



## Analysis of the Cultural Symbolism of Doormat

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**Abstract:** The study of doormat in Northern Nigeria reveals the nuanced layers of cultural symbolism embedded within these seemingly mundane household items. Drawing from diverse scholarly perspectives, such as McLuhan's theory of media ecology and anthropological insights from Douglas and shaping societal norms, values, and power dynamics. Positioned at the threshold between public and private spaces, doormats serve as tangible conduits of communication, conveying messages of hospitality, cleanliness, and social status. Moreover, the gendered symbolism of doormats reflects entrenched expectations surrounding gender roles and domestic responsibilities within Northern Nigerian culture. The commercialization of the doormat industry further exposes economic disparities and labor exploitation, while advertising influences consumer perceptions and preferences, shaping cultural narratives surrounding doormats. Through a critical media ecology lens, this study offers insights into how doormats mediate social interactions, embody cultural identities, and mirror broader societal structure in northern Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Doormat, Symbolism, Culture, Analysis.

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## Introduction

In the tapestry of human culture, seemingly mundane objects often carry profound symbolic significance, reflecting the complex interplay of history, tradition, and societal values (Heath and Potter, 2004). Among these everyday artifacts, the doormat occupies a unique position at the threshold between the public and private spheres, serving as both a practical necessity and a canvas for cultural expression and representation. Hall (1977) proposes that objects, individuals, and events do not possess a singular, inherent meaning akin to a fixed number, but instead carry diverse and fluid meanings that evolve across cultures, languages, historical contexts, and social groups.

He suggests that meanings are not inherently fixed in the world itself but are rather stabilized and interpreted through our systems of representation. Hall (1997) posits that the creation of meaning through the display of artifacts in contemporary museums, including their positioning and organization within physical spaces, is fundamentally influenced by their status as tangible objects rather than images or spoken languages. This characteristic transforms the process into a system or method of representation.

Every decision regarding which artifacts to exhibit, their juxtaposition, their contextualization, who has access to them and who doesn't reflect a deliberate choice about the representation of

other cultures, each of these choices carries implications, affecting not only the meanings that are conveyed but also the mechanisms through which meaning is constructed. Over the past few years, scholars and cultural observers have increasingly turned their attention to household items, recognizing them as potent symbols that embody meanings, beliefs, and identities within domestic life. According to Douglas and Isherwood (1979), the material objects, commonly found in households, reflect cultural values and beliefs through their design, materials, and usage, acquiring layers of symbolic significance. Through social construction, they seamlessly integrate into daily routines and domestic environments, conveying narratives of social status, identity, and shared values influenced by cultural norms, traditions, and historical contexts. In this way, household items serve as silent storytellers, communicating tales of social dynamics, gender roles, and aesthetic preferences within specific cultural contexts, playing a pivotal role in shaping and reflecting societal norms and values.

The well-known doormat is a widely utilized item found in and out of various households, differing across cultures in its design, material, and imagery. Its usage and the significance attributed to it remain somewhat ambiguous. The interpretations of the doormat vary across cultures, with the meaning behind its design, material, and engraved images often remaining elusive.

Drawing upon the works of Buchi (2015) who discusses the significance of everyday objects within domestic environments and their role in shaping cultural practices and perceptions and that of Dune, Firdaus, Mapedzahama, Lee, Stewart, Tronc, and Mekonnen (2017). that use doormat to reflect on gender roles but did not specifically touch on the cultural symbolism of doormat, this study aims to delve into the cultural symbolism of doormats and also examine doormats as environment that help organize and shape power relations in various ways recognizing that this object is not merely a passive artifact but rather an active agent in the construction and negotiation of cultural meaning. By exploring various aspects ranging from the selection of materials and designs to the practices surrounding placement and maintenance rituals, a deeper understanding may emerge that will provide answers to the following questions

### Research Questions

What does the doormat signify within the Northern Nigeria context?

How doormat reflect and reinforce societal norms, values, and traditions in Northern Nigeria?

