceschini and Loubere (2022). Both approaches tend to frame China as either in opposition to the Global North or bound to the context of Asia. Different from ‘Global China as method’, they fail to take account for the inseparable entanglement of China with the whole world, both Global South and North. Or, as Franceschini and Loubere (2022) put it:

‘Only by reconceptualising China as inextricably part of the world can we begin to understand what Chinese developments, both domestic and international, actually mean for people around the globe and present a more accurate depiction of the implications of China’s rise on the global stage.’ (p. 6)

In their book *Global China as Method* (2022), Franceschini and Loubere discuss Global China in relation to a range of recent phenomena including the Belt and Road Initiative. Yet, they do not

cover the global spread of Chinese-made products and their localised impacts. Neither do they delve into the issues of how China's specific modes of commodity production and transnational trade extend to media use and mediation in other countries. This paper uses Global China as a concept to gain a more holistic view of how Chinese goods, their producers and traders impact the mediation of fashion in a South–South context, instrumentalising and appropriating a messenger service from the Global North while doing so. Thereby, it shines light on fashion as an often trivialised but important product category in Chinese-African trade (Khan-Mohammad & Kernen, 2023). In 2020, the market value of clothing and footwear in all of sub-Saharan Africa was approximately 31 billion USD (UNESCO, 2023), while most of these items were imported from China (UN Comtrade, 2020). According to official trade data, Mozambique imported garments, accessories, and footwear worth 387 million USD in 2022, of which almost 90% came from China (UN Comtrade, 2023).

Different from 'orderly' Western European or US markets with their high levels of formalisation and regulation (Aspers, 2010; Entwistle, 2009), the mediation process in fashion systems located in the Global South are not restricted to certain professions. Instead, there are many different mediations and negotiations going on between agents across sectors, roles, and nationalities (see also, Molloy & Larner, 2010). Without the established rules and procedures of Western fashion markets, and their traditional intermediaries, such as fashion journalists, the fashionable image of certain garments and textiles is constructed through more fluid activities and practices, von Pezold (2022) has shown. To socially construct certain garments as fashionable, the personal taste and agency of individual people is paramount (von Pezold, 2022). According to Aspers, 'agency means that actors have the power to act, to try to change structures or values, to understand the environment they operate in, by reflecting and acting on the different options they perceive'. Thereby, 'actors can switch paths or even strike new paths' (2010, p. 37). Nevertheless, Aspers adds, all actions have to be seen in context, since peoples' wishes are also mediated by others. Building on these insights into the characteristics of fashion mediation in the Global South, his paper puts a special focus on the role of media in this process, revealing the wide-reaching and often unexpected impact of Global China in the form of Chinese garments.

## Methodology

WhatsApp is the most common mode of digital communication in Mozambique for both private and business purposes. Yet, the messenger service is a challenging platform to do research on using purely digital methods, Baulch et al. (2020) have pointed out. Without any large datasets available for analysis, a more creative approach is warranted. Cruz and Harindranath (2020) complain that 'there are fundamental digital mediations that remain largely obscured precisely because they cannot easily become data, at least in "automated" and "extractable" form'. Instead, 'some mediations, some "lives" (and their technologies), can only be grasped with an holistic and immersive approach that situates the studied phenomena in broader socio-, political, and economic contexts', they make clear. To understand how WhatsApp is used in different socio-cultural contexts, they advocate the use of ethnographic methods which focus on the lived experiences of individuals and communities (Cruz & Harindranath, 2020). Miller and Wang (2021) agree that as online and offline worlds are closely interwoven nowadays, they have to be looked at together to allow for 'holistic contextualisation', as they call it: 'This creates both depth and breadth, allowing us to interpret the consequences of social media holistically in the context of all that we are learning about people's offline lives'. (Miller & Wang, 2021)

Acknowledging the potential of anthropological approaches in media and communication studies (Miller & Wang, 2021), I combined in-person ethnographic fieldwork with online data



collection (Kefala, 2023) to better understand the use of WhatsApp as a relational affordance in the context of the Chinese–Mozambican garment trade. The long-term relationships and trust I built up in the course of my fieldwork helped me to navigate and make sense of many different things. Among them were not only the many contradictions I encountered between what people say they do and how they actually act (Miller & Wang, 2021) but also the multi-modality and semi-public form of communication that is typical for WhatsApp (Cruz & Harindranath, 2020).

