How the pandemic changed fashion

By Giorgia Lupini , issued by KLA

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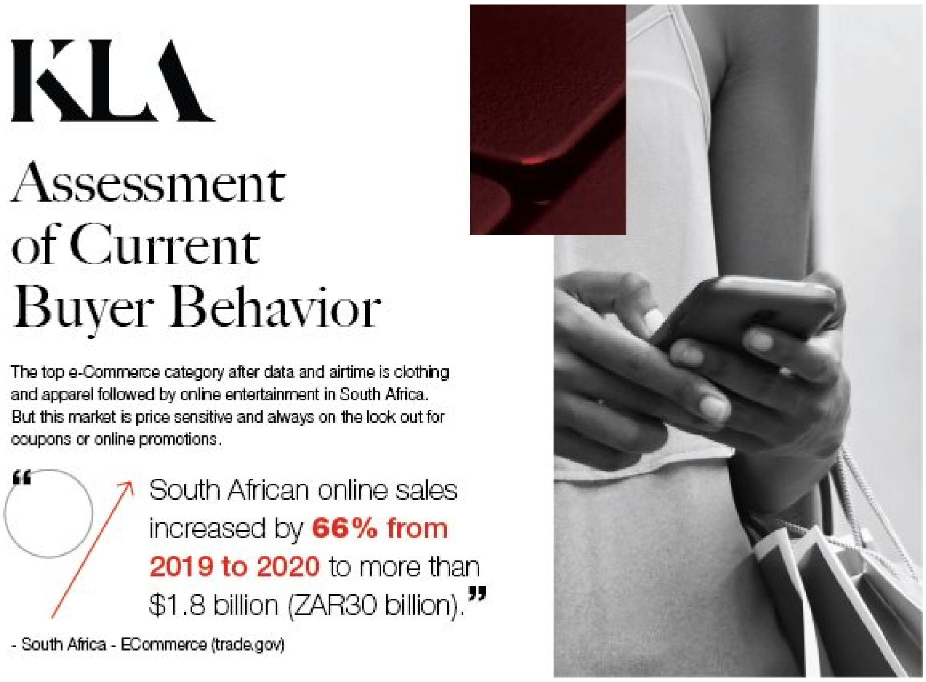
The global pandemic has changed consumer buying behaviour and expectations, and fashion isn't exempt. Today, consumers are slowing down and taking stock of their lives and their changing needs are reflected in their changing purchasing patterns.



According to the *Euromonitor International Top 10 Global Consumer Trends* report, 2022 is the time of consumers taking back their power and forging a future built around their passions and values. The *Flux Trends 2022* report agrees, pointing out that retail will continue to recover if it pays attention to shifts in consumer behaviour and expectations.

For the fashion industry, this means listening to what consumers want and using these insights to create retail and fashion experiences that connect with the customer and build towards the future. There will be a return to the confidence and freshness that epitomises the fashion category, and retailers can most definitely take advantage of it. Just take a look at one key trend – dopamine dressing. The bright colours and vibrant fashion adventures taken by consumers keen to shake off the dark pandemic days in favour of items that bring them joy.

This is particularly relevant in South Africa where a weakening economy and high levels of unemployment, alongside ongoing load shedding, are impacting on retail growth and consumer delight. Retailers need to be more strategic and revise their offerings to meet key consumer needs. Online stores also have to revise and shine – they've historically been platforms where customers compare prices, now they have to be agile and digital, another engaging touchpoint from which to connect with the customer.

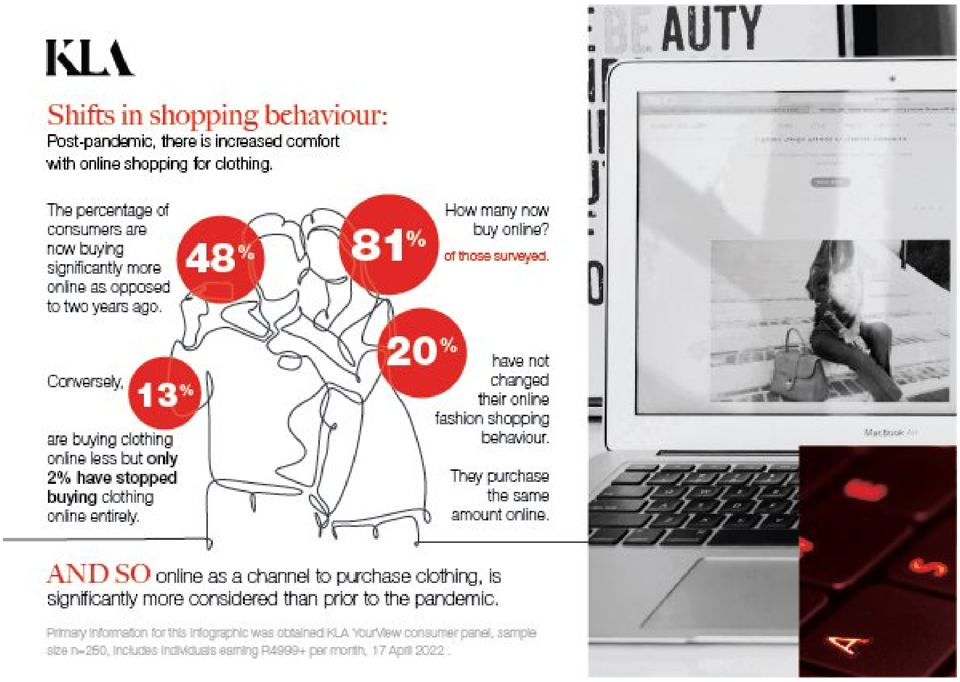
The question is, how?

