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China as data coloniser? rethinking cultural production, cultural mediation, and consumer agency on Kenyan and Chinese e-commerce platforms

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Abstract

Has China become a neo-colonizer, exporting its cultural and economic power to the world based on its agenda of building soft power? Existing scholarship on neocolonialism and data colonialism largely focuses on how China's infrastructural expansion and increasingly platformised cultural sectors can achieve its ambitious platformised cultural sectors overseas. Yet, how China's cultural power is manifested, negotiated, or resisted in people's daily lives in a South–South setting remains under-researched and under-theorised. This article uses everyday fashion in Kenya as a case study to investigate China's cultural and economic power expansion in the Global South.

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We examined how cultural differences are negotiated and mediated on two Chinese(-invested) e-commerce platforms. Through focus groups and platform walkthrough method, our findings serve to enrich existing theories of cultural production–platform relationships applicable in the study of various cultural and creative sectors, to offer new understandings of how symbolic, sociopolitical and cultural meanings of fashion are constructed through divergent platform affordances, and to reveal the various forms of cultural negotiations and resistance in different contexts, multiplying our frames of reference.

Keywords

Africa, Alibaba, China, consumer agency, cultural production, data colonialism, e-commerce platform, everyday fashion, Kenya, Kilimall

It is not a given that platformization will *radically* alter prevailing power relations within the cultural industries. (Poell et al., 2022: 181)

Introduction

Africa's e-commerce industry is often considered to have the greatest potential for further development, with its revenue reaching US\$16.5 billion in 2017, and expected to rise to US\$29 billion by 2022 (Li and Bode, 2021: 48). Another industry report even projected the market to reach US\$75 billion by 2025 (McKinsey Global Institute, 2013). China, amongst top global players, appears to be the most ambitious, with African infrastructure investments between 2011 and 2016 averaging US\$12 billion per year. Kilimall, the largest e-commerce platform in Kenya, was established by an Africa-based Chinese start-up, whereas Alibaba, China's top e-commerce and platform giant, provides machine translated content on its AliExpress platform in more than 20 languages (Li and Bode, 2021: 51).

Has China become a neo-coloniser, exporting its cultural and economic power to the world based on the country's 'neonationalist', soft power building agenda (Fung, 2016: 3016)? Or has China become a white knight who enables 'South–South cooperation', leading to co-dependent economic growth and cultural exchange, and creating a more egalitarian world? Existing theoretical arguments about neocolonialism (Langley and Leyshon, 2022) and data colonialism (Couldry and Mejias, 2019) largely focus on how China's technological and infrastructural expansion, as well as its increasingly platformised media and cultural sectors, can achieve its ambitions abroad. Yet, how China's cultural power is manifested through its cultural production and how it is negotiated or resisted in people's daily lives in a South–South, cross-national setting, remains under-researched and under-theorised.

This article responds to a recent call for a better understanding of how the platformisation process reconfigures cultural production across different geographic contexts, and how cultural producers across different sub-sectors and geographic markets differentially depend on digital platforms for the creation, distribution, and monetization of creative and informational content (Poell et al., 2022). We use *fashion*, a significant economic force and one of the most pertinent indicators of cross-cultural exchange, as an exemplary case to assess both China's economic and cultural power expansion in the global South. While a theory should not be regarded as irrelevant and inapplicable in a non-Western context simply because it is 'Western' (Tse, 2022), in existing studies of cultural

production and its relationship to platforms/platformisation, the case of non-Western everyday fashion serves to enrich existing theories of cultural production–platform relationships and multiply our frames of reference, to offer new understandings of how symbolic, sociopolitical and cultural meanings of fashion are constructed through divergent platform affordances, and to reveal the various forms of cultural negotiations and resistance in different contexts.

As we will further elaborate, the predominant ‘Western’ logics of cultural production, definitions of cultural producers and their relations to major mainstream platforms (mostly social media), and the assumed extractive force of datafication in the Global South, as a one-way colonising process (Couldry and Mejias, 2019), do not neatly fit into the case of China–Africa fashion production, trade, and consumption. ‘Platform-dependence can vary substantially depending on when and where we look in the production process’ (Poell et al., 2022: 196). Unlike gaming, the news business, and social media, fashion – as Hesmondhalgh (2013) argued – is a ‘hybrid’ cultural industry involving not only the ‘creation, distribution, marketing, and monetization of symbolic products’ (Poell et al., 2022: 180), but also their interwoven *material* aspects, interplaying with both its various business agents’ and consumers’ offline social and cultural practices (Tse and Tsang, 2021), thus can hardly be fully platform-dependent. To understand the cultural production–platform relations in Kenya’s everyday fashion industry, it is insufficient to merely focus on mainstream social media platforms and influencers/creators, as it often neglects the important dynamics between other key human and non-human agents (Tse et al., 2020) and the non-social media platforms. The emerging field of ‘Creator Culture/Creator Studies’ (e.g., Craig and Cunningham, 2021), while providing great insights into the shifting trends of cultural production across many advanced platform markets, still inadequately accounts for the much broader scope of cultural producers and mediators involved in the cultural creation, distribution, and monetization processes in many ‘Southern’ countries. Recognising this wider range of cultural producers and mediators helps one comprehend to what extent and how they operate (in)dependently from various platforms at each stage, and how they go beyond the stereotypical, assumed universal cultural production–platform relationship. This echoes what Poell et al. (2022: 181) acutely argue about the importance of ‘examin[ing] the changes as well as the continuities in the institutional relations and emerging practices of cultural production’ beyond the ‘trap of platform essentialism’.