Its location on the East African coast and its traditionally close political ties to China make Portuguese-speaking Mozambique a popular market for Chinese products. During early 2021, I conducted six months of fieldwork in the country (mainly in the capital Maputo), which was preceded by a one-month pilot study in Mozambique in Summer 2019 and several shorter fieldwork trips to Guangzhou in Southern China in the same year. There, I employed participant observation in market spaces and informal, semi-structured interviews with the different groups of people involved in the Chinese–Mozambican garment trade. This offline data collection was combined with online data collection via Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Through WhatsApp groups of traders, wholesalers, and their customers, I gained access to visual and textual data about promotional activities and new products, including their prices, design, and presentation. Additionally, I used messenger services and social media to stay in contact with my research participants in China and Mozambique, and to keep up with relevant developments.

Accounting for the increasing visuality of human communication through smartphones and social media (Miller & Wang, 2021), I eventually collected tens of thousands of promotional product images online. These mainly originated from WhatsApp groups and WhatsApp status updates, which traders in Mozambique use to inform resellers and regular customers of the arrival of new products from China. Most traders were happy to let me join their chat groups. These not only gave me access to dozens of product updates each day, and even after I had left Mozambique, but also to some of the daily online conversations and interactions taking place between those traders and their clients. By observing sales and marketing activities playing out in real time, I gained unfiltered insights into the ways in which traders and resellers mediate the fashionability of Chinese-made products towards their customers, and into which meanings and qualities they attach to the products in this process.

During my fieldwork, I already identified recurring themes and preliminary findings while transcribing my handwritten observations and interview notes. After concluding my data collection, I revised the themes that had emerged from my data, and developed categories based on them and my review of the relevant literature. Re-reading my transcribed notes and going through the images I took and collected in the field with these categories in mind, I constantly revised them, also adjusting my interpretations and theoretical approach. My data classification and analysis process therefore included a mix of both deductive (top-down) and inductive (bottom-up) coding approaches (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

## **Switching and bridging: WhatsApp in Chinese–Mozambican trade**

WhatsApp very likely is the most downloaded and most used smartphone application in Mozambique, made affordable through preferential data plans offered by the main telecommunication providers. In private life, it is used to stay in contact with friends and family. In this context, it is very common to regularly send motivational or religious GIFs and images to each other to express care and sympathy. Yet, WhatsApp is a big part of Mozambican business life and especially trade, too. Owing to its ubiquity and encryption feature, the app not only plays a central role in the operation of

Mozambique's notorious heroin trade (Hanlon, 2018) but is also used for many transactions of more innocuous nature.

In the early 2010s, experienced West African businesspeople started importing car parts, building materials, electronics, garments, and shoes from China to Mozambique, and local Mozambican traders joined them soon after (von Pezold, 2022). During their sourcing trips to China, both groups have long relied on WhatsApp to stay in contact with their clients back home to accept orders and receive their feedback about the goods on offer. When due to the outbreak of COVID-19, travel restrictions from both Chinese and Mozambican sides caused them to be unable to continue their regular in-person trips to China (see also, Cissé, 2021; Mathews, 2022; Skovgaard-Smith, 2021), many of the traders quickly resorted to pursue their negotiations online instead. Chinese e-commerce platforms, such as Alibaba, have been aggressively expanding into African countries for some years now, and other cross-border business-to-business platforms, such as Chinagoods and e-Cantonfair, have been boosted recently (Li and Bode, 2020; Wu, 2020). Nevertheless, in 2021, Chinese–Mozambican trade mainly took place via WhatsApp and its Chinese equivalent WeChat.

Easily available and simple to use, these applications are a handy way for traders to stay in contact with their suppliers, agents, and brokers in China. While Chinese guides and agents accommodate their international clients by using WhatsApp, for which they need a VPN in China, most Chinese suppliers themselves are only reachable via WeChat. Mozambican consumers and resellers, on the other hand, are usually not familiar with WeChat and use WhatsApp only. Therefore, traders have to navigate both messenger services, switching between Chinese, English, and Portuguese while copying and forwarding content such as order information and especially product images from one platform to another.

