

PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION AND CULTURAL BRANDING IN NIGERIA'S LEATHER INDUSTRY: A CONTEXTUAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Nigeria's leather industry possesses significant cultural and economic potential, yet it remains constrained by weak value addition, limited global visibility, and the declining recognition of indigenous craftsmanship. Despite the intrinsic quality of Nigerian leather, the sector continues to function largely as a supplier of semi-processed raw materials, resulting in the erosion of cultural identity and lost development opportunities. This study examines how communication-centered strategies can contribute to the revitalization and repositioning of Nigeria's leather industry. Anchored in a dual theoretical framework integrating Participatory Communication theory and the Social Construction of Value perspective, the study explores how stakeholder engagement and cultural meaning-making shape value perception and industrial outcomes. Using a qualitative research approach, the study analyses relevant literature, policy documents, and sectoral reports on participatory communication, cultural branding, indigenous knowledge systems, and leather industry development in Nigeria and comparable African contexts. The analysis reveals persistent structural, institutional, and socio-cultural constraints, including inadequate stakeholder participation, fragmented policy implementation, cultural devaluation of local products, and limited integration of indigenous knowledge systems. The findings demonstrate that participatory communication plays a critical role in bridging policy–practice gaps, fostering inclusive governance, and enabling the co-creation of cultural narratives that enhance value perception. Simultaneously, the Social Construction of Value framework elucidates how cultural narratives and symbolic meanings influence the valuation and market positioning of Nigerian leather. The study contributes to Communication for Development scholarship by extending participatory communication theory into an industrial and value-chain context, while offering policy-relevant insights for integrating communication, cultural capital, and stakeholder engagement into sustainable and inclusive industrial development strategies.

Keywords: Cultural Branding, Economic Growth, Leather Industry, Participatory Communication and Social Construction of Value

Introduction

Globally, the leather industry constitutes an important segment of industrial production and international trade, generating employment, foreign exchange, and opportunities for value-chain development in both developed and developing economies. Countries that maintain domestic capacity for leather finishing, branding, and product design tend to capture significantly higher economic value than those that rely primarily on exporting semi-processed raw materials. As a result, competitiveness in the global leather market increasingly hinges not only on the availability of hides and skins, but also on coherent industrial policies, branding capability, and effective coordination among stakeholders across the value chain.

Within Africa, the leather sector plays a strategic role in national industrialisation and economic diversification efforts. Many African countries possess substantial livestock resources and produce high-quality hides, yet a significant number remain confined to low-value positions within global supply chains. While some countries, notably Ethiopia, have actively pursued local finishing, branding, and industrial upgrading, others continue to export largely semi-processed hides and skins, thereby constraining employment generation and value addition (African Development Bank, 2023). These contrasting trajectories underscore the influence of policy alignment, institutional capacity, and knowledge systems in determining industrial performance.

Nigeria's leather industry offers a particularly revealing case within this context. Before and during the early oil boom era, leather was among Nigeria's leading non-oil export commodities. The hides and skins of Red Sokoto goats were internationally prized for their durability and fine texture, contributing meaningfully to foreign exchange earnings and employment generation (Ihuoma &

Dike, 1992). However, the discovery of oil redirected national economic priorities, leading to sustained policy neglect and progressive marginalisation of the leather sector (Fiya et al., 2022).

Currently, Nigeria's leather production remains largely limited to the wet-blue stage, with approximately 90 percent of output exported in semi-finished form for completion overseas. This export pattern results in significant losses in domestic employment, industrial learning, and value addition (Gimba et al., 2023; Junaidu et al., 2021). Although Nigerian leather continues to enjoy global recognition for its quality, its national identity is frequently obscured through foreign finishing and branding practices. International luxury firms utilise Nigerian hides while marketing finished goods as European products, thereby diminishing Nigeria's cultural and industrial visibility within the global leather economy (Ugbede, 2025).

Beyond challenges related to branding, the sector contends with persistent structural constraints, including the diversion of hides for food consumption (kpomo), inadequate flaying and preservation practices, fragmented cattle markets, obsolete tanning technologies, environmental pollution, and insufficient domestic finishing capacity (Darshe et al., 2024; Bhardwaj et al., 2023). Despite the existence of a national leather research institution (NILEST, Zaria) and repeated technical recommendations, weak policy coordination and limited stakeholder inclusion continue to impede meaningful sectoral transformation.

