

A framework for developing culturally significant designs for the leather industry in Botswana

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ABSTRACT: This article is based on the findings and results of a recent pilot study with designers in Botswana. The investigation had two objectives: to examine the awareness and use of cultural elements by designers in Botswana, and to gain insights into the leather industry. Data for this study were collected through interviews with designers in Botswana. Participants were selected based on a purposive sampling approach. Results indicate that there is use of both cultural elements and culturally significant designs, but only for special occasions, such as weddings, independence celebrations or cultural festivals and targeted at tourists. Some limitations were noted, such as incorporating cultural elements and the lack of use of local leather. In addition, it was noted that there is a need for product innovation and collaborative networks for the reinvention of cultural elements in leather products. These findings can contribute to the development of a framework for culturally significant designs for the leather industry in Botswana. This would in turn add value to the economy.

INTRODUCTION

With increasing global competition, there is a growing close connection between local culture, global markets and innovative products in design. In design, cultural value added creates the core of a product's value. It is the same for culture: design is the motivation for pushing cultural development forward [1]. According to the World Bank, globally the demand for leather and leather products is growing faster than supply. Although leather sectors in Africa have much natural strength they risk missing out on opportunities in an expanding global market [2]. The leather and leather products industry play a prominent role in the world's economy, because leather is one of the most highly traded commodities in the world. Botswana has an annual national herd size of 2.5-3.3 million cattle; with an average off-take ratio of 9% estimated through the Botswana Meat Commission (BMC), yielding 200,000-300,000 hides per year [3].

The leather industry in Botswana is currently underdeveloped. However, the government of Botswana has identified it as an area of strategic importance. It is included in the economic diversification strategy as part of the government of Botswana's drive to diversify the economy, as highlighted in policy [4].

Its heavily diamond-dependent economy was hard hit by a reduction in diamond revenue. Rhodes observes that although Botswana has been mining diamonds since 1967, the country has remarkably little in the way of jewellery design and manufacturing [5]. On a similar note, with such abundance of cattle, the country could have established a leather and leather goods industry. According to a report published by the Botswana government, the decision to focus on the growth and development of the leather industry in Botswana has two aims [6]:

- To reduce the waste of importation of leather products by supporting and growing local industry.
- To increase the export potential of leather products in Botswana.

Furthermore, there is a growing interest in national identity and national culture, and how those ideas can be interpreted within product design. Moalosi et al pointed out that there is little in-depth research that can assist designers to use culture as a catalyst for designing innovative products within Botswana [7]. Kawamura pointed out that *...Japanese designers in Paris use their heritage as their strongest point when it comes to design* [8].

European labels such as Burberry, Chanel, Dolce and Gabbana make the most of the heritage and national elements to support their brands. Moalosi argues that in the case of Botswana, it is only through education that a new breed of designer who will appreciate the influence of culture in their design practice can emerge [9]. This fact motivated the current study in terms of looking into aspects of culture through design as an agent of change. This point is underscored by a policy which states that Botswana's cultural and heritage products are not fully appreciated, because of a lack of exposure, so their economic value has not been realised locally, regionally and internationally [10].

UNDERSTANDING CONCEPTS

Culture

The term, *culture*, has been used in the fields of sociology, anthropology and linguistics [11]. Berk suggests that the definition of culture is mainly derived from cultural anthropology used in the field of design [12]. Hofstede refers to culture as the *collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another* [13]. Culture refers to a set of values, ideas, artefacts and other meaningful symbols that help individuals to communicate, interpret and evaluate as members of society. It is normally a homogeneous system of collectively shared meaning, way of life and a common set of values shared by a member of society and that are learned from one generation, imposed by the current generation, and passed on to succeeding generations [14].