The answer lies in creating experiences and environments that meet very clear customer needs. In a recent survey across more than 250 customers, KLA asked relevant questions of consumers to find out what influences their buying behaviour and how digitisation has shifted their shopping expectations.

South African consumers are looking for quality and durability, but without having to pay high prices within this category

Consumers want quality but they also want more value for money, which can be contradictory. The fast fashion trend dominated pre-pandemic with customers buying cheap over sustainable but now its about clothes that will last. Wearability is the defining factor for 86% of respondents which suggests that brands need to focus on clothing longevity across factors such as washability, classic styles, and smart cuts that grow with the child or the trends.

Beyond this, indicators of quality include clothing with a good fit/cut (53%) and garments that are made from certain fabrics (39%). Fashion brands should consider investing in sourcing quality fabrics, ensuring craftsmanship and considering washability of garments in order to enhance the quality cues for consumers. Online, this attention to quality should be reflected in more detailed item descriptions that outline the type of fabric used, for example, so consumers can make informed decisions.



Price has little influence on the perception of quality

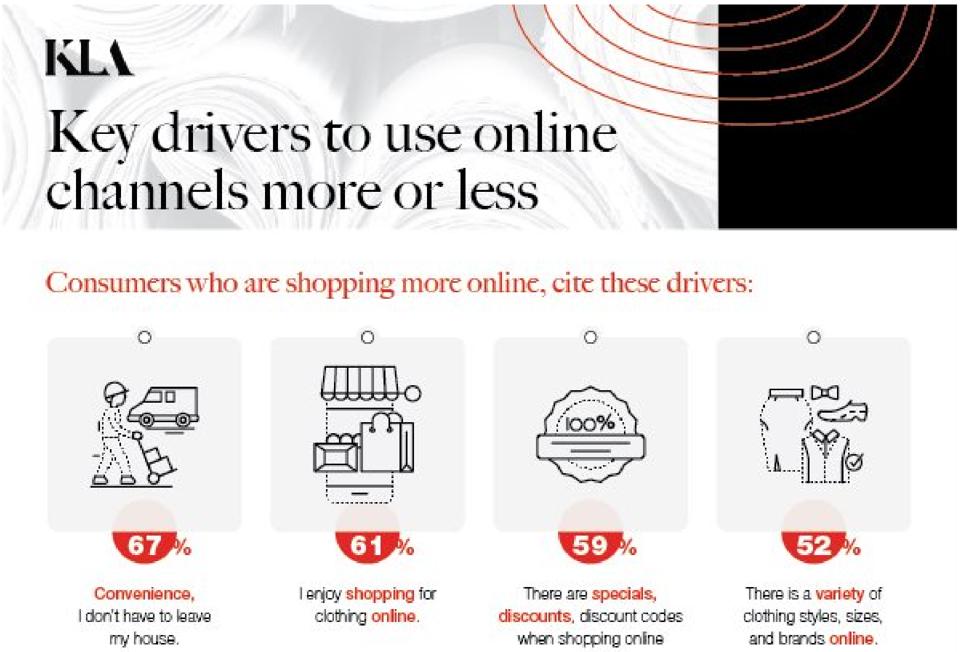
Only 14% of respondents said that a higher price implies that the clothing's quality is higher. In addition, branded clothing is now also not seen as a quality metric.

While most consumers are interested in buying local fashion, very few associate it with quality (only 7%) and few feel that the quality of South African fashion equates to that of international brands (only 8%). Local designers and fashion houses clearly need to consider up-weighting their quality by providing insight into handmade or artisanal processes that often directly result in higher quality products.

A different stance to sustainability

While the sample as a whole does not directly link quality to sustainability, 45% of women feel that quality clothing is sustainable, especially the younger age groups (18–24). This strong link between sustainability and quality can be leveraged by fashion brands.

