



**AN INVESTIGATION OF HOW CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICAN
FASHION DESIGNERS COMMUNICATE CREATIVE BRAND
STORYTELLING AND BRAND AESTHETICS**

by

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ABSTRACT

The principle of ‘story’ finds residence in many areas of the brand. This includes areas pertinent, but not solely limited to, brand heritage, brand identity, brand personality, brand story, brand aesthetics, and brand history. Marketers constantly work towards persuading consumers to be part of the brand evolution, which is understood as the most basic principle of storytelling—taking the consumer on a journey. Covid-19 has intensified the need for restoration as the local fashion industry and many others experienced much turbulence. Local and international businesses were thrown off balance. This emerged as an opportunity for innovative entrepreneurial fashion design brands to forge out unique niche segments and present contemporary collections inspired by meaningful stories and aesthetic designs. The possibility to move South Africa into a new fashion renaissance exists. Contemporary, entrepreneurial fashion designers can produce aesthetic-branded goods which communicate a distinctly South African story.

The discussion on the zeitgeist of fashion, design, and fashion brand communication where entrepreneur fashion designers are emerging in many locations in South Africa, is prompting questions of viability and survival. The subject of storytelling and aesthetics has been explored through different angles. This study examined the entrepreneurial marketing and brand storytelling activities that South African entrepreneur designers undertake and further explored the brand aesthetics tactics used. However, the fashion studies’ approach to how ready-to-wear fashion design brands communicate stories anchored in brand-relevant content, which discusses fashion entrepreneurial storytelling strategies from entrepreneurial fashion design enterprises, proves scant.

The study profiled 14 South African entrepreneur designer fashion brands – using semi-structured in-depth interviews. Interacting with participants included face-to-face meetings, telephonic conversations, and a single written response. This study was exploratory. The results, as generated from the thematic analysis, indicated seven themes. The seven themes that emerged were: fashion brands storytelling techniques; brand aesthetics tactics – a positive aesthetic response; entrepreneurial social media marketing channels – online presence; entrepreneurial marketing activities; narrative behind a story; colour symbolism; and South African entrepreneurial fashion brands in

Covid-19 times: understanding the impact of Covid-19 on local entrepreneurial fashion design enterprises. This research intends to make the following contributions to literature in South African fashion brand communication scholarship. First, expanding the concept of fashion entrepreneurial marketing from the context of South African entrepreneur fashion design brands. The exploration of fashion entrepreneurial marketing through practical business models proves mandatory for the success of a contemporary fashion brand. It is important for fashion marketers to build on this practice in keeping fashion brands relevant. Second, to create a better understanding in the brand-oriented vs business-oriented fashion entrepreneurship typology within the creative fashion industry of South Africa. Third, expanding the knowledge base of fashion practitioners, marketing agencies and Fashion Designers. Many studies hold contrasting convictions in seeing the brand as a business; or seeing the business as a brand; or even seeing them as one entity. This 'unclear' typology proves interesting to look into within the discipline of fashion design and fashion marketing as a whole.

Keywords: Aesthetics; Brand; Communication; COVID-19; Entrepreneurs; Fashion; Marketing activities and Storytelling

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation titled “An Investigation of how contemporary South African fashion designers communicate creative brand storytelling and brand aesthetics” submitted for the Master of Arts in Creative Brand Leadership degree to The Independent Institute of Education is my own work and has not previously been submitted to another university or higher education institution for a degree.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

- EM:

Entrepreneurial marketing

- SMMEs:

Small, medium and micro enterprises

- LSM:

Living Standards Measure

- RSA:

Republic of South Africa

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

1.1 INTRODUCTION

As a daily phenomenon, fashion finds origin in art which shows the true essence of social and cultural movements. When taking a closer look at various forms of dress styles, even from a historical angle, it is indicated that fashion continues to express sartorial taste, generational cohorts and the spirit of time. Beauty and fashion have always existed within the philosophy of aesthetics. These shift constantly and continue to influence fashion as both a historic and contemporary phenomenon. In order to relate to their audience, fashion designers have had to find a way to communicate their brand values and positions in marketing to their consumers. This resulted in the rise of using brand storytelling and brand aesthetics as more genuine forms of creative communication (Yang and Kang, 2021:8).

This kind of communication uses a creative approach and a narrative structure to tell a story or convey a message for the brand. These strategies can be used to reveal an in-depth and meaningful expression of a fashion brand, often taking a stance on many marketing activities. Despite the scholarly effort over the past decades to answer the question of what constitutes creative brand storytelling and brand aesthetics, (Björkman, 2002; Granitz and Forman, 2015) there is no empirical study to conceptualise how South African fashion designers communicate to their customers (Lewis, 2012; De Greef, 2015 and Turner, 2021).