Messenger services are now the main platform for different traders to order goods from their Chinese suppliers and intermediaries, and to organise their transport to Mozambique. This usually happens via shared shipping containers. WeChat is an even more infrastructuralised platform as WhatsApp and has a payment and money transfer function whose transformation into an integrated nationwide payment system has been enabled and supported by the Chinese government (Plantin & de Seta, 2019). It is, however, rarely used for facilitating payments in Chinese–Mozambican trade. Instead, payment is usually discussed via the encrypted WhatsApp and then carried out through informal channels (see also, Cheuk, 2021), circumventing tightening Chinese regulations on cross-border money transfers (Wu, 2021).

WhatsApp and WeChat are also used to co-create new garment designs with China-based designers and producers (see also, von Pezold & Driessen, 2021). Mozambican shop owner Fenias, for example, commissions exclusive menswear designs from China. He has worked with his Chinese suppliers – whom he describes as ‘fashionable’ (da moda) – for many years, and knows them well. Sending pictures via WeChat, and using the translation function, he explains his creative vision to them. Like many other traders of Mozambican or West African origin who are active in the Chinese–Mozambican garment trade, he constantly switches between WeChat and WhatsApp in his daily work, depending on whom he is communicating with. This shows that in the Chinese–Mozambican context, the two platforms are not necessarily perceived as competing alternatives but as complementing each other.

## Mediating Chinese-made garments in Mozambique

The following section will look at the strategies different actors employ to construct a fashionable image for Chinese-made garments in the process of their trade and retail in Mozambique (see also, von Pezold, 2022). A special focus is put on the way WhatsApp is used by different groups to

advertise these Chinese goods to their Mozambican wholesale and retail customers, and what meanings and qualities become attached to the products in so doing.

Among Mozambican and West African sellers, it is common to use Facebook and Instagram for marketing purposes, yet WhatsApp groups and status posts are most usual. This puts them ahead of their Chinese competitors. While some individual Chinese traders importing garments to Mozambique use WeChat to sell-on their goods to other Chinese traders, they often lack the knowledge, skills, or capacity to promote their goods to local retail customers via Facebook, Instagram, or WhatsApp. Even though these platforms are freely accessible in Mozambique, many Chinese traders are unfamiliar with them as they are blocked in China.

Senegalese shop owner Nano, for example, has a WhatsApp group with all his regular resellers, through which he updates them about any new goods. Like most resellers in Mozambique, Nano's wholesale customers sell their goods on the street, in markets, or via social media, again mostly using WhatsApp. There are also WhatsApp groups in which resellers discuss the latest opportunities and warn each other of scammers (*burladores*). West African traders likewise use WhatsApp to communicate with their Mozambican retail customers. Through WhatsApp groups, they inform their customers, who are eager to buy the latest styles before they sell out, about newly arrived shipments from China. These group chats are usually set up by the sellers in a way that only they themselves as administrators can send messages, while everyone else is muted.

To inform their resellers and regular retail customers of the arrival of new fashion products from China, West African traders usually just forward the promotional images that they have received from their Chinese suppliers via WeChat. These images put emphasis on the (often counterfeit) items' brand names and logos, or include curvy female models emulating the style and poses of US or West African celebrities and social media influencers (Figure 1). The often elaborately staged and edited photos and collages regularly include visual markers of wealth, prestige, and Western



**Figure 1.** Promotional image shared by a Malian trader via WhatsApp, 2021.

lifestyles as photo props, be it fashion magazines, cigars, Italian coffee, large wrist watches, or even McDonalds food (Figure 2). In this manner, the images most likely try to create an air of cosmopolitanism and sophistication. Sometimes, the traders also just post media images of US celebrities wearing the specific sneakers or clothing items they sell in counterfeit form. By only giving the items' prices, or not even doing that much, the West African business owners allow the product images to speak for themselves, trusting that their stylish looks are the only, or at least most important information that their customers need.

For Mozambican traders, WhatsApp is an important sales tool as well. Only few of them own a physical store. If they are not visiting their clients at their homes, they resort to selling via social media, such as Facebook or Instagram, or WhatsApp groups. It is also very common for Mozambican traders to post product images and promotions in their WhatsApp status updates (Figure 3). Especially Mozambican women, for whom selling Chinese fashion from home is a viable way to earn some extra money, benefit from WhatsApp as a cheap and easy marketing tool they are already familiar with.<sup>1</sup> In the WhatsApp groups and status posts of Mozambican traders, Chinese product shots are usually interspersed with jokes, memes, posts celebrating national holidays, and images of the clothes in use to make it more interesting for the customers. Often, in between garments, shoes, and accessories, a wide variety of other products imported from China are advertised, too, such as chicken cages, furniture, and blankets.