Scholarly enquiries into Nigeria's leather industry have largely concentrated on technical production methods, environmental impacts, and economic performance. While these contributions are valuable, they pay limited attention to the role of communication, participation, and stakeholder engagement in addressing policy gaps, harmonising value-chain actors, and integrating indigenous knowledge into industrial development strategies. Although foundational

participatory communication scholarship (Boafo, 1985) and more recent studies on social empowerment and inclusive development (Akpan, 2025) highlight the transformative potential of participatory approaches, they rarely explore their application within industrial sectors such as leather manufacturing.

This study responds to this gap by examining the role of participatory communication in revitalising and repositioning Nigeria's leather industry. Specifically, it seeks to: (i) analyse how inclusive dialogue and stakeholder participation can help identify and address policy and operational constraints; (ii) assess the influence of cultural branding and indigenous knowledge on value perception within the leather sector; and (iii) propose a participatory communication framework for sustainable industrial transformation. By extending participatory communication theory into an industrial context, the study contributes to development communication scholarship while offering policy-relevant insights into sectoral governance, value-chain upgrading, and inclusive industrial development in Nigeria. The relationship between communication and development has been extensively documented in development communication scholarship (Servaes, 1996; Cadiz, 2005; Bessette, 2004). In response to top-down and prescriptive development models, participatory communication emerged as an approach that emphasizes inclusive dialogue, shared decision-making, and knowledge exchange among stakeholders. This approach is particularly relevant to sectors such as Nigeria's leather industry, where cultural heritage, local craftsmanship, and global market dynamics intersect.

Freire (1970) is widely regarded as a foundational scholar in participatory communication. Through his concept of dialogical communication articulated in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire argued that marginalized groups should actively participate in shaping their social and economic

futures. Building on Freire's work, Mefalopulos (2008) emphasized listening and dialogue as central to development communication, arguing that genuine inclusion in decision-making processes is a prerequisite for sustainable development.

Extending this discourse within African contexts, Manyozo (2012) conceptualized participatory communication as a practice embedded in cultural contexts and power relations. His research in sub-Saharan Africa demonstrates that locally driven communication platforms, such as community radio and traditional storytelling serve as mechanisms for innovation, knowledge exchange, and social mobilization. These insights are directly applicable to Nigeria's leather clusters, where indigenous tanning practices and cultural narratives remain central to production and trade.

Empirical studies within Nigeria further highlight the relevance of participatory communication for bridging policy and community realities. Ojebode (2018) and Albert (2017) demonstrate that inclusive communication strategies foster trust, ownership, and collective responsibility, which are essential for revitalizing traditional industries. Similarly, Agena (2020) argues that participatory communication is indispensable for sustainable development in Nigeria, advocating bottom-up approaches that integrate cultural values and indigenous knowledge systems. Bofo (2006) reinforces this position by asserting that communication must be dialogic, enabling grassroots stakeholders to define problems and co-create solutions within development processes.

Research on indigenous knowledge systems further strengthens this perspective. Obinyan and Ehimua (2024) conceptualize indigenous knowledge as a dynamic resource capable of complementing modern industrial strategies when properly integrated. Khan and Gope (2025) similarly emphasize the strategic integration of indigenous knowledge and contemporary technologies as a pathway toward sustainable industrial development. From a decolonial

standpoint, Akpan (2025) argues that theorizing indigenous communication systems is essential for ensuring that development solutions are culturally grounded and locally legitimate.

In addition, global development institutions such as the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) have emphasized the role of participatory governance in upgrading Africa's leather value chains (FAO, 2020; UNIDO, 2021). These institutional reports suggest that policy interventions often fail when local knowledge and stakeholder participation are excluded. Olatunji et al. (2025) reinforce this view by identifying eco-conscious branding, innovation, and sustainability as critical factors shaping competitiveness in global leather markets.

Despite these contributions, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding how participatory communication can be operationalized to support the revitalization of Nigeria's leather industry. Existing studies rarely examine the communication processes through which inclusive decision-making, cultural integration, and stakeholder engagement can reposition Nigerian leather from an imported-luxury paradigm to a source of local pride and global competitiveness. This study addresses this gap by applying a dual theoretical framework that integrates Participatory Communication theory and the Social Construction of Value framework, both grounded in indigenous knowledge systems, to Nigeria's leather sector.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a dual-framework approach, integrating the Social Construction of Value and Participatory Communication frameworks to examine how cultural narratives and stakeholder engagement can facilitate the revitalization of Nigeria's leather industry.