By critically analysing the China–Africa networks of fashion production, trade, and consumption on e-commerce platforms, this article captures divergent cultural production–platform relations and dissects the complex dynamics and expressions of power involved in China’s actual cultural, economic, and symbolic impacts. Drawing on neo-colonialism and data colonialism theories as a starting point, how and by whom cultural differences are negotiated and mediated on two specified e-commerce platforms (AliExpress and Kilimall) will be critically examined. In the case of everyday fashion, we contend that platform-dependent creators are not always the primary and only cultural producer. We pay attention to other human actors and non-human actants: the formal and informal traders, e-commerce platforms and Kenyan consumers, *all* play the role of cultural producer in creating and mediating certain cultural and symbolic values online and offline. The broader physical and digital infrastructures also

reshape the symbolic fashion meanings. However, value extractions, via datafication and algorithmic control, do not always work so smoothly, as we observed there are other forms of cultural negotiations and resistance involved. In the Kenyan context, which is essentially not an ‘advanced platform market’, e-commerce platforms and their algorithmic infrastructures arguably play a less significant role as cultural producer due to issues such as (lack of) trust, fraud, linguistic and logistical barriers, underdeveloped online payment systems, cultural beliefs, gender norms, religious practices, and practical ethics (Njoroge, 2021; Wanyonyi, 2018).

China as a neo-/data coloniser?

In the age of platformisation, the China–Africa fashion trade potentially creates novel forms of economic exploitation and cultural invasion, resembling historical colonialism. Couldry and Mejias (2019) coined the term ‘data colonialism’ to describe – within a broader frame of social processes, distinctive of the 21st century – how the predatory extractive practices of historical colonialism and the quantification methods of computing are combined (Couldry and Mejias, 2019: 337–338). The social quantification sector – Amazon, Apple, and Google in ‘the West’, and Alibaba, Baidu, and Tencent in China – are the principal actors in data colonialism; they capture everyday social acts through algorithmic means and convert them into quantifiable data, which are analysed and used for the generation of profit (Couldry and Mejias, 2019: 340). These newly configured ‘data relations’ render social life all over the globe an open resource for value extraction and an object that is subject to continuous management and surveillance (Couldry and Mejias, 2019: 337). The two authors also contend, distinct from other critical approaches to data, including platform capitalism (Smicek, 2017) and critical data studies (e.g., Milan and Treré, 2019), the data colonialism thesis ‘reposition[s] those critiques explicitly within colonialism’s centuries-old relations to capitalism [...] therefore expands, not narrows, our understanding of data practices within an arc of historical comparison that includes both China and North America/Europe.’ (Couldry and Mejias, 2023: 787). In doing so, they also claim to expand, rather than narrow, our understanding of the ‘integrated history’ and ‘contemporary and evolving relations’ of colonialism and capitalism (Couldry and Mejias, 2023: 788).

Allegedly, Couldry and Mejias follow the late Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano’s ambition of ‘epistemological decolonisation’ to challenge colonialism’s legitimacy through ‘decolonial’ ways of thinking, and the seemingly natural, necessary, and continuous ‘enhancement’ of human development (Couldry and Mejias, 2019: 345). However, Langley and Leyshon (2022) further analyse how the expansion of Africa’s FinTech economy is not only constituted through historically specific and geographically uneven conditions of racialised marginalisation, rooted in colonial legacies, but also the distinctive platformisation processes of platform capitalism, ‘renew[ing] colonial relations in the present [and] intersect[ing] with the power relations of contemporary neo-colonialism on the African continent’ (Langley and Leyshon, 2022: 403). Moreover, Mumford (2022: 1512) argues that data colonialism theory’s primary concern with datafication as resource extraction, while highly insightful and convincing as a concept, has not gone far enough to prompt a ‘decolonial shift in thinking’. Ironically, these epistemological and analytical biases

re-westernise such a ‘decolonial’ theoretical lens as the objective centre in the intellectual world (Mumford, 2022), something Moosavi (2020) would describe as ‘Northern-centrism’ in intellectual decolonisation, that inadequately engages with, or at times utterly neglects, the relevant Southern scholarship and the opportunity for bottom-up theorisation.

It is thus important to situate the development of Kenya’s digital infrastructure and e-commerce in the history of China-Africa interactions. Avle (2022) contends that while Africa is often portrayed as a passive recipient of Chinese generosity within the narratives of ‘debt traps’ and ‘resource for financing’ exchanges, one should look beyond the high-profile infrastructure project communications through the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), particularly within the sphere of digital technologies, to be aware of other forms of engagement and empowerment on the ground. Pollio’s (2024) study of the history of *chinku* (affordable Chinese phones) in Nairobi also makes a connected argument: instead of seeing the success of China’s digital infrastructure expansion in Africa as an absolute form of digital neo-colonialism or a frictionless transfer of Chinese technologies, knowledge and power (see Lu, 2021, in her study of Transsion in Ghana), one should attend to the limits of China’s data coloniality and the ‘trials, negotiations, glitches, and adaptations’ from where China’s techno-capitalism emerges and expands (Pollio, 2024: 16).

Kenya has the fastest growing and transitioning e-commerce in Africa (UNCTAD, 2019). The country has a population of 47.6 million with a median age of 20 years (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2019) and a high internet penetration rate (85%) when compared with other progressive African countries such as South Africa (58%) and Nigeria (73%) (Nielsen and Fletcher, 2023: 490). According to the Communications Authority of Kenya, 39% of private enterprises in Kenya engage in e-commerce; its Cross-Border e-commerce is also taking shape, with retailers and consumers ordering locally unavailable items via Alibaba, Amazon, Kilimall, Zalando and more (Njoroge, 2021: 5). However, specific challenges face the expansion of e-commerce in Kenya, e.g., unstable high-quality internet connectivity (Nyaga, 2023) and the absence of a national courier service (Wanyonyi, 2018), all crucial for efficient logistics and delivery of goods (Langley and Leyshon, 2022).

