



Female Entrepreneurship in the African Fashion Industry: A Review of Its Determinants and Characteristics

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1 INTRODUCTION

The modern economy is fast, dynamic and in a constant state of change. The critical challenge for entrepreneurial leaders is to respond rapidly to market change. Sustainability must act as the catalyst of organizational change that will guide their businesses to market leadership. Tastes and fashion are a prime example of the constant changes in society, and these include new trends such as a preference for sustainable products, or the collaborative economy. The intensive use of technology is another example, with omni-channel a common feature in today's markets. There is also the growing popularity of social media, especially among younger people, who use digital technology to obtain information, communicate and shop online, while older people will perhaps stick to their traditional methods of communication and purchase.

Figure 1 shows that the rate of internet penetration in 2018 in countries such as Kenya and Tunisia is similar to that of developed countries, reaching 70% of the population, while others such as Mali, Morocco or

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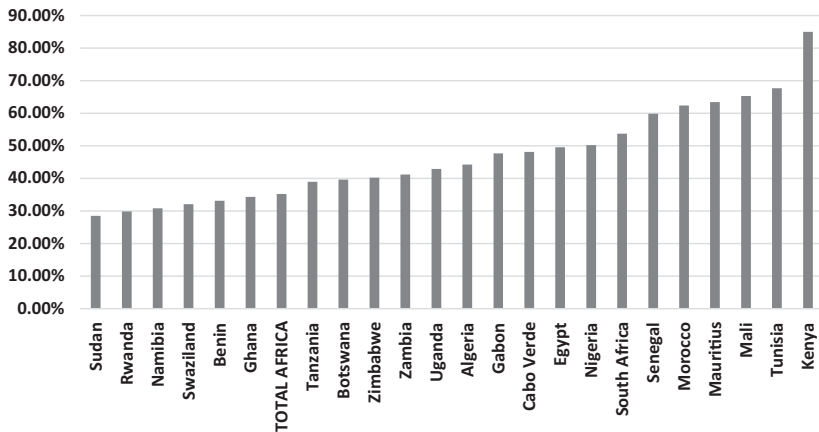


Fig. 1 Internet penetration in African countries, 2018 (% population) (Source Internet World Stats 2018)

South Africa exceed 53%. According to the Internet World Stats (2018), the internet adoption rate has been very high in Rwanda, Mali and Nigeria, exceeding 43% in the last ten years, while in other cases, the pace of adoption has been slow but constant, such as in South Africa or Tunisia, where it has not exceeded 10%.

The changes in society also take their toll on businesses and the people who lead them. Changes in social, economic and technological factors can impact a firm in many ways. We live in a world where technology is as accessible as drinking water, and nowadays we are unable to imagine living without it. In recent years, innovations in technology have allowed widespread access to information, making consumers more informed and demanding, but have also given them access to a global economy where they can buy a wide range of products and services quickly and at a lower cost. Since the 1990s, excess supply and better economic conditions have created a consumer society, where people seek personal satisfaction and love technology, and where their excessive consumption of natural resources has taken the planet to breaking point.

The cult of human power and blind adoption of technology has been a Faustian bargain, offering a wealth of benefits, but at the risk of losing our souls. We need to reject conceptions of the market that suggest all our problems can be solved merely by increasing the profits of companies

and individuals. Nobody is suggesting a return to the Stone Age, but in order to preserve our heritage we need to slow down and look at reality differently. Most event businesses, for example, are products of strong-willed and ambitious social entrepreneurs who impact society with knowledge and experience gained from the products of modern technology. Leading social enterprises in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa can strengthen African culture and heritage for future generations to emulate.