The Social Construction of Value framework posits that economic value is not inherent in products but is socially created through culturally embedded meanings, symbols, and narratives (Dolfsma, 1997; Ponizovskiy et al., 2019). This perspective explains why Italian leather commands premium status in global markets, while Nigerian leather despite comparable material quality remains undervalued due to weak symbolic association with luxury and heritage.

Complementing this perspective, the Participatory Communication framework emphasizes dialogue, inclusivity, and co-creation as mechanisms for social and institutional transformation (Servaes, 1999; Jacobson, 2003). Through participatory media and stakeholder engagement, communities can redefine cultural narratives, co-produce solutions, and foster shared ownership of development processes. This framework aligns with UNESCO's position that cultural heritage safeguarding is unsustainable without the active participation of local communities (UNESCO, 2007, Article 15).

Together, these frameworks conceptualize industrial revitalisation as both a communication and cultural process. Value creation emerges not merely from marketing strategies, but from socially constructed meanings supported by inclusive participation. By integrating symbolic representation with participatory governance, the framework explains how Nigeria's leather industry can achieve economic resilience, social sustainability, and innovation through co-creation.

Finally, this combination of the two frameworks will produce three significant outcomes:

1. Economic Resilience and Global Competitiveness,
2. Social Sustainability and Heritage Preservation,
3. Innovation and Co-Creation.

Table 1: Integrated Theoretical Approach for Revitalizing the Leather Sector

Category	Social Construct Value	Participatory Communication Theory
Concept	Value and reality are constructed and developed through socially constructed meanings and culture in society.	Stakeholder participation is fostered through effective communication for decision-making and implementation.
Legacy of the Leather Industry	Socially constructed meanings, traditions, and cultural identity of artisans' craft in leather development.	Dialogue enables producers, policymakers, and consumers to jointly develop solutions.
Roles of Stakeholders	Communities establish quality and value standards in line with prevailing social norms.	All actors (artisans, policymakers, marketers) contribute equally to planning and implementation.
Method of Implementation	Leather products are positioned as cultural heritage and symbols of social status.	Platforms for collaborative problem-solving, training, and feedback loops are established.
Expected Outcomes	Increased acceptance and pride in locally made leather products.	Sustainable long-term industry growth through shared ownership and mutual respect.

Authors Construct 2025

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, conceptual research design based on systematic secondary document analysis. Qualitative and conceptual approaches are appropriate for studies that seek interpretive insight, theoretical explanation, and contextual understanding of complex socio-industrial phenomena rather than statistical generalisation (Bowen, 2009; Creswell & Poth,

2018). The study examines how participatory communication and indigenous knowledge systems can contribute to the revitalisation of Nigeria's leather industry.

A descriptive qualitative approach was employed to analyse existing academic literature, policy documents, and institutional reports related to leather sector development and development communication. Document analysis is widely recognised as a systematic method for examining policies, institutional practices, and socio-economic systems (Bowen, 2009), making it suitable for this study's objectives.

The study reviewed 48 documents, comprising peer-reviewed journal articles, books and book chapters, institutional and policy reports, as well as case studies and sectoral assessments. Key sources included publications from the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the African Development Bank (AfDB), and Nigeria's National Institute for Leather Science and Technology (NILEST). Case-based materials focused on leather clusters and value-chain initiatives in Kano and Aba, alongside comparable African contexts such as Ethiopia and Kenya, which have received significant analytical attention in leather value-chain development literature (FAO, 2011; UNIDO, 2010, 2023).

The review covered literature published between 2010 and 2025 to capture Nigeria's pre- and post-structural adjustment industrial transition, shifts in global leather value chains, and the emergence of participatory communication and indigenous knowledge frameworks in development research (Dolfsma, 1997; Servaes & Malikhao, 2020; UNESCO, 2007).

Documents were accessed through academic databases including Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ResearchGate as well as institutional repositories and the official websites of international development organisations. Selection criteria included relevance to Nigeria's leather industry or comparable African contexts, engagement with participatory communication or indigenous knowledge, publication in English, and demonstrated source credibility.

Analysis followed a thematic document analysis process. Selected texts were reviewed iteratively to identify recurring themes related to indigenous tanning practices, communication structures, stakeholder engagement, policy gaps, and branding and value perception. Interpretation focused on conceptual linkages between participatory communication processes—such as inclusive dialogue and knowledge co-creation—and industrial transformation, emphasising relational patterns rather than frequency counts (Servaes & Malikhao, 2020).