Fashion as cultural industry: Existing ‘Northern-centrism’ in fashion scholarship

As part of the Cultural and Creative Industries, fashion is recognised as a significant cultural and economic force globally. Yet, the globalisation of fashion is often narrowly understood as ‘the global spread of Western fashion, and with it a hierarchy of Eurocentric fashion discourse over other fashion discourses, practices and systems’ (Cheang et al., 2021: 2). In other words, fashion studies remain ethnocentric to the point of systematically ignoring, misunderstanding, and excluding the fashion circuits, and production and consumption practices of billions of people in the Global South that do not operate via ‘the West’ or seek legitimacy from it (Baizerman et al., 1993). Although there is a growing body of research into inter-cultural fashion exchanges and influences (e.g., Aspers and Godart, 2013; Ling and Segre-Reinach, 2018; Rabine,

2002; Sylvanus, 2016; Tse et al., 2024), most studies relate Asian or African fashions to Western norms and power dynamics, not to each other (Bhachu, 2004; Hansen, 2000; Hendrickson, 1996; Rovine, 2015; Tarlo, 1996). Rabine (2002) first proposed a new model of informal linkages between countries of the Global South that remain un-influenced by the West, along which fashion travels directly between what she calls ‘peripheries’. These ‘peripheral’ South–South interactions rely on different circuits of goods and knowledge, and commercial and aesthetic exchanges (Haugen, 2018; Maclean, 2019). Xu’s (2021) study of the Chinese-invested fashion production in South Africa is another representative case, in which he emphasised ‘the varied and creative ways in which African manufacturers, traders, and consumers actively “fashion” and refashion Chinese materials to fit their own tastes and style trends’ (Xu, 2021: 976), as other emerging research have also highlighted (e.g., von Pezold and Driessen, 2021). These interactions and enactments of cultural meanings, further reinforced by the Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) and platformisation of cultural industries, are key to understanding how ‘fashionability’ (Lan and Zhang, 2024: 3) – what is desirable and fashionable and thus valuable in the (global) marketplace – is first created and circulated by different actors and brokers then embedded in a material clothing or accessory items in Chinese–African cross-national contexts, generating a unique form of cultural and economic power that is arguably independent of Western spheres of influence (Allman, 2004; Jansen and Craik, 2016; Maclean, 2019).

It was predicted that by 2023, seven of the world’s ten fastest-growing economies would be located in Sub-Saharan Africa (International Monetary Fund, 2021). African consumer expenditures are expected to rise to US\$2.5 trillion by 2030, double the level of 2015 (Signé, 2018). Although the biggest spending increases are expected to be in the sector of fast-moving consumer goods, the consumption of clothing and footwear on the African continent is also growing rapidly (Signé, 2018). Meanwhile, the largest fashion producer in the world is now China, accounting for 47% of the world’s textile output in 2017 (McKinsey and Company and Business of Fashion, 2018). However, non-Western costumes and styles from Asia, Africa, or Latin America are typically perceived as lacking the cultural achievement and individual creativity that constitutes ‘Western’ fashion (Craik, 1994; Hansen, 2004). They are often described as being folk, primitive, tribal, exotic, or ethnic, or they are orientalised, exoticised, and reduced to ‘ethnic chic’ (Bhachu, 2004; Tarlo, 1996), becoming a ‘mere currency in the [Western] fashion system’ (Chan, 2000). Africa’s long history of creative adaptation and cross-cultural fertilisation is downplayed (Hansen, 2004; Rabine, 2002; Rovine, 2015), and even its consumers are stereotyped as being passive and traditional (Niessen et al., 2003). Recently, Ikpe et al. (2024) compare two uniquely significant African fashion hubs – Lagos from Western Africa and Nairobi from Eastern Africa – on their capacity for domestic creative production and potential for internationalisation. Moreover, scholars often focus on high fashion, disregarding how foreign cultures and their aesthetics also influence everyday, ordinary fashion practices ‘in all directions, across class lines, between urban and rural areas, and around the globe’ (Hansen, 2004: 372).

Amid the ongoing platformisation of Africa’s fashion sector, more fashion designers, marketers, informal traders and content creators are now tapping into various social media platforms (e.g., TikTok, Instagram) to encode (symbolic) fashionability as well

as sell their products directly online. In return, social media platforms render Instagram influencers in Africa the ‘commodified subjects of a global cultural phenomenon of platformisation’ (Njathi, 2024: 202). Muturi’s (2024) study portrayed the situations in South Africa and Kenya: 63% of South African fashion consumers make purchase decisions based on the visibility of these products and services on social media and increasingly engage in social commerce, e.g., Facebook Marketplace and Instagram Shopping, whereas Kenyan fashion entrepreneurs and designers also increasingly showcase their creations on Facebook and Instagram (Muturi, 2024: 26–27). However, as discussed earlier, existing literature (e.g., von Pezold, 2019; von Pezold and Driessen, 2021; Xu, 2021) does not directly address how platformisation affects the production of Chinese everyday fashion (in both its symbolic and material aspects) in Africa, rendering a unique empirical gap this cross-national study strives to fill.

Methodology

In our case study, we extend Mumford’s (2022) call for a genuine analytical lens of ‘decolonial thinking’ in complementing and enriching existing Western-centric theorisation of fashion as a cultural industry and its cultural production-platform relations. Rather than merely delineating the platformised cultural production a form of resource extraction from social and economic exploitation, we emphasise the importance of reassessing its neo-colonial cultural logic: that is, whether or not the functionality that is offered to enable such a data/resource extraction process will simultaneously impose the ‘neo-colonial’ culture onto its ‘neo-colonised’ subjects smoothly without any technical hurdles, intercultural frictions, negotiations and resistance. We propose examining two e-commerce platforms operating in the Kenyan market (AliExpress and Kilimall), to highlight the often-neglected dialectical platform trade practices and agency of African consumers. We comparatively analyse how symbolic and cultural meanings of fashion and beauty are interculturally and intertextually (both visually and textually) constructed through the specific affordances of the two platforms.

Our empirical focus on China’s everyday fashion production for Kenya demonstrates the country’s sociocultural and politico-economic specificity when compared to that of other African countries (e.g., Mozambique; see von Pezold, 2019). First of all, it is an African gateway for China’s BRI (Dossou, 2018). It has strong trade ties with China and heavily relies on cheap imports from China (BBC, 2019). The former British colony is the second-largest economy in eastern and central Africa (International Monetary Fund, 2021) and has a rapidly developing clothing and textile industry. With a GDP per capita (PPP) of 1838.21 USD in 2020, Kenya qualifies as a rapidly growing lower-middle-income economy. Specifically, Nairobi is one of Africa’s ‘fashion capitals’, not only serving as a major regional commercial hub, but also possessing a vibrant local fashion and design scene (Pool, 2016).