There is thus a lack of knowledge regarding the essential nature of the construct, within which the appropriate definition of the concepts should be classified. In light of this unexplored topic, it is important to understand the manner in which contemporary South African fashion designers communicate creative brand storytelling and brand aesthetics to customers. Given this gap it is important to delve into the context and background of this study first.

1.2 CONTEXTUALISATION AND BACKGROUND

An investigation of how contemporary South African fashion designers communicate creative brand storytelling and brand aesthetics is a study which looks into entrepreneurial South African fashion brands. Arvanitidou and Gasouka (2013:111) define fashion as the practice of dress which enables the wearer to transition into a state of 'otherness' through clothing and accessories as key instruments which enable that process. Within South African fashion design, fashion is a widely prevalent industry that continues to expand to date (Roussos, 2018).

The 'new' generation of designers and creatives' within the South African industry are 're-defining the design landscape' by crafting designs that are often described as being original and contemporary which energises fashion in turn. It is wearable malleable art which affords the conscious fashion dresser to define who they are and helps them communicate it to the world. Whether individuals are aware of it or not, fashion brands are daily tools of self-expression which ignite a story of self and brand. Storytelling is created when a brand persuades the consumer to be part of the brand journey, even when it evolves over time (Romo, García-Medina and Romero, 2017:141). This is further projected through the choice and style of garments which either conceal or reveal the body (SA Fashion Week Annual Report, 2018:7). Fashion Designers need to focus extensively on the concept of aesthetics as a way to reinforce a desired brand identity as a practical technique of creating distinct product appeal (Mazzalovo, 2010:3). The constant desire and 'buy more' mentality have resulted in the excessive consumption of fashion, forcing fashion brands and retailers to respond to ever-changing consumer demands (Ozdamar-Ertekin, 2016:1). A successful contemporary fashion brand requires creativity, effective brand communication strategies, competitive advantage, distinct aesthetics and quality product lines which can be sold to an identified market (SA Fashion Week Annual Report, 2018:6).

Literature indicates that consumers have adapted to an "aesthetic economy" (Entwistle, 2002:321) where norms of attire, dress and appearance are strongly influenced by socio-cultural forces. In particular, 'MaXhosa Africa' fashion brand brings the Xhosa aesthetic to international fashion. Laduma Ngxokolo is an award-winning South African textile and

knitwear designer who was able to merge his creative aesthetic with his isiXhosa heritage. In a much broader sense, brand aesthetics is a concept which constitutes two terms: brand and aesthetics. Mazzalovo (2010:4) provides the full meaning as a set of brand features or elements of identification, which label a brand and its image. Brand aesthetics entail properties of recognition, which are mainly perceived through human sensory inputs, namely sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell – which help manifest the brand to its audience. For the purposes of this research, brand aesthetics is contextualised with much consideration to clothing as tangible material. In the literal sense, individuals experience clothing through its wearability, eyesight, smell and touch. However, the research perceived little to scarce literature on how contemporary South African fashion designers communicate creative brand storytelling and brand aesthetics within the fashion industry. Therefore, this study focused on brand aesthetics as artistic visual characteristics which present an overall creative look-and-feel of fashion products. More

1.3 RATIONALE

A lot of scholarly work remains deficient in proving the potential of fashion in South Africa, more especially in the development of local and international trade markets (SA Fashion Week Annual Report, 2020:1). As the market for fashion becomes increasingly competitive, fashion entrepreneurs are inspired to develop means to make their brands famous in the same strategy of commercial product brands. Large fashion retail businesses have the financial means to have marketing campaigns with large budget allocations for market research. In a contrasting reality, small, micro and medium enterprises (SMMEs) are not afforded the same privilege (Hills, Hultman and Miles, 2008:100). Cultivating a strong fashion brand which can compete in the same league as established brands requires tactful entrepreneurial marketing which solely depends on the resources that are at the disposal of an entrepreneur (Hills *et al.*, 2008:100). However, the fashion designer entrepreneurs' perspective within current research is largely underrepresented by actual Fashion Designers themselves. They are mostly absent from the academic sphere, whereby they are positioned more in the creative business industry. Hence, it may be argued then, that a large amount of research will consequently be largely speculative rather than scientific or realistic views.