### The Rationale of the Study

The rationale for studying the cultural symbolism of the doormat is situated in the recognition that objects that are perceived as mundane, such as household items, have reflective symbolic importance within human culture. According to Heath and Potter (2004), These objects serve as valuable reflections of history, tradition, and values in the society. They argue that the doormat occupies a unique position on the brink between private and public spheres. Drawing from the proclamation of Hall (1997) where he said that meanings are not inherent in objects themselves but are constructed and interpreted via systems of representation, this research tends to grasp how the display and depiction of doormats reproduce diverse cultural narratives and identities. Additionally, Douglas and Isherwood (1979), noted the relevance of researching the symbolic meanings attached to these objects, stating that the symbols on the objects serve as salient raconteurs of gender roles, social dynamics, and appealing preferences within specific social contexts. Therefore, by examining the cultural symbolism of doormats, this research aims to unveil the layers of different meanings embedded in their materials, design, and usage which will explain their significant role in shaping and reflecting societal, values, norms, and identities.

### Contribution

The contribution of this work to scholarship is significant in several key aspects. To begin with, the study will provide a deeper understanding of the significance of material culture by highlighting the symbolic meanings embedded within ordinary objects like doormats. By knowing and viewing these objects as valuable reflections of history, social values, and tradition, the research will enhance our appreciation of the cultural importance of everyday items. Furthermore, by tapping from the theoretical framework of scholars such as Heath and Potter (2004) and Hall (1997), the research provides a clear perspective of how the cultural symbolism of the doormat is created and construed within distinct cultural narratives and identities. Lastly, the research contributes to the increasing attention to household items, as noted by Douglas and Isherwood (1979), by specifically concentrating on the meanings symbolically encoded within doormats, the research

will provide adequate information on doormats as noiseless storytellers of gender, the social dynamic, gender roles and aesthetics preferences within diverse social settings. Overall, by unraveling the layers of meanings implanted in the materials, design, and use of doormats, the research will deepen our comprehension of these ordinary objects reflect significantly on values, social norms, and identities

### Thesis

Investigating the cultural symbolism of doormats discloses the philosophical importance of seemingly ordinary household items in reflecting and determining values and societal norms, as evidenced by their exceptional position at the intersection of public and private spheres and their roles as unnoticed story tellers of social dynamics and identity within specific cultural milieu.

### Literature Review

The unnoticed doormat, often not valued because of its simplicity in looks, serves as a very fascinating lens via which complexities of cultural symbolism and everyday practices can be explored. While it seems ordinary, the doormat occupies a crucial place at the entranceways of homes across the globe, acting as a verge between public and private spaces. While scholarly attention may not have been tilted toward the unassuming doormat, its potential to showcase broader cultural meanings and social dynamics has been recognized by researchers. Miller (2008) argues material possessions are significant in shaping personal and cultural identities and that material things play important roles in shaping human identity, relationships, and well-being. Miller Argues that the common perception that materialism and consumer culture are not entirely negative, suggesting that our relationships with objects are complex and multifaceted. He contends that possessions provide humans with a good sense of comfort, security, and a sense of belonging, serving as extensions of ourselves and clear reflections of our identities and social connections stressing that our relationship with things is fundamental to our understanding of selfhood and the social fabric of our societies.

Similarly, Douglas and Isherwood (1979) studied the cultural and social dimensions of consumption practices aimed at providing a philosophical framework for comprehending how material objects, including household items, are inextricably connected with cultural meaning and values. Douglas and Isherwood (1979) argue that there is a deep connection between cultural and social dynamics, material objects, and consumption practices of household items such as doormats. They posit that material objects serve as intricate symbols of status, identity, and social relationships within different cultural contexts.

Buchi (2015) examined the connection between architecture, social identity, and material culture concentrating primarily on architectural structures while discussing the significance of everyday objects within our domestic environments. Buchi argues that architectural structures serve as strong symbols for different social organizations, power relations, and cultural values swaying the ways individuals perceive themselves and their place in society. Buchi 2015 emphasizes the relevance of taking into cognizance not only the physical components of everyday architectural items but also put into consideration the dynamic expressions they hold in the expressions of social life with significance that extends beyond their everyday functional purposes. Examining these everyday objects beyond the ordinary lens helps us understand that domestic

objects have significance in shaping daily routines, social interactions, and personal identities.