We adopted a mixed methodological paradigm to collect empirical evidence, first through focus group interviews with Kenyan consumers, and second, through a platform walkthrough method analysing the product information presented on the websites. As we are interested in identifying Chinese cultural elements and potential user resistance on the platforms, focus group interviews with Kenyan consumers were first conducted to elicit both shared and differing perceptions of cultural meanings embedded in their fashion

consumption practices. With the aid of a Kenyan researcher, we conducted focus group interviews (in both Kiswahili and English) with 22 Kenyan consumers in Nairobi, in December 2022. Snowball sampling was employed using the researcher's professional contacts at a university in Kenya, as well as the Kenyan researcher's personal networks. Selection criteria were: gender (female), age (an equal split between the two main market segments targeted by Chinese fast fashion: 18–30 and 31–45 years of age), and consumption patterns (e.g., prior purchasing experience). Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they understand this study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. We acknowledged potential risks, including discomfort from discussing personal experiences, and have implemented measures to minimize these risks by providing a supportive environment and offering the option to skip questions or withdraw. Each participant was offered an honorarium for their time and transportation cost (1000 KES/6.2 euros). In the following discussions, all participants were also anonymised (e.g., R1, R3, R8).

Building on our focus group findings, we then deployed the walkthrough method (Light et al., 2018) to analyse Kilimall's specific platform infrastructure, user interface design, and digital affordances: its intended purpose and embedded cultural elements, implied ideal users and uses, and mode of consumption. Founded and named eponymously by a Chinese start-up in 2014, Kilimall has been growing rapidly, and has become the largest Kenya-based e-commerce platform, with more than 10 million users and over 10,000 sellers from both Africa and China (Zhang, 2019). One author examined and systematically stepped through the various stages of platform entry and everyday use (Light et al., 2018), yielding further insights into how the platform mediates fashion values and perceptions of China and 'Chineseness' through both visual and textual representations of its products. With a strong presence in Kenya, Uganda, and Nigeria, Kilimall features a wide array of products, many made in China, including clothing and accessories, skincare and cosmetics, wigs and hair extensions, shoes and bags, personal care, electronics, home appliances, and so forth. The company also partners with local businesses and governments, allegedly providing tailored products and localised services to African consumers.

Data analysis

Focus group

The increasing use of Chinese (Alibaba) and Chinese-invested e-commerce platforms (Kilimall) to purchase Chinese-made fashion products by female Kenyan consumers – as evident in the focus group discussions – does not directly translate into the consumers' assimilation of Chinese culture, aesthetics, and fashionability. This contradicts the assumed logic and typical narrative of neo-colonialism. Instead, the Chinese platforms' digital infrastructures and the perceived 'immoral' trading practices of Chinese merchants play a key role in generating negative cultural meanings for its Kenyan consumers.

'The only thing I don't like about the Chinese things are shoes ... they just look Chinese.'
(Case 11, R4)

'My [experience of] Kilimall... I have never had a bad experience except synthetic hair (chuckles). [Interviewer: What did they deliver?]' 'Oh my God, something that just didn't look like hair at all.' (Case 12, R4)

Female Kenyan consumers repeatedly expressed strong cultural sentiments against products made in China during interviews. Apparently, this shows that China's fashion production and trade in Kenya (both online and offline) fail to sell 'Chineseness' through their fashion offerings. Many informants criticised the unsuitability of Chinese-made fashion items in terms of their size, cut, material quality (not durable), and symbolic inferiority (e.g., fakeness).

'Those Chinese things, I leave that for others ... most are just fake. If someone wants to annoy you, they will refer to it as it is from China (laughter).' (Case 5, R6)

The Kenyan informants' moralised judgement of Chinese fashion products was interactionally reinforced in the focus group, indicating their strong sense of cultural superiority over China. Consumers from the older market segment spoke of their love of the traditional, authentic Kenyan clothing, Kitenge, whereas the younger consumers, in fluent English, discussed their favourite Western-style denim jeans, dresses, and skirts, revealing Kenya's unfinished decolonisation from Britain on a cultural level and how Western symbolic power still lingers. It seemed that the more experienced they were in purchasing Chinese fashion products online, the more negative conceptions of China/Chineseness they maintained. Unexpectedly, rather than directly promoting Chinese fashionability, e-commerce platforms in Kenya, as non-human actants, mediated Chinese merchants' and informal traders' problematic online fashion trade practices and further amplified the negative image of China: recurrently, Kenyan consumers exaggeratedly described Chinese fashion traders as being too greedy, cunning, and not trustworthy, with many illustrative examples emphasising the materiality of fashion (which was created, circulated, and redistributed in and through different cultural, economic, and social circuits beyond the platforms):

'Here I have never heard of somebody having shoes delivered that are for the same foot!' (Case 9, R8)

'I am not satisfied ... you cannot return [the items], so [Kenyan] people need to be taught about how to buy from Alibaba.' (Case 9, R1)

In addition to the contrast between the product images and descriptions (encoding symbolic fashion) offered on both AliExpress and Kilimall, and the material products received, the Kenyan women further criticised Chinese clothing sizes as being too tiny and not curvy enough:

'We have the shape, God gave us the shape ... (crosstalk) and you also need to consider the plus-size, because we Kenyans, even if you look at me (chuckles), they should consider that.' (Case 1, R5)

'Actually, I think with Chinese things, the biggest risk you can take is in the sizing. I feel their body type is completely different from ours, we are more curvy, more fleshy.' (Case 12, R4)

Interestingly, two interviewees automatically referred to the UK size chart, typically adopted and shown on e-commerce platforms, as a standardised reference point. This implicitly reflects how the remnants of British colonialism infiltrates into Kenyans' everyday fashion practices, forming a strong barrier of China's neo-colonial cultural influences through fashion production. Fashion goods from both the UK and USA are often regarded as having higher quality than the Chinese ones,

'so once you bring them in Kenya, selling them is very difficult. Because you know, even if the brand is from USA, once they hear that it is [imported] from China, they don't want to buy [...] anything from China.' (Case 5, R4)

Paradoxically, a strong emphasis of and attachment to Kenyan–African culture is also evident, indicating the existence of an anti-Western colonial sentiments. There is an instilled need to behave in a culturally appropriate manner and avoid appearing as being 'too westernised' in everyday cultural consumption and social practices.

