

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Digital fashionistas: young women, wealth-in-followers and matronage in Yaoundé, Cameroon

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## Abstract

Against the background of post-Cold War trade and media liberalization, this article examines how young women living in Yaoundé, Cameroon, share digital images of their crafted styles via WhatsApp. Such sharing is an act of influence usually aimed at building the woman's name as a digital 'fashionista', in that it constitutes a virtual potential for persuading others to copy one's style. When this potential is actualized among women of status and rank, young women can fashion relations of matronage, opening up avenues of upward social mobility. To reach out to women of status and rank, young women circulate images of their styles to mobilize digital follower networks of peers, kin and strangers, drawing on their skills, status and knowledge. This mobilization in turn relies on the actual and potential benefits that sharing a fashionista image can bring to the follower. Thus, I argue, interdependencies between stylish leaders and their followers are key to making and maintaining a name as a digital fashionista. This article contributes to the literature on fashion and social mobility in West Africa by showing how the circulation of digital images over social media networks generates potentialities for young women living in Yaoundé to fashion matronage relations and social mobility. More broadly, the framing of followers as a form of wealth-in-people provides a critique of the neoliberal market valuation of social media influencers, illuminating alternative regimes of valuation that inform digital influencer economies.

## Résumé

Sur fond de libéralisation des médias et du commerce d'après-guerre froide, cet article examine la manière dont les jeunes femmes vivant à Yaoundé (Cameroun) partagent des images numériques de leurs style élaborés via WhatsApp. Un tel partage est, pour la femme, un acte d'influence généralement destiné à se forger un nom en tant que « fashionista » numérique, en ce qu'il constitue un potentiel virtuel pour convaincre d'autres femmes de copier son style. Dès lors que ce potentiel se réalise auprès de femmes au prestige social reconnu, les jeunes femmes peuvent forger des relations de matronage favorisant l'ascension sociale. Pour rejoindre ces femmes au prestige social élevé, les jeunes femmes font circuler des images de leurs styles pour mobiliser des réseaux de followers constitués de pairs, de

parents et d'inconnus, en s'appuyant sur leurs compétences, leur statut et leur savoir. Cette mobilisation s'appuie, à son tour, sur les avantages potentiels et réels que peut apporter au follower le partage d'une image de fashionista. L'auteur soutient donc que les interdépendances entre les leaders de style et leurs followers sont essentielles pour se faire un nom en tant que fashionista numérique et le conserver. Cet article contribue à la littérature sur la mode et la mobilité sociale en Afrique de l'Ouest en montrant comment la circulation d'images numériques sur les réseaux sociaux génère des potentialités pour les jeunes femmes vivant à Yaoundé pour forger des relations de matronage et créer de la mobilité sociale. Plus largement, le cadrage des followers en tant que forme de richesse en personne fournit une critique de la valeur de marché néolibérale attribuée aux influenceurs des réseaux sociaux, mettant en lumière d'autres régimes d'évaluation qui informent les économies des influenceurs numériques.

## Resumo

No contexto da liberalização do comércio e dos meios de comunicação social pós-Guerra Fria, este artigo analisa a forma como as jovens mulheres que vivem em Yaoundé, nos Camarões, partilham imagens digitais dos seus estilos de roupa através do WhatsApp. Esta partilha é um acto de influência que normalmente visa construir o nome da mulher como 'fashionista' digital, na medida em que constitui um potencial virtual para persuadir os outros a copiar o seu estilo. Quando este potencial é actualizado entre mulheres com estatuto e posição social, as jovens podem criar relações de matronagem, abrindo caminhos de mobilidade social ascendente. Para chegar às mulheres com estatuto e posição social, as jovens fazem circular imagens dos seus estilos para mobilizar redes de seguidores digitais de pares, parentes e desconhecidos, tirando partido das suas competências, estatuto e conhecimentos. Esta mobilização, por sua vez, assenta nos benefícios reais e potenciais que a partilha de uma imagem de fashionista pode trazer ao seguidor. Assim, defendo que as interdependências entre os líderes com estilo e os seus seguidores são fundamentais para criar e manter um nome como fashionista digital. Este artigo contribui para a literatura sobre moda e mobilidade social na África Ocidental, mostrando como a circulação de imagens digitais através das redes sociais gera potencialidades para as jovens mulheres que vivem em Yaoundé, no que diz respeito às relações de matronagem e à mobilidade social. Em termos mais gerais, o enquadramento dos seguidores como uma forma de riqueza-em-pessoas fornece uma crítica à avaliação de mercado neoliberal dos influenciadores das redes sociais, revelando regimes alternativos de avaliação que informam as economias dos influenciadores digitais.

Stella is in her mid-twenties and is enrolled on a biology degree at the University of Yaoundé I. When we met, she was living in a small student room in Ngoa Ekélé, Yaoundé's student district. The room was sparse, simply furnished with a bed, a desk and a gas stove. Under the bed, she kept suitcases of clothes; under the mattress, fashion catalogues. One Sunday, I accompanied Stella to a church on the other side of town. As we settled into the back seat of the shared taxi, she pulled out her phone and started scrolling through images of herself in a dress she had recently picked up from Vicky, her seamstress. The eyes of a fellow passenger quickly became glued to the screen, observing the flickering images for a while before exclaiming, 'Wow, I want to copy this style!' Stella offered to send her an image of the dress. While the image was being transferred via Bluetooth, Stella launched into a loud, detailed and expert

explanation of the style. Her descriptions of fabric tones, stitches, cuts and sleeves soon drew the attention of the passenger in front, a middle-aged woman dressed in a voluminous *pagnes* dress and head wrap who also asked to see the style. Upon seeing the image, she, too, exclaimed, 'Wow! Can I copy this style too?' As our ride continued, new passengers joined and left but Stella continued to be the centre of attention. Several other women asked her to send them the image, and each was invited to join her WhatsApp group, 'Everyday Fashion'. By the journey's end, three new members had been added to the group, a fact immediately mentioned to the group of followers who awaited her when she arrived at the church. As Stella entered the church, she was still boasting about the new style displayed on her phone. The mass was about to commence and a friend hushed her: 'Shhh, fashionista!'