To enhance analytical rigour, findings were triangulated across academic, institutional, and case-based sources. Clear documentation of data sources, selection criteria, and analytical procedures ensures transparency and methodological replicability of the research process (Bowen, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Measures of Operational Constructs

Although this study is theoretical in nature, selected indicators and conceptual measurement strategies are referenced to illustrate how participatory communication and knowledge integration could be operationalised in empirical research (Dolfsma, 1997; Ponizovskiy et al., 2019; Servaes & Malikhao, 2020; UNESCO, 2007)

Social Construction of Value

This theory emphasizes how value is socially and culturally constructed rather than inherent in products. To measure this construct, the **Perception Score** can be calculated as:

$$\text{Perception Score} = \frac{\sum \text{Consumer Ratings}}{\text{Number of Respondents}}$$

This formula aggregates consumer ratings of Nigerian leather and divides by the total number of respondents, providing an average perception score. A higher score indicates stronger perceived value.

Participatory Communication

This theory focuses on stakeholder engagement and co-creation. To quantify participation, the Participation Rate formula is:

$$\text{Participation Rate (\%)} = \frac{\text{Number of Participants}}{\text{Total Invited}} \times 100$$

This percentage shows the level of involvement in participatory platforms such as workshops or forums. A higher rate reflects greater inclusivity and engagement.

Ethical Considerations

As a conceptual study using secondary data, no human participants were involved. Ethical rigor was ensured through accurate representation of sources, proper acknowledgment, and adherence to academic integrity and transparency.

Limitations and Scope

This study presents a conceptual and theoretical investigation into how Participatory Communication and Social Construction of Value (SCV) can help to revitalize Nigeria's Leather Industry. Nevertheless, there are some limitations which need to be recognized to enable an appropriate interpretation of the findings and to facilitate further research. First and foremost, the study has not included empirical primary data collection. The study has relied upon secondary literature, policy reviews and theoretical arguments. There were no direct interviews, surveys, focus group discussions, or participatory workshops conducted to collect first-hand views from key stakeholders involved in the Leather Value Chain - namely tanners, artisans, livestock producers, traders, government officials and consumers. Direct contact with those people would have provided much greater insight into the communication barriers, power relationships and cultural values systems which determine the success of the industry. Secondly, the study has used no observational/ethnographical methods to explore the many complexities of artisanal processes, market transactions, and institutional practices of the people engaged in producing leather. Observational/ethnographical methods would have provided a greater understanding of how cultural stories/narratives, relationships of trust and informal communications networks are influencing the quality of production and the perceived value of the products. Thirdly, the geographical area of study was specifically Nigeria's Leather Industry. While the problems and opportunities identified by the study are likely to have wider relevance to other African countries with comparable agro-industrial systems, socio-economic situations and cultural heritage systems; the study's findings cannot be generalised to other contexts without due consideration of regional variations in terms of governance systems, livestock management systems, infrastructure availability and craftsmanship traditions.

Fourthly, the study focused on communication, cultural branding and governance issues and did not provide any evaluation of the technical, financial or environmental aspects of leather processing technology or supply chain logistics. These areas were beyond the scope of the study and will be important considerations if full-scale sectoral revitalisation is to take place.

Lastly, since this is a theory-driven study, the proposed framework for Participatory Communication remains at a conceptual level. Therefore, it will be necessary for subsequent researchers to implement and evaluate the framework through pilot studies, stakeholder dialogue, participatory workshops and longitudinal studies to assess whether the framework has real-world application in terms of improving the collaboration of the parties involved, creating more value for all concerned and ultimately achieving better results for the industries' overall success.

Findings and Discussion

Cultural Identity, Rebranding, and the Social Construction of Value

Analysis of reviewed policy documents, institutional reports, and scholarly literature reveals a recurring emphasis on cultural identity as a central but underutilized asset in Nigeria's leather industry. Across these sources, rebranding is framed not merely as a marketing strategy but as a mechanism for preserving intangible cultural heritage embedded in indigenous craftsmanship. When tangible elements of cultural heritage deteriorate, the intangible practices that sustain the identity of craftspeople are likewise eroded. **UNESCO (2007, Article 15)** emphasizes that safeguarding cultural heritage is unsustainable without the active participation of local communities, a position echoed in sectoral assessments that link cultural erasure to declining artisanal identity. These findings suggest that rebranding initiatives disconnected from cultural

participation risk accelerating the loss of indigenous leather practices rather than contributing to their revitalization.