1.4 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Fashion, in contrast to dress, which is arguably mostly confined to gender and a style of monotony, is different. Fashion communication has its own ambiguous semiotic anatomy, which is deeply rooted in the signifiers of time, stories, creativity and innovation (Lewis, 2012:72). In the past two decades, South Africa has experienced a significant shift in effects attributed to globalisation, trade, and consumption in the formation of its 'renewed' collective fashion identities (Lewis, 2012:72). In other words, a massive turn of events occurred in both the political and social fronts, where behaviours and experimentation with attire and fashion took on a different trajectory. Currently, local fashion identities have evolved and have faced a different renaissance. Fashion designers continue to emerge in many locations in South Africa, with their own stories, narratives and aesthetics, thus prompting critical questions of market viability and survival.

Studies continue to point out that business-related storytelling plots are largely from the perspective of enterprises (Chadha and Ahuja, 2020:62) and provide rich valuable content—covering how marketers continuously attempt to put a storyline together to spark people's actions, values and behaviour. The former referred to the story content (Romo, García-Medina and Romero, 2017:2) while the latter indicated storytelling methods. The assessment of fashion studies as communication, regarding how ready-to-wear fashion designers possibly convey stories anchored in brand-related content (Conti, Mazzola, Motta and Pillan, 2020:180-181) and that which discusses fashion entrepreneurs' storytelling strategies from the perspective of fashion design entrepreneurial enterprises proves scant (Chadha and Ahuja, 2020:63). Ultimately, this research will help bridge this perspective from an angle of fashion entrepreneur designer brands in a way which can be understood by both practitioners and researchers.

1.5 RESEARCH PURPOSE

The research examined the entrepreneurial marketing and brand storytelling activities that are undertaken by South African fashion entrepreneur designers, and further explored the brand aesthetics tactics used. The main purpose of the study was twofold – first, it was to explore what brand storytelling and aesthetic techniques are used by South African fashion entrepreneur designers if any, to communicate with customers. Secondly,

it was to understand the brand narratives used to distinguish each ready-to-wear fashion brand.

In closing the loop and pinpointing the research focus, attention is placed on two of Kakroo's (2015) pillars of storytelling being the "plot and character" in order to confront the two critical aspects of the research purpose. The research already included the concept of aesthetics, and built on this by further incorporating two supporting constructs of 'plot' and 'character'. The study examined the entrepreneurial marketing and brand storytelling activities – plot and character that are undertaken by South African entrepreneur designers, and further explored the brand aesthetics tactics used. Moreover, the main purpose of the study was to embrace both the men's and women's value chain to understand the range, and diversity, if possible, of how South African entrepreneur designers take on the exploration of masculine and feminine fashion styles.

1.6 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research posed the following research questions:

Main research question

- Are South African fashion entrepreneur designers using creative brand storytelling and brand aesthetics to communicate ready-to-wear fashion for men and women's markets?

Sub-research questions

- How is brand storytelling, including the brand aesthetic of ready-to-wear fashion for men and women, defined and practised among fashion entrepreneur designers in South Africa and in targeting consumers?
- How do South African fashion entrepreneur designers use brand narratives for a ready-to-wear market brand when targeting consumers across media platforms?
- What type of aesthetic technique is applied in South African fashion entrepreneur designers' ready-to-wear designs to attract consumers with their attire and adornments?

1.7 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Main research objective

- The main research objective for this research was to determine how South African fashion entrepreneur designers use creative brand storytelling and brand aesthetics to communicate ready-to-wear fashion for men and women's markets.

Sub-research objectives

- To understand how brand storytelling, including the brand aesthetic of ready-to-wear fashion for men and women is defined and practised among fashion entrepreneur designers in South Africa when targeting consumers.
- To explore how South African fashion entrepreneur designers use brand narratives for a ready-to-wear market brand when targeting consumers across media platforms.
- To understand the nature of aesthetic techniques applied in South African fashion entrepreneur designers' ready-to-wear designs to attract consumers with their attire and adornments.

1.8 METHODOLOGY

The research was exploratory in nature. Primary qualitative data was collected through 14 in-depth using semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with entrepreneurial South African-based Fashion Designers in Gauteng and North West province. Given the exploratory nature of this research, a constructivism philosophical paradigm was selected as a suitable paradigm to apply, as the study relied on the knowledge and subjective interpretations of human subjects. Special attention was placed on contemporary South African fashion brands which specialise respectively or collectively in menswear and womenswear clothing lines. Prior to the main data collection phase, two pilot-test interviews were conducted. Manual and Atlas ti. 8 software thematic analysis methods were used for this study. This study was given ethical clearance by the Post Graduate Ethics Committee. The Ethical Clearance form is on page 139 Appendix C.