Heath and Potter (2004) critique consumer culture by analysing how mundane objects and commodities are used for the expression of identity and social status. The research offered insight into the wider cultural importance of household items within consumer society. Heath and Pooter (2004) argue that consumerism is characteristically negative, stressing that it serves as a surrounding for individual expressions of creativity. Heath and Potter (2004) posit that mundane objects such as doormats enable the formation and expression of status and identity in a given community. They suggest that the choices of consumers are driven not only by economic factors but also by cultural deliberations, such as the cravings for self-expression, social recognition, and belonging.

Turkle (2017) examined the impact technology has on social interaction and human relationships. The study looked at the importance of physical objects and spaces and how they mediate social connections and cultural practices amid different domestic environments. Turkle (2017) argues that as much as technology provides convenience and aids creativity, it can also trigger feelings of isolation, disconnection from others, and social distraction. Turkle highlights the pertinence of everyday physical objects and spaces, especially within our home environments, in mediating social interactions, connections, and cultural practices. Turkle suggests that reclaiming physical spaces for physical interactions and creating opportunities for germane conversation are highly requisite for promoting closeness and empathy resulting in a stronger physicality and valuable experience in human relationships and social interactions.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research is situated within McLuhan's theory which states that artifacts are not common and passive objects, instead they are active channels of communication. According to McLuhan, every technology or artifact outspreads some characteristic of human competence or experience, altering the ways individuals perceive and intermingle with the world. This idea is enshrined in McLuhan's famous phrase, the medium is the message. (McLuhan, 1964)

Based on McLuhan's views, the media and technology remain unbiased channels for sharing information while actively shaping human behavior, culture, and consciousness. He argues that diverse media settings propel different ways by which perception and social organizations are formed. McLuhan's comparison of the hot medium of print, which merits full concentration and spurs linear thinking, while the cool medium of television, which tries to engage multiple senses simultaneously promotes a more participatory form of communication.

In the context of analyzing the cultural symbolism of the doormat as an artifact, McLuhan's theory proposes that ordinary objects

within our domestic environments are not just mere decorations for wiping one's feet rather, they are important mediums of communication that relate symbolic messages with cultural meanings through their material, design, and placement. The design, placement, and materiality communicate social values, norms and make an identity that mould human interactions and behavior within a specific environment. Therefore, by embarking on the analysis of doormats from a symbolic cultural dimension, a deeper understanding of their communicative role in mediating social relationships and cultural significance with a wider media ecology will emerge.

### **Methodology**

In both the traditional and modern eras, doormats remain an essential aspect of the domestic environment. Made with different materials, in different designs to meet evolving needs based on different cultures and contexts which shape its symbolism and rituals across the globe. To examine its cultural symbolism, this research employs the critical media ecology approach. This approach is essential because it offers a methodological framework suitable for the comprehension of their significance, and interaction with media, technology, society, and culture. The method also provides guide for delving into how doormats function as a communication medium through diverse aspects like placement, design, and inscriptions while exploring their role molding and reflecting gender, culture, and power dynamics in Northern Nigeria.

### **History of Doormat in Nigeria**

For centuries, doormats have been used in Nigeria. During the primitive era, doormats were made with natural materials such as grass, reed, and animal hide. The early doormats served as cleaning footwear before having access to the home. They also served the cultural function of symbolizing hospitality and cleanliness within households in Nigeria. (2018). With the uprising of colonialism and massive increase in trade, the importation of materials like rubber and coir gained wide acceptance leading to the manufacturing of more quality and beautiful doormats.

During Nigeria's economic boom in the mid-20th century tagged as the post-colonial era, the doormat industry experienced massive growth and diversification. During the period, small-scale manufacturers and local artisans began designing a variety of doormats harnessing both modern and traditional materials as well as techniques. Similarly, the expression of the middle class and the rise of urbanization contributed to the high demand for household items, including doormats, as symbols of modernity and status (Onwuka, 2019). However, challenges regarding economic challenges and fluctuations in consumer preferences have also shaped the doormat industry in Nigeria leading to periods of decline and reformation.



Source: [theafricanhistory.com](http://theafricanhistory.com)

Currently, the doormat is an important household object, openly found in businesses, homes, and public spaces across the nation. The local doormats are still manufactured in rural settlements while the modern doormats which are products of industrialization and globalization are being produced massively in a mechanized way using imported materials. Despite all of these, the cultural symbolism of the doormat remains glaring showcasing cleanliness, hospitality, and social norms within Nigerian society.

