

Matsi Kolobe on founding a female, Black-owned digital agency and the human side to entrepreneurship

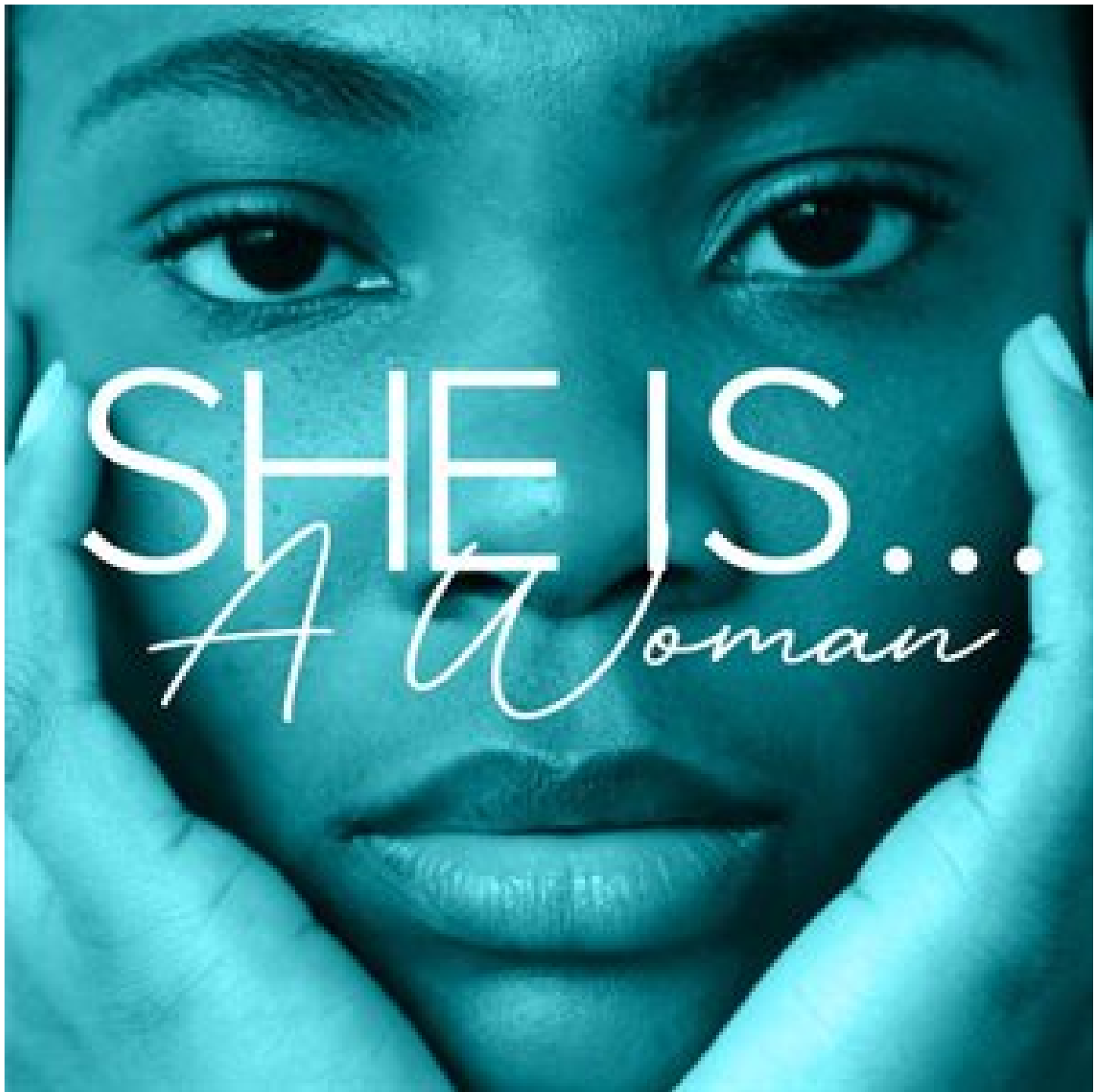
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From brokenness to breakthrough, that has been the entrepreneurial journey for Matsidiso Kolobe, CEO and founder of Leseli Creative, a Cape Town-based advertising and marketing agency specialising in native languages as a primary form of communication.



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“You as the business owner
are the foundation - you must
focus on building YOU”

Matsidiso Kolobe

CEO, LESELI CREATIVE

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Leseli Creative started out as a hobby at first until 2018 when Matsidiso felt she had toyed enough with the idea of starting her own business, and decided to give entrepreneurship a go. "Before I made the move to operate my business full-time, it was lonely and difficult. I didn't know what to do or who to approach. I had worked for a few agencies, moved to Johannesburg, hated it, moved back to Cape Town and then took a moment to reflect on what really mattered to me," shares Matsi as she is more commonly known to her colleagues and friends.

Growing up in a single-parent household in Willows, a local suburb in Bloemfontein, in the Free State, Matsi cites her mother, an entrepreneur herself, as her role model. "I always saw myself in business, it was others who saw the creative in me. Initially, I wanted to study psychology but my mom always worried that I would be the one crying if I became a psychologist," she says with a chuckle.