1.9 DEFINITION OF TERMS

Aesthetics

The art of beauty and how it's created for it to be experienced intensely through human sensorial functions. It is the essence which qualifies static or motion artforms; how it's appreciated and perceived through multiple means of expression, ranging from film, design, theatre, music, poetry, fashion and storytelling (Brielmann and Pelli, 2018:859).

Brand

The term brand is multi-faceted in it being a word which can describe a design, logo, business, product, person, service, image and much more. It is understood as a tool of differentiation and representation which assigns meaning; an identity and it creates a reputation for the entity it represents (Maurya and Mishra, 2012:123).

Communication

Transmitting and making meaning of messages exchanged between the sender and receiver (Jaska and Werenowska, 2014:49). In the context of brand communication, it can be described as the number of ways in which the brand shares, markets, and engages its market and the general public. Communication establishes the consumer-brand relationship and influences how the consumer develops trust with the brand (Jaska and Werenowska, 2014:49).

Entrepreneurs

A term which describes individuals who have the ability to start and anchor their business ideas around competitive and definitive functions which will result in sustainable financial gain and continued economic business activity (Koellinger, 2008:22). Furthermore, such individuals enter a marketplace and operate competitively amongst other existing enterprises in an effort to establish their businesses within a particular economic setting (Koellinger, 2008:22).

Fashion

The term embraces a plethora of styles and collective dress movements. Fashion can be described as wearable and functional bodily adornments such as clothing, shoes and accessories. These are designed with careful consideration to fit, silhouette, size, and

surface embellishments which communicate binary or non-binary markers of gender and sexuality. Prevalent styles are womenswear and menswear which attribute femininity, masculinity or an interplay of the two as androgyny (Rosenberg, 2019:287).

Marketing activities

Tools and processes which are strategically designed to attract an audience and assist the business to sell its commodities to consumers (Bansal, Mendelson and Sharma, 2001:63).

Storytelling

An age-old practice which continues to permeate many areas of daily life through visual, audio or written material (Paquette, Yang and Long, 2017:4). Storytelling describes cultural and social activities which are narrated through events and shared experiences in time, for educational or entertainment purposes. It continues to be a concept which is evident within many branding and marketing campaigns of the 21st century (Paquette, Yang and Long, 2017:4).

1.10 DELIMITATIONS

Theofanidis and Fountouki (2018:157) refer to research delimitations as pre-set restrictions or boundaries which a study adheres to, in an effort for a researcher to have more control in conducting and completing the research timeously. For this qualitative study in particular, spatial and content delimitations were set.

Spatial delimitation

The findings of the study are restricted to contemporary ready-to-wear, entrepreneurial fashion brands in South Africa only.

Content delimitation

The study has been primarily concerned with the concepts of brand storytelling, brand aesthetics and entrepreneurial marketing of the 14 fashion brands which were investigated for the purposes of this research only.

1.11 DISSERTATION OUTLINE

Chapter 1 - Introduction

The chapter introduces the study and includes a rationale to how the entrepreneur fashion designers use creative brand storytelling and brand aesthetics to communicate ready-to-wear fashion for men and women's markets. Moreover, Chapter 1 provides explanations which justify why this research was conducted – by proposing the research problem, research purpose, research questions, and selected methodology, including the study delimitations.

Chapter 2 - Literature review

Chapter 2 presents a review of scholarship – conceptual and theoretical framework. The theory relates to the use of creative brand storytelling and brand aesthetics. These establish an understanding regarding the communication aspects behind brand storytelling and brand aesthetics. Theory included in this literature review addresses the research questions and justifies the study credibility in the latter parts of the dissertation.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

The methodology chapter reports on the overall procedures and methods undertaken in conducting the research investigation.

Chapter 4 - Findings and interpretations

In Chapter 4, the research findings and discussions thereof are presented. Primary data which was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews is reported. In the latter parts of the chapter, the key findings are discussed in detail.