In 2015, trend hunter Li Edelkoort took the fashion industry by surprise with her *Anti-Fashion Manifesto* criticizing the unbridled production of fashion aimed only at profit. “Prices,” she explains, “profess that these clothes are to be thrown away, discarded as a condom and forgotten before being loved and savored, teaching young consumers that fashion has no value. The culture of fashion is thus destroyed” (BusinessFashion.com 2017). Indeed, fast fashion has led to a situation where worker exploitation and the use of toxic pollutants are the norm. The cost of labor in countries such as China, Bangladesh and Cambodia accounts for less than 1% of a garment’s retail value. While this may mean cheap clothing for consumers, the prices of the product are not always reduced, and it is the company that increases its profit margin. Meanwhile, fashion companies’ workers must work long hours in harsh conditions to meet top production targets, only to be rewarded with extremely low wages (The Ground Up Project 2016).

In contrast, slow fashion, in all its stages, respects the environment and society. Not only does it value, care for and teach the people involved in the production process, but it also encourages conscious and responsible consumption among consumers. Today, slow fashion is gaining prominence thanks to a new generation of local entrepreneurs—mainly women—and sustainable craft workshops and sewing ateliers.

But small entrepreneurs and local businesses are only part of the solution. Big fashion companies also have to reconsider their business strategies. As social agents, international companies must offer value, both to the client through their products, and to society as a whole. In addition, their processes must be efficient, but also socially and environmentally sustainable. It must not be contaminated, but also it must promote the economic and social development of the territory. And in this sense, the international fashion companies have begun to act on two fronts: (1) enhancing the role of providers in the global value chain; and (2) supporting certain traditionally disadvantaged groups, such as women.

2 WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN AFRICA'S FASHION SECTOR

As we have seen in Chapter 3, the African fashion industry has the potential to become one of the main drivers of the economy at no distant future date. Dressmaking is a significant activity anywhere in Africa, with local artisans acting as social agents in the development of African fashion. Their importance and impact on clothing production and local trends is to preserve traditional know-how, which needs to be taken into account in companies' business models. This can be achieved in two ways. The first is through local industry development creating jobs and training for local craftsmen and artisans and reducing unemployment in their communities. The second is empowerment, especially of women and young people, by including them in the companies' manufacturing teams. The major focus here is to provide continuous training to up-skill the craftsmen to be able to produce world-class products and increase their employability.

At present, the African fashion industry is a loose amalgam of world-wide designers, creative professionals, non-government organizations, small to medium-sized businesses—including craft workshops and sewing ateliers,—chambers of commerce and others who are interested in the formal establishment and successful promotion of the industry. While some African designers may achieve fame and success on the continent, the industry needs to act as a bridge so that buyers, the press, and fashion enthusiasts can discover them and increase the associated trade and investment opportunities (Brown 2016). In recent times, sales have increased for some African designers and brands, where their work has caught the eye of international actors, but most of the activity in Africa remains merely supply of raw materials and development of production activities for international companies in the sector.

Whether designers or workers in small craft workshops and sewing ateliers, the African fashion industry has historically been female dominated. According to the C&A Foundation Report (2017), female employment in the fashion industry in Africa is as high as 80%. This percentage is similar to that of other countries such as Bangladesh or Cambodia where the rate of female employment in the garment industry—one of the most important in fashion—is 80 and 90% respectively.

Most of them are women employed in small workshops and sweatshops, developing a knowledge-intensive activity. Although producing for some of the most profitable companies in the world, they are working under dreadful conditions for very low wages, and they have to do an

excessive amount of overtime. For these women, personal development is closely linked to working conditions. It's not just about escaping from poverty, becoming more independent and growing as an individual—it's about decent pay, as well as dignified conditions, basic job security and even guarantees of future stability. They also want to ensure that it is they who will energize their homeland and guarantee its economic growth and social development.

Luckily, the interest in African fashion shown by some designers has opened up opportunities for some women in the sector. As entrepreneurs, they have not only created successful businesses at the international level, but they are also offering improvement and development opportunities for many other women who work in small local businesses. Max Osterweis, who along with ex-Gap designer Erin Beatty runs New York-based, Kenyan-made Suno, agrees with this idea. The primary goal is to make clothing desirable enough internationally to provide African designers and dressmakers with long-term employment. Sometimes, having famous clients—such as Michelle Obama or Carol Lim who are regular customers of African fashion—helps increase the recognition and prestige of the African fashion industry internationally. At other times, the connection between local producers and big brands is favored by organizations such as The International Trade Center. Helping to connect such projects with more prominent brands is the Ethical Fashion Programme of the ITC (The International Trade Centre, a joint agency of the World Trade Organization and the United Nations). Run by Simone Cipriani, the program aims to provide long-term employment under certified fair-labor conditions for artisans working in impoverished areas (*The Financial Times* 2017).