Participatory Communication Gaps and Stakeholder Exclusion

The document analysis further reveals systemic shortcomings in stakeholder engagement throughout Nigeria's leather value chain. Policy frameworks and industry strategies frequently adopt top-down approaches, marginalizing artisans, small-scale producers, and local communities. Across reviewed studies, the absence of participatory communication mechanisms is associated with weak policy ownership, limited compliance, and fragmented implementation. In contrast, comparative literature demonstrates that inclusive dialogue and co-creation foster trust, enhance policy legitimacy, and support sustainable industrial coordination.

Participatory Communication as a Mechanism for Sustainable Governance

Findings indicate that participatory communication offers a governance mechanism capable of addressing tensions between economic, environmental, and social priorities in the leather sector. Reviewed case studies highlight how dialogic communication facilitates knowledge sharing on cleaner technologies, ethical labor practices, and compliance standards. However, the literature also identifies persistent barriers, including power asymmetries, institutional resistance, and the risk of tokenistic participation. These challenges emphasize that participatory communication must be intentionally designed and supported institutionally to produce meaningful outcomes.

Consumer Education, Narrative Co-Creation, and Ethical Value Chains

Analysis of development communication literature reveals that consumer education functions most effectively when framed as an interactive process rather than unidirectional messaging. Participatory communication enables consumers to engage directly with manufacturers,

regulators, and advocacy groups, reducing misinformation and greenwashing. Across sources, the co-creation of sustainability narratives is shown to enhance trust, strengthen ethical consumption practices, and generate demand for culturally authentic products. This has direct implications for repositioning Nigerian leather within global value chains.

Institutional Policy Frameworks and Participatory Implementation

Review of the National Leather and Leather Products Policy demonstrates alignment with global best practices in industrial upgrading; however, implementation gaps persist. The literature identifies limited resources, administrative complexity, infrastructure deficits, and exclusion of informal operators as key constraints. Documented experiences indicate that participatory communication can mitigate these issues by facilitating stakeholder dialogue, co-developing compliance standards, and improving training effectiveness. These findings reinforce the view that policy success depends not solely on design but on communicative processes.

Transformative Potential of Participatory Communication

Collectively, the findings suggest that the revitalization of Nigeria's leather industry is fundamentally a communicative and institutional challenge rather than a purely technical one. Participatory communication emerges as a transformative mechanism capable of redefining value, aligning stakeholder interests, and integrating cultural heritage into industrial strategy. Transformation requires reframing success beyond export volumes to include participation levels, social inclusion, and local economic impact.

Challenges and Opportunities

Nigeria's leather industry faces a set of interrelated structural, institutional, and socio-cultural challenges that constrain its capacity for inclusive and sustainable transformation. A recurring challenge across policy documents and sectoral analyses relates to infrastructural deficits. Many leather clusters and tanneries operate with limited access to modern production facilities, unreliable electricity supply, and inadequate digital connectivity. These deficiencies restrict the industry's capacity to adopt environmentally sustainable practices and limit participation in digitally mediated platforms necessary for stakeholder communication, branding, and market access.

Institutional bureaucracy further compounds these infrastructural limitations. Rigid trade regulations, lengthy export procedures, and weak coordination among regulatory agencies create operational inefficiencies that hinder innovation and collaborative governance. Such bureaucratic constraints reduce policy responsiveness and discourage coordinated action among stakeholders, thereby limiting the effectiveness of industrial revitalization initiatives.

Access to finance remains a persistent challenge, particularly for small-scale tanners and artisans. Financial exclusion, characterized by limited availability of formal credit facilities and reliance on informal financing mechanisms, restricts the ability of these actors to upgrade technology, build productive capacity, and comply with sustainability standards. This financial marginalization reinforces existing inequalities within the leather value chain and undermines efforts toward inclusive industrial development.

The industry also contends with cultural barriers and attitudinal resistance, especially consumer perceptions that favour imported leather products over locally manufactured alternatives. Such

perceptions erode confidence in indigenous craftsmanship, undermine local cultural pride, and create resistance to narrative repositioning efforts aimed at redefining Nigerian leather as a heritage-based luxury product.

