

Fashionably conscious: Made in South Africa, it's not just a movement

 By [Cyril Naicker](#)

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A new generation of manufacturing is making local quality clothing. But can their success lead to a revival of 'Made in South Africa'?



Cyril Naicker

I grew up in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, a city rich with textile mills. As a student, I remember being captivated by beautiful textiles in the factories – which lead to me studying fashion design in Durban. I was a regular at the textile department on campus, not only because I had a few friends studying there, but because it fuelled my inspiration in design at large.

Fast forward to today, the once industrious textile mills industry in Natal is dead. And I can confidently say that there is no major interest for students to study textile design in comparison to twenty-two years ago when opportunities for local jobs were plentiful.

The closure of these mills and job losses in the sector was a consequence of the change in the industry to 'fast-food-like-fashion' – quick fashion and cheap imports. It was and remains impossible to compete with cheaper prices especially when we do not have active fabric mills in South Africa. Local designers pay high prices for fabrics and naturally the consumer is faced with a higher priced item in stores. I'm often told 'we cannot afford local as it is too expensive'.

There is no quick-fix solution to creating quality clothes at low cost – it takes time and it costs money. There are so many factors that come into play. There is the ethical side as well as the sustainable side. Let's clear any confusion on these two terms. Ethical fashion deals with people who make our clothing. Their working conditions and human rights issues. While, sustainable fashion relates to our environment. It speaks about waste, recycling, encourages upcycling, deals with water consumption to produce the clothes we wear and the basic wellbeing of our ecosystem. If you asked me, I would say both are important: we have to be responsible in how we treat the planet and how we treat people.

Rise of Fashion Revolution

The people who make our clothes are the people we never see. Yet, it is their very hands that stitched together the clothes we wear so intrinsically, and fabricate our identity. It is never the people who make our clothing that we find sitting in the front row of a fashion show or that we see as we slide through our Instagram feeds nor the heroes that cover the pages of our glossy magazines – ever! Yet it is their very hard work, their very own hands that make the clothes we wear every day. They are the heroes of this story, yet their faces remain forgotten. It was these very people, all 1134 of them that paid the ultimate price for making our clothes – all 1134 who died in the [Rana Plaza collapse in Dhaka, Bangladesh](#) that gave rise to Fashion Revolution.

At the core of every human being, we all want to be validated. Do you see me? Do you hear me?



Consumers are being informed about their shopping habits and Fashion Revolution has done an amazing job in the last four years by raising awareness globally about the people who makes our clothing. Brands have taken note and there is change.

South Africa is at a turning point in the clothing industry. Job losses have been contained and jobs are being created. Our clothing and textile workers union, SACTWU are focused on making sure people who work in our clothing factories are treated fairly. The bargaining council has ensured a minimum fair wage, and while we still have a long way to go, a lot of positive things have already been put into place.

Trade Call Investments Apparel (TCIA), is one of South Africa's leading apparel design and manufacturing companies. In April 2014, TCIA was formed through the acquisition of the Seardel Apparel Group, with the purpose of securing jobs in the local sector and creating a sustainable, world class clothing and textile value chain within Southern Africa.

Movement towards more conscious fashion

The TCIA Design Centre is at the cutting edge of local design, interpreting future trends and making them customer relevant. Offering a more customer-friendly, creative experience, the space allows for a more effective collaboration on product strategies for the future. But what is more interesting is the fact that the Design Centre is the first green centre of its kind, having created various elements in and around the building that focuses on reducing its carbon footprint.

It signals a movement of growing momentum towards more conscious fashion. It reflects the success of the collective vision of designers, manufacturers, retailers and consumers to grow and sustain the local fashion industry.



I'm in the business of trying to change consumer behaviour. We cannot compete with cheaper imports on price but just look around at the quality of locally made clothing and accessories in South Africa. I think we offer the consumer value. There is also a group of consumers who are tired of buying poorly-made fashion and they are tired of seeing their garments fall apart.

I strongly believe that mainstream fashion will not last. People are looking for something different, something extra special. This is where craftsmanship plays a major role. We have amazing talent in South Africa and on the African continent. It is this very talent that will stand the test of time. There is an excitement in the air when it comes to South African fashion. We have fabrics made in Cape Town from recycled plastic bottles, fabrics we have never seen before. The bonus is we get to clean up the ocean at the same time! I live for the day when the fashion business model is focussed on local, ethical and green and where made in South Africa isn't seen as inferior but rather a product of quality and one we wear with pride.

fashionrevolution.org

ABOUT CYRIL NAICKER

Cyril Naicker is the Chief Executive at Imprint Luxury, an events, PR and marketing company. He is also the country coordinator of Fashion Revolution South Africa, an international fashion activism NGO addressing the clothing and textile crisis, and he has been appointed as the Chief Sustainability Executive at Plain Tiger, a global platform for sustainable and ethical luxury.

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