

## COSTUME AND THE DRAG SKIT MAKER: THE EXAMPLE OF WARRI MAMA

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### Abstract

*Costume plays a crucial role in the world of drag performance, shaping character and narrative. However, scholarly attention on African digital activism and youth culture lacks in-depth exploration into the specific nuances of innovative aesthetic costuming and its impact on the portrayal of drag personas, especially as it relates to skit making. Warri Mama's character, while humorous, perpetuates stereotypes about Warri women, blending comedy and cultural critique to facilitate his skit making art. However, the role of costume in shaping his identity and the impacts on audience perception remains underexplored. This study, therefore, examines Warri Mama's online comedy skits, focusing on the intricate costumes involved in his performance. It provides insights into the relationship between costume and drag performance, offering practical implications for drag artists, costume designers, and scholars. The essay highlights the intersection of gender, performance, and visual culture in Warri Mama's art, arguing that the innovative use of drag artistry and fashion's semiotic power creates a camp-infused digital activism that resonates within the Nigerian youth. The paper adopts a qualitative research methodology, an approach used to analyze the artistic, cultural and social dimensions of costumes used in drag skits. This paper employs multidimensional lens of semiotics, performativity and humour to explore how costume contribute to character creation, audience engagement and social commentary. The findings of this work is that costume is central to the success of drag skits, serving as a medium for storytelling, cultural representation and social critique. The research recommends that priority should be on costume design and cultural authenticity.*

**Keywords:** Drag performance, Cross-dressing, Social commentary, Artistic expression, Humour, Gender performativity.

### Introduction

Over the past few years, Warri Mama has risen to viral stardom in Nigeria through his funny skits posted across social media. A drag persona created by comedian/actor Ezekiel Black Didi, also known as Warri Mama is a humorous and exaggerated portrayal of the stereotypical “Warri woman” from the Warri region of Delta State. He serves as a quintessential example of a drag skit maker who expertly utilizes costume to create compelling and transformative performances.

This paper explores the impact of innovative aesthetic costume on the portrayal of drag personas in African digital activism, socio-cultural commentary, queer politics and culture, highlighting the need for nuanced examination of Warri Mama's caricatured costuming choices. The analysis focuses on his strategic manipulation of attire, including dress, headgear, and accessories, reinforcing subversive humour and critiques of gender constructs and normative ideologies.

Drag has evolved into an essential component of contemporary pop culture, enthralling audiences worldwide with its compelling performances, outlandish characters, and bold celebration of uniqueness. It has commonly been used to arouse laughter from the period of silent, low-budget films to date (Severová, 2021). Drag serves as a comic element as it adds humour to the performance to provoke laughter and create amusement in the audience. Essentially these drag performers' intent and style is meant to be humorous and parodies the art form. Thus, Severová says that “drag is an art form that some

people use to make money or to be creative...” (2021, p. 19). It also seems to be a place where people can express various aspects of their gender and sexual identities (Dougherty, 2017). Drag performances reinforce gender norms and the belief that gender and sex classifications influence one's identity. This suggests that some aspects of drag may reflect normative gender assumptions.

Costumes in drag performances have been a significant part of the entertainment industry, using makeup, costumes, and exaggerated movements to create a new persona. This art is influenced by various cultural dynamics that shape its development. Though previous research like “The theatricality of the everyday through costume expressions of fandom and drag”, “The RuPaul effect: The exploration of the costuming rituals of drag culture in social media and the theatrical performativity of the male body in the ambit of the everyday”, Contemporary drag practices and performers: Drag in changing scene”, and A Natural History of the drag queen phenomenon has explored the history and cultural significance of costuming and drag skit-making in various societies (Sandoval, 2021; 2018; Vuolaslempi, 2021; Moncrieff and Lienard, 2017; Winge, 2018), there is limited research on most Nigerian skit makers especially Warri Mama with his costuming and its unique contributions and influence to this art form and the broader cultural landscape.

With references to popular culture, Warri Mama's skits resonate strongly with young Nigerians. He has become an iconic and inspiring figure for using comedy to speak truth to power. As his sketches continually go viral across Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, largely due to strategic costume, which allows him to seamlessly transform into the character, Warri Mama proves that biting political satire and queer-inflected camp can find a passionate audience in 21st century Nigeria.