To stay in direct contact with his customers, trader and shop owner Fenias Macupe not only posts almost daily on his Instagram and Facebook pages, where he had more than 20,000 followers in 2021 but also personally manages six WhatsApp groups of more than 200 people each. Even though Facebook is key for Fenias to garner attention and new customers, WhatsApp is his main way to stay in contact with them, and to generate and conduct actual sales. While he is one of the more



**Figure 2.** Promotional image shared by a Malian trader via WhatsApp, 2022.



**Figure 3.** Promotional image posted in WhatsApp Status by a Mozambican reseller, 2021.

well-known and successful Mozambican entrepreneurs importing garments and accessories from China, his social media and especially messenger use is representative of many of his fellow traders.

His posts in the different groups are a mixture of product images, photos of clients modelling his goods, and personal anecdotes. These are interspersed with memes, comments on national news, celebrity gossip, and motivational messages. The product shots Fenias uses to announce the arrival of new goods or special offers are usually taken over from his Chinese suppliers. The Chinese origin of many of these images is obvious, as they, for instance, show Asian models, are taken from Chinese social media platforms, such as Xiaohongshu, or were taken in Chinese locations. Chinese suppliers also seem to use apps, such as Meitu, to create collages and to portray their often

counterfeit goods in an attractive and often vaguely European manner, adding gibberish blurb about the brands, and their quality and elegance (Figure 4).

Fenias usually leaves these English and Chinese language elements as they are, simply adding further information, such as sizes, prices, and his logo and contact details for his Mozambican customers. To these multi-lingual assemblages, he sometimes also adds self-created humorous



Figure 4. Chinese-created promotional collage shared via WhatsApp, 2021.

stickers to mark the images and the depicted products as being exclusive to him and his shop (Figure 5). In this way, the culturally ambiguous and multi-layered images are repositioned to suit the local Mozambican context. The shop owner regularly receives and posts images of his clients, famous or otherwise, wearing his garments at events. This increases his trustworthiness and prestige, and gives potential customers a more realistic impression of the items on offer. Like the messenger groups of many other Mozambican traders, Fenias' six WhatsApp groups fulfil a wider social purpose than merely being product promotion and sales conversation platforms. In these groups, sellers and customers alike share news, ask for fashion advice, or elicit compliments for a stylish outfit.

The images Fenias posts of himself not only showcase his goods or document luxurious events and travels but also depict the less glamorous aspects of his work. They include throwbacks to his first trips to China, depicting him in crowded wholesale markets, balancing large plastic bags full of goods on his shoulders. Therefore, he fulfils the role of a seller and a digital influencer at the same time, relying on his own personality and story to create an impression of authentic fashionability. There also are videos taken by his employees that show how Fenias unwraps boxes full of newly arrived products from China, commenting on and praising each item. He is very open about the Chinese origin of his merchandise but always highlights his own agency and expertise in the trading process. Similar to his West African competitors, he reuses much of the visual material he receives from his Chinese suppliers via WeChat. Different from them, however, he adds a strong personal note to it, building on and reinforcing his familiarity with his local customer base through WhatsApp.



**Figure 5.** Promotional image with contact number and a self-created sticker ('God of the designer brands!') shared via WhatsApp by Fenias, 2021.

## Discussion and conclusion

With these examples, I hoped to illustrate how Mozambican and West African traders use WhatsApp to mediate Chinese fashion for their Mozambican customers. Translating images across cultures, they erase, keep, or enhance cultural markers, visual effects, script and design elements to qualify Chinese-made garments as fashionable and desirable. The fashion construction strategies of the different groups are partly enabled by the use of common digital platforms. Despite the mainstream character of these social media and messenger services, they are employed in very diverse ways, matching each actor's respective approach towards fashion construction with regards to aesthetics, narrative, and level of interactivity. Utilising large groups and status updates as both sales platforms and opportunities for direct interaction with customers, WhatsApp is particularly used in a highly personalised and creative way, going beyond its mere function as a messenger service. Through their personal agency and specific strategies, the different traders have an impact on how they and their Chinese products are seen, which they often actively instrumentalise. West African traders, for example, bank on the attractivity and cosmopolitan flair expressed through the promotional images they receive from China. Mozambican traders, on the other hand, put extra effort into refitting the Chinese visuals and fashion products into the local context, stressing their personal role in the import and sale of the goods. It is, however, important to note that this creative agency is limited by each person's experience and cultural knowledge, as well as the preconceptions Mozambican consumers may have towards their nationality. Theoretically, it is therefore more difficult for Chinese entrepreneurs and companies to promote their wares as being fashionable.