We anticipate that sustainability and high quality will be become synonymous with brand stickiness and value. In other words, it feels good to buy a garment that is sustainable as it is aligned to personal beliefs but, at the same time aligns with personal needs from the category i.e. something that will last longer, due to its higher quality.



Consumers are looking for value for money and enjoy tried and tested mechanics

The research indicates that value for money is about specials, discounts and promotions with 55% agreeing that promotions such as ‘buy 3, get 1 free’ or ‘buy 2 and get 20% off’ offer good value.

Loyalty programmes remain relevant and enticing and 54% of consumers state that loyalty programmes offer a sense of value for money. Markdowns on older stock, seasonal sales and instant discounts at the till also communicate value for money. The last two years haven’t changed the consumer’s passion for a good deal and a solid discount.

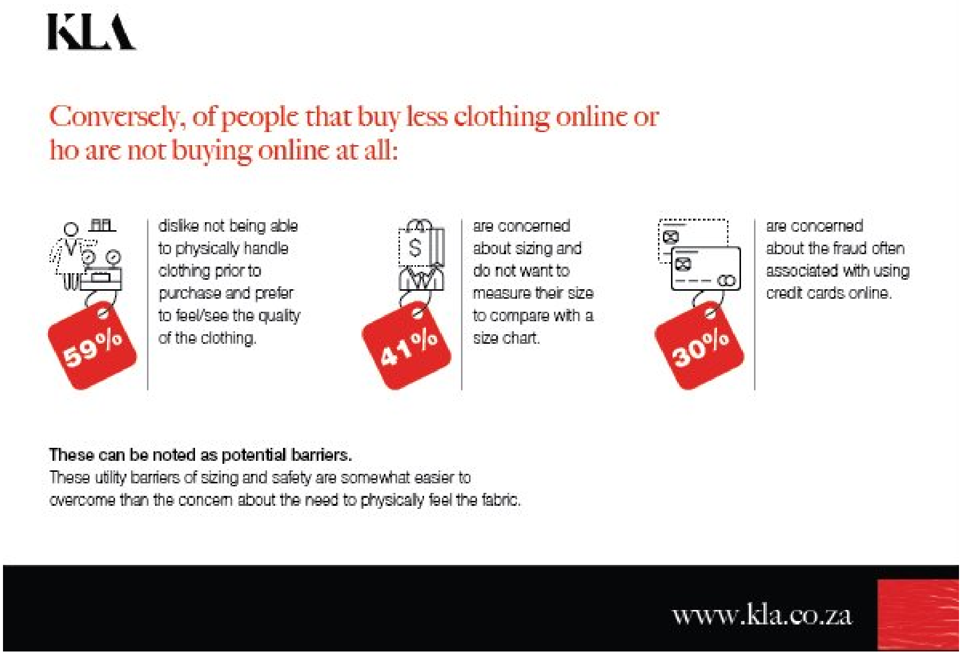
When it comes to fashion retailers, Edgars, Ackermans, and Woolworths rank as the top three brands that offer the best value for money in the category.

While limited, there are some interesting demographic elements at play when it comes to ranking brands around value for money offering. Younger age groups favour H&M’s value for money offering, whereas, older groups prefer the likes of Pep and Pick n Pay clothing. Women think that Ackermans and Pick n Pay clothing offer more value for money than men.

Moving into the future: How do we keep consumers interested, online and in-store?

Thinking into the future and of ways to create interest and stand-out in the category, consumers are looking for opportunities to customise and personalise their purchases, be part of the brand, as well as exciting in-store experiences. This extends to the concept of co-creation as, 54% are looking to have clothing that can be completely customised to fit in their desired fabric and colour, for example. In addition, 31% want to be rewarded for creating media content using clothing, including Tik Tok videos and Instagram posts. This an interesting intersection of social media and fashion as consumers enjoy playing their part in a brand story.

Regardless of the increase in online shopping, consumers still head to physical stores. We cannot escape the fact that fashion is an interactive and highly tactile category for consumers. But, a tech-based future is foreseen and winning brands will be those that take their clients on this journey in a meaningful way both in-store and online.



Taking one step forward toward customer connections

It is imperative that brands are cognisant of current trends but remain in touch with the advancements of the very near future. And so, the apparent local appetite mixture of channels we see in the research speaks to a potential desire for the next big thing, immersive technology. Brands like Gucci and Balenciaga are pioneering this. If brands begin to equip themselves to fulfil a seamless omnichannel offering, with a potential value add of such immersive technology, we believe that they are one step closer to the potential future and being at the forefront of fashion consumers post-Covid-19.

For more information, visit www.kla.co.za.

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