This study finds support in performance theory, gender performativity, cultural identity and semiotics. The performance theory provides an avenue through which skit makers are understood as performers who construct, enact and challenge traditional gender identity and create new meanings through their performances. According to Schechner performance is a voluntary or involuntary activity, engaged in by a person or group that is framed as 'play', 'make-believe', or 'simulacrum' of some other human activity, ranging from rituals to play performance (2003). On the other hand, the concept of gender performativity provides ample evidence that gender is constructed and performed, so highlights how drag artists challenge and deconstruct societal norms surrounding gender. They make mockery of what true gender identity is, so see “gender as an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylised repetition of acts” (Butler, 2007, p. 191). Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity highlights the role of representation in shaping and reshaping identities. Hall posits that “cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation” (1990, p. 225). Roland Barthes' offers a framework for analysing costume as a system of sign. For him, “clothing is not only a functional covering but a signifying system” (1983, p. 8). Costume is, thus, seen as a social construct and visual language that communicates identity and humour beyond its functionality. The interplay of these theories aid in examining the how costumes function as a medium for identity construction, cultural expression, social critique, and entertainment within the Nigerian context.

This study not only highlights the above, but is significant because it deepens our understanding of the interplay between costume, society, performance, and cultural identity within the context of Nigerian drag skits. It contributes to a broader discourse on gender dynamics, humour, cultural representation, and popular culture, gaining deeper appreciation of the significance of these performances that provides a means of expressing social values and negotiating identity.

Drag is a performance art that utilizes costume as a means of expressing non-normative gender; in other words, it is a performance of masculinity, femininity and/or other forms of gender expression in an over-exaggerated representation of gender (Rossi, 2023; Baker, 1994). Butler explains that “drag subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality” (2011, p. 125). The major element in a drag performance is the use of costume – comedic cross-dressing – for impersonation. This costumed body “... generated by creative whim, fashion, and systems of commodification” to express, perform, upturn, and subvert gender stereotypes that “re-gender the male body, transforming it into a theatrical instance” (Sandoval, 2021, p. 235). Scholars like Hobson perceive “drag performance as a site where the dynamics of race, class, gender and sexuality play out in both oppressive and resistant ways” (2013, p. 48). Others like Butler argue that “drag performance can be used to subvert socially constructed performances of gender” (2011, p. 125). Yet, some believe drag performance not only reinforces but adheres to the gender binary that mirrors normative assumptions associated with gender (LeMasters, 2015). These performances have continued over the years in theatres, moved to television, movies, music; but currently, the influence of pop culture has taken over these performances on social media platforms with varying aesthetic dimensions.

### **Digital Media Platforms, Drag Culture, and Performance**

Digital media platforms, such as social media and streaming services like Instagram, TikTok, X and YouTube have significantly impacted drag culture and performance (Feldman and Hakim, 2020). Traditionally, drag artists had to rely on physical venues and word-of-mouth to showcase their talents and build a following. However, social media has provided a global stage for drag performers to reach audiences worldwide, transcending geographic barriers. This increased accessibility has not only expanded the visibility and appreciation for drag artistry but has also opened doors for aspiring drag performers from diverse backgrounds and communities to emerge and find their audiences.

The rise of digital media platforms has significantly revolutionized and influenced drag culture and performance, offering a dynamic space for drag artists to showcase their creativity, connect with audiences, and challenge societal norms, making them a powerful force in the industry. These are proven with their visibility metrics and viral contents, commercial successes in terms of fan engagement and their influence on mainstream platforms. These platforms have significantly democratized and enriched drag culture by enabling performers to reach audiences on a global scale. Through social media channels, drag artists can share their performances, and personal stories with people from diverse backgrounds and geographic locations. This increased visibility has helped to popularize drag culture and expand its influence beyond traditional venues and communities (Gamson, 2013).

Digital media platforms have also catalyzed the evolution of drag performance formats and styles. The rise of digital drag, where artists incorporate video editing, animation, and other digital effects into their performances, has pushed the boundaries of what is possible in the realm of drag. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram Reels have given birth to micro-drag performances, where artists create short, highly shareable content that caters to the social media age's fast-paced consumption habits (Khamis et al., 2017; Lingel and Golub, 2015; Downing, 2013). These bite-sized performances often go viral, introducing drag to new audiences and sparking cultural conversations.