The use of a society's cultural factors in design has not only made technologies most appropriate for their social context, but makes better use of culture itself as a resource for innovation [15]. However, a limited amount of research on cultural elements and their application to product design has been carried out. Globalisation has sparked a new awareness of local identity, and growing niche markets for unique and authentic products have emerged from the homogeneous globalisation-driven market [16]. The importance of cultural features and concepts of *global market and local design* are not well studied [17].

Design

According to the definition provided by a former chairman of the UK Design Council, design is that which links creativity and innovation; therefore, it does shape ideas to become practical and attractive for users or customers and can be described as creativity deployed to a specific end [18]. Design is a central component for the development of successful cultural products. Design changes culture and at the same time is shaped by it [19]. For example, Best suggests that *design* is both a process of making physical objects (designing) and the product of this process (design). In her view, design plays a role in shaping the world and generating new products, systems and services [20].

Culturally Significant Designs

Designs and products that emerge from place-based practices may be *culturally significant* if they contribute to a sense of local identity, rich in historical links with communities [21]. According to Jung and Walker they define designs and products practice as follows:

- Design refers to distinctive features of products, such as surface patterns, three-dimensional forms, motifs, material specifications and aesthetic detailing.
- Products are confined to those that are durable, portable, tangible and visually creative.
- Practices refer to activities that relate to those designs and products, including their creation, use and preservation [22].

Luo and Dong in their study emphasised that *ancient cultural artefacts* and *culture* provide a rich source of inspiration for local product design, because they are local and better suit local people's needs [23]. Their reference to culture and artefacts blends well with the concept of culturally significant design, capturing both designs and artefacts. In that regard, Moalosi et al highlighted that there is a lack of *in-depth* in designing culture in Botswana product designs [7]. Hsu et al argue that to incorporate culture into products requires an understanding of the link between local culture and the global market [17].

RESEARCH METHOD

The study adopted a qualitative method. Qualitative research does not begin by forming a theory, as that theory might not sufficiently explain what is happening in the natural environment. The data collection methods involved human participation with the intention of developing and understanding the designer's point of view rather than testing any theory. A purposive sampling strategy was chosen. A pilot study was used to explore the awareness and use of cultural elements in the leather industry in Botswana. Bryman and Bell indicated that by conducting a pilot study, opportunity is given to assess the appropriateness of the chosen research method and approach, and therefore provide a necessary reference for use in a major study [24].

The respondents were designers from Botswana. The reasons for this selection were as follows: their expertise; understanding of the design landscape; their understanding of Tswana culture and knowing what is happening in the industry. In addition, they all own design businesses. A semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions was developed and used to guide the interviews. The interview questions were developed based on objectives created for the study and a literature review. This semi-structured interview approach was adopted to gather insights from designers on the use of leather, which is a locally available material in Botswana. The participants in the pilot study were three people (two females and one male) who work in the design field of fashion and product design. The interview was conducted in English and lasted around 45 to 50 minutes via the telephone.

Robson identified strategies to pursue qualitative research: case studies; grounded theory; ethnography and content analysis [25]. According to Hsieh and Shannon qualitative content analysis is one of numerous research methods used to analyse text data [26]. Due to the exploratory nature of the project, content analysis was found to be a suitable research strategy by which to analyse data, reasons being that this strategy enabled the researchers to gain direct information from the study participants without imposing preconceived categories [26]. Each respondent's interviews were transcribed and analysed in order to gather an in-depth understanding of the designers' opinions, views, awareness, use of cultural elements, culturally significant designs and the leather industry in Botswana. According to Kondracki, text data might be in verbal, print or electronic form and might have been obtained from narrative responses, open-ended survey questions, interviews, focus groups, observations or print media, such as articles, books or manuals [27]. Data were read word by word to derive codes [28].