Gender and social exclusion represent additional challenges within leather clusters. Women and other socially marginalized groups are often absent from decision-making processes, reducing diversity of perspectives and limiting innovation potential. This exclusion perpetuates power asymmetries and constrains the participatory governance structures needed for sustainable sectoral transformation.

Finally, a significant challenge lies in the misalignment between national industrial policies and local leather cluster realities. Although federal initiatives promote local content development and industrialization, insufficient integration of local stakeholders into policy formulation and implementation results in missed opportunities for accessing funding, technical assistance, and institutional support.

Opportunities

Despite these challenges, the literature identifies several opportunities through which Nigeria's leather industry can be repositioned as a competitive and culturally grounded sector when strategically supported by participatory communication.

Nigeria's rich cultural heritage and long-standing leather craftsmanship traditions constitute a significant yet underutilized asset. Indigenous skills and artisanal knowledge are internationally recognized for authenticity and quality. When leveraged through participatory cultural narratives, these attributes provide a foundation for positioning Nigerian leather as a premium heritage product in global markets.

The growth of digital communication platforms presents important opportunities for participatory engagement. Affordable mobile technologies and social media platforms enable interactive communication among artisans, consumers, regulators, and marketers. These tools facilitate branding, consumer education, and stakeholder dialogue, thereby reducing information asymmetry and expanding access to domestic and international markets.

Emerging international and industry partnerships further enhance opportunities for sectoral growth. Increasing global emphasis on ethical sourcing, sustainability, and traceability within the fashion industry creates pathways for collaboration with development agencies and responsible fashion brands. Participatory communication strengthens such partnerships by fostering transparency, trust, and shared value creation.

Supportive policy initiatives promoting local content and export diversification also provide an enabling institutional context. Government programs encouraging “Made-in-Nigeria” products create strategic openings for leather industry revitalization, particularly when policy implementation is supported by inclusive communication mechanisms that align national objectives with local cluster needs.

The role of civil society organizations and media advocacy offers additional opportunities for narrative transformation and stakeholder mobilization. Through participatory storytelling and public engagement, these actors can promote sustainability awareness, cultural pride, and increased demand for locally produced leather goods.

Finally, the integration of the leather sector into the broader creative economy, including fashion, art, and tourism, presents opportunities for market expansion and innovation. Linking leather

production to creative industries fosters cross-sector collaboration, amplifies cultural expression, and reinforces the symbolic value of Nigerian leather as both an economic and cultural resource.

Recommendations

To address the structural, institutional, and socio-cultural challenges confronting Nigeria's leather industry, this study proposes the following policy and practice-oriented recommendations. Each recommendation is explicitly aligned with the challenges identified through the document analysis and is grounded in participatory communication principles.

- 1. Strengthening Infrastructural Capacity through Participatory Platforms.** To mitigate infrastructural deficits, targeted investments should be directed toward improving electricity supply, production facilities, and digital connectivity within leather clusters. Government agencies, development partners, and industry associations should adopt participatory planning processes that involve artisans and cluster operators in identifying priority infrastructure needs. The establishment of shared digital platforms for communication, training, and market access would enhance stakeholder coordination and enable the adoption of sustainable production practices.
- 2. Streamlining Institutional and Regulatory Frameworks through Inclusive Governance.** Institutional bureaucracy can be reduced by simplifying export procedures, harmonising regulatory functions, and strengthening inter-agency coordination. Participatory communication mechanisms such as multi-stakeholder forums and consultative policy platforms should be institutionalised to ensure that tanners, artisans, and cluster associations contribute to regulatory reform. Such inclusive governance

structures would enhance policy responsiveness, foster innovation, and improve compliance.

3. **Expanding Access to Finance for Small-Scale Producers.** To address financial exclusion, tailored financing mechanisms should be developed for small-scale tanners and artisans. Public–private partnerships involving financial institutions, government agencies, and producer cooperatives can facilitate access to affordable credit, grants, and capacity-building support. Participatory communication can enhance transparency and trust between financiers and producers, ensuring that financing models reflect local production realities and sustainability goals.
4. **Reframing Cultural Narratives through Participatory Branding Strategies.** Cultural and attitudinal barriers can be addressed through participatory branding initiatives that reposition Nigerian leather as a culturally grounded luxury product. Artisans, designers, marketers, and consumers should be actively involved in co-creating narratives that highlight indigenous craftsmanship, heritage, and quality. Such narrative reconstruction, facilitated by participatory communication, would challenge negative perceptions of locally produced leather and strengthen cultural pride.
5. **Promoting Gender Inclusion and Social Equity in Leather Clusters.** Efforts to revitalise the leather industry must incorporate deliberate strategies to address gender and social exclusion. Policies and programmes should ensure the meaningful inclusion of women and marginalized groups in decision-making processes within leather clusters. Participatory communication can provide safe spaces for dialogue, amplify underrepresented voices, and support inclusive leadership structures that enhance innovation and social equity.