Despite all the complaints and discontent, the popularity of AliExpress and Kilimall among female Kenyan fashion consumers seems to support Couldry and Meijas's (2019) argument about data extraction, in this case, concerning China. Apparently, most of the interviewees were willing to participate in both e-commerce and digital payment. Platformisation across various facets of life also makes it increasingly difficult not to do so, favouring data colonialism in Kenya in the long run. One interviewee mentioned M-Pesa (a mobile phone-based money transfer, payment, and micro-financing service, offered by Vodafone and Safaricom since 2007) which is widely used in Kenya, particularly on Kenyan e-commerce platforms. Yet, we discern the lingering of Western sartorial ideals on the symbolic and cultural level in everyday Chinese fashion production. On top of this, the differences in body sizes, and the lack of trust in the quality of Chinese goods, e-commerce processes, platforms, and logistics, together with the reliance on the more trustworthy African informal traders and intermediaries in Kenya, all constitute a pragmatic hindrance for Chinese(-owned) platforms' extraction of comprehensive consumer data at the individual level, and also the smooth convergence of neo- and data colonialism as an evolved, contemporary form of historical colonialism and capitalism (Couldry and Meijas, 2019, 2023).

'Another thing about China is that they should stop dumping expired shit here especially make-up and lipsticks.' (Case 8, R7)

'Like their [Chinese] shoes don't last, you buy online, the first and second day the third you see them starting to split.' (Case 10, R1)

Discussion

Drawing on our focus group findings, most of the 22 Kenyan interviewees indicated their first-hand experiences of purchasing everyday fashion products (clothing, wigs, cosmetics, and skincare) directly from Chinese merchants through various available e-commerce platforms in Africa; many also indirectly purchased these products through informal African traders who acquired them in bulk through e-commerce platforms.

The overall responses of these consumers indicate that their perceptions of fashion(ability) are often shaped and mediated by (i) their online encounters with the texts and images, first created by Chinese e-tailers and African informal traders, and subsequently posted and circulated on the e-commerce platforms or through WhatsApp and WeChat posts, (ii) Western fashion trends and values as the remnants of British colonial culture and its lingering sartorial and symbolic ideals, in addition to (iii) their own integrative social and cultural practices other than fashion consumption (Tse and Gheorghiu, 2023). Practically, the symbolic and material facets of fashion are often intertwined and are rarely perceived as two separate entities, as they often co-constitute each other, e.g., ‘good quality’ is perceived as a prerequisite for ‘good fashion’.

In the context of the China–Kenya fashion trade, there exist few (Chinese) creators producing online creative content directly targeting consumers. Our focus group informants did name a long list of creators (e.g., TikTok, Instagram) in the Kenyan context, whose fashion styles they aspire to and admire (e.g., politicians, celebrities, musicians). These high fashion styles intertextually distributed in and through the social mediascape, however, are only partly translated into actual everyday fashion practices. Instead, they often speak of how they mix and match these ‘pocket-friendly’ Chinese fashion offerings to approximate the unaffordable, out-of-reach high fashion looks from the West, or the pragmatic issues that either encourage or discourage their fashion consumption: product images and descriptions, price and availability, delivery time, return and refund policies, durability, ‘authenticity’ (von Pezold, 2019), and other embedded cultural and symbolic meanings. These mundane practices of everyday fashion production (and its connected material aspect) in the ‘Southern’ countries fill the gap in existing Western-centric scholarship of high fashion systems and the cultural economy. However, rather than aiming to reinforce the epistemic and empirical North–South divide (e.g., that social media platforms, content creators and data extractivism are most important in cultural production scholarship in the West, and they are unimportant in the non-West), our findings suggest research on fashion as well as other cultural economies could be approached in less Eurocentric ways (Cheang *et al.*, 2021).

Walking through Kilimall

‘There are very modern cities in Africa, with many handsome men and beautiful women, who are becoming increasingly affluent.’

Yang Tao, founder of Kilimall (Zhang, 2019)

Kilimall started out by targeting local merchants to resell their products on its platform through a commission-based system. Since April 2015, the platform has been open to thousands of Chinese suppliers, who now make up half of the sales volume (Emukule, 2023). The platform connects thousands of Chinese small businesses, that are eyeing-up the booming African market, with local infrastructural building and logistics services. Resembling Alibaba’s model, the company also provides an online payment system, Lipapay, and a logistics system KiliExpress. Kilimall aims to become a ‘digital enabler’ in Africa, with the mission of ‘enriching lives for Africa’ by creating a ‘better

life’ for people in both Africa and China (Our Today, 2023). It strives to facilitate entrepreneurship and state–business partnerships in both China and Africa and boost economic growth in different emerging African markets.

Walking through Kilimall’s registration and categorised sales pages, as well as the expanded classified sections, we evaluated to what extent its user interface design and digital affordances can create and remediate culture-specific fashion meanings, in addition to affording intercultural exchange and economic empowerment in Africa, as the company claims. In general, the platform’s digital infrastructure and interface design are quite similar to AliExpress (also known as Taobao – the Chinese Mainland version for the domestic market), the most popular Chinese B-to-C e-commerce platform, operated by Alibaba. It adopts the same orange colour tone and similar page layout as AliExpress, with a search bar placed at the top, category menu on the left, and carousel slides with images of top sellers and hot items in the centre. Such platform affordances do not necessarily remind Kenyan consumers about the Chinese tech giant nor recreate a favourable image of the Chinese-invested platform. Chinese merchants who are experienced in Taobao trading can easily adapt to the procedures of registration, product browsing, online shopping, reviewing, and C2C (customer to customer) communication on Kilimall. That is, the similar user experience enhances platform’s adaptability among Chinese users (mainly merchants), more so than for those from other contexts. However, this does not imply that Chinese merchants are obliged to take on the role of cultural mediators while enjoying the advantage in their commercial trading practices.

Chinese merchants as privileged cultural mediators?