Beyond performance opportunities, these online platforms have facilitated the formation of virtual communities within the drag culture. Drag performers like Luna DuBois, Denrele Edun, Trixie Mattel, James Brown, Sasha Velour, Cute Abiola, Pablo Vittar and Dymond V Cassadine Carrington among others can connect, exchange ideas, and collaborate on projects regardless of physical proximity (Baxter et al., 2023). These virtual spaces have become invaluable for networking, collaboration, and

creativity, fostering a sense of belonging, support, and solidarity among drag artists while contributing to the vibrancy and diversity of the drag scene. Digital media platforms provide drag artists with unprecedented opportunities for creative expression and experimentation. From makeup tutorials to lip-sync performances to elaborate costume showcases, drag performers leverage various multimedia formats to showcase their talents and push the boundaries of artistic expression. The accessibility and versatility of digital tools empower drag artists to innovate and explore new artistic possibilities.

For marginalized communities within the LGBTQ+ spectrum, digital media platforms serve as a vital platform for visibility and representation. However, some drag performers who identify as transgender, non-binary, people of colour, or other marginalised identities can use social media to amplify their voices, share their experiences, and challenge stereotypes. This visibility not only promotes greater inclusivity within drag culture but also fosters broader societal acceptance and understanding. This increased visibility and popularity of drag culture on digital media platforms have also brought about opportunities for commercialization and monetization (Brennam and Gudelunas, 2023; 2017). Drag artists can now build substantial online followings, share their performances, and engage with fans directly through these digital channels. This increased visibility has also helped challenge mainstream perceptions of drag and LGBTQ+ culture, fostering greater acceptance and appreciation for this art form. However, this commercialization has also raised concerns about the potential exploitation or commodification of drag culture, as well as debates around maintaining the art form's integrity and authenticity in the face of corporate interests. Though, these digital media platforms have influenced the way drag performances are conceived, executed and consumed in terms of its form and medium of engagement as it allows the performers to think and create unique pieces that reaches global audiences.

While digital media platforms have undoubtedly been a boom for drag culture and performance, they also present challenges that need to be addressed (Muñoz, 1998). Online harassment, censorship, and algorithm biases can hinder the visibility and reach of drag content, particularly for marginalized communities or controversial subject matter. Additionally, the commodification of drag, and the constant pressure to create shareable and viral content can potentially lead to a homogenization of drag performances, as artists may prioritize broad appeal over artistic expression or risk being overshadowed in the saturated digital landscape. Moreover, the rules and policies of social media platforms can impact the visibility and reach of drag content, raising concerns about censorship and platform bias.

Drag performances have always been rooted in subversion and satire, serving as a powerful tool for challenging societal norms, especially gender and sexuality. According to Butler, “drag has significant potential in exposing the performative nature of gender, ... in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency (2011, p. 137). This means that by embracing exaggerated aesthetics and theatricality drag artists critique, expose and destabilize the oppressive systems that construct natural binaries of gender while celebrating individuality and diversity that sustain heteronormativity.

The intersection of drag performance and youth-oriented digital activism, therefore, represents a transformative space where a compelling synergy of creative expression merges with digital platforms to challenge societal norms, promote inclusivity, and mobilize collective action. Youth engagement using drag on digital platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, have driven social change while addressing and navigating challenges like commodification and online harassment to ensure that these movements of global reach, bypassing traditional gatekeeping and democratizing drag culture remain authentic and impactful. As Earl and Kimport (2011) note, digital platforms empower young activists by reducing barriers to participation and facilitating decentralized, grassroots movements. For these youth drag artists, Warri Mama inclusive, their performance is characterized by its innovative use of social media to amplify marginalized voices and foster global solidarity.

This intersection amplifies the visibility and impact of drag performance while also creating new avenues for creativity, community-building, commercial opportunities and resistance against marginalization (Bailey, 2013). As this dynamics continue to evolve, it is crucial to strike a balance between embracing the advantages of these platforms and preserving the authenticity and diversity that has made drag culture a powerful and enduring art form. These media platforms have significantly contributed to contemporary celebrity and fandom by enabling self-branding, which relies on attention and narrative, while extending the potential for fame and celebrity. According to Khamis et al, “self-branding is the idea that, just like commercially branded products, individuals benefit from having a unique selling point, or a public identity that is singularly charismatic and responsive to the needs and interests of target audiences (2017, p. 191-192). It involves managing one's reputation, image, and identity in personal and professional contexts, which involves defining brand identity, setting goals, understanding audience, and crafting compelling narratives using digital platforms as platforms.