Chapter 5 - Conclusion

As the final part of the dissertation, the chapter comprises the restatement of purpose, conclusion on research objectives, summary of findings, possible explanation of research findings and implications of research findings. At the end of the chapter an overview summary of dissertation chapters, limitations of the study, recommendations for future research and practical applications are presented.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The research profiles contemporary South African fashion brands which use story-meaning, beauty and aesthetics to 'weave in' signifiers and narratives of time through clothing and collective consumer dress culture. The dimension of brand in this study probes the concept of brand aesthetics and brand storytelling as two key methods of planned brand contact strategies and narrative-driven branding. The inquiry into these three concepts was made by examining the entrepreneurial marketing, brand storytelling activities and brand aesthetics that are undertaken by South African fashion entrepreneur designers, and further intended to explore the brand aesthetics tactics used. The structure of this literature review consists of part one and two. Part one presents the conceptual framework. Four fundamental constructs of the study are presented, namely brand storytelling, aesthetic response, brand aesthetics and entrepreneurial marketing. In part two, the theoretical framework engages various scholarships which expand on the study's overall theoretical orientation. This is structured with much consideration to the conceptual framework, research problem and convictions through literature which discusses the research at great length.

Randolph (2009:2) defines a literature review as an evaluation of seminal scholarship which discusses critical theories of phenomena. This literature review comprises a conceptual and theoretical framework.

This literature review chapter is conceptual and theoretical in approach and is presented in two parts. Part one presents the conceptualisation of key constructs as the selected structure which best informed the progression and argument of the research problem under investigation. The study proposes brand storytelling, aesthetic response, brand aesthetics and entrepreneurial marketing as the main constructs of this research. This conceptual framework as part one provides a detailed explanation of the main constructs using critical theories and empirical research (Adom, Hussein and Joe, 2018:439) in an effort to justify the reasoning of how the identified research problem as introduced in Chapter 1 was explored.

In part two of this literature review, the theoretical framework is presented. The framework delineates various literature which underpins the scope of the research problem, the interrelation of constructs in focus (Carnie, 2018:7) and the overall logical orientation of the study purpose, questions and objectives. The literature engages seminal theories in turn. These are brand storytelling theory, brand aesthetics theory, ready-to-wear menswear and womenswear collections theory, clothing as communication theory, the fashion business landscape-entrepreneurship theory, and finally, the landscape of fashion in South Africa theory. Introductory theory towards understanding where this research falls as a fashion brand communication study, in the context of planned brand contact strategies and narrative branding is discussed first in part one.

2.2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Rocco and Plakhotnik (2009:122) suggest that qualitative conceptual frameworks map out the study, based on empirical studies and relevant scholarship which also indicate how research constructs relate. In this study, the conceptual framework was organised by theme. As the study falls within the discipline of fashion branding, communication and storytelling, befitting theory pertaining to planned brand contact strategies, narrative-driven branding and brand activation are discussed first.

2.2.1 Planned brand contact strategies and narrative-driven branding

Brands are considered as instruments in everyday life given their ability to help individuals express a story and sense of inner self (Carroll, 2008:146). In South Africa, examples of eponymous entrepreneur fashion designers of ready-to-wear menswear and womenswear brands include David Tlale, Thebe Magugu, Rich Mnisi and MaXhosa Africa by Laduma Ngxogolo. Traditionally, the decision of a consumer to buy into fashion brands is largely dictated by the brands' level of impact and in them influencing the choice of the consumer in selecting a certain product and leaving another (Glanfield, 2018:4). In the fashion industry, 'the brand' is a means of identification with certain fashion trends, styles and ways of life (Završnik and Potocan, 2020). A good brand has a clear identity and is a strategic move for entrepreneurs. Sammut-Bonnici (2015:1) defines the term brand as physical and abstract properties created to single out "a product, service, person, place or organisation" from competitors within a particular market. In other words, a brand is

projected through a concept or tangible elements in order to attach a certain look or perception to an individual, area or business. Nhedzi (2020:2) explains that “brand goes beyond programmes, services, products and displays; rather, it encompasses everything else about an organisation, including reputation, culture and core values. As such, it is not simply advertising or marketing.” In a similar vein, the definition of brand according to Methanuntakul (2010:52) refers to a unique identity of an individual, entity or a product tailored to show its strongest and trustworthy “promise” to the end user. In context of the two definitions, this study conceptualises brand first, as a ‘living’ concept and a visual source in time defined by an existing enterprise; product; story; distinct aesthetic and quality standard in a marketplace, for targeted consumers. This study suggests that fashion designers assume the position to constantly form narratives and allow their consumer to experience the idea of dress on an emotional level. In turn, using consumer brand activations becomes significant in the creation and selling of aesthetic attire beyond the idea of them being considered solely as products of utility. In discussing this further, the next section expands on the theme of brand activation.