Hsieh and Shannon in their article defined qualitative content analysis as a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns [26]. As a result, since identifying patterns within raw data was an aspect of this study, this qualitative content analysis was adopted for the semi-structured open-ended questionnaire for analysing the interviews. The researchers chose this, because of the coding and classifying themes or patterns. The researchers examined the findings from three respondents' answers, identifying differences and commonalities. Then, the researchers coded each question and compared the emerging themes and patterns from the three respondents and highlighted areas, which suggested opportunity or weakness, and their experiences. The process was intended to establish suggestions for further directions for the study. For privacy issues, each respondent was labelled R1, R2 or R3 to maintain anonymity. The aim of the pilot study was to examine awareness and the use of cultural elements by designers in Botswana, and to gain insights into the leather industry.

RESULTS

Culture

The results show that, with regard to culture, the interviews revealed they all have an understanding of culture as belonging to a society and involving values, norms and ways of life. In terms of incorporating cultural elements into their design practice, all respondents said they used cultural elements, although R1 and R2 noted their limitations. Respondent R2 stated ... *I try to use cultural elements, but it is not easy.* Furthermore, all respondents mentioned that they incorporate culture during brainstorming in the conceptual phases of the design process. The respondents listed examples of Tswana cultural elements, which were unique to each of them. For example, R1 made use of the silhouette of *lesaka* (an enclosure for domestic animals, such as cattle or sheep) and ostrich egg shells. On the other hand, R2 made use of design lines from *segaba* (a traditional musical instrument), the silhouette of *mokoro* (wooden carved boat) and the geographical contours of the map of Botswana. In the case of R3, the respondent made use of the *kgotla* concept (village traditional gathering place), basketry designs and *leteisi* fabric, referred to as German print.

Design

In response to the questions on design, all respondents said design is about providing innovation, such as the incorporation of cultural elements into design, followed by functional considerations, and then managing the design process, then integrating culture into products and lastly promoting cultural heritage. Others said design is about promoting cultural heritage. The key things that emerged was that respondents valued research and innovation, so as to incorporate culture into the design process. Lack of innovation in design results in other designers copying what another is doing. They see the design process as a good vehicle to incorporate culture into the products they produce. Cultural products are only promoted to tourists. Respondent R3 opined that *innovation is key because currently there is a culture of copying what the next designer is making [and there is a need to] ... incorporate innovation in the design process and use cultural elements such as the kgotla set up and traditional leather rug phate and contextualise this into something contemporary...*

Respondent R1 argued that the most important thing is promoting cultural heritage: *...we do not consume enough of cultural products as the owners of the culture, we only promote culture products to foreign nationals, tourists ... I do not understand how we have not tapped into those resources in our heritage.* Moreover, respondent R2 claimed that *I think we should be proud of our culture, learn it, and go back to our grandparents to teach us.* Respondent R3 said *...cultural heritage does not have to be tangible, even the intangible can be shown in the products, for example the spirit of Batswana as being a friendly people.* The respondents also suggested that more research needs to be done towards producing contemporary cultural design. Respondent R2 stated that *...we should benchmark with artisans that have been in the industry.* One of the participants expressed his emotions and said: *... it pains me ... when a design house from Asia is able to produce a collection and entire line with cultural significance to Botswana or any African culture without having been part of it and interpret it so much more eloquently than we can do (R1).*

Culturally Significant Designs

The respondents highlighted the need for culturally significant designs in Botswana and agree that it should be adopted as part of the professional practice of contemporary designers to help preserve a culture which otherwise will be lost. They were inspired by diverse culturally significant sources; namely, tourist destination places, such as Maun in the north of

Botswana, the Okavango Delta and the Thapong Visual art Centre. On a similar note, all respondents said their works were inspired by the *kraal* and *kgotla* traditional concepts. Culturally significant designs target tourists and lodges around tourist destinations in the northern part of Botswana; to be precise, Maun. Respondent R2 highlighted that she *normally imitates the lekgapho pattern, which is fading away, and a drum that is culturally significant for the Kalanga tribe in Botswana.*

