

Fulfilling the potential of South African fashion

By  Lucilla Booyzen

28 Sep 2020

The Italian fashion industry is a prime example of how a well-coordinated and government-supported fashion industry can blossom into a major economic force. Generating €66.6bn in 2019, it is among the top industries in Italy.



Lucilla Booyzen, SA Fashion Week CEO

In the same breath, a local, SA designer-led fashion industry also has the very real potential to make a significant contribution to national GDP.

This has also been abundantly demonstrated by other leading fashion countries such as France, the UK and the USA, with other countries following suit with equal success.

This is the reason I started SA Fashion Week (SAFW) back in 1997.

Fashion reflects national identity

Local fashion supports national identity and mirrors the special qualities that personify a country, a region and climate.

The role of the large international retail chains stifles and swamps this identity and there is a definite trend that is rapidly moving away from mass, global, fast fashion, opening new opportunities for development that pairs the strengths of small (SME) manufacturing businesses in tandem with local design talent.

It is the role of Government to recognise this and create the necessary strategies to bolster our local designer-led industry, as is the case in many countries where fashion has become a major contributor to the national economy. We all have to wear clothes.

The strength of our designers lies in the fact that they all have their own following, generated by exposure through SAFW and social media. This gave them the autonomy, during lockdown, to reach out to their clientele and supply base without having to rely on 3rd party retailers to do so. It also enabled them to survive lockdown and maintain continuity of their operations.

This fact is changing the retail landscape from large supply bases to smaller social media and e-commerce linked enterprises. The move is towards slow fashion and a different mindset.



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Initiatives to support SA designers

As a result of Covid, I also started reaching out and connecting with a variety of international parties who are excited by our

initiatives and are showing renewed interest in our SA designers.

Over the years, SAFW has been paving the way for small retailers and boutiques to support SA designers. We do this via trade shows, designer pop-up events and other initiatives that widen the designer exposure.

Michael Clampett, heading up The Mall of Africa, is a visionary in the property industry. He is able to identify connections and collaborations outside of traditional linkages, and is passionate about developing local talent and skills and providing opportunities through a physical property footprint for entrepreneurs.

From 1 to 3 November 2020, SAFW will be hosting our wholesale trade platform, open to buyers and boutiques nationwide to view and buy SA designer garments. Vodacom has also undertaken to introduce designers to their VIP clients which will happen during the SAFW Pop Up Shop from the 26 to 27 November.



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Bolstering local production

South African departmental stores and mainstream retailers have largely neglected to engage and harness the potential of supporting and developing local design talent. This could be seen as short-sighted and favouring cheap foreign imports over building SA brands. The large international chains that are currently dominating our market must also commit to supporting local SA production.

A holistic approach by Government regarding the industry should also include our very strong and experienced textile manufacturing industry which has decades of experience behind it but which has been severely compromised by cheap imports with little protection from Government.



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Government involvement needs to introduce incentives and strategies to enable these companies to update their technology and production equipment, thus increasing efficiency and competitiveness and bringing complementary endeavours together. Without constructive government intervention, the knowledge and experience that these companies can offer, will soon disappear and will be almost impossible to revive.



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Breaking the mould of fast fashion

The eyes of the world, more than ever before, are on Africa and more specifically, South Africa. We find ourselves in the very real position of being able to offer a fresh perspective. SA design breaks the mould of fast fashion and the SA designers, those of whom are moving toward slow fashion, hold tremendous appeal.

In short, all our designers have the potential to attract a new and sustainable interest in SA design and we have to do everything in our power to support and encourage them.

After all, no one escapes fashion; "we consume fashion like we consume electricity without realising the power of fashion."

ABOUT LUCILLA BOOYZEN

Lucilla Boozyzen is the CEO at SA Fashion Week.

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