International fashion companies are aware of the benefits of working with African suppliers. Luisa Laudi, creative director of MAX & Co., a Max Mara Group brand aimed at younger customers, says: “Working with Kenyan craftswomen in the slums is complicated and not like producing accessories in Italy, but this is not charity.... The accessories are great and in line with our production standards.” However, the risk is always present, no matter how high the quality of the products manufactured. Thus, when international fashion companies fail to look after their suppliers, the results can be highly damaging. In some cases micro-producers have abandoned their own cottage industries to work with outsiders, and if this work dries up, they have lost the little they had before. The result is brutal. They starve.

Another African woman icon making significant contributions to the African fashion world is Honey Ogundeyi, the founder of Fashpa. This company is using technology to create an online one-stop fashion shop. Fashpa.com is Nigeria's premier online fashion retailer. Vertically integrated Fashpa designs, manufactures and distributes its own clothing line. Ogundeyi acknowledges that starting a business, especially in Nigeria, is challenging, but she also agrees that companies have a chance to grow if the entrepreneurs are astute, passionate and creative.

Honey Ogundeyi is a model in the race for female entrepreneurship. She has always had a passion for both technology and fashion, so she eventually decided to work on an idea she had been passionate about for a very long time, and that was how to make fashion more accessible for Africans. Interestingly, Nshe (2016) suggests that Honey Ogundeyi started Fashpa (meaning Fashion Parade), out of frustration at not being able to access quality fashion following her move back to Nigeria after several years living abroad. She realizes that Africans have the same modern, sophisticated tastes and love for fashion as consumers elsewhere in the world. The only difference is that the developed-country consumer has access to fashion, while the African consumer does not. According to Nshe (2016), "she wants to bridge that gap using technology, by creating an online fashion platform targeted at style-conscious consumers who wanted quality, variety, and convenience, at affordable prices". Thus, the idea of solving the problem of access to fashion has evolved into a powerful business model that offers a new solution. Currently, Fashpa is a marketplace retailer that produces its own line, like Zara, H&M, Steve Madden, Topshop and a few others.

Female entrepreneurship in African countries is a proven fact. According to the World Bank, Africa boasts the highest growth rate of female-run businesses in the world (Meunier et al. 2017). Similarly, the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) 2016/17 Women's Report shows women's entrepreneurial activity in Africa rose by 5 percentage points over the year (GEM 2017). Countries such as Uganda, Senegal and Botswana have female entrepreneurship as high as 34% (WEF 2018), exceeding the percentages in the United States, Russia and New Zealand.

The data show that 61.8% of the African women entrepreneurs said they started a business because they were taking advantage of the opportunity, rather than out of necessity (GEM 2017). However, the report also shows that sub-Saharan Africa has the highest discontinuance rate—at 8.4%. Around 56% of women entrepreneurs in the region cite

either unprofitability or lack of finance as a reason for closing down their business.

Indeed, the World Bank report points out that despite the increase in the percentage of activity, to be an entrepreneur is difficult for women, who have to face social and financial, barriers. In contrast to the GEM data, the World Bank report shows that a significant proportion of the women who have started their own entrepreneurial activity indicate that they do from family necessity. Nevertheless, according to Donna Kelly, entrepreneurship professor at Bobson School, whatever their reason for being an entrepreneur, what is certain is that women entrepreneurs provide incomes for their families—in many places they are the only source of family income—and also employment for those in their communities, and products and services that bring additional value to their environment.