The Leather Industry in Botswana

With regards to leather as a product, the researchers wanted to understand from respondents if they use leather and their views on how culturally significant designs can be integrated into the leather industry. Respondent R2 uses leather as the main material and respondent R3 combines that with other materials, whereas respondent R1 stated, *I do not use leather, I am remarkably in the dark as to how leather works.* Interestingly, one of the respondents sources her leather locally from a relative who owns a small tannery, and the leather is not fully processed as it still has fur. Respondent R2 buys leather from South Africa. Respondent R1 argues that he would *...like to know the process of preparing leather for end-use applications ... this could be a very big fashion opportunity that is not being explored.*

Respondent R1 pointed out that, based on his area of expertise as a fashion designer *...he would like to engage at the last stage of processing leather.* The participant, who uses leather, also points out that this could mean that she would *...not travel to South Africa to purchase leather. I will be very proud to use leather that comes from cattle in Botswana ... I will promote my product with so much pride that ... manufactured locally ... with local material ... will exert positive energy on the product* (R2). This suggests that designers have an interest in working with leather, especially if sourced locally. However, only respondent R3 was engaged with this at the moment; she collaborates with her relative, who is a leather artisan. When asked in what ways can local designers work with artisans for a successful reinvention of cultural elements in leather products that can be sold in both local and global markets, all three respondents reinforced the need for collaboration. Respondent R1 stated, *I like the word reinvention making things come to life ... cultural elements already exist, it is a matter of bringing life into them.*

Respondent R3 added that *...we have to keep up with the trends but also infuse our culture into products, for example a stitch that resembles the kraal concept.* Conversely, respondent R1 pointed out that there are some limitations, and that *...designers seem to have individualists' goal set for industry, we hardly collaborate and I think it is the worst downfall... Botswana creative industry is not where it could be with such brilliant talent ... we are losing a lot of cultural knowledge that could create contemporary cultural products* (R1). When asked about their opinion on which culturally significant designs can be used in the leather industry to develop goods for the local and global market, the responses differed and offered suggestions. Respondent R1 pointed out *...to see a lot more imagery being used as photographic images stamped on leather product with our very iconic wildlife ... our economy is strong through tourism and diamonds, so such would instantly connect consumers outside the country to Botswana.* Respondent R3 stated: *...as a designer you have to understand and study your audience, research about customers to give them the aesthetics they want ... others may prefer leather with patterns, drawings or stiches.* Respondent R2 suggested the *use of traditional house patterns i.e. lekgapho, which is no longer visible due to modern houses.* Furthermore, the study revealed that respondents do not have much interaction with the government.

DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed certain themes/patterns common to participants' answers. Emerging issues and challenges were also noted. Seven themes emerged; namely, targeting tourism; use of cultural elements and culturally significant designs; challenges to the incorporation of cultural elements into designs; the need for product innovation; the need for collaborative networks; lack of government support; and the need to use local leather. These are discussed in full below.

Targeting Tourism

This theme emerged from answers to questions under *leather industry in Botswana* and *culture* sections of the interview questionnaire. All respondents indicated that they understood the concept of culture. The use of cultural elements in the design process for special occasions or to target tourists seems to be a viable outlet that needs further exploration. It was also suggested that locally, people seem not to fully embrace local cultural products.

Use of Cultural Elements and Culturally Significant Designs

This theme relates to questions on culture and culturally significant designs. Participants were asked if the use of both cultural elements and culturally significant designs should be adopted as part of professional practice. All respondents for this study emphasised the importance of including cultural elements and culturally significant designs in contemporary design. This finding is consistent with existing literature, e.g. Moalosi [9]. Moalosi argued that through education, a new breed of designers will appreciate the influence of culture in their design practice [9].

According to the respondents, designs anchored in cultural heritage give products a strong and distinctive identity. This concurs with Lin, Berk and Ko et al, who pointed out that cultural elements in products help consumers understand cultural differences, as well as cultural development, and contribute significantly to product innovation [11][12][29].