Many young women I worked with in Yaoundé sought to become digital fashionistas. Akin to a microcelebrity (Senft 2013) or fashion influencer, 'fashionista' commonly denotes young women who design, make, photograph and digitally circulate images of their unique styles. The name constitutes a virtual form of influence (Munn 1986), operating in a similar way to branding (Foster 2008). Prior to the digital age, such roles were mostly filled by married urban women of rank and status,<sup>1</sup> wealthy female entrepreneurs and traders, who displayed photographs of their styles to claim and build their positions in female circles. Today, mobile phones with cameras enable young unmarried women to make and circulate images of their styles and thus establish relations of matronage with women further up the social hierarchy, unlocking opportunities ranging from regular financial support to job offers. Many young women thus invest considerable economic and social resources not only in following and consuming digital fashion, but especially in sharing the images of their laboriously constructed styles via social media, particularly WhatsApp.<sup>2</sup> This article examines how sharing digital style images helps young women build their names as digital fashionistas and thus establish matronage relations and achieve social mobility. It asks what these processes tell us about the economies of social media influence more broadly. Underlying this question is a concern about how digital materiality matters when it comes to the making of one's name.<sup>3</sup>

I argue that building a name as a digital fashionista – a virtual potential to influence others – relies on fashioning interdependencies with wealth-in-followers (Guyer 1993; Guyer and Belinga 1995): making, maintaining, strengthening and managing economic, social and affective relations through the circulation of digital images of one's styles. When young women actualize this potential influence on

<sup>1</sup> Textiles form part of bridewealth and what is given to a woman within intimate economies of gendered labour exchanges.

<sup>2</sup> I focus on WhatsApp as this was the most popular app in use at the time of my fieldwork. Other apps now popular with social media influencers, particularly Instagram, had not yet emerged.

<sup>3</sup> I follow Pink's understanding of digital materiality, which does not see digital and material as separate but instead focuses on the processual nature of the digital and material as entangled. As such, digital materiality refers to what emerges through these entanglements, which here amount to virtual images of styles circulated on social media over the phone, usefully obliterating binaries of digital/material, online/offline, and human/technological (Pink *et al.* 2020). This further fits with the overall point that underlies what follows, namely about potentiality and its actualization as entangled rather than treating the former as pertaining solely to the virtual and the latter to the material world.

women of status and wealth who then follow their styles over those of competitors, young women can establish matronage relations and open up paths to upward social mobility. This article contributes to the literature on young women and upward social mobility through fashion in Africa (e.g. Cole 2010; Sylvanus 2019; Steel 2021), demonstrating that the circulation of virtual images of their digitally crafted styles allows my interlocutors to position themselves within matronage relations and advance economically and socially, however tenuously. More broadly, by pinpointing interdependencies as means of value creation, the concept of wealth-in-followers illuminates an alternative regime of valuation that informs digital influencer economies.

The anthropological and Africanist literature on upward social mobility of young women in Cameroon in particular, and in West Africa more broadly, has long emphasized reproduction and marriage as well as productive work as the main paths through which women can establish their social and economic positions (e.g. Feldman-Savelsberg 1999; Johnson-Hanks 2006). Thus, female status and upward social mobility were and are linked to the status and wealth of the men they marry, the number of children they bear, but also to the success of the productive activities they run, whether business or trade, or various forms of available private or state-linked employment (e.g. Goheen 1996). In the aftermath of the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s and a post-Cold War currency devaluation that saw the Central African Franc (FCFA) reduced in value by half, the Cameroonian economy was shattered and many of the former paths to upward social mobility were severely compromised. In this light, the literature has highlighted young women's engagement in sexual economies as offering some a way to make ends meet while enabling others to become upwardly mobile (e.g. Cole 2010; Honwana 2012; Pype 2020).

Even in the context of economic precarity, however, scholars have noted that investments in fashion persist. From Gondola's famous arguments about Congolese *sapeurs* (1999) through other examples in Niger (Masquelier 2013) and Madagascar (Cole 2010), much of the literature describes youth using fashion to blur social boundaries and status lines to generate new opportunities with a view to reworking their economic and social predicaments. Through the display of fashionable garments, young men can situate themselves in upwardly mobile patronage networks at home (Gondola 1999) or abroad (Newell 2012). In turn, young women, when fashionably dressed, may also enter sexual economies, with a view to securing incomes and perhaps social ascent through marriage (Cole 2010). In Senegal (Nyamnjoh 2005) or Uganda (Tamale 2015), the literature emphasizes how young women display sexy dress styles as a means of attracting men for sexual transactions, generating monetary and other returns from their sponsors and patrons, whether payments for university fees, room rentals or subsistence. Thus, the display of sexy styles operates as an entry into sexual economies for female youth (Cole 2010; Groes-Green 2013). But aside from offering an entry into sexual economies, in what other ways does fashion play a role in social advancement for young women?

From the Asante hightimers' flamboyant styles in Ghana (Gott 2009) to the entrepreneurial styles of Igbo women in Nigeria (Bastian 2013), women of status and wealth engage in conspicuous consumption of fashion at social events directed not at men but at other women (Sylvanus 2019). Printed images of such fashionable styles are displayed as photographic images in albums or on the wall. They are later debated in female circles, as described by Sylvanus in Togo (*ibid*), and are gifted or exchanged

between women, as Mustafa has shown in Senegal (2002). Through such actions, photographs of styles extend fashion as a female status-seeking display (Gott 2009); they constitute women's attempts at claiming positions, demonstrating wealth, and asserting taste and social mobility in female circles. How digital images of fashionable styles might afford similar avenues for upward social mobility has attracted little attention in the literature on fashion in Cameroon (Pommerolle and Ngaméni 2015; Röschenthaler 2015; Mougoué 2019) or in West Africa more broadly (e.g. Allman 2004; Hansen and Madison 2013; Gott *et al.* 2017; Sylvanus 2019; Dosekun 2020), even as studies of social media influencers proliferate in the field of media studies (e.g. Marwick 2015; Abidin 2018; Arriagada 2021; Iqani 2021). Since young women use fashion to enter sexual economies and patronage networks with men, and since fashion is a means of asserting one's economic and social position in female circles of status and wealth, how are young women using fashion – and the digital images through which it is circulated – to enter into relations with wealthier and more powerful *women* rather than men?