3 DRIVERS OF FEMALE ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN AFRICA

Evidence, research and experience have shown that there is a strong tradition of craftsmanship and textile heritage and an emerging cadre of designers and entrepreneurs in the fashion space, coupled with a lack of penetration by foreign clothing brands. Fashion industry activities are concentrated in notable cities and countries. Lagos (Nigeria) and Nairobi (Kenya) in particular are witnessing a booming fashion scene and widespread interest in clothing. African fashion is significant because some of the countries are so large. For instance, Nigeria, one of the “African Lions” alongside Kenya, Ruanda and Mozambique, is one of the most developed countries in the fashion industry. These and other markets, such as Cote d’Ivoire, are expected to see a significant growth in the numbers of high net worth individuals in the near future, a trend that promises well for the fashion industry.

Women constitute more than half of any African country’s population. In most countries, however, women are central to the development of the national economy, contributing more than men towards the value of recorded production both quantitatively in labor force participation, and in educational achievement and skilled manpower (Lawanson 2008).

Traditionally, African women are seen as home-makers, who oversee and coordinate household affairs and activities at home. With the advent of Western education, industrialization and paid employment, men as well as women have joined the labor market. Today, there are

visible changes in the perception of women, mainly because they have greater opportunities for education than before. As Anarah et al. (2017) evidence, they are forming various organizations that fight for women's independence and empowerment, claiming equal rights and opportunities in all spheres of life.

In recent years, women have assumed a vital role in the development of entrepreneurial activity. According to Singh et al. (2011), an entrepreneur is a person who has ideas and personal goals and the ambition to start a new enterprise, as well as bringing capital, skilled people, equipment and facilities to the new business.

The scientific literature does not clarify the influence of gender on the development of entrepreneurial activity. Neither Beraza Garmendia and Rodríguez Castellanos (2012) nor Parker and Van Praag (2012) identify important differences in characteristics and type of address according to gender. These authors show that some entrepreneurs' socio-demographic and psychological characteristics influence their ability to recognize and develop opportunities and to set up a business with the potential to succeed. Regarding socio-demographic profile, Parker and Van Praag (2012) identify two characteristics that determine entrepreneurs' capacity to manage business growth: professional experience and academic education/training. Jo and Lee (1996) and Chandler and Jansen (1992) show that prior experience in directorship posts or experience gained through prior entrepreneurial processes determines outcomes. When entrepreneurs have greater experience, they possess more information about the problems and obstacles they are likely to encounter in the first few years of a firm's life; they have also acquired more problem-solving knowledge.

Similarly, entrepreneurs' level of education/training affects their capacity to adapt to the different activities required of an organization and to handle the risks associated with them. Parker and van Praag (2012) recognize that when a person can demonstrate a higher level of education/training, their greater formal knowledge improves organizational performance. However, it is also necessary to underscore the need for both technical and specialized management education/training. Jo and Lee (1996) warn that when the entrepreneur knows about the firm's product or service, the firm gains a greater marketing advantage because it offers a technically superior product. Management knowledge and skills are also key, in that they help identify business opportunities and establish the right combination of resources and capabilities in the organization to develop and exploit those opportunities (Cavusgil and

Knight 2015). Finally, we note that certain characteristics of the entrepreneur's personality help determine firm creation and growth. The literature identifies creativity, intuition or ambition, together with control capability, risk propensity and the need for recognition (Lee and Tsang 2001). In entrepreneurship, these factors tend to translate into a positive attitude—or propensity—toward organizational growth. This type of behavior is a particular feature of innovative technology firms because the risk and uncertainty inherent in them require a creative, adventurous kind of entrepreneur in search of growth opportunities (Beraza Garmendia and Rodríguez Castellanos 2012).