2.2.2 Brand activation

Saeed, Zameer, Tufail and Ahmad (2015:94) define brand activation as an “inter-active” marketing practice which “activates” real-time brand experiences that can potentially yield consumer interest and a heightened sense of emotional attachment to brand. As the study explored the concept of entrepreneurial marketing, brand activation becomes integral in elevating fashion brand consciousness (Saeed *et al.*, 2015:94). Through brand activation, the experiential aspect indexes information about a brand in the mind of the consumer (Gunawardane and Thilina, 2020:69; Ridho, 2020:30). Brand activation efforts are integrated through experiences and are then monitored through consumer behaviour (Dissanayake and Gunawardane, 2018:37). The purpose of such a multi-dimensional branding approach, forms the basis to connect brand to individuals by emotional and sensory content through vision, feel and touch (Dissanayake and Gunawardane, 2018:37). Perception determines the memory of a brand or how it is best remembered by consumers. Even if this is the case, only half the work is done there, considering the presence of more factors to contend with (Pogorzelski, 2018). It is imperative to keep igniting this memory of how individuals truly recall a brand, given its significant influence

on consumer preference and choice (Pogorzelski, 2018). Essentially, appropriate connective stimuli create the pathway which directs the consumer towards the brand (Dissanayake and Gunawardane, 2018:37). Pogorzelski (2018:42) mentions the following nine variations of mental stimulations in how they facilitate effective processing of information to memorise a brand, and register it to the conscious mind:

- Stimulations which best complement different product groups, and those which resonate with consumer motivations;
- Stimulations which, as they make the mind more aware, register information easily to the mind database;
- Stimulations which evoke positive emotive responses;
- Stimulations which register information seamlessly to the mind database;
- Stimulations which are significantly different to the pre-existing mind database;
- Stimulations which work on a subconscious level through emotive 'hints' in order to influence behaviour;
- Visual stimulations;
- Multi-sensory stimulations; and
- Stimulations which form a sense of positive mental harmony

A significant brand should be within reasonable reach and its perceived identity should meet a certain criterion (Methanuntakul, 2010:47). Through these mental stimulations, people have increasingly become accustomed to fashion brands as personal markers of meaning, social capital and inclusion in social circles (Carroll, 2008:148). In particular, premium branded fashion clothing could possibly allude to one's occupational status and position within society (Carroll, 2008:152). Amatulli *et al.* (2015:344) put this in perspective by explaining that being in possession of premium branded items at times evokes a sense of intrinsic validation for the wearer, regardless of their intended basic functionality or display. On a basic level, the brand acts as a tool which singles out and essentially represents a single product from others (Glanfield, 2018:4). Overall, a brand constantly reverts messages to its initial creator or provider by communicating the message, benefits and value based on the consumer's behaviour towards a certain product. It can then be argued that a brand does not create itself but requires adequate

and appropriate marketing channels to reach and attract the right consumers (Glanfield, 2018:4). The next section brings focus to the conceptualisation of key constructs brand storytelling, aesthetic response, brand aesthetics and entrepreneurial marketing.

2.3 CONCEPTUALISATION OF KEY CONSTRUCTS

Green (2014:36) asserts that conceptualising research constructs comprises literature which defines them; discusses various theories as well as the assumptions which best informed the research purpose. This section, as the conceptualisation of key constructs, presents a discussion of four themes pertinent to the study in turn. Brand storytelling is explored first.

2.3.1 Brand storytelling

Literature suggests different definitions of storytelling. It is also clear that storytelling can play out in different environments through cultural and social subject matter. The philosophical convictions of this concept are rooted in storybooks where human beings experience it as early as infancy. Scholarship continues to use such a medium as the foundation of basic communication and in the exchange of information (Jones, 2006; Ochoa and Osier, 1993). Hwang (2017:12) suggests that brand storytelling and brand-conscious individuals “bring a brand story to life” as opposed to ‘conventional’ brand strategies which typically place emphasis on logical-thinking. A living brand story signifies meaning and inner value by “speaking” its own unique language (Hwang, 2017:12).

In defining the concept of brand storytelling, it should first be mentioned that these are two separate terms: brand and storytelling. When combining the two, Delgado-Ballester and Fernández-Sabiote (2016:117) define it as a powerful brand communication strategy which plays out through a narrative standpoint. It becomes the essential tool to help people construct their own brand experiences based on a convincing and persuasive brand story (Delgado-Ballester and Fernández-Sabiote, 2016:117). In a similar perspective, Paquette, Yang and Long (2017:4) argue that marketers use brand storytelling as a way for brands to be authentic in defining “who they are and what they stand for.”

This study suggests that entrepreneur fashion designers assume roles as “living mirrors” within a particular society (Preiholt, 2012:181) by using design as symbolic references to construct and reflect lived cultures, through creative stories within a location such as South Africa. South African fashion stories exist within and beyond many spaces, in rural and urban areas (Lewis, 2010:74). For instance, people constantly consume its diverse narratives through shared content inclusive of fashion, collective dress culture, pop-culture, media, books, film, art, music, performance and design.