### **The Feminization of Drag Performance Culture: Embracing the Power of Womanhood**

The world of drag has evolved significantly, moving away from its traditional roots as a male-dominated art form to celebrate and empower expressions of womanhood on stage and beyond. This shift challenges conventional understandings of drag as solely a portrayal of exaggerated femininity by male performers, opening up space for a broader spectrum of expression and representation and sparking profound discourse around gender, identity, and performance (van den Berg, 2021; Cohen, 2019). At its core, the discourse surrounding the feminization of drag revolves around the exploration and celebration of femininity as a multifaceted and dynamic concept. Drag artists who boldly embrace and exaggerate feminine qualities, are not merely mimicking women but rather reimagining and redefining gender and power in different social contexts (Sa'ar, 2006) through their performances. They challenge societal norms and preconceived notions of gender expression. Through their performances, they reclaim and redefine what it means to be a woman, from embodying traditional notions of beauty and grace to subverting gender norms, rejecting the confines of traditional gender roles and stereotypes, and exploring themes of empowerment and self-expression.

Drag performance culture is deeply rooted in the historical portrayal of femininity by individuals who may not identify as female, often as a form of gender parody or critique on stage, with a lineage tracing back to ancient Greece (Kotliuk, 2023). This performative femininity within drag is not only a form of entertainment but also a critical commentary on gender, race, class, and national identities, challenging the gender roles imposed by society (Dougherty, 2017; Butler, 2011). The feminization of drag culture acknowledges the diverse experiences and identities within the community, embracing diversity and recognising that anyone can embody femininity regardless of their assigned gender at birth. This diversity challenges societal norms and expectations, blurring the lines between masculinity and femininity. However, controversies exist, such as concerns about cultural appropriation and the commodification of queer identity (Workman, 2020; Buck, 2019) while contradictions and interesting facts emerge when considering the varied experiences of gender among drag performers. Some performers experience gender as binary or fluid and report shifts in their gender identity during performances (Levitt et al., 2018).

The feminization of drag has facilitated a broader conversation about gender fluidity and the deconstruction of binary gender norms, celebrating the complexities of human identity, and embracing and embodying femininity as a performative act. Furthermore, drag performance is recognized as a space for resistance, negotiation, and empowerment of femininity (Heller, 2015; Liladhar, 2000). Some cultural-historical analyses reveal that drag can extend beyond entertainment to encompass manipulation and deception, highlighting the complex interaction between femininity and the male ego (Gaidash and Mykhailiuk, 2022). This is evident in the way drag queens and queer performers use the stage to subvert traditional gender roles, highlight the performative nature of gender, and evolve and influence cultural understandings of gender (French, 2017; Farrier, 2016).

The feminization of drag performance culture has the potential to influence public perceptions by presenting audiences with different powerful and captivating performances, narratives, and perspectives, challenging biases and preconceived notions about gender and femininity. This movement empowers individuals to embrace their authentic selves, transcending societal expectations, and promotes inclusivity, creativity, and representation within the drag community and beyond.

The feminization of drag is evident in the linguistic choices and narrative arcs presented during performances. Some drag artists like Warri Mama, Cute Abiola, Mama Gold, Mama Chinedu, Mama Ukah, Woman Leader, Angelica, and Mama Ojo often adopt colloquial expressions, regional dialects, and cultural references that resonate with marginalized communities, giving voice to the experiences and perspectives of women from diverse backgrounds. Through their storytelling, they challenge societal perceptions, addressing issues of gender inequality, discrimination, and the marginalization of women in powerful and thought-provoking ways.

Beyond the verbal presentation, one of the most striking aspects of the feminization of drag is the unapologetic embodiment of feminine aesthetics. Drag artists adorn themselves in extravagant costumes, intricate makeup, and exaggerated body shapes, creating larger-than-life personas that exude confidence and self-assurance. This deliberate amplification of feminine traits serves as a celebration of womanhood, rejecting the notion that femininity should be subdued or diminished (Muñoz, 2009; Butler, 1988).

### **Exploring the Influence of Costume on Drag Skits**

Drag performance is a vibrant, dynamic, and multifaceted art form that encompasses a wide range of expressive elements; like gender expression, theatricality, and visual spectacle. With the potential for these performances to go viral, drag artists often incorporate elements that cater to online audiences, such as high-energy lip-syncing, elaborate costume reveals, and comedic or satirical content. Costume plays a pivotal role in the construction and representation of drag personas as well as the presentation of drag skits, as costumes significantly impact the performance and perception of drag.