On the other hand, Alti and Ahmed (2016) point out some differences between women and men entrepreneurs. According to Brush et al. (2009), cited in Alti and Ahmed (2016), businesses owned by women are one of the fastest-growing entrepreneurial populations in the world. Galewood et al. (2003), cited in Alti and Ahmed (2016), assert that in the USA, the ability of women entrepreneurs to achieve firm growth and attract venture capital has now become so important that it is a topic for systematic research (OECD 2004). They make a significant contribution to innovation, employment and wealth creation in all economies. Their efficiency and productiveness in entrepreneurship are made possible by the fact that women, by their nature (Rosener 2011):

1. have creative ability;
2. are blessed with the ability to persist and pursue their desires;
3. are patient nurturers of children, a tenacity that is usually transferred into business;
4. are good innovators;
5. have the ability to develop passion for what they believe in;
6. possess managerial skill—every woman is a manager. Women are innately skilled managers because of their peculiar nature as home-makers; and
7. are reliable and responsible regarding financial record-keeping.

According to Sarri and Trihopoulou (2005), some of the key personality traits that women entrepreneurs should have are:

1. A vision of the future: Women entrepreneurs have an idea of what the future could be like for them and their businesses, but also, more critically, they are willing to fight to achieve their dreams.

2. Love/passion/devotion: women entrepreneurs love what they do, and it is this passion that sustains them and makes them not give their dreams up when the going gets tough. These feelings also give them the impetus to be involved in daily activity, increasing the value of the products they sell.
3. Determination: they implement their ventures with total commitment. They seldom give up, even when confronted by obstacles that seem insurmountable.
4. Proactiveness: women entrepreneurs seem to be practical about business. Some African fashion companies are at the forefront of retail transformation in Africa, using market data to market innovative strategies and offer sophisticated and appropriate solutions to consumers' needs.
5. Willingness to take risks and the ability to manage risks/tolerance of ambiguity/thinking outside the box: women entrepreneurs leverage their first-mover advantage, their innovative business model and their relentless focus on the customer experience, with access to the right funding.
6. Long-term thinking: critical thinking about the entrepreneurial break. For instance, some African fashion companies like Fashpa base the success of their business model on data mining or mobile commerce.
7. Destiny: they want to be in charge of their own destiny rather than dependent on an employer.

These traits have led a growing number of women entrepreneurs to realize their dream of starting up and running their own enterprise. They are local heroes who today are re-shaping the African local economy, creating jobs, wealth and sustainable livelihoods, and reducing poverty.

4 YOUNG WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS IN THE AFRICA SCENARIO

Entrepreneurship is a personal journey where entrepreneurs learn a lot about themselves, business, teamwork and the fine art of balance. In today's fast-fashion world, young women entrepreneurs are adding value to the entrepreneurs' network. Women entrepreneurial spirit in Africa is centered on two fundamental pillars: (a) social entrepreneurship that is

critical to collective success; and (b) intensive use of the digital environment as a communication, dialog and relationship channel.

Annan (2010) believes that social entrepreneurship is founded on the principles of private initiative, entrepreneurship and self-employment, underpinned by the values of democracy, equality and solidarity, and that the co-operative movement can help pave the way to a more just and inclusive economic order. Social entrepreneurship may be seen as merely combining commercial enterprises with social impacts. According to Pozen (2008), a social entrepreneur is a pragmatic visionary who achieves large-scale, systemic and sustainable social change through their unwavering belief, driving passion and dogged determination. The power of social entrepreneurship to alleviate social problems has been generally accepted by policymakers and political leaders as an essential mechanism in addressing the need for societal change. But young women entrepreneurs in the fashion sector also use the internet and social networks as a communication, dialog and relationship environment (Duffy and Hund 2015). They can use these technological tools efficiently and economically, to reach out to their target global customers. An essential part of their activity has a digital base, and social networks are used as the main channels of their marketing communications. Some of the central value-creation activities they develop—including communication with suppliers and retailers—are also carried out on the network (Payne et al. 2008).

A quarter of young people in Africa are out of work and not in education, and the majority are women. Encouraging entrepreneurship and promoting social enterprise can help to address some of the continent's development challenges.