To address this question, I draw on Munn's understanding of sharing as an act of persuasion that can be scaled up through circulation into fame – here, the digital fashionista name (Barber 1991) or brand (Foster 2008) – and on Guyer's classical conceptualization of wealth-in-people as a measurement of value (Guyer 1993; Guyer and Belinga 1995). I extend Munn's concept of fame and Guyer's notion of wealth-in-people to social media's fashion influencer economies, drawing out how digital materiality makes wealth-in-followers and the actualization of fame interdependent. Thus, I explore how, by sharing virtual images of their styles over WhatsApp, young Bamileke women in Yaoundé mobilize wealth-in-followers, building brands as digital fashionistas that can be actualized to develop relations of matronage and achieve upward social mobility.

Following Guyer, one's followers define and generate social status, rank and influence (1993; Guyer and Belinga 1995). Followers produce wealth through a diversity of work, which can then be invested into attracting and attaching yet more new followers (Guyer 1993; Guyer and Belinga 1995). The key to ensuring followers' support or labour is their loyalty and reciprocity – so-called 'rights-in-people' (Kopytoff 1987) that are made and maintained via transactions of material objects (Guyer 1993; Guyer and Belinga 1995). Here, wealth-in-followers or the social relations that digital fashionistas entertain and that in turn make one a leader in style are based on their rights-in-people or 'brand loyalty', which is in turn fashioned through the transaction of virtual objects. The question then becomes how rights-in-people or 'brand loyalty', through which the wealth-in-followers is built, can be fashioned when young women share *virtual objects* such as the digital images of their styles.

For Munn, sharing is a transaction of persuasion geared toward eliciting desirable return actions from others (1986: 115). The transacted objects are media of influence towards obtaining desirable returns, and the materiality of transacted objects delineates how one's influence can travel across time and space (*ibid.*: 116). The virtual image of a style can be kept, cheaply copied, and shared potentially endlessly, sufficient phone credit and internet connection permitting.<sup>4</sup> The transaction of

<sup>4</sup> While internet outages are a common experience for Cameroonian mobile phone users due to problems with the network connection and electricity infrastructure, young women are accustomed to them and have developed strategies to cope. For example, the lack of phone credit is dealt with through a 'bip' (a single ring to request a call-back).

virtual images thus offers an exponential potential for fashioning and strengthening rights-in-followers as well as adding new followers, exploiting the ways in which the digital materiality of the phone allows virtual images to be mobilized.<sup>5</sup>

Sharing virtual images allows the fashioning of potential rights-in-followers through whom one's wealth-in-followers can be built, wherein each follower also becomes a potential conduit through which images might spread further, thus scaling up one's influence. This matters because followers constitute those images' virtual audience, which is necessary for fame – in this case, the fashionista's name – to emerge (Munn 1986). Fame 'depicts influence, that is the influential acts of any actor, as being *the potential for influence* on the acts of a *third party other*' external to an image-sharing transaction (*ibid.*: 116). This potential expands with each additional virtual member in a digital fashion group. 'As iconic and reflexive code, fame is the *virtual form of influence*' (*ibid.*: 117) that here circulates as and through the gaze of the virtual audience witnessing each persuasive transaction. Thus, being seen as a fashionista consists in managing one's style-related image-sharing transactions in such a way that the expanded influence can be actualized from an external and distant source.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, the framing of virtual images as a medium of transaction also questions how the rights in and relations with followers through whom one's name is built can actually be fashioned. The potential returns of desirable actions in the form of onward sharing of images and acknowledging their originator are uncertain. Followers can, for example, edit circulating images and share them on other groups to build their own fashionista name. Whether a follower acts loyally by further distributing a stylish image and revealing such sharing acts to the originator, drawing more attention to a fashionista's styles or engaging in other desirable actions on the fashionista's behalf, depends on the economic, social and affective benefits such sharing can *actually* or *potentially* bring to the follower herself. Thus, I argue that fashionistas and their followers are interdependent and one's wealth-in-followers is also translated into one's wealth-in-prospects (Johnson-Hanks 2017). Extending the concept of wealth-in-people as a theory of value of social relations in social media influencer economies reveals these interdependencies between leaders and followers as being key to the making and maintenance of the digital fashionista's name (Guyer 1993; Guyer and Belinga 1995).

Within media studies, the literature highlights how social media influencers in Chile (Arriagada 2021), Singapore (Abidin 2018), South Africa (Iquani 2021) and the USA (Marwick 2015) all create value based on affect, numbers of followers and reputations for self-branding. Fashion influencers are hired by brands to market sponsored products to their followers, who are in turn maintained through affective and intimate engagement. Influencers compete for the attention of brands based on their number of followers. Here, value is produced in capitalist and neoliberal terms: through, among others, the extraction of labour by influencers from followers and by brands from influencers and followers; and through quantification of influence,

<sup>5</sup> While I focus here on the affordances of virtual images over mobile social media to collect followers and shape reputations, I do not mean that such affordances are only technologically determined. Rather, as the article shows, affordances are relational in the sense Willems proposes: they emerge from the interplay between technology, users and their broader context (2021).

<sup>6</sup> They are distant in terms of class, rank and wealth and/or in the geographical sense.

usually numbers of followers, constituting a measurement of value of social relations for brands (Rocamora 2022). That is, market value is conceived in financial terms through the value of labour directed towards the promotion of the brand being reduced to a uniform or commensurate measurement (Rocamora 2022; Arriagada 2021; Iquani 2021; Marwick 2015).