We observed different messages the platform intends to convey to its targeted users from China and Africa. On the registration page (see Figure 1(a) and 1(b)), at the top one sees bilingual slogans (in Chinese and English) superimposed upon an image of Kilimanjaro – the

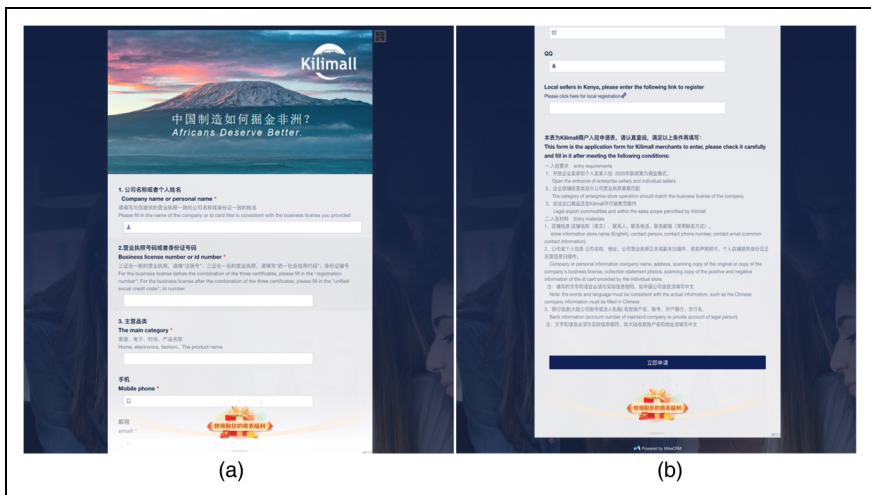


Figure 1. a (left) and 1b (right): seller registration pages.

highest mountain in Kenya – whose name echoes the platform’s name (in Kiswahili, *Kilima* means ‘mountain’ or ‘hill’). The meanings of the two slogans differ: the Chinese text literally means ‘How can the “made-in-China” [Chinese products and merchants] dig gold in Africa?’ by direct translation, assuming China’s dominant position; whereas the slogan in English adopts a more Afrocentric tone, ‘Africans deserve better’, granting Africa agency. The divergent texts symbolise the contrasting perspectives (i.e., Chinese merchants versus African merchants) and goals (i.e., gold-digging [resource extraction] versus diversification of the market [contributing to Africa]) of an intended Kilimall merchant, rather than remediating the primacy of Chinese culture to its customers.

Furthermore, the registration page settings are not inclusive to accommodate non-Chinese merchants: simplified Chinese is used as the primary language to illustrate the registration procedures and the documents required for registration are not applicable to non-Chinese merchants (e.g., a Chinese ID or three-in-one business licence in mainland China, Chinese bank information, or Tencent QQ account name – the most popular instant messaging communication tool in China). Kenyan merchants and other foreign sellers need to scroll all the way down to the bottom of the page for a hidden click-through link, which redirects them to another gateway for registration. Such a platform design creates obvious linguistic and technical hurdles for non-Chinese-speaking merchants. The ‘Kilimall seller support guide’ page also fails to provide full Chinese-to-English translations of all terms and conditions. While the platform settings require non-Chinese merchants to understand the Chinese language, they do not encourage them to appreciate it, and more often this generates negative impressions of it (and its cultural origin) as an undecipherable language.

‘Digging gold’ from Africa: Technical hurdles and intercultural friction

On the sales page, the platform’s infrastructure and user interface design provide a convenient classified and featured items search option, which enables online shoppers to easily identify the products they are looking for (see Figure 2). Even so, for Kenyan African consumers who purchase products from thousands of miles away, the quality assurance of Kilimall offering products remains uncertain and ambivalent, rendering the problem of trust. Aligned with the focus group findings, the platform lacks a well-established legal infrastructure to ensure timely international delivery and after-sales services. Specifically, we found that its product displays and descriptions, as well as the online transaction regulations, were unclear and inconsistent. There is no standard format or system for product description and product image display. The information provided varies greatly between merchants. Some merchants list detailed product descriptions, including features, specifications, usage instructions, and so forth; others merely provide pictures of products without any accompanying descriptions. Regarding the product visuals that are uploaded, some simply show a product image with no brand or further information, and some are even computer-generated images (e.g., prototypes or hand-drawings) or are simply photos taken from the internet instead of original photos, often featuring Caucasian models and Western fashion styles. These images inaccurately and inauthentically portray fashion and clothing products to Kenyan e-consumers, raising questions about their potential to symbolically valorise China.

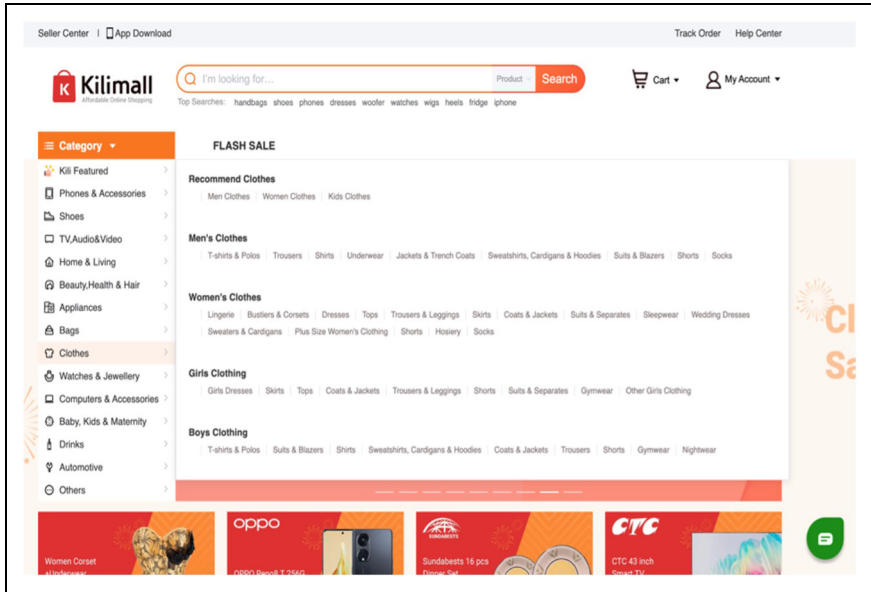


Figure 2. Classified menu and sections under each category.

