

Menswear in Africa: bold, brave and patriotic



By [Lauren Hartzenberg](#)

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Menswear is a slightly smaller category than womenswear, with population demographics being one of the reasons for this as well as the fact that women tend to buy clothing more frequently than men. But the segment has gained ground over the last decade.

The South African market alone has been forecast to reach R41 billion in value in 2021, driven by a growing interest among men in their appearance and personal grooming. African fashion is seeing growing recognition abroad, and menswear, in particular, has become bolder, more expressive and less restricted by social norms.



SAMW Fashion Talks. From left: Seth Shezi, Mkolisi Mkhize, Gilmore Mboyo, Anuell Ahmar and Jason Storey.

A handful of industry mavens unpacked the trends driving the business of men's fashion during a panel discussion hosted by fashion blog *Renaissance Men SA* at the South African Menswear Week (SAMW) held in Cape Town earlier this month. The Fashion Talks segment looked at the current state of menswear in SA and the greater African continent, and the opportunities and challenges impacting its growth.

Celebrating African heritage

Jason Storey, founder and CEO of clothing brand Unknown Union, proclaimed that fashion in Africa is verging on revolutionary.

“The African renaissance is upon us. Right now, I think the world is turning its energy and its gaze towards this continent. Walking through the streets, seeing the way people are styling themselves and viewing the designers' work I see limitless creativity, I see fresh interpretations of things, and I see a daring approach to fashion with an audacity and boldness that is particular to this space.”

Another panellist, creative director and designer of House of St Luke, Mxolisi Mkhize, noted the shift away from the idolising of European fashion to an embracing of local heritage. He spoke of a time growing up when Italian fashion was coveted and considered superior to locally-made apparel. But this mindset is changing.

“People are embracing their African cultures and traditions. Being different has become exciting and I believe that in terms of design we’re competing on a global level,” Mkhize said.



House of St Luke. Credit: Simon Deiner / SDR Photo

Silmore Moyo, a Zimbabwean social entrepreneur and PR consultant, echoed these sentiments. “In Africa, I think we're beginning to find ourselves more, but I think we need to find even more inspiration from each other and not look to Europe or Asia. We're seeing more fashion inspired by African roots and backgrounds and we're beginning to realise that we need to make our expression to the world.”

While African fashion may be enjoying growing exposure globally, one could argue that the talent and ingenuity has always existed here. “Look at how our ancestors covered themselves in jewellery and beadwork. African fashion has always been on the cutting edge; it was just never celebrated,” said Seth Shezi, a local PR consultant, writer and lifestyle brand strategist.

He believes that what's changed is that people have gained confidence. “People are realising that who they are and how they feel they want to express themselves is enough. It doesn't need verification. And that confidence is highlighting creativity that's always been there.”



Lauren Hartzenberg 21 Feb 2018



Breaking gender stereotypes

Less bound to the rigid gender roles of the past, fashion too is moving into a more gender fluid space. “There are fewer stores now that have separate men’s and women’s fitting rooms, and many are mixing men’s and women’s clothing in the same department,” said Anuell Ahmar, editor-in-chief and executive director at online magazine *Style Me Strauss*.

I visit a store and I find myself purchasing items from the ladies’ section because there are specific garments that I’m drawn to.

As a South African market we are pushing boundaries and moving towards a genderless state where men and women are realising that they don’t have to conform to a style that has been imposed on them by societal norms years prior. We are starting to find our individuality and identity as individuals,” Ahmar said.

Similarly, Moyo said that current men’s fashion is reflecting a time in history when women controlled the motherland. “I’m seeing softer fabrics used in menswear and skirts for men are appearing on the runway. When we go back to the origin of our continent women ran households are they’re the ones inspiring fashion.”



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Becoming globally competitive

While the panel’s attitude towards the state of local fashion from a design perspective was a positive one, the discussion around the effects of cheap Chinese imports on the local production sector was less optimistic.

Deliberating on whether SA’s manufacturing sector stands a competitive chance in producing clothing not just for the local market but for the rest of the globe, many felt that the bulk of responsibility lies at government level.

But Storey urged local designers to tap into the technical expertise that is lying dormant since the thriving days of SA’s clothing production sector, a time when Cape Town specifically served as a manufacturing hub for a number of global fashion houses.

The individuals who trained and worked under those experts are still here. They're still alive today. And my experience here has been that when you find somebody who can do really amazing work, they tend to be 50 years-old and over.”

He cautioned: “We need to act quickly, whether in the public or private space. The window of opportunity is closing quickly. Once those individuals are gone that expertise is no longer here.”

Shezi, meanwhile, highlighted the power of social media in influencing perception around the style and design that exists within the African continent, especially among Millennials and Gen Xers.

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A post shared by BlackBrain Pictures (@blackbrain_sa) on Jan 9, 2018 at 3:15am PST

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in terms of access, social media manages to catapult or be a catchment for what magazines can't do. While the print magazine industry is busy dying, social media is there to amplify whatever the young generation is doing,” he said.

Referencing the Afropunk festival in Joburg, which gathered a crowd of bold, fashion-forward attendees visibly inspired by their African roots, Shezi noted that social media coverage of the event helped showcase their creative expression.

For kids at that age to be able to feel confident and express themselves to that level is relatively new for us, and it's adding to the pot that is very fertile at the moment for African fashion. It's a good space to be in and I just hope that everyone sees that and harnesses it.”

ABOUT LAUREN HARTZENBERG

Managing editor and retail editor at Bizcommunity.com Cape Town apologist. Dog mom. Get in touch: lauren@bizcommunity.com

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