In contrast, digital fashionistas operate within a terrain similar to that of digital money and its networks of circulation as described by Kusimba in Kenya (2021), producing value in 'economic and social, collective and individual' terms. In other words, value – the creation of a digital fashionista's name – is reliant on the strength of their social, economic and affective relations with followers. Followers, meanwhile, do not merely constitute commensurate entities in a digital attention economy; rather, their work towards making someone else a fashionista is based on potential and actual returns. As Kusimba argues, people do not only seek financial capital: 'As participants in these economic networks [in this case, WhatsApp fashion groups], people seek to accumulate ties, influence and mobilize people, and lay claim to their affection, support, resources, labour and loyalty: wealth-in-people' (*ibid.*: 8). They also convert one form of value into another and back. Pinpointing different kinds of interdependencies between fashionistas and followers as sources of value creation reveals wealth-in-people as an alternative regime of valuation to neoliberal models of social media influencer economies (Marwick 2015; Senft 2013; Iqani 2021; Rocamora 2022).

This article is based on fieldwork carried out in Cameroon between November 2013 and June 2014, and between March and June 2015, with three research collaborators: Félicité Djoukouo, Annie Kamta Matsida and Pamela Mikamb. Our methods included participant observation, sixty semi-structured interviews with seamstresses, tailors, photographers and their clients, and photographic elicitation with women of three generations (i.e. young women, their mothers and their grandmothers), as well as subsequent and ongoing digital ethnography with young women (via Facebook and WhatsApp) in continuous collaboration with Félicité.

The young women addressed in this article are all aged between eighteen and thirty-five years and unmarried. All identify as Bamileke and trace their origins to Mbouda in the Grassfields, in the Western region of Cameroon (the chiefdoms of Batcham, Bamissengue and Babajou).<sup>7</sup> They define themselves as Christian and attend church irregularly. They are either presently enrolled in a university or have received a university education. They all live in Yaoundé (in the Biyem Assi, Ngoa Ekélé and Efulan neighbourhoods), with kin or on their own in rented student rooms. They typically sustain themselves on handouts from their kin, wealthier peers or lovers (see, e.g., Pype 2020) and, as this article shows, by circulating fashions. They belong to the urban lower middle classes and have kin who hold important positions in chiefdom hierarchies.

The first section of this article traces how mobile phones with cameras changed fashion-making in Yaoundé, positioning young women at its centre and affording them the means to create digital advertisements of their styles. The second section

<sup>7</sup> In digital groups that I accessed, members were mainly Bamileke but included Bamun and Beti. Whereas I have not seen young women discriminate around group membership in terms of ethnicity, I have also not focused on researching this issue in particular.



looks at the formation of the WhatsApp fashion groups through which the resulting images of styles are shared. I argue that such groups function as wealth-in-followers and discuss the role that mobile phones and digital images – as style advertisements – play in their tenuous formation. The last section discusses how young women mobilize their wealth-in-followers and actualize their digital fashionista name, fashioning matronage relations and obtaining upward social mobility. I suggest that the various kinds of affective, social and economic benefits obtained by followers through the advertising of digital fashionistas' styles are what mitigate against the tenuousness of these relations; thus, I argue, value resides in the interdependencies between leaders and followers.

### Digitizing female fashion

Before the turn of the millennium, the fashionable customers of seamstresses and tailors in Africa – belonging to what Mustafa in Senegal called the 'sartorial ecumene' (2002) – relied on those with cameras, professional (and usually male) photographers, to document their styles and extend their display beyond the moment of wearing. Indeed, as the literature on photography in Africa highlights (Pinther and Ng 2007; Wendl 2001) and as the popular Cameroonian saying goes, 'one goes to a studio to photograph clothes'. Photographers in Yaoundé frequented events and ceremonies, as well as seamstresses' and tailors' shops, and the resulting style photographs became advertisements for the styles portrayed. Customers, seamstresses and tailors would thus purchase printed images of their own and others' styles to compose fashion catalogues in plasticized photographic albums for clients to flip through. Thus, even as a garment departed its site of production, its photograph would keep advertising it. Guests to private homes were shown personal albums in which images of styles were exhibited, extending (Mustafa 2002; Bastian 2013; Sylvanus 2019) and praising their owners' names (Adéèkó 2012; Barber 1991). Borrowing, exchanging, gifting or snatching photographs was a common visual means of shaping reputations, even though this was at times unwelcome, especially for those of lower status and wealth who often had only one printed copy of the style.

The post-Cold War media and trade liberalization refashioned the dynamics of making fashion in Yaoundé. In the late 2000s, inexpensive android phones with decent cameras flooded the Cameroonian market, making image creation easy and cheap. At the same time, cheap Chinese versions of traditional *pagne* textiles became widely available, with the lowest grade selling for as little as 3,000 FCFA (€4.50), half the cost of local products and less than a fifth of the price of imports. *Pagne* fashion became increasingly accessible to young women (cf. Fokwang 2015; Pommerolle and Ngaméni 2015). As Annie neatly put it, now one could be 'Fashion 24/7'. By 2016, heightened competition among telecoms networks had driven the price of a daily 1GB data allowance down to just 10,000 FCFA (€15) per month. Going online was now accessible, infrastructure permitting, which enabled young women to keep honing their fashion expertise, often in between household chores and other duties. Phone cameras and photo-editing apps offered new creative tools, while cheap data meant that these digital fashion advertisements could be affordably shared. Television, movies and telenovelas popularized gendered neoliberal myths of social ascent achieved through the body, beauty and fashion. These stoked young women's desires





Figure 1. A style made for work – advertising a product (2017). Used with permission of the photographer.

to invest in fashion, desires that were equally embedded in Cameroonian practices of fashion socialization, as well as in desires for upward social mobility, understood as economic, political and intimate security. Within this context, fashion-making, modelling and advertising (Figure 1) represented valued and arguably increasingly gendered types of aspirational work (Duffy 2016).