### **The Doormat as a Medium**

The doormat emerges as a fascinating medium within the Hausa culture. Beyond its conventional role as a household item, the doormat serves as a symbolic and functional medium that influences social interactions, cultural practices, and power dynamics in Nigerian society.

The doormat can be viewed as a medium that mediates interactions between individuals and their physical environment, as well as between individuals and social structures within Nigerian society. One aspect of the doormat as a medium lies in its role as a symbol of hospitality and social etiquette. In Hausa culture, particularly in rural and urban areas, the act of stepping on a doormat before entering a home or establishment signifies adherence to social norms and respect for the host. This ritualistic behavior is ingrained in Northern Nigerian societal customs, where the condition and cleanliness of the doormat convey messages of hospitality, cleanliness, and social status.

Furthermore, the doormat serves as a tangible interface between individuals and their immediate environment, facilitating communication and interaction. As individuals step on the doormat, they engage in a physical act that signals their intention to enter a space while also acknowledging the boundaries set by the homeowner or host. This interaction between individuals and the doormat reflects the dynamic relationship between humans and their material surroundings within the context of media ecology.

### **The Cultural Representation of Doormats in Northern Nigeria**

In the rich history of the Hausa culture in Northern Nigeria, the doormat holds a significant place because of how deeply rooted doormat is in traditions, customs, and heritage. Beyond the utilitarian functions, the doormat symbolizes a myriad of cultural values, social norms, and power dynamics that shape interpersonal relationships and community cohesion.

One of the fundamental aspects of the doormat's cultural significance in the Hausa culture lies in its role as a symbol of hospitality and respect. Hospitality is a cherished value in Northern Nigerian culture, where guests are treated with utmost reverence and generosity. The doormat, placed at the entrance of a home or establishment, serves as a welcoming gesture, inviting visitors to step inside and partake in the warmth of the host's hospitality. In this sense, the condition and cleanliness of the doormat reflect the level of care and respect extended to guests, underscoring the importance of hospitality in the Hausa culture.

Moreover, the symbolism of the doormat extends beyond mere hospitality to encompass broad cultural values such as humility and defense. In many Hausa Households, the act of cleaning the doormat or maintaining its cleanliness is often assigned to younger members of the family, emphasizing the importance of humility and service to elders. This practice instills a sense of respect for authority and reinforces hierarchical structures within the family unit. Additionally, the doormat serves as a tangible expression of identity and belonging within Northern Nigerian culture. Decorated with intricate patterns and motifs, doormats often reflect the cultural heritage and artistic traditions of the region. The designs and symbols adorning the doormat not only beautify the entrance but also serve as a reminder of cultural heritage and collective identity, fostering a sense of belonging and pride among community members.

To this end, the doormat embodies a complex interplay of cultural values and social. As a symbol of hospitality, humility, and

identity, it fosters a sense of community and belonging while showcasing ways in which cultural practices shape social interaction and power relations.

McLuhan suggests that media shape human perception and cognition by creating environments that influence behavior and social interactions. Doormats, as mediators between indoor and outdoor spaces, contribute to the construction of domestic environments and social norms. McLuhan's theory underscores the idea that "environments are not passive wrappings, but are, rather, active processes which are invisible." (McLuhan, 1964). In this sense, the presence of a doormat at the threshold of a home communicates cultural expectations regarding cleanliness, hospitality, and privacy.

### **The Doormat: Unveiling Power Dynamics among the Hausa's in Northern Nigeria**

Historically, Nigeria has grappled with various forms of power imbalances, stemming from colonial legacies, tribal affiliations, economic disparities, and political affiliations. These power differentials manifest themselves in everyday interactions, where the concept of who stands where in the social order is subtly enforced, sometimes through the symbolism of the doormat.

In the Hausa culture, the humble doormat serves not just as a functional item but also as a symbolic representation of the intricate power dynamics deeply entrenched within the social fabric. Beyond its seemingly mundane purpose of cleaning shoes before entering a home or establishment, the doormat reflects socio-economic, cultural, and political realities, often revealing hierarchies and inequalities that shape interpersonal relationships and societal structures.