6. **Aligning National Policies with Local Cluster Realities.** To resolve misalignment between national industrial policies and local leather clusters, policy formulation and implementation should adopt bottom-up participatory approaches. Local stakeholders should be involved in translating national objectives into cluster-specific strategies through structured dialogue and continuous feedback mechanisms. Such alignment would improve access to funding, technical assistance, and institutional support while ensuring policy relevance at the grassroots level.
7. **Institutionalising Participatory Communication in Sectoral Governance.** Across all identified challenges, the institutionalisation of participatory communication is critical. Government agencies, industry bodies, and development partners should mainstream participatory communication into leather sector governance frameworks. This includes embedding dialogue, co-creation, and feedback loops into policy processes, training programmes, and monitoring systems, thereby promoting sustainable sectoral transformation.

Implication for Policy and Practice

The results of this research clearly indicate the urgent need for the implementation of policy changes and practical intervention that incorporates participatory communication as a foundation of the revitalization of Nigeria's leather industry. The current policy frameworks, such as the National Industrial Revolution Plan (NIRP), focus on the diversification of industries, however, do not include mechanisms to support inclusive stakeholder engagement and cultural branding (Dashe et al., 2024). As a result of these shortcomings, the top-down approach has been implemented to exclude artisans and local producers from decision making, thus restricting the ability to innovate and increase competition. For the purpose of positioning Nigerian leather as a

global cultural luxury, policymakers should implement a new paradigm of policy development that incorporates participatory governance, indigenous knowledge and sustainability principles.

Policy Implications

Institutionalizing participatory communication within industrial policy is critical. Government agencies should establish cluster-based stakeholder forums that bring together artisans, cooperatives, marketers, and regulators to co-create solutions for quality improvement and branding (Boafo, 2006; Della Spina, 2025). These forums can serve as incubators for cultural branding strategies, ensuring that policies reflect local realities rather than prescriptive models. Lessons from Ethiopia's Leather Industry Development Institute demonstrate that participatory structures embedded in policy frameworks enhance competitiveness and attract foreign investment (FAO, 2020).

Policy alignment with export diversification programs is essential. Integrating leather sector initiatives into national trade strategies will enable access to incentives, financing, and international markets (Wakdour & Tlaty, 2025). This alignment should prioritize cultural branding as a competitive advantage, positioning Nigerian leather as a premium product rooted in heritage rather than a commodity.

Third, gender and social inclusion policies must be mainstreamed into leather industry development. Evidence from Kenya's women-led cooperatives shows that inclusive platforms foster innovation and expand market reach (UNIDO, 2021). Nigerian policies should mandate representation of women and marginalized groups in decision-making bodies, ensuring equity and social cohesion across the value chain (Agena, 2020).

Finally, environmental compliance and sustainability standards should be enforced through regulatory frameworks that incentivize cleaner technologies and ethical practices. The Leather Working Group's life cycle assessment metrics illustrate how structured monitoring systems improve global competitiveness while safeguarding ecological integrity (Leather Working Group, 2024).

Practical Implications

For practitioners, these policy shifts translate into actionable strategies. Industry associations and cooperatives should leverage participatory platforms to develop joint branding campaigns that highlight authenticity and craftsmanship (Okunowo, 2025).

Digital storytelling, influencer partnerships, and fashion collaborations can amplify Nigeria's cultural narratives globally, challenging the aspirational bias toward imported goods (Castro & Sáiz, 2020). Additionally, capacity-building programs must equip artisans with technical skills for finishing processes and digital marketing, reducing dependence on foreign intermediaries.

Monitoring and evaluation frameworks should track indicators such as stakeholder engagement, adoption of ethical practices, and market performance to ensure accountability and continuous improvement. By embedding participatory communication principles into both policy and practice, Nigeria can transform its leather industry from a raw-material supplier into a globally competitive, culturally resonant sector.

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