Young women were walking along busy roads to save their taxi fare for new garments. They photographed new and second-hand items (*nouveaux arrivages*) displayed outside shops and by itinerant sellers, and at the market stands they would try on clothes and headgear and request a photograph using the camera on their phones. Passers-by would stop women on the street and ask to photograph their styles, and they would pose like models on a catwalk while others stopped to watch,

turning the street into a runway (Wissinger 2015). Television series, fashion shows and even videos of social events such as marriages or funerals were combed for inspiration, with viewers using their phones to photograph the TV screen when they saw a style they admired. Others would wait for cheaper night-time data rates to browse the internet in search of tutorials or footage of recent fashion shows from Paris or Milan. They studied fashion blogs and downloaded images and assiduously surveyed and surveilled others' styles, in sewing shops but more often on peers' Facebook walls. It was crucial to know who wore what, where and when, to keep abreast of the competition. Images of styles were edited, catalogued and classified into digital collections such as 'everyday dress', 'evening dress' and 'funeral dress', constantly integrating 'the latest'. That is, these organized, patient, meticulous investments in fashion involved digital work. The resulting personal digital fashion collections, each distinctive and curated, complemented and competed with existing commercial fashion catalogues, locally made fashion posters and calendars, and personal print photographic albums. Crucially for those young women on the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder, phones allowed them to make, gather and assemble images of styles they had not yet made or paid for. Thus equipped, they could not only make but also share images of designs and styles, mobilizing fashion to create influence and build a name (cf. Gilbert 2019).

Stella, whom we met in the opening vignette, saved up for two months to pay for the stitching of a unique style she had worked to develop, and at last excitedly brought the neatly ironed garment home in a black plastic bag (Figure 2). Alone one afternoon, she carefully laid out the dress on her bed, spending time rearranging it and searching for the best light in the room. She placed it on the bed, on a chair and on a hanger, photographing it from the front and back as she sought to highlight different details. But relying solely on selfies compromised the image: the frame could not contain the whole garment. So she asked a student neighbour who worked as an itinerant photographer to help her set up a photo shoot. He used her phone as a camera, and during the session Stella walked *as if* she were a star on an imagined red carpet, displaying her 'unique' style and striking a variety of poses, as do celebrities displaying their dresses at mediatized, camera-dense events. She placed her legs and hands to accentuate the contours of her dress – poses that hark back to black-and-white photography and remain popular in studio photography today (Vokes 2019). Throughout the following week, Stella reworked and edited the images in between her household chores, during taxi rides to the market to help her aunt, and late at night. She increased the images' contrast, foregrounding the dress so that the virtual image generated the desired sensory effect of catching and prolonging the attention of the viewers.

In crafting these images, young women reiterated certain general rules of creating visual effects. They aimed to enhance attractiveness, seizing and prolonging viewers' attention through a combination of light, sheen and volume – what Stella referred to as catching or 'hitting the eye' (*bien marrier pour frapper*) – and echoing how their elders had made and displayed scarification (Bohannan 1956). Such visual rules derived from broader techniques of attention (Pedersen *et al.* 2021) that pertained to embodied knowledge and structured much of young women's everyday lives in relation to fashion and beyond. As Stella explained, fried bananas are cut and displayed at an angle to call attention to their size and to influence – enhance –



**Figure 2.** A style that Stella developed for months and for which she saved money (2016).

viewers' perception of them. Similarly, young women's digital images of styles were meant to develop their image or brand as a digital fashionista, by producing and enhancing the visual attention of the viewer, like catalogue advertisements.

Indeed, note how Stella's photo session described above resembled a product shoot for an advertisement, while the edited images resembled those fashion advertisements found in the catalogues under her bed. She worked to present her style in the best light with the intention of prolonging viewers' attention through her skills of display. When virtual images are shared, what attracts and retains followers are the resulting visual sensations – what Munn called desirability (1986) and Ahmed refers to as affects (2004), here circulated through, among others, virtual images of styles. The sensations generated by a style are created, reassembled and conjured differently

depending on the material form that mediates that style (Munn 1986): its size, volume and weight. Young women knew that virtual images could travel far and fast over the phone, yet, as already noted, they considered their small size unsatisfactory as it would not allow the whole garment to fit. This was compensated for by volume – producing numerous images of each style from a variety of different viewpoints designed to show as much of the garment as possible. The resulting advertisement features aimed to reiterate and amplify the fashionista’s followers’ visual sensations with a view to capturing and maintaining their attention (Gell 1992). In other words, phones and social media apps afforded extensions for steering and heightening attention to the visual aspect of display, making techniques of attention (Pedersen *et al.* 2021; Warnier 2010; Mauss 1973) reproducible and scalable in new ways (Miller *et al.* 2016).

### Wealth-in-followers

Most of the young women I worked with managed WhatsApp fashion groups with between nine and twenty members; each had from one to seven groups and WhatsApp was the only app used for this purpose during the time of my fieldwork. Most of the digital fashion groups displayed similar dynamics, with members having connections outside the group and mostly interacting in virtual time and space. For example, Stella’s peer Tina had a WhatsApp group with ten members: four peers from her biology course, one newly married female neighbour, and two married female cousins. The group also included her seamstress and two women of a different ethnicity whom she had met through the seamstress. Tina’s fellow students were from wealthy families, with parents working in medium- and large-scale trade and lower state administration, or from families that ranked high in village and chieftom hierarchies. She considered two of them close friends (*amies intimes*). The female neighbour was married to a successful businessman. Her cousins lived outside Yaoundé and she saw them no more than once or twice a year, usually at funerals in her ancestral village.