Source: [theafricanhistory.com](http://theafricanhistory.com)

Outside the confines of private residences, the symbolism of the doormat extends to public spaces and institutions, reflecting broader societal power structures. In socio-political spheres, marginalized groups often find themselves relegated to the status of 'doormats,' subjected to discrimination, exploitation, and systemic injustices. The metaphorical use of the term 'doormat' to describe individuals or communities underscores their marginalized position, highlighting their vulnerability and lack of agency in shaping their destinies.

Furthermore, the positioning of the doormat within the household reflects traditional gender roles and social hierarchies prevalent in

One of the most apparent manifestations of power dynamics concerning the doormat can be observed in domestic settings. Traditionally, in many Nigerian households, the responsibility of maintaining cleanliness falls upon women. Consequently, the act of cleaning the doormat or ensuring it remains pristine often becomes emblematic of women's subservience and relegated societal roles. This practice reinforces patriarchal norms, where women are expected to serve and cater to the needs of their families without question.

However, alongside its cultural significance, the doormat also reflects underlying power dynamics within Northern Nigerian society. While it symbolizes hospitality and respect, it can also be seen as a subtle assertion of authority and control. The homeowner or host determines who is allowed to step on the doormat and enter the premises, thereby exercising a degree of power over visitors and guests.

### **Placement of Doormat**

In "Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man," McLuhan argues that the media environment, including physical objects such as doormats, shapes human consciousness and social interaction (McLuhan 1994). McLuhan suggests that the placement of such objects at the threshold of a home can have significant symbolic and communication implications.

In Northern Nigeria, the positioning of the doormat within the Hausa household can also signify power dynamics. In some households, the doormat is strategically placed at the entrance, symbolizing a barrier between the outside world and the sanctity of the home. This placement implies a sense of control and authority, where the homeowner dictates who enters and exits the premises. In this context, the doormat becomes a metaphorical threshold, delineating boundaries and asserting ownership.

Northern Nigerian society. In many households, women are primarily responsible for domestic chores, including the upkeep of the doormat. This division of labor reinforces gender norms and expectations, where women are expected to fulfill domestic duties while men assume roles of authority and leadership.

McLuhan highlights the importance of considering the temporal and spatial dimensions of media environments. Doormats, situated at the entrance of buildings, mark transitional spaces between public and private realms. They influence the temporal flow of individuals moving through physical spaces and communicate social cues regarding appropriate behavior. McLuhan's concept of the medium as an extension of human faculties suggests that

doormats extend the boundary of personal space and contribute to the organization of social interactions." (McLuhan, 1964). He further argues that

### **Design of the Doormat.**

The design and decoration of the doormat serve as a form of visual communication, conveying messages about cultural identity, value,

and status. In Northern Nigeria, doormats are often adorned with patterns, motifs, or symbols that reflect ethnic heritage, religious affiliation, or socio-economic status. These visual cues contribute to the construction of individual and collective identities within Nigerian society, highlighting the role of the doormat as a medium of cultural expression.



Source: [theafricanhistory.com](http://theafricanhistory.com)

McLuhan argues that the material characteristics of a medium influence how messages are perceived and understood. In the case of formats, their physical properties, such as texture, color, and size shape the sensory experience of the individuals interacting with them. As McLuhan famously stated in *Understanding the Media: The Extension of Man*. The medium is the message because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action (McLuhan, 1964)

### **Gendered Symbolism of Doormat in Northern Nigeria**

In Northern Nigeria, the doormat carries significant gendered symbolism within the context of household dynamics and cultural norms. This division of labor reflects broader gender roles where women are expected to oversee domestic tasks, while men often have roles outside the home. The condition of the doormat, therefore becomes a reflection of a woman's diligence and competence in upholding household standards. The gendered symbolism of the doormat underscores broader societal expectations regarding femininity, domesticity, and cleanliness in Northern Nigerian culture. Therefore, the role of the doormat intersects with gender dynamics in the following ways.

**Care and maintenance of the doormat:** Culturally, household upkeep, including maintaining and cleaning the doormat, falls within the responsibilities of women. They are tasked with making sure that the home is kept neat and presentable, which includes keeping the doormat neat. How labor is divided reflects gender norms regarding household responsibilities.