Woodside (2010:532) explains the significance of storytelling and its effect on the human brain according to five important principles. First, the “database” of human memory processes information through story-indexing. Secondly, story-indexing has an effect on memory which can link a story to lived experiences at a specific time and place. Thirdly, a story can bring a sense of comfort, in that it can be repeated, redefined and reinterpreted as a way of reliving negative or positive emotions. Fourth, storytelling can take place through archetypes by bringing characters to life. Fifth, repetition is essential for clarity in storytelling as a way to reinforce the idea of these archetypes.

Marketers continue to lean towards story as a strong force to meet targets and drive such effective brand messages (Pereira, 2019:146). Packaging an authentic story as a branding strategy places a brand further apart from competitors in overly-saturated spaces and lowers the chances of it being overlooked for alternative or similar brands (Sammot-Bonnici, 2015:1). Furthermore, Carroll (2008:150) mentions that stories actually anchor a brand around persuasive narrative(s) through aesthetic visuals and strong embedded meanings which can ultimately trigger a positive response and increase consumer purchase intention.

The research proposed four key constructs in the conceptual framework. Brand storytelling, Aesthetic response, Brand aesthetics and Entrepreneurial Marketing. The four constructs were selected as they underpin the entire research topic. The constructs are key anchor points which also underpin the research focus in turn. It was imperative to look into these constructs by reviewing existing literature and further looking into the empirical findings of past studies to examine what is reported within each area of knowledge. A Polish mixed-method study by Grębosz-Krawczyk, (2020) found that

consumer storytelling in fashion brand management strengthens business-to-consumer relationships. The purpose of the study was to look into the advantages of consumer storytelling through word-of-mouth communication for 'nostalgic' brands. The study looked into a combination of Polish and other international brands which have long been in existence thus considered 'nostalgic brands.' Empirical findings suggest that brands which are considered 'nostalgic' are trans-generational. The study looked at the concept of storytelling from the perspective of a consumer. The study was conducted amongst 1000 Polish consumers. Through the use of word-of-mouth communication, consumers find solace in nostalgic trans-generational brands. Such brands carry a sense of comfort, a remembrance of the past for individuals. As a result, this encourages positive word-of-mouth communication. Positive brand stories can be spoken using word-of-mouth communication about these nostalgic brands.

The study of Von Wachenfeldt (2021) looked into digital storytelling in relation to luxury fashion brands. The research explored 'The Rich Kids of Instagram' social media page. The study analysed signifiers reminiscent of luxury. This constitutes the following. The Rich Kids of Instagram social media page itself. Luxury fashion brand apparel. High-end modes of transport such as their sports cars and private jets. The study found that that such signifiers communicate luxury in a modern digital platform such as Instagram and encourage the psychological performative nature to flaunt objects of luxury in today's self-indulgent era.

2.3.2 Aesthetic response

Kim (1998:52) defines the term aesthetics as the artistic ideation of creative concepts which can be communicated through visual or abstract forms. Jiang and Cai (2013:405) suggest that the term 'aesthetic' holds contrasting convictions in literature. Objects, people or art can be qualified as 'beautiful' or 'ugly' to the observer. When referring to fashion in particular, visual aesthetic stimuli such as colour, texture, design and shape, which are seen as 'beautiful' or 'pleasant to look at' evoke a positive aesthetic response from an onlooker, as many cognitive properties come into play. An aesthetic response induces emotions and feelings towards an object, all which originate from intrinsic hedonistic motivations. Hartatin and Simanjuntak (2016:34) explain 'hedonism' as a

psychological term which states that human desire is driven by motives of gratification and pleasure-seeking experiences. In the context of fashion, this can be seen in compulsive behaviour towards a consumer's favoured fashion brand such as repeat-purchasing of its product range. A positive aesthetic response to garments may allude to a wearer's sartorial dress sense and preference of visual characteristics in clothing. On a very simplistic level, aesthetic psychology asserts that when a consumer perceives a garment to be their 'taste', it automatically solicits a positive reaction towards the garment (Jiang and Cai, 2013:406). The inherent nature of fashion brands, dress culture and fashion movements are understood through visual cues rooted in ideals of a fashion designer's aesthetic (Fiore, Moreno and Kimle, 1996:169). The conscious fashion dresser may ultimately perceive a designer's brand aesthetic as 'beautiful' and make the decision to purchase this particular aesthetic.