It was only years later, after completing her studies at the AAA School of Advertising, that the creative in her would truly arise in roles such as brand manager, and art director at the likes of mega-agencies FCB and Ogilvy. Although these

environments presented an ideal training ground for a young Matsi, she began to realise that in all the roles and projects she had been a part of, none of them were really speaking to the hearts of the people to whom they were targeted. "I felt that I was getting tired in the work and especially in the lack of campaigns delving into native languages. It was always so difficult translating a message from vernac to English, it loses its impact. I realised then that I wanted to be the one to figure out how to capitalise on that gap and so the vision for Leseli Creative was born," says Matsi.

Having started out back in 2018, not completely new to the ad industry, but quite the newcomer to the world of business, Matsi quickly realised that she needed help. "In the beginning of my journey as an entrepreneur, I was broken. Both personally and in business, I felt stagnant. I was unable to make profit, I almost lost my home, every amount of money I made I put into my bond. My marriage was non-existent. I remember on two occasions, I just started crying in meetings for no reason. I had the belief that my vision had true potential but I didn't know how to get there. I didn't just need any help at the time, I needed the right people to come alongside me. People that could help me understand the true value of the services I was offering, and then I came across the Innovator Trust," shares Matsi.

The Innovator Trust incubation programme

Leseli Creative became a beneficiary of the Innovator Trust's 2-year Enterprise Development incubation programme in 2018 where she found herself the only one-woman run business among her peers, all business owners with teams. "My journey on the programme was an emotional one. I had to unpack and unlearn what I thought I knew. I was open enough to take on the important, constructive criticism for my business to grow but I was not aware that it would be the emotional support and mentorship that would be such a major thing for me," recalls Matsi.

Through the ED programme, Leseli Creative had the opportunity to undergo a gap analysis to identify areas in the business where potential could be maximised. For small business owners like Matsi, the programme also provided the correct tools, training and infrastructure support needed in order to support and accelerate growth. As a business owner and a team of one, Matsi had recognised her need for therapy and the Innovator Trust, through the programme, was able to provide her with that support.

"If I had your back was a person, it would be the Innovator Trust," says Matsi jokingly. "Usually you ask for help and people say I'm really sorry and that's that, but not with this team. Whenever I was faced with a challenge, they somehow always managed to help me out of it. It was a time of rebuilding, a real detox moment for me - that's what the therapy brought. It also made me realise my value as a human being."

Working in a man's world

Matsi notes the value of steady growth in her own entrepreneurial experience and how being a woman in a male-dominant industry such as advertising has affected her. "As a women in the ad industry, it was challenging for me to be heard. I've always struggled with my soft voice, even since my varsity days. I was often overlooked at work because you need to speak up, you need to sell yourself. I questioned whether I was in the right industry but what this also did was give me time to observe, to study other people in the advertising space. I had time to work on myself and play the cards that make sense for me. It has taken patience but it has given me an opportunity to craft my skill, hone what I can offer and let my work, and not my gender, speak for me," she comments.

A moment to reflect

In the last four years, Leseli Creative has specialised in visual communications, corporate IDs, web design and general design work but since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, a shift to more strategic content development and campaign building has been evident among the company's client base. "Being patient with myself and with my business journey has also attracted the right clients for us," shares Matsi who now, after graduating from the ED incubation programme in 2020, services a boutique range of corporate clients including the Innovator Trust, as facilitator of their current SMME Marketing programme.

"During Covid, when we saw a lot of businesses closing, that was not the case for us. My team and I had the opportunity to work proactively on new ideas, we did not have to concentrate on the fact that no work was coming in because the Innovator Trust had ensured that we could cover salaries through access to their Resilience Fund. They are the ones who truly kept us afloat," says Matsi.

In hindsight, it is through a process of reflection and refinement brought on by many learnings, mistakes and a few difficult clients, that Leseli Creative has taken shape and solidified its vision and brand as a female, black-owned and run digital agency.

"Our vision has always been to champion the local use of languages in branding, not only as brand building but as a significant contributor to the evolution of South African marketing, that's what we aim to do," says Matsi with a sense of pride and patriotism.

Parting lessons for entrepreneurs

On the road ahead and final parting words to aspiring entrepreneurs entering the tech space, she had this to say, "I once heard this quote, this would be my message, if you think you're too small to make a difference, try sleeping with a mosquito. No idea is ever small if you're serving a need. Start your business, scale fast but do not rush to grow. Grow at a pace that is directly aligned to where you are as the compass of your ship. Please know that it is what you say no to that will forever empower you on your journey as an entrepreneur. Outside of business, we are breadwinners, wives, mothers, we are all of these roles that people don't know about. I see how some people are able to step into fully fledged entrepreneur mode where it's all about the money from day one. I don't know if there is any rule of law of how to be an entrepreneur, but you cannot build a business on a foundation that is not sound and you as the business owner are the foundation. I don't know anything else but this, my story."

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