**Doormat as a symbol of cleanliness:** A lot of gender expectations are tied to the hygiene and cleanliness of the doormat. For example, a neat and well-maintained doormat shows consideration of domestic competence and details boldly associated with femininity. Consequently, an unkept or dirty doormat is often perceived as household incompetence to standards which potentially reflects negatively on the female occupants.

**Door as a symbol for expressing hospitality:** In the Hausa Culture, hospitality is highly valued, and the presentation of the home, including the doormat, plays a role in expressing hospitality to guests. Women may feel pressure to ensure that the doormat is clean and welcoming as part of their role in maintaining the household's reputation for hospitality and warmth.

**Division of Labor based on Gender:** The division of labor concerning the doormat reinforces traditional gender roles within Northern Nigerian households. While women are responsible for cleaning and maintaining the doormat, men may not be actively involved in these tasks. This division perpetuates gender inequalities by assigning certain tasks based on gender rather than individual capability or interest.

### **Commercialization of Doormat**

The commercialization of Nigeria's doormat industry offers a lens through which the intricate power dynamics within the country's economy can be examined. While the production and sale of doormats generate revenue for some, it often exploits laborers working in substandard conditions for minimal wages. The disparity between the profits accrued by manufacturers and the meager earnings of workers underscores economic inequalities prevalent within the country.

Ojo and Ito (2019) argue that there are systematic issues across different industries in Nigeria including those involved in doormat manufacturing stressing that laborers are consistently exploited by earning minimal wages. Fasan (2017) argues that strong income inequality and economic disparities provide valuable insight into the root causes of power imbalances, emphasizing that unequal resource distribution and limited access to opportunities are the major drivers. The symbolic significance of the doormat catalyzes critical conversation about power dynamics and the need for transformative change.

The critical perspective resonates with findings from Amnesty International and Human Rights, which expose labor rights abuses and exploitation within the Nigerian manufacturing sector. (Amnesty International, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2019)

### **Advertising and Doormat**

**Representation and Messaging:** Advertisements often depict doormats as symbols of hospitality, cleanliness, and social status. Through language and visuals, they convey cultural narratives, suggesting meanings attached to owning certain types of doormats. For example, a commercial might show a pristine doormat at a luxurious home, implying affluence and sophistication.

**Consumer Behavior and Preference:** Advertising influences consumer choices regarding doormats by highlighting specific

features like design, and material. Or brand reputation. By aligning with cultural values and aesthetics, advertisements shape the perceptions of consumers.

Top of Form Cultural Narratives and Identity: Advertisements contribute to the construction of cultural narratives surrounding doormats, reflecting societal norms and identity constructs. Analyzing advertising trends reveals shifts in cultural perceptions, such as evolving notions of hospitality and hierarchy depicted through doormat portrayals over time.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the examination of the cultural significance of doormats unveils their profound importance as commonplace objects in Nigerian society, particularly in Northern Nigeria. Utilizing insights from diverse scholars and theoretical perspectives, such as McLuhan's media ecology and the anthropological studies of Douglas and Isherwood, this research elucidates the intricate layers of meaning inherent in this seemingly ordinary item.

Doormats serve as tangible manifestations of cultural values, societal norms, and power structures within Nigerian households, functioning both as practical utilities and symbolic channels of communication. Through their design, materials, and positioning, doormats communicate messages of hospitality, cleanliness, and social standing, reflecting broader cultural narratives and communal identities. Additionally, the gendered symbolism of doormats underscores ingrained expectations regarding gender roles, domestic duties, and personal hygiene in Northern Nigerian culture.

The commercialization of the doormat industry provides further insights into the economic dynamics of Nigeria, exposing the exploitation of laborers and the prevalence of economic disparities within the nation while advertising on the other hand Shapes perceptions, preference, and cultural narratives regarding doormats by portraying them as symbols of hospitality, cleanliness, and social status, influencing consumer choices and reflecting evolving societal norms and identities. By framing the study within a critical media ecology perspective, this study offers a nuanced comprehension of how doormats facilitate social interactions, shape cultural behaviors, and mirror larger societal structures.

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