

Why a competitive local fashion industry needs the creativity of designers

 By [Lauren Hartzenberg](#)

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The creativity of fashion designers is a valuable resource that must be nurtured if African countries are to grow their fashion industries into competitive global players. This was the impassioned message from Lucilla Booyzen, CEO of SA Fashion Week, during a recent Fashionomics Africa webinar titled Textile and Fashion Value Chains: Opportunities for the Private Sector in Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa.



Lucilla Booyzen, SA Fashion Week CEO

While clarion calls, in South Africa specifically, to revitalise garment manufacturing are warranted, it's not a cure-all for the sustainable development of the sector.

"There must be manufacturing, yes, but the designers tell the story of the soul of a country. We have to build the entire value chain, we can't leave out any link," said Booyzen.

Fashion mirrors national identity

Having launched SA Fashion Week in 1997, Booyzen is a notable advocate for the development of a local designer-led fashion industry, and the value it can create for a country's brand and economy.

In countries such as Italy, the fashion industry is an important contributor to GDP, but this was only possible because the government drove coordinated support for the designers and their work, which were identified early on to be valuable resources.

For Booyzen, local fashion reflects national identity and mirrors the unique qualities of a country or region. As such, a focus on manufacturing in and of itself, without investing in the intellectual property of designers, means facing the challenge of competing with manufacturing powerhouses like China.

"What we as a country can create that's truly competitive rests with the creativity of designers," said Booyzen during the online event.



Source: [Pexels](#)

What's holding African designers back?

Unfortunately, Booyzen said that many African designers are opting to leave the continent and establish themselves further elsewhere.

"They win an award and then they leave. We haven't built the supportive infrastructure for them to grow within their own countries. We haven't developed a system to sustain the development of the backbone of the industry – the designers," Booyzen said.

With 30 fashion schools in the country, SA at least has the educational foundation to train designers at a tertiary level. But beyond this, resources are lacking to assist working designers to build a globally competitive fashion business.



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While government, and the DTIC specifically, is hyper-focused on manufacturing, Booyzen called for a state-backed programme that assists with upskilling designers and which allocates funding and grants to eligible business owners. "You have to put money behind the industry if you want to grow it," she said.

"We need to focus on developing the designers and fashion businesses in our respective countries first, and then there will be a natural evolution into exporting."

"[SA Fashion Week has] had lots of interest from abroad – America, France and soon Italy. There are opportunities to grab," said Booyzen, but many designers require financial and educational support to enable them to sustainably supply to other markets, especially at scale. "The education around exporting is so important," she added.



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Exporting aside, the local creative fashion industry would advance greatly if a larger share of the general public wore locally-designed and made clothing. “Buying power sits everywhere. Everyone wears clothing. We need to have different designer collections at different price points – affordable designer clothing that can be sold to lower-income consumers who have an affinity for fashion.”

This is where the big retailers come into play, as they have the ability and resources to partner with designers, collaborate on a collection and sell it at scale. “They have the power to mentor the designers, and share trade secrets with them. This is being done in the industry, but not enough,” said Booyzen.

A recent example of such a collaboration is the [Pick n Pay Clothing Futurewear project](#). Launched in partnership with recognised designer Gavin Rajah, the project aims to find and build local fashion talent by allowing emerging designers the opportunity to launch their business with an exclusive collection in collaboration with PnP Clothing.



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In calling for a holistic approach from the government for the development of the fashion industry, Booyzen touched on the need to stimulate local textile production. According to Booyzen, South Africa’s textile manufacturing industry, which has decades of experience behind it, has been compromised by cheap imports with little protection from the government.

“We must focus on producing our own textiles. Designers tell their stories through fabric design. Fashion talks through colour, design and texture. If we don’t nurture our textile development, we don’t allow our designers to truly express themselves,” said Booyzen.

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