What separates real entrepreneurs from dreamers is that they do not hesitate when it is time to act, and they do not retreat when it is time to press forward. Among the African women entrepreneurs who moved from idea to enterprise is Bethlehem Tilahun Alemu, founder of soleRebels, one of Africa's fastest-growing footwear companies. African women have always had enormous talent for design and production, but it was invisible before the appearance of entrepreneurs like Alemu. She built up her company and turned it into an international brand, using traditional spinning techniques but in a modern way. Today the company has 120 workers manufacturing its products in Ethiopia.

As Toesland (2016) points out, this philosophy exemplifies the modern African fashion industry's outlook: sustainable, business orientated

and employing traditional African production techniques and styles. Among famous fashion designers who have creatively used beads and sequins on traditional gowns, blouses and skirts that are now popular both nationally and internationally are Frank Oshodi, Lanre da Silva Ajayi, Deola Sagoe, Ohimai Atafu (Mai Atafu), Ngozi Cardow (Zizi Cardow), Uduak Umondak, Folake Folarin Coker (Tiffany Amber), Lisa Folawiyo (Jewel By Lisa), Omoniyi Makun (Yomi Casual Clothing) and Mudiaga Enajemo (Mudi).

Fashion has a wide range of meanings, as it refers to what most people wear or should wear (clothes, shoes, belts, hats, bags, etc.) in a society, as well as the way these products are designed. The term “fashion industry” refers to all aspects of fashion: design, fabric production, marketing and education. When in full bloom, the fashion industry is expected to have professional designers, models, modeling agents, dressmakers, fashion photographers, fashion schools, fashion retailers, fashion journalists and magazines all successfully operating (Gbadamosi 2016).

A case in point is the entrepreneurial fashion activities of Toyosi Akerele. In 2007 she was selected as one of 101 Young African Leaders by the African Business Leaders Forum of *Business Magazine*. Currently, she is a successful entrepreneur and consummate young professional. But one of her main characteristics is her extensive academic training. She holds a bachelor’s degree in civil law from the University of Jos, a certificate in youth inclusive financial services from the University of New Hampshire, Durham, USA, a certificate in media enterprise from the School of Media Communication, Pan African University and an executive master’s certificate in project management from the Project Management College, UK (Proudly Nigeria 2015). She is the founding executive director of Rise Networks, a Nigerian social company that is actively involved in national and international projects about the need to provide a platform for youth inclusion in policy formulation and implementation. Toyosi has conceptualized and designed effective programs to deepen the links and learning opportunities for young people in knowledge acquisition, enterprise and nation building. The Rise National Youth Forum, the flagship project of Rise Networks, has attracted hundreds of thousands of young people in over 20 Nigerian states in the last five years (Proudly Nigeria 2015).

Another example of young women’s entrepreneurship in Africa is Nkechi Iheanacho, an industrial chemistry graduate who is Managing Director of Pink and Blossom. Iheanacho always loved to organize and

started her business as an off-shoot of her sister's wedding, when she not only did the traditional wedding catering but also arranged the decorations and ancillary services including the white wedding. After the wedding people started making inquiries about the organizer of the event, but it took quite a while to convince some of them that she had handled it. Those who did believe in her encouraged her with jobs such as birthdays and end-of-year parties. She says:

I didn't look for start-up capital because my initial clients paid up front, so I can say that I started with zero capital. My drive and love for putting things together kept me going. At the initial stage, I had no steady staff. I only used ad hoc staff, but now as a full-fledged event management company, I have at least 15 permanent staff. I engage ad hoc staff if I get several jobs at the same time or a huge job because sometimes I have as much as 30 people working on a project.... I have never had any problem paying my staff, from nothing we have grown to pick up jobs of over a million naira and our balance sheet is good. When we get jobs that require for instance a marquee we outsource some of the engineering, electrical, plumbing jobs and concentrate on our core competence which is food and decoration. (Iroegbu-Chikezie 2015: 35)

In the midst of today's economic development, the growing spirit of young women's entrepreneurship offers a ray of hope for jobs and livelihoods for most African countries. The most significant economic development spirit in today's world is the spirit of entrepreneurship.

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