Furthermore, the linguistic barrier between Chinese e-merchants and Kenyan e-shoppers necessitates the use of English as a third language for product descriptions, evaluations, delivery, maintenance, returns, and refunds, forming unique cross-cultural dynamics and mediation. This explains why some mixed-language product labels, descriptions and trademarks are rather incomplete and confusing, and why most of the written reviews by the buyers are short and simple (see Figure 3(a) and 3(b)).

Discussion

Walking through the 'Beauty, Health & Hair' and 'Clothes' pages on Kilimall, and examining their classified sections and the goods information displayed, we found that a large proportion of products on Kilimall are not tailored for African customers. In the advertising images of clothing, African models are rarely seen across the whole Africa-oriented platform. Over 60% of the goods images are presented by non-African models (i.e., White, East Asian, and sometimes Latino). The visual representations of traditional African aesthetic standards and large-size body shape are largely absent. A universalist sense of fashionability and beauty standards, largely based on Western norms, is mechanically transplanted from overseas to Africa with very limited local adaptations. African consumers and their needs are presumed to be the same as those from other cultural and geographic locations. Rather than fully accepting this, African consumers show their discontent and resistance to the neglect of their physical traits and cultural particularities from the assortment of everyday fashion goods offered.

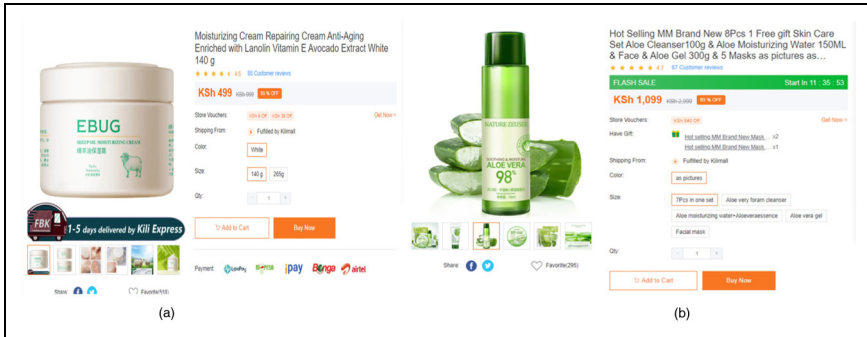


Figure 3. a (left) and 3b (right): examples of skincare products with mixed-language labels and trademarks.

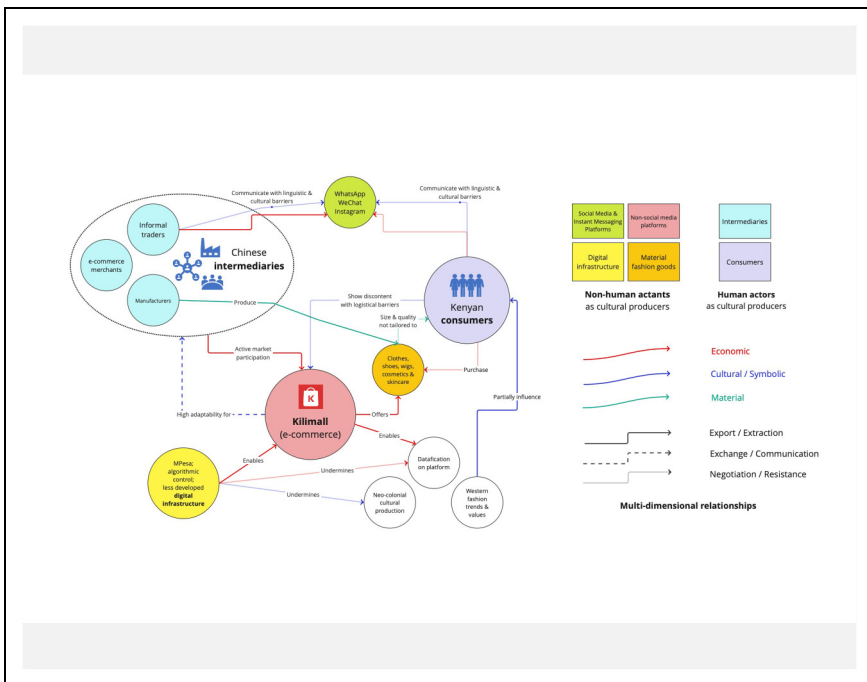


Figure 4. A web of cultural production-platform relationships: multi-dimensional dynamics, relationships and mediations among the key actors of the Chinese-African fashion trade.

Kilimall’s platform affordances and interface design focus on enacting impulsive purchasing (Ou and Davison, 2009), such as the discounted prices, products’ sales volumes, and trending items, rather than promoting Chinese cultural identities. Through a simple cross-platform search and internet search for images, we also found many exported products from China. These Chinese products are not for domestic use. Usually, they will be

given foreign language labels or packaging and sent for cross-border export. Similar advertisement images can be found on both Kilimall and Taobao. However, on the product description labels, information about the place of origin is sometimes hidden or blurred. Without careful research and comparison, an ordinary consumer may not notice a product's place of origin or related manufacturing information. Finally, the use of the English language, besides making it easy for African consumers to understand, also serves the purpose of concealing the made-in-China status, to avoid the potential negative perception of Chinese products in Africa (Gariba and Ying, 2016). In order to present a more 'global' image, Chinese e-commerce platforms provide many options for imitating Western platforms in terms of their platform infrastructure and settings, and aligning their 'global' vision/website positioning. Their major users – Global South consumers – even encounter difficulties while using the platforms due to linguistic barriers.

Conclusion

In our focus group and walkthrough analysis, we zoomed in on *who/what* plays an important role in creating, distributing, and monetising the values of Chinese everyday fashion as a cultural product in Kenya in the age of platformisation. Our analysis explicates an oft-neglected encoding process of fashionability beyond the seasonal-cyclical logic of high fashion trends, in which the values of fashion are not only created by traditional cultural producers (fashion designers, brands, and advertising media) or mediated by mainstream social media platforms.