Costume can be seen as a form of urban theatricality in which minimalistic and politicized costumes are worn as a means of protest (Rewa, 2012). Similarly, in the context of non/human drag, costumes are used for self-exploration and embodying queer colour identities and self-exploration (Zamani, 2023). Costumes become a powerful tool for expression and identity formation rather than a mere aesthetic choice. Interestingly, costuming in drag skit can be a vehicle for social criticism or political protest in addition to enhancing the performance with elaborate and creative attire. Drag performances' reactions are influenced by costuming choices, performer charisma, and thematic relevance, evoking emotional responses and challenging societal norms, while audience demographics and experiences shape perceptions (Taylor and Rupp, 2006).

Costume in drag performances on digital platforms is a crucial aspect of the art form, as it enhances the narrative depth, emotional resonance, and immersive experience for viewers. It promotes inclusivity, challenges norms, and empowers performers to authentically express their individuality. The choice of costumes in drag skits can elevate or detract from the performance, allowing performers to transcend gender, identity, and conventionality. A well-crafted costume not only enhances the visual impact but

also reinforces the narrative and character.

One of the most striking aspects of costuming in drag skits is its ability to exaggerate and make a caricature of societal stereotypes. By adorning themselves in outrageous outfits, wigs, and makeup, drag performers can satirize and comment on societal expectations, gender roles, and cultural norms. This exaggeration often serves as a mirror, reflecting the absurdities and contradictions inherent in our society, prompting audiences to question their preconceived notions. Moreover, costumes in drag skits serve as a powerful tool for storytelling. It is key in defining a character: their personality, ethnicity, mood, situation, etc. It can be used to show harmony or contrast between characters, or convey a change in a character (Shields, 2012, p. 13). Through careful selection of clothing, accessories, and makeup, performers can create intricate character arcs, conveying emotions, personalities, and narratives without uttering a single word. A well-executed costume can transport audiences into different eras, cultures, or fictional realms, amplifying the impact of the skit and engaging viewers on a deeper emotional level.

The visibility of drag on social media has also had a significant impact on costuming and fashion within the drag community. Drag artists now have a global audience to showcase their creative talents in costume design, makeup artistry, and styling. This exposure has led to increased collaboration between drag artists and fashion designers, makeup brands, and wig companies, resulting in more innovative and elaborate costumes and looks. Drag artists have become influential figures in the fashion world, inspiring mainstream trends and challenging traditional gender norms in clothing (Mike, 2024).

The intersection of digital media platforms, drag culture, and costumes form a dynamic and transformative space where artistic expression, community engagement, and cultural representation entertains, educates, and empowers, leaving a lasting impact on contemporary society. This fusion shapes narratives, challenge norms, and celebrate diversity in the realm of performance art, highlighting how these elements converge to amplify voices, foster creativity, and advocate for inclusivity within the vibrant landscape of artistic expression as well as enhance visibility and representation for drag artists and LGBTQ+ communities.

### **Semiotics of Fashion and Costume in Nigerian Drag Performance Culture**

African fashion is a vibrant expression of cultural heritage, symbolizing traditions, beliefs, and social identities (Nobler, 2021; Rovine, 2014). The semiotics of African fashion and costume delve into the intricate language of symbols, meanings, and cultural messages embedded within the garments, accessories, and styles that make up the rich tapestry of African sartorial traditions. It serves as a marker of belonging and community affiliation among diverse ethnic groups (Okadigwe, 2024; CIAFE, 2023). Traditional attire preserves ancestral customs and honours cultural legacies, reinforcing pride and continuity. The semiotics of African fashion also reflects colonial histories, globalization, and contemporary influences. It blends traditional elements with Western styles, reflecting diverse narratives and identity expressions. African fashion also serves as a platform for political and social commentary, addressing issues of gender, power, activism, and identity.

The semiotics of fashion and costume in Nigerian drag performance culture can be understood as a complex system of signs that communicate various aspects of identity, culture, and social commentary. Limited studies have directly addressed Nigerian drag performance culture in terms of costumes, but some works have collectively underscored the significance of dress as a semiotic tool capable of

