

How To Carve Out Space for African Talent in Fashion.

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Written by Maya Avram.

In recent years, the fashion and luxury industry looked to expand into new markets, with China, India and Africa often regarded as its new frontiers. Focusing on the latter, UNESCO, the United Nations agency specialising in international cooperation through education, arts, sciences and culture, released its inaugural report at the start of Lagos Fashion Week — “The Fashion Sector in Africa: Trends, Challenges and Opportunities for Growth”.

UNESCO forecasts a 42% increase in demand for African designer fashion over the next 10 years, owing to a growing young population and rapid digitalisation. “Across the continent, people are increasingly looking for product made in Africa, which they see as a symbol of pride and a way to affirm their identity,” said Omoyemi Akerele, director of Lagos Fashion Week.

However, a lack of investment and inadequate educational and legal frameworks prevent the sector — and its associated talent — from reaching their full potential.

Rounding up Black History Month, here we advise African talent and those of African heritage on how they may harness their unique cultural identity to succeed in the global fashion scene.

Formulate a Business Plan.

Although true for all aspiring fashion creatives, formulating a long-term business strategy is particularly vital for African talent who regularly contend with systemic racism and unconscious biases throughout their careers.

“One of the challenges that I see most African talents [struggle with] is understanding the business,” says Olamoniso Nduka, head of business development at Polo Luxury, a Lagos-based retailer of fine jewellery and luxury fashion brands including Rolex, Cartier, Valentino and Alexander McQueen, among others.

Recognising this skills gap, Polo Luxury launched its own masterclass series whereby African designers learn about the operational side of the business and how to gain more international exposure. “You can be the most creative person on the planet and have the most innovative ideas,” says Nduka, “but if your business model is not working and you aren’t very organised and strategic in how you manage your brand, then it’s just not going to work.”

He advises talent to explore different business models and learn about operational functions that are imperative to their business, like quality control, audit, and budgeting to position themselves as standout players.

Secure Capital and Mentorships.

Lack of access to resources remains the main barrier to entry for aspiring African talent or those of African heritage.

In the continent, the UNESCO report mentions the lack of capital, as well as appropriate education and legal infrastructures, as the sector’s main obstacles to reaching its full potential. In the northern hemisphere, this may translate into individuals of African heritage being less likely to afford to intern for free — often a requirement at entry level — or a lack of business training and mentoring opportunities.

One way to overcome these challenges is by applying for competitions designed to equip young talent with generous bursaries as well as entrepreneurial support from industry leaders. Some of these are open to all, like the LVMH Prize, Hyères International Fashion and Photography Festival and International Talent Support (ITS), while others are more specialised, like The International Woolmark Prize, or are location-specific like ANDAM, the BFC/GQ Designer Fashion Fund or the CFDA/Vogue Fashion Fund.

Indeed, this is not necessarily the easiest route to take and entails months of preparation and scrutiny. However, these programmes are worth considering as they have seen the likes of London-based Grace Wales Bonner and South African Thebe Magugu and Lukhanyo Mdingi expand their reach and make themselves global household names.

Form Strategic Partnerships.

The nascent state of Africa’s fashion industry, combined with the heightened curiosity around its culture and demand for its unique craftsmanship, prime designers of African heritage for collaborations.

Recent years have seen both LVMH Prize finalist Thebe Magugu and BFC/GQ Designer Fashion Fund winner Grace Wales Bonner create commercially successful collections for sportswear giant Adidas; menswear designer Martin Rose, originally supported by the Prince’s Trust, Fashion East, and the British Fashion Council’s NEWGEN MEN awards, also went on to collaborate with Nike.



On the luxury end of the spectrum, in 2021 Dior’s Kim Jones tapped Ghanaian painter Amoako Bofo for the men’s summer collection, where the latter transported his paintings onto Jones’s distinctive silhouettes.

“The [industry] is [all about] collaborations, collaborations, collaborations,” says Nduka of Polo Luxury. He suggests African talent not see the modus operandi as a threat, but as an opportunity “to use your strengths to [offset your] weaknesses, [for example, if you] have a customer database [you] cannot reach, or a potential market you want to tap into. The only way for [you] to [expand into those places is] to collaborate, but for [a big brand] to collaborate with you, [they] need to understand what your brand represents.”

To find the right partnership and to ensure it is mutually beneficial, consider your brand pillars and how they align with those of your potential collaborator. “Be true to your identity and be very clear about your brand,” says Hannah Ajala, an international broadcast journalist for BBC World Service radio whose reporting focuses on West Africa. “That will live longer than Instagram followers and likes,” she adds.

Fuse Your Practice to Other Cultural Vehicles.

The UNSECO report makes the connection between evolving consumer tastes and excitement for products made in Africa and an increase in African creative production in other sectors, particularly film and music.

“We’re currently seeing a lot of exports in terms of music [from] Africa to the Western world, from Burna Boy to Wizkid to Davido. The fusion of fashion, music and technology creates a cultural volcanic eruption,” says Nduka. Of course, the connection between these worlds is not new, most recently galvanised by the appointment of music artist Pharrell as creative director of Louis Vuitton menswear earlier this year.

Yet in the continent, this hybrid is still evolving. “[Fashion] is aligning itself with African music,” says Nduka. “We’re going to see more of that happening [...] because there’d been a success story with African music [that] paved the way to collaborate with the Western world, and they don’t do that alone. African designs are shown in music videos to show the culture. Now it’s time for the fashion industry to tap into that huge potential.”

For more advice on planning your career in fashion, explore The Glowth Academy’s courses <https://www.glowth.io/courses>.

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