The ways in which these groups were constituted partly resembled all-female credit and savings associations (Feldman-Savelsberg and Ndonko 2010) and the broader dynamics through which groupings in the region have historically been fashioned (Kopytoff 1987). Unlike other digital influencers who commonly do not know nor have to know their followers, the young women who aspired to become digital fashionistas usually first transformed existing relationships into virtual followers, starting from kin (*ibid.*). For example, Stella’s aunt worked in a clothing shop in Yaoundé’s central market, importing and selling clothes from Turkey, Dubai and China, and Stella would often help her to design displays to ‘catch the eye’. Stella also had an uncle who traded in *pagnes*, and helping him unpack and categorize newly arrived textiles taught her to differentiate between grades of textiles and to discern their provenance through touch. In return for her help, he gifted her *pagnes*. Vicky, her seamstress, was her cousin and would sew her dresses on time and on credit, a common though sometimes unwelcome duty, as *‘famille c’est à credit’* (family, that’s on credit). These kin relations, key to refining young women’s fashion competencies and realizing their dresses, were among the first members of their digital groups (Guyer and Belinga 1995).

Alongside family members, most young women also attempted to extend their following by inviting university classmates and campus neighbours who expressed interest in their styles (Kopytoff 1987). For example, Tina's group included four peers from her computer science degree as well as a seamstress from her neighbourhood. In Stella's case, however, only two out of four invited peers accepted her invitation, perhaps suggesting competing allegiances. But those peers who are requested to join constitute the potential of forms of work other than kin, who might help update fashion competencies and offer *pagnes* or do jobs, thus increasing the chance that styles might be stitched on time or at all. It was through peers that a fashionista might expand attention to her styles by engaging them to share images further, as university-age peers with fewer responsibilities tended to have more time available to spend online than kin whose family and work obligations needed to be prioritized.

While image sharing was geared towards reaching women of status and wealth through whom paths to upward social mobility might be fashioned, the 'composition' of followers (Guyer and Belinga 1995) – their various skills, labours and resources – was intended to facilitate access to a sustained flow of images of fashions, with a view to making a name as a digital fashionista. For wealth-in-followers was also one's 'wealth-in-knowledge' (*ibid.*), wherein followers were valued for their singular skills and embodied labour that might be pooled to sustain one's name – the extent to which they might open up a path to social mobility, whether they were friends or kin or might scale up transactions, whether they could produce dresses or provide textiles or help update competencies, or the amount of time they spent online – rather than only in neoliberal terms as quantified commensurate entities whose attention is to be monetized (Senft 2013; Rocamora 2022).

Other followers might be recruited, as Stella showed in the opening vignette, in taxis, at school, during celebrations, gatherings and events, at the market or in church. Yet digital means made it possible not only for fashionistas to set up several groups but also for their followers to participate simultaneously in several virtual groupings without letting others know. Thus, aspiring fashionistas, already competing for the attention of wealthy women of status and rank, were also compelled to 'compete for the attention' of their peers (Fuh 2012). This competition involved, for instance, responding promptly to queries about a textile's colour or place of purchase, or providing extra images of a style. Depending on the relative importance of a particular follower at a given time, fashionistas might go to considerable lengths. Some, for example, left church services or classes to respond to calls, or they travelled across town to meet a group member at a seamstress. Some recorded videos or voice messages detailing and correcting errors in style. In doing so, young women leveraged their followers' lack of knowledge to build and assert superiority by offering volumes of style expertise. The considerable lengths young women went to were meant to create 'brand loyalty': that is, to fashion and strengthen one's rights-in-followers – establishing and extending the duration and frequency of requests and responses and returns of influence in various online and offline forms – so that followers would make desirable returns to them rather than someone else.

Becoming a fashionista remained desirable for many young women, however, and some followers, particularly peers, would improve their own competencies and fashion skills and could become potential competitors. They often saved received



images, changing them a bit (*changer un peu*) to innovate and leave their own imprint with the hope of starting a trend. Some would crop out the wearer's head and claim the image as their own when forwarding it, erasing the originator and thus decreasing her potential influence. When one of Annie's peers attempted to claim Annie's style as her own by reworking it slightly and sharing the resulting images on her own WhatsApp group, Annie publicly ejected her from all her groups and drove a backlash against the ex-follower. Wariness of this kind of competition was one reason why digital groups were kept small and invitations limited – one could not be sure if a follower would act loyally and share one's styles further, thus amplifying one's potential influence, or if, on the contrary, they might weaken one's influence by working to establish their name at the cost of the originator. Put differently, in order to emerge as digital fashionistas, many young women made use of the concealment of the act of sharing afforded by digital means – one knew only partially how many followers other women had and who was actually following whom (Archambault 2017).

Phones allowed young women to circulate virtual images with the aim of directing and maintaining others' attention regarding their styles. Rather than have someone see the actual garment or borrow it for their seamstress to copy, rather than having to print images of the style and then travel to distribute them further, young women could just repeatedly send an image while sitting at home. Or they could call or send a 'bip' (call-back request) so that thorny style details could be expertly explained. Bene, for example, avoided meeting her followers, instead sending additional images. This also secured competitive advantages and style leadership by keeping a check on apprenticeship, as followers could not observe how the fashionista assembled a particular style or discern her principles for composing collections, nor see her notebooks of drawings, her wardrobes or suitcases of almost-ready garments, nor watch how she practised displaying her forthcoming styles in front of a mirror. Young women eagerly shared or revealed certain parts of their expert competence, but they concealed or withheld others. Rather than replicating other forms of social media influence by offering one's followers feelings of intimacy or closeness (e.g. Abidin 2018), these young women maintained and enhanced their distance from followers (Miller *et al.* 2016), in part because of the potential for sabotage that intimate friends can bring (Geschiere 2013; Gilbert 2018). While the volume of images shared could strengthen rights-in-followers, temporarily asserted hierarchies, the potentials of concealed sharing and informal behind-the-scenes apprenticeship meant that competition was only ever a step away. Thus, virtual wealth-in-followers was a tenuous formation.