Figure 4 presents the multi-dimensional dynamics, exchange and negotiations among the overlooked (human) actors and (non-human) actants identified in our study, showcasing an intricate web of cultural production-platform relationships in Chinese-African everyday fashion trade, potentially applicable in the study of other cultural and creative sectors (e.g., arts and crafts, architecture, furniture and product design). Chinese merchants, informal traders, and retailers (human actors), with their visual and textual promotional content disseminated via instant messaging apps and e-commerce platforms, as well as the less visible logistical infrastructures, user interface design and platform settings (non-human actants), all play the role of cultural producer in (re)creating fashion meanings and symbolic values. Arguably, the platformisation process does not render the platformised Chinese fashion in Kenya fully platform-dependent (at least among female consumers), due to various pragmatic constraints, e.g., a limited disposable income for fashion consumption for the majority¹, routinised cultural and social practices², digital and social media user preference, and linguistic and logistical barriers. Under both the indigenous and British postcolonial cultural infrastructures, most Kenyans speak both English and Kiswahili, whereas most Chinese designers and traders do not, as they rely on the bilingual African traders and e-commerce platforms to facilitate such cultural mediation processes (Li and Bode, 2021). The theoretical view of Chinese cultural production as an imperialist or colonialising force does not neatly fit into the case of Kenyan fashion trade.

To affirm the mixed cultural assimilations and resistances of the African consumers against Chinese everyday fashion keeps us away from the neo-colonialism pitfall (Casilli, 2017). These consumers, while heavily engaged in the two Chinese e-commerce

platforms, are not necessarily subject to the total algorithmic control of data colonialism as ‘a historic new phase of colonialism: a new asymmetric mode of dispossession *through data*’ (Couldry and Mejias, 2023: 795, emphasis in original), and its symbolic and economic violence. The platform affordances simply do not facilitate that. Instead, the lingering British postcolonial cultural infrastructure as well as the less developed digital infrastructure in Kenya, as illustrated in our study, undermines China’s neo-colonial cultural production and datafication. It also demonstrates the uneven spread of data extractivism on a global scale (Segura and Waisbord, 2019) and ‘(data) colonialisms in the plural’ (Calzati, 2021: 917), complicating the cultural dynamics of data colonialism by China in Africa and other Global South regions.

The arguments made by Mumford (2022) and her critique of data colonialism as presented by Couldry and Mejias (2019) are also important. While data colonialism deals with ‘social’ data as an extractive resource, the traditional paradigm of North-to-South colonisation/colonialism only partly fit into the case of the Chinese–African fashion commerce. As Calzati (2021) argues, China’s approach to Africa is different from ‘the top-down approach of many Western powers towards developing countries’. While we should not neglect the ongoing trends of datafication through the platformisation of Chinese cultural production and trade in Africa, the logistical and digital-infrastructure challenges also hamper the efficacy of the extracted data and the means to extract it. The Kenyan consumers’ dissenting voices and mixed perceptions of Chinese fashion, Chineseness and China also complicate the top-down neo-colonial narrative in the Kenyan context.

In Couldry and Mejias’s (2023) responses to the ongoing criticisms of their crude use of the data colonialism thesis as a colonising move (e.g., Calzati, 2021; Mumford, 2022), the two authors insisted the importance of recognising the force of such a universal discourse (of datafication), similar to the case of neo-colonialism, as a general ‘theoretical horizon’, for forging specific resistance against neo-colonial cultural production and its potential symbolic, economic and cultural violence. Couldry and Mejias argued, ‘[i]gnoring that force for fear of contributing to a “general discourse” risks *missing the forest for the trees*: business, governmental and social discourses and practices today do support datafication almost everywhere’ (2023: 793; emphasis added). What we also strongly advise against, however, is to prophesise and perpetuate the omnipotence of a supposed ‘neo-coloniser’ (China), and to assume the ‘data-/neo-colonised subjects’ as being always passive and vulnerable out there, waiting for the deep-thinking scholars to theorise their embodied experience of exploitation from afar, yet sometimes not being exactly aware of their potential resistance based on their existing cultural infrastructure (e.g., the indigenous, British postcolonial and other external cultural forces) and mundane social, consumption and data practices (e.g., a lower level of platform-dependence; divergent power dynamics and negotiations between other human and non-human agents as key cultural producers; distinctive user practices on non-social media platforms).

Finally, whether studying Western or non-Western, high or everyday fashion and other cultural phenomena, we should always avoid conceptual essentialism or universalism (Tsang et al., 2024), recognise the heterogeneity of cultural negotiations and resistance in divergent contexts, and pay attention to the historical-materialist roots of platformised cultural production not only across the ‘multiple Souths’ (Calzati, 2021) but also the ‘multiple Norths’, as ‘the North is not a single, unified block ... [but] multiple


and diverse Norths' (Milan and Treré, 2019: 326). Indeed, this article concretely presents different perspectives on business and social discourses and practices in the multiple Souths. More often, their freedom and agency against neo-colonialism (whether by a 'Global North' or another 'Global South' country) come from our recognition rather than salvation, or we are complicit in rendering them the powerless neo-colonised subjects and reproducing the colonial knowledge hierarchies – at least on a discursive level.

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Notes

1. In Kenya, an average of Ksh 4,150 [26.77 euros] per person per year for all purchases of second-hand garments, new clothes, and footwear (Anonymous, 2021).
2. There is a huge demand from Kenyan consumers for Chinese-made (first- and second-hand) fashion and other consumer products, but it does not form a critical mass of online consumers for such fashion content on social media platforms, for several reasons: (i) most Kenyan fashion consumers cannot afford first-hand fashion products; (ii) there are cultural and linguistic barriers for both Chinese and Kenyan fashion content creators to mediate 'everyday fashionability'; (iii) the creation and mediation of everyday fashionability are grounded in a *different cultural production-platform relationship*. Nonetheless, the interview responses and conversations demonstrate that there is a great deal of symbolic and cultural meaning being produced, mediated, and resisted along the multi-scalar China–Africa fashion production, trade, and consumption processes.

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