Consequently, this paper agrees with [Molloy and Larner \(2010\)](#) that the fashionable image of certain garments is constructed through more fluid activities and practices than the often highly formalised and limited processes that have been described in Euro–American contexts. It makes clear that the physical creation and social construction of fashion is not simply a top-down, one-directional cultural flow, but the result of diverse interactions between people at different levels and stages of the fashion chain.

This gives a new perspective on how global media are impacting on, and are in turn being transformed by China, yet not solely by Chinese institutions or companies, but also by the people in the Global South who get in contact with Chinese products and their aesthetics. Subverting dominant, state-centred narratives of Chinese influence abroad, this paper confirms the key role of individuals – of both Chinese and non-Chinese nationality – and their agency in shaping the digital impact of Global China. Despite structural limitations such as national differences in app usage and availability, censorship, language barriers, and travel restrictions, they actively seize and shape the opportunities provided to them in the form of global media platforms, moulding them to their own needs while doing so.

This paper goes beyond much-discussed Chinese platforms such as Tiktok and Alibaba, complicating narratives of the wide reach of Chinese techno-nationalist agendas ([Plantin & de Seta, 2019](#); [Qiu, 2010](#)). It thus adds an urgently needed grassroots perspective to the current focus on attempted official Chinese influence on African media, and global marketing initiatives by big Chinese brands. Instead of macro-level soft power building, it elucidates the daily-life, bottom-up effects of Chinese garments and their global availability on the Mozambican use of a Western messenger service that is not even officially available in China.

By doing so, it also demonstrates how closely and on how many levels China is entangled with both the Global South and Global North. China not only impacts but is also impacted by what is going on in the rest of the world, making 'Global China' ([Franceschini & Loubere, 2022](#); [Lee, 2017](#)) a helpful analytical framework and methodological approach through which to understand China's



global rise and influence. The country's inextricable, multifaceted, and longstanding linkages to the world therefore render any decolonial and '(trans-)Asia as method' angles insufficient in comparison. This is supported by the fact that in the mediation of Chinese fashion in Mozambique via WhatsApp, US and European aesthetics and cultures are often referenced to increase the desirability of certain garments. Following [Franceschini and Loubere \(2022\)](#), taking 'Global China as method' hence is 'an endeavour of crucial importance if we hope to come to grips with what Chinese globalisation in the twenty-first century means for our collective future'. (p. 58)

When looking at the everyday use of transnational apps for the purpose of economic and aesthetic value creation, it becomes clear that in the context of Chinese-Mozambican trade, WhatsApp is not only a 'technology of life' ([Cruz & Harindranath, 2020](#)) that helps to navigate all aspects of daily life by bridging and combining online and offline connections. The app is also used parallelly and complementarily to its Chinese competitor WeChat, with content and information freely flowing between the two of them. The flexible switching between the two messenger services that can be observed among Mozambican and West African traders in Mozambique dispels concerns about the absolute nature of US-Chinese competition on the African continent.

Moreover, this paper proves that specific platforms and their affordances are indeed not that consequential for user behaviour and content ([Miller et al., 2019](#)). To gain deeper insights into locally different user behaviour that might migrate between platforms, it is necessary to combine online and offline data collection, it confirms. Only with the help of ethnographic methods, a thorough understanding of the sociocultural, political, historical, and economic factors that shape the use of 'relational affordances' ([Willems, 2021](#)) such as WhatsApp, and thereby an urgently needed 'holistic contextualisation' ([Miller & Wang, 2021](#)) are achievable. This way, it will finally be possible to explore and appreciate the diverse and complex ways in which global media platforms and their use are adapted and shaped beyond the Global North.

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## Note

1. While cross-border trade in Mozambique has traditionally been dominated by women, only few of them import garments from China full-time. Therefore, many of the larger Mozambican import and retail businesses are owned by men (see also, [von Pezold, 2022](#)).

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