### Wealth-in-prospects

Having carefully curated her images for a week, Tina finally messaged the members of her 'Everyday Dress' WhatsApp group to announce the launch of her new style, 'a style that would impress even the President's wife!' (Figure 3). Group members expressed impatience, asking her to send it 'right away'. Tina waited another day, though, once again reworking the images in between running errands for elders and cooking. When she finally sent out the style, however, there was no response. She sent three more images later that night when the network is considered more reliable and the connection cheaper. Three group members were online and expressed their



**Figure 3.** A style that a follower of Tina shared further on Tina's behalf. The style was received by a woman of wealth and status who called Tina for more advice on fashion and style (2016).

wonder via a series of 'wows'. Congratulatory remarks followed, including clapping-hands emojis as well as requests to copy the style. As followers virtually gathered around the images, attention to the style was reiterated and amplified as transactions of images and text accumulated visual sensations (Brennan 2004). The discussions continued into the night, with group members asking for details about the dress and advice about colour matching or silhouettes – expertise that Tina was excited to share via text, images and even one phone call with an impatient follower. Throughout, she was declared a fashionista, but as she was sending more images and being pestered for the address of her seamstress, her battery ran out. The next day she received three phone calls from people she did not know, each requesting style advice and soliciting images. This reveals how



followers act as both target and conduit, further enhancing the fashionista's influence not only on other members of the group but also on crucial third parties.

Indeed, three members of the 'Everyday Dress' group had forwarded Tina's styles to others outside the group, resulting in these new inquiries. One call came from Ma Elize, whose niece had followed Tina loyally since receiving good advice about a wedding dress. The aunt, who worked as a secretary to a senior executive at a large state-linked firm, called Tina the next day to request images of her styles. Tina immediately showered her with images, fashioning her rights-in-followers and affirming her fashionista name through the volume of images shared. The following week Tina was invited to visit her at her office to showcase another style. As she entered, Ma Elize immediately set aside her work and began to admire the outfit, declaring her desire to copy it. 'This style,' she said, clasping her hands in a sign of satisfaction, 'will keep my husband.' To further affirm the strength of her digital fashionista name and influence, Tina gave Ma Elize a guided tour through the fashion catalogues she had compiled on her phone, revealing multiple WhatsApp fashion groups, their numerous virtual followers, and her numerous acts of sharing – which might otherwise remain concealed from others. In doing so, she converted the potential that virtual wealth-in-followers constitutes into actual influence on a third party to situate herself within a desirable social network of status and rank. Ma Elize called a colleague over to admire the style, who brought with her two other women, and the group spent several subsequent hours in Ma Elize's office discussing the styles. By the end of the workday, they had all joined Tina's digital fashion group.

Through phone calls and images, Ma Elize reported how she had impressed others by wearing Tina's styles at various events and ceremonies, or gatherings at church. When the company organized a Labour Day celebration at one of the most upmarket hotels in Yaoundé, Tina was invited as the guest of Ma Elize. Most of the women present had travelled to the capital from other cities, and as Tina paraded through the entrance they surrounded her like the photographers who surround stars at galas – to make images of her style with their phones. Iconic virtual images of her styles had coded and circulated her name via digital social networks, and at the event this scaled-up influence was reflected back from an external source: the unknown audience (Munn 1986: 116–17) in attendance. Ma Elize had boasted (*se venter*) to many women that she copied Tina's styles, and now strangers from Douala and elsewhere knew Tina's name even before she arrived. They bypassed the other young fashionable women present and pestered her for fashion advice and style images. Now walking a physical red carpet, Tina wore not only her glamorous style but also her name as a renowned fashionista. Actualizing virtual persuasion and transforming it into actual influence on third parties depends on followers sharing one's images. In the Cameroonian context, where gerontocratic and status relations dominate, it is especially dependent on those with whom images will be shared. Indeed, reaching one or two followers holding positions of status, wealth and/or rank might lead to many new followers, making a fashionista's name grow rapidly and amplifying her fame. In other words, the value of Tina's brand, her fashionista name, was contingent on, amplified by and stabilized through Ma Elize's name – that is, branding a name as a digital fashionista relied on the fashioning of interdependencies (Kopytoff 1987).

Towards the end of my fieldwork, Ma Elize helped Tina to get a temporary job. Colleagues soon began gathering around her desk every morning to view her new and

unique styles. Requests to join her group exploded, bringing more potential followers. She was requested to design more new styles, answer more calls to deliver expert advice and make and share more images. Tina welcomed these requests – now that the value of her brand had grown, those better-situated followers could, she hoped, potentially make more substantial returns and even bring more followers of wealth, status and rank. If Tina was able to fashion her path through the company to ultimately secure a position, it was because Ma Elize's acclaim in her own elite circles was contingent on Tina's style advice. In other words, Tina was also Ma Elize's wealth-in-people. Ma Elize, in turn, made Tina's following grow and was proud to mention that she copied Tina's styles. The value of Tina's brand was magnified by Ma Elize, whose advertising of the styles won Tina new followers. Yet as Tina pondered why she was not receiving requests from Ma Elize's elite circles, she warned me about such relations. Tina knew that Ma Elize's powerful position meant that she had her pick of fashion advisers and could turn easily to another for advice about fashion and styles, and she was also aware that economic decay in Cameroon renders matronage uncertain. While she kept advising Ma Elize, she wondered, for example, how best to share a video on how to wear a recent 'Michelle Obama' style. Now looking to diversify her wealth-in-followers as a means to mitigate against Ma Elize's weakening loyalty, Tina took a risk and privately shared this video advice with another wealthy woman, Ma Laura, whom she had met at the Labour Day event. If Tina was sending such valuable expertise to this new follower, it was precisely because of how her name had grown through the interdependence with Ma Elize. But those more powerful followers also competed for her expert advice on style. The extension of Tina's appointment at the company depended on Ma Elize. If Ma Elize saw in the group how keen Ma Laura was on Tina's styles, she might be inclined to secure Tina's position sooner rather than later, in order, Tina reckoned, to stake a durable claim to Tina's loyalty. That is, some interdependencies hold the potential to strengthen or weaken others, and vice versa.