conveying complex messages about identity, culture, and social dynamics. The anthropo-linguistic approach to Nigerian dress culture emphasizes the significance of taking taste, convenience, and modernity into account as well as the communicative roles of clothing that is similar to those of language (Olaoye and Bello, 2016). In Honeycutt (2021), the semiotic study of clothing in films is examined, with a focus on the symbolic and cultural meanings that can be derived from costume design. Rossen (2023) discusses the negotiating of identity through dress, which is particularly relevant to drag performance because it often entails the subversive and humorous reimagining of cultural symbols. The branding of a drag persona could be derived from exploration of the deeper meanings underlying signs and symbols and their implications for branding and communication (Gandla and Vemali, 2023; Suparmo, 2017). According to Rolling and Teel's (2020) analysis, drag costumes have the potential to become more than just clothing; they may be viewed as performative art. Drag performance clothing's multi-sensory experience could be better understood by drawing on Hume (2013) "senses" approach to religious dress. Drag, which often challenges social norms, is especially relevant to Rubinstein's (2018) concept of clothing as a system of signs and symbols intended to organize society and allow for social change. Lastly, a comparative viewpoint on the usage of drag costumes as a non-verbal communication medium could be provided by Vogt's (2013) case study on rock art as a kind of social communication through visual signals.

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of costume in shaping the construction and expression of identity for drag performers, serving as a transformative tool that enables the embodiment of diverse personas (Joseph et al., 2023; Taylor and Rupp, 2004). The intricate relationship between costume and performer is evident in the way attire facilitates the negotiation of body image and the projection of a crafted identity, which is central to the performance and experience of drag. Costuming, therefore, is not merely an aesthetic choice but a critical component of the performative act that allows drag artists to explore and express their gender and sexual identities (Miller and Taylor, 2015). It acts as a medium through which drag artists can challenge existing gender norms, foster inclusivity, and engage with personal and collective narratives of identity (Calderon, 2021; Donorfio et al., 2022). The transformative power of costuming in drag underscores its significance not only as a performative tool but also as a vehicle for social and political commentary with cultural influences and individual style preferences. This concept of "costume-as-character" emphasizes the transformative power of costuming in enabling performers to embody their drag personas and explore different facets of their identity ([Papantoniou and Pantouvaki, 2022](#); Roche, 2018).

Drag performance culture utilizes visual aesthetics like costume, accessories, and makeup to create powerful statements about identity, society, and culture. The costumes in drag are not only visually striking but also laden with meaning, serving as a canvas for the performer's message. This aligns with the broader discourse on the communicative potential of clothing in various artistic contexts, where costumes are an essential element in the creation of an artistic image and the conveyance of complex ideas (Honeycutt, 2021). Interestingly, while drag costumes may appear to prioritize external spectacle, they also resonate with the concept of the body philosophy, emphasizing the integration of body movement and aesthetic expression (Xie and Ge, 2024). This integration is akin to the symbolic and communicative functions of costumes in film and other performance arts, where they contribute to the construction of character and narrative. Moreover, the semiotic richness of drag costumes can be seen as a form of socio-political commentary.

In the framework of Nigerian culture, therefore, drag costumes can be viewed as a complex tapestry of symbols that reflect and defy cultural norms, convey both individual and group identities, and engage in

the larger discourse about fashion and costume as communicative mediums (Okadigwe, 2021; Adamo, 2011). Thus, the study of semiotics in African fashion helps revitalize cultural practices, ensuring traditional attire, craftsmanship skills, and symbolic meanings are upheld and passed down. It allows individuals to affirm their identities, express unique stories, and reclaim agency over their cultural narratives. This exploration promotes cross-cultural understanding, appreciation, and dialogue, enriching perspectives and celebrating the beauty of African fashion expressions.

### **Costume and Drag Skits: Example of Warri Mama**

Costuming plays a pivotal role in the performance of drag skits, as it is integral to the embodiment and portrayal of characters such as 'Warri Mama'. The creation and use of costumes in drag performances are not merely about aesthetic appeal rather it serves as a medium for expressing and exploring gender and identity, much like the cosplay phenomenon described in Winge (2018), where costume is a form of creative expression and social interaction. It functions not only as a means of disguise but also as a creative expression that is deeply connected to the performer's identity and the character being portrayed (Lamerichs, 2014). Interestingly, while costumes are essential for the authenticity and effectiveness of a performance, they can also challenge gender roles, cultural norms, and values as well as reinforce cultural expectations, and socio-political dynamics.