Furthermore, sections on culture, design, culturally significant designs, and the leather industry in Botswana revealed that respondents get design inspirations from different sources. For example, basket weaving had inspired some designers to use this concept in designs. This produced culturally significant designs that are unique. Other sources which inspired designers include some of the traditional practices that are becoming extinct. Grant and Grant pointed out that there is a real danger lekgapho designs could disappear [30]. One respondent was inspired and imitated lekgapho patterns, which were used, in a new context, to decorate traditional mud huts. Lekgapho is a wall decorative design made using cow dung.

Challenges of the Incorporation of Cultural Elements into Designs

This theme emanated from the section on *culture* where participants were asked if they use cultural elements in their design. The findings indicate that even though respondents said they used cultural elements in their work, they were challenged to incorporate cultural elements into the designs. Lin pointed out that the process of transferring cultural features into a cultural product has become a critical issue [11]. For this reason, it is deemed important to further study this area, to assist designers.

The Need for Product Innovation

This theme emerged from the *design* section of the questionnaire. Participants were asked to state, in their opinion, the most important functions of design in Botswana. They were also asked to state what designers could do to safeguard culture from being lost. Findings indicate the need for product innovation within Botswana. Respondents echoed the need to develop knowledge and skills of making new products that promote cultural heritage.

The findings reveal that currently, people are copying what others are doing. The issue of lack of innovative skills among designers is a great challenge. The findings also reveal that not all designers were aware of the importance of being innovative, since some of them were not trained as designers, but engaged in design due to passion. Innovation is important in design since innovation gives a competitive advantage in today's competitive markets [31]. According to Luo and Dong, for design, culture adds core-value to inspire new thinking for product innovation [23].

The Need for Collaborative Networks

This theme arose from the question on the *leather industry in Botswana* section of the questionnaire. Questioned in this section was whether designers work with artisans for the successful reinvention of cultural elements in the leather products that could be sold in both the local and global markets. Responses reiterated the need for collaboration and the necessity to infuse culture into design products. The reinvention process was recognised as an opportunity to bring to life the already existing cultural elements in leather products to make contemporary designs.

Lack of Government Support

This theme emanated from the *leather in Botswana* section of the questionnaire. This section addressed whether there is a relationship between designers and the government of Botswana. This study revealed that there is little interaction between respondents and the government, despite the fact that it has policies on leather. Moreover, little is known about the proposed leather park by designers.

The Need to use Local Leather

The findings revealed that the use of leather has the potential to awaken the designers' cultural heritage. Participants believed that leather is their traditional attire before cloth. Participants expressed the view they do not embrace the German print cloth popularly known as leteisi. This is because, even though the cloth is used as a cultural element significant to Botswana, the cloth is an adopted culture. They stated that sourcing leather from South Africa is a burden as it is costly. The study revealed that the use of local leather by designers is limited. Encouraging the use of Botswana leather in their designs will enable them to promote their products with pride.

CONCLUSIONS

The study findings confirmed the need to use both cultural elements and culturally significant designs as a vehicle to incorporate culture in products. Participant responses expressed enthusiasm about this study, especially about leather. They expressed a wish to see more people engaged with leather. Participants also hoped this would awaken cultural heritage and grow the leather industry, which is a demonstrated gap revealed by this study. They suggested that building collaboration between designers and artisans would foster creativity for culturally significant designs in leather for both local and international markets.

Respondents presented their own experiences in design with cultural elements to target tourists, lodges around tourist areas or international fashion shows. This suggests that the local market is limited for such products. In conclusion, this study helped the researchers to understand possible future opportunities. The aim of this study was to develop

a framework or model to enable designers to produce culturally significant designs using leather for the contemporary, local and global markets. A further ethnographic study will be conducted to explore in-depth the situation, so that solutions can be proposed. Concepts will be developed to mitigate challenges in the design process using culturally significant designs. Many questions remain which will be investigated in future work.

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