Different kinds of interdependencies underpinned possibilities of value creation. Thus, for Tina to reach Ma Elize, it not only required that the married neighbour was satisfied with her fashion advice about wedding dress styles. The neighbour herself had strengthened her affective connection by recommending such a skilful adviser as Tina to her aunt. In the case of Bene, the seamstress's returns were related to Bene herself recommending her work to followers from another of her digital fashion groups. Meanwhile, despite never being active on Stella's 'high fashion' WhatsApp group, the uncle who offered her *pagnes* derived affective benefits from presenting Stella's styles to his wives. For Stella, sharing images with her uncle despite his lack of online activity served to maintain a moral relationship, affirming her own right-in-people, making returns towards the *pagnes* he had offered her in return for her help on his market stall. As her uncle shared the images with his wives, Stella created belonging among this part of her kin. Indeed, for many young women, sharing images with kin was itself a means of fashioning themselves into kin. For loyal peers from lower socio-economic backgrounds, such WhatsApp groups were their path into the fashion community of a university, neighbourhood, and for some even a city. Thus, followers, like fashionistas, in assessing how to distribute styles – and thus increase someone's influence – were guided by the actual or future potential affective, social and economic benefits that such sharing might bring. Rather than valuing these relations solely in individual and monetary terms, as is common in social media

influencing (e.g. Iquani 2021; Rocamora 2022), these relations also embraced principles of interdependence, with leaders and followers each seeking to ‘accumulate ties, influence, affection, support, resources, labour and loyalty: wealth-in-people’ (Kusimba 2021: 8).

Aside from returns in kind, renowned fashionistas such as the Ghanaian hightimers described by Gott (2009) might also receive substantial sums of money – a practice similar to tipping and known as *farotage* – when they entered an event or ceremony wearing fashionable styles. This was particularly common in the dry season (roughly November–March), when new and unique styles were in demand for life events such as marriages and funerary celebrations (*cry-dies*). Some described receiving as much as 20,000 to 80,000 FCFA during such events or the equivalent in *pagnes* from their wealthier followers in return for exclusive advice on crafting their unique styles. Actual benefits varied from drinks and mobile credit, to fabric and regular gifts of money, to offers of temporary employment from wealthier women of status and rank. Importantly, young women often redistributed these rewards to those kin and followers who had demonstrated ‘brand loyalty’ by sharing images of their fashionista’s styles. This took many forms: money, the gifting of part of a *pagne*, paying a taxi fare or offering a printed image of oneself in a dress from an event, as Tina usually did for her uncle. But as young women’s names grew, others also increased their claims. Tina’s uncle, for example, increasingly made claims for even more images. In the case of Annie, after a Saturday wedding ceremony where her style attracted crowds, on Monday morning peers welcomed her at the university gate with claims for new returns. When possible, young women saved these returns and reinvested them in new and unique styles and new images. If maintaining their name was dependent on the different types of embodied work embedded within these networks of multi-layered relations (Kusimba 2020), sharing these returns was aimed at making rights-in-followers more durable, to maintain possibilities of value creation and the potential that their virtual influence could again be actualized. In doing so, fashionistas created value in ‘economic, social, affective, individual and collective terms’ (Kusimba 2021: 8), revealing an alternative to the ‘proprietary organization of attention’ by which micro-celebrities are often fashioned in the digital age (cf. Senft 2013).

Other young women established relations of matronage in similar ways. Annie, for example, impressed the secretary at the Ministry of Higher Education while picking up her diploma and added her to a group where she shared fashion advice. In return for sharing her volumes of styles, the secretary not only brought new followers to Annie’s group but also promised to help Annie obtain a teaching position in her preferred district so that she could stay close to her kin. Adelaide developed a relationship with a pharmacist, who, in return for fashion advice, helped obtain a particular medicine for Adelaide’s kin. She also shared styles with a married neighbour in the hopes of reaching the neighbour’s aunt, the boss of a parastatal company. In making women of higher status reliant on them for fashion advice, young fashionistas not only negotiated their positions and bought into networks of matronage but temporarily reversed certain dominant social hierarchies and created matronage around themselves (cf. Rösenthaller 2015). In other words, in the digital age, wealth-in-people reveals the different degrees to which digital leaders and their virtual followers are reciprocally yet unequally each other’s wealth. But as young women invested in followers, it remained uncertain whether and when a relationship

might bear fruit, what opportunities it might bring, or how durable followers' loyalty would be. Thus, if such networks are 'ways of generating, circulating, distributing, and accumulating wealth-in-people', 'ways of surviving, ways of belonging, and ways of getting ahead' (Kusimba 2021: 10), they are also young women's wealth-in-prospects (Johnson-Hanks 2017).

### Value in interdependencies

Post-Cold War media and trade liberalization brought cheap mobile phones with cameras as well as cheap textiles, enabling young women to make and share digital images of their fashionable styles. These in turn provided key if uncertain means for young women to 'compete for attention' from both peers and women of status and rank (Fuh 2012) so as to fashion avenues of upward social mobility. In order for virtual images to circulate, young women had to compose and rely on a network of kin, peers and strangers, their virtual wealth-in-followers (Guyer and Belinga 1995) through whom they could build up their brand name. Many young women aspired to become digital fashionistas, sharing virtual images for themselves and on behalf of others, and concealing sharing across simultaneous WhatsApp group memberships. Thus, as virtual images were shared, it remained uncertain whether an aspiring fashionista's fame and style would be enhanced as a visual sensory brand (cf. Munn 1986; Foster 2008). Indeed, digital images were shared further when such sharing offered potential or actual affective, social or economic benefits to followers. I have thus argued that it is through fashioning interdependencies with followers that young women can develop, actualize and amplify their names as digital fashionistas. When matronage relations generated actual upward social mobility, young fashionistas further redistributed the resulting benefits to those followers who had made their name known in the first place, as means of making rights-in-followers more durable, mitigating against uncertain loyalties, affirming the renown of their amplified names and thus securing avenues of value creation. By proposing the interdependencies between fashionable leaders and their followers as sources of value creation, this article offers the broader concept of wealth-in-people as an alternative regime of valuation, acknowledging that social relations are not merely means by which to secure attention, possessions or currency, but rather that virtual images, money or in-kind benefits also serve as means to temporarily accumulate and strengthen multi-layered social relations (Kusimba 2020).

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