In the context of indigenous performances, such as those in Nigeria, costumes are expected to reflect and respect local values and sensibilities of the people (Navei, 2023; Dennis, 2022). The transformation of fashion into costume and vice versa with the historical roots of certain costuming traditions provide a rich backdrop against which drag skit makers can craft their performances. However, the adoption of drag skit-making and the associated costuming, introduced elements that are perceived as conflicting with traditional African values. This tension highlights the complex interplay between cultural expression, performance art, and societal norms. Moreover, the somatic approach to costume design emphasises the relationship between body and costume and can be particularly pertinent to drag, where the physicality of the performer is integral to the act. The drag artist, as a skit maker, leverages these various aspects of costuming to enhance the performative narrative and engage with the audience on multiple levels.

Warri Mama, a Nigerian drag artist cum comedian, is known for his satirical drag skits, which have sparked conversations about gender expression, societal norms, and cultural issues. His larger-than-life caricature of a stereotypical Nigerian woman, often portrayed as loud, brash, and unapologetically confident challenges gender roles and societal expectations. Warri Mama utilizes humour, satire, and storytelling to explore societal norms, gender roles, and culturally diverse skits. Drawing inspiration from pop culture and everyday experiences, he engages audiences with his unique artistic expression and shrewd social commentary. His skits satirize and celebrate aspects of Warri/Nigerian culture with a signature costuming that exaggerates femininity, drawing from the bold, flamboyant outfits and accessories associated with some Warri women.

Costume forms an integral part of Warri Mama's artistry, serving as a visual extension of the character's personality, narrative, and thematic elements within each performance (Yin, 2023; Pantouvaki and McNeil, 2021). The careful selection of garments, accessories, and props help to establish authenticity, enhance the storytelling, and captivate the audience's imagination. Warri Mama's drag costuming reinterprets styles rooted in some Nigerian ethnic cultures, particularly the Urhobo culture and politics, to create comedic effect.



Fig. 1: Warri Mama fully kitted, ready for a performance.  
Image credit: Warri Mama Facebook; June 29, 2022.

This sartorial choice help blend traditional African attire with modern, flamboyant expressions of gender and reframe these gender roles while providing opportunities for critique and subversion of entrenched norms around femininity. In an interview with Ezekiel (Warri Mama), his reason for the choice of performing femininity is because he loves the way the matriarchal figure in the Nigerian society behaves and the way she carries herself in her outfits. For him, the matriarch is seen as the backbone of the family and community, authoritative yet nurturing; so, he creates this purposeful and meaningful performance that engages with the complexities of Nigerian social life. Warri Mama's costumes visually amplify her subversive humour and critical perspectives on society, highlighting corrupt politicians, materialistic youth, or religious fanatics.

Warri Mama's performance of femininity is intricately linked to her use of costume not only to re-construct identity but as a form of cultural critique. The costumes reflect the deeply ingrained social hierarchies and expectations "... shaped by social and economic forces, reflecting current social and cultural concerns" (Twigg, 2009, p. 105). Warri Mama's dress is symbolic of motherhood, marriage, and age, "espousing values, identity and position" (Oyeniyi, 2016, p. 106).



Fig. 2: Warri Mama goes shopping for a new bag  
Image credit: Warri Mama Facebook; January 3, 2025.

African women's clothing often symbolises their status as wives and mothers with adornments like blouse, wrapper and head wraps, and carrying specific current and historical sets of social meanings. But Warri Mama's sartorial choice of a bright, flamboyant attire with a voluminous head wrap and matching accessories reflect the act of exaggerated femininity that pushes against the restrained roles that African women's clothing is often designed to signify (Eicher, 1993). Warri Mama's constant dress-codes anchors her character in the local cultural aesthetics with her iconic head wraps that symbolizes the African women's pride and status and her sometimes off-coloured accessories (handbag) that mimic the flamboyance of the African women. The choice is not just designed to reflect the moral and social background of the people but to also emphasize the cultural expectations and symbols of womanhood in African societies.

Warri Mama sartorial choice becomes a tool of oppression and a site of resistance, questioning not only the limitations of feminine dress but also the societal expectations placed on women to embody and perform motherhood. The modest, functional and repeated garments signal the nurturing, sacrificial role of mothers who are often boxed into culturally prescribed roles (Amadiume, 2000). These garments are often used to resist colonial norms but donning indigenous attires, embracing traditional Nigerian garments that are designed in ways that reflect a self-determined femininity rather than one imposed by society. As Aris writes, “dress can serve as method of cultural expression and resistance” (2007, p. 1).

Warri Mama serves as a quintessential example of a drag skit maker who expertly utilizes costuming to create compelling and transformative performances that blend humour, social commentary, and artistic expression. His bold, eye-catching African-themed costumes establish him as a strong, distinctive character, which enhances his narratives while showcasing the progressive development of his performance style. The visual storytelling of the costumes entertains, engages and draws audiences into the narratives, building a sense of cultural celebration with cultural pride and artistry. His visual coherence and consistency in costume throughout several skits helps connect with him, the nuanced details reinforce African background and contributes to his recognition as a relatable and appealing figure for audiences. His Ankara attire, intricate headpiece, and off-coloured handbag, which graphically express “her” status as an African mother/matriarch figure, highlight Warri Mama's strong personality. His signature style, which includes eye-catching designs, intricate headdresses, and off-colour clothing, is a visual depiction of the extravagant persona he represents. The narrative is made livelier by Warri Mama's matriarchal, **no-nonsense**, tell-it-like-it-is demeanour, which is embodied in the fabrics, patterns, colours, and accessories chosen. This distinctive attire reflects West African culture, pride and heritage; thus, becoming an integral component of his 'signature brand'.

Warri Mama's drag skits, costume and performances have solidified his 'brand', thus captivates audience because it transcends cultural boundaries and sparking important conversations about gender, societal norms, and the power of humour as a tool for social commentary.



Fig. 3: Warri Mama uses his costume as his signature brand different performances.  
Image credit: Warri Mama Facebook, July 4, 2024.

Beyond the comedic value of his skits, Warri Mama's content often serves as a vehicle for social commentary and cultural critique. Through his humorous lens, he tackles issues such as gender inequality, societal expectations, and the complexities of Nigerian culture. By portraying Warri Mama as an unapologetic and empowered woman who defies societal norms, he challenges traditional gender roles and encourages his audience to question and re-evaluate their perceptions and biases.

Warri Mama uses costume as a performative tool that facilitates the embodiment of a character, allowing him to navigate themes of humour, social commentary and identity. His costume choices, such as wigs, makeup, bags and traditional attire, illustrate how gender roles are not static or inherent but rather performed and questioned through sartorial and visual means rather uses these costumes to subvert traditional gender roles and constructs new identities.



Fig. 4: Warri Mama anchoring a wedding ceremony.  
Image credit: Warri Mama Facebook, November 7, 2022.

Warri Mama's performances can be seen as a cultural product that reflects the socio-political realities of the society; his use of costume reflects the complexities of Nigerian cultural identity, combining

traditional elements (the Ankara fabrics and head-tie) with contemporary expressions of drag performance to challenge dominant thoughts. This interplay emphasises the fluidity of cultural identity in modern Nigerian comedy. For Warri Mama, costumes are loaded with cultural and comedic signifiers that convey messages about class, gender, and societal norms. The exaggerated features of the costume often serves as visual satire, critiquing stereotypes like Warri women especially older women and aged mothers who have some social issues to deal with.

In giving an analysis of costume in a study, pictorial evidence is highly recommended. This will aid good description and analysis of the intend area of study and make it more relatable by your readers.

I also suggest that since you are looking at costuming in Warri Mama's Skit as a means to digital activism and social commentary, a content analysis of any of his skit(s) can be studied briefly, highlighting the issues of digital activism and social commentary and how the costuming of the character aided in achieving it.

## Conclusion

This study has demonstrated how Warri Mama leverages elaborate costuming in his viral skits as a potent vehicle for digital activism and social commentary. Through content analysis, it is evident that his strategic layering, accessorising, and gender-bending of costumes enables absurdist caricatures that invert normative gender constructs and ideologies. The sheer exaggeration and incongruous combinations in Warri Mama's looks generate parody and camp drag humour that reveals rigid socio-cultural roles as pure artifice.

Ultimately, this examination of Warri Mama's costume-centered drag artistry provides critical insights into an emerging format of youth-oriented digital activism. His adept manipulation of fashion semiotics aesthetically advances critiques of conspicuous consumption, class pretensions, and gender stereotypes circulating online. This reveals the power of strategic costuming and styling to enact political perspectives through the prism of youth-resonant popular culture. It points to rich areas for further scholarship at the intersection of African digital platforms, performance studies, and costume aesthetics. As Warri Mama's star continues ascendant, his ingenious harnessing of attire's signifying potential provides a telling representation of 21st-century queer African activism mobilizing through social media networks. His unique brand of content has not only entertained but also challenged perceptions, encouraged critical thinking, and contributed to the increasing visibility and acceptance of drag culture in Nigeria and beyond.

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