2.3.3 Brand aesthetics

Mazzalovo, (2010:2) defines brand aesthetics as a set of differentiating features and qualities created to have a positive effect on the human senses. This concept first came to light in the early 1990s from semiology expert Jean-Marie Floch. Entwistle (2002:321) argues that consumers have adapted to an "aesthetic economy" where taste and sartorial clothing choices in dress and image are strongly associated to socio-cultural influences. In particular, the process of producing clothing itself integrates many aesthetic elements drawn from historical to modern and postmodern artefacts, which enable all wearers to assign relative meanings, as participants of an aesthetic economy (Entwistle, 2002:319).

Fashion can also be consumed through the zeitgeist as seasonal design styles reflected as the signs of time (Krause, 2019:1). Krause (2019:1) describes the zeitgeist as a dominating ideal, theme or mood of a particular season or era. In this regard, a fashion designer can be seen as the 'narrator' of the zeitgeist through their brand story, aesthetic and collections (Osipova, 2015:6). Approaching the zeitgeist through a sense of creativity by interpreting its signs through the creation of contemporary fashion commodities proves to be instrumental in the entrepreneurial approach of fashion enterprises (Ruppert-Stroescu and Hawley, 2014:10). Designers work through a creative process of producing

design and aesthetic content to reflect the brand value and for the purposes of marketing their brands to their desired audience (Andersson and Warell, 2015:2192).

2.3.4 Entrepreneurial marketing

The term 'entrepreneurial marketing' refers to the marketing activities of small and new ventures (Nwankwo and Kanyangale, 2020). Entrepreneurial marketing takes the form of innovativeness, risk-taking, proactiveness and the pursuit of opportunities with regards to the currently available resources for small and new ventures.

Entrepreneurial Fashion Designers are exploring techniques at their disposal to market their creative work and fashion products such as engaging online content and exclusively-designed capsule collections (Thomas, Brooks and McGouran, 2020:387). Artistic entrepreneurs commonly gravitate towards being self-employed. This allows them freedom to explore and establish their enterprises in a less traditional way, without needing elaborate and complex operational systems (Kurz, 2010). Creative individuals such as fashion designers are often directed by intuition and intrinsic motivation. Characteristics such as having a strong passion for what one does and loving it are what describes the essence of their careers. This also alludes to their innate nature of being emotionally invested in their work. A creative fashion designer represents their brand every waking day of their life. Creating authentic and meaningful work allows the designer's psyche to come to life. Meaningful and authentic work is produced in turn. The designer's story and aesthetic come through effortlessly, and can be seen successfully through their capsule collections (Kurz, 2010). Entrepreneurial Marketing is applied by entrepreneurial individuals who are decisive in circumstances defined by simplified systems and methods which allow individuals to be flexible. The simplified systems revolve around a quick feedback loop, narrow decision-making loops, clear understanding and quick reverts to customers or client demands (Nwankwo and Kanyangale, 2020). In fashion, entrepreneurial action is mandatory as it's marked by marketing focused on innovative-thinking, calculated risks, and being proactive in operating an enterprise with limited resources. Literature suggests that the strategic role of EM is not about relying on one marketing technique but rather adopting a marketing attitude that goes against the grain of 'conventional' marketing gimmicks (Nwankwo and Kanyangale, 2020).

Entrepreneurial Marketing avoids certain principles that are typically used by large companies. Such a marketing practice enables small-scale enterprises to operate and function in spaces where competition remains stiff and volatile (Gilmore, McAuley, Miles and Pattinson, 2020). Entrepreneurial Marketing favours eccentrics and ‘new’ marketing techniques which aid emerging brands in gaining momentum within highly competitive industries (Whalen *et al.*, 2016). Focus is placed on exploring non-linear, often fluid and imaginative marketing tactics (Nwankwo and Kanyangale, 2020).

Part two of this literature review, which follows next, presents the theoretical framework of the study.

2.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Lederman and Lederman (2015:593) assert that qualitative theoretical frameworks always align with the research paradigm in turn. This constitutes a process of reviewing empirical studies and literature, as well as paying close attention to emergent possible gaps in scholarship (Lederman and Lederman, 2015:594). This study is explored through a constructivism philosophical paradigm. The constructivism philosophical stance suggests that the constructivist learns information through “mental reconstruction” as a way to understand their world and own sense of reality (Olusegun, 2015:66). As theoretical frameworks articulate a focused theoretical scope, theories are used to assert a “new” understanding and disposition of phenomena (Collins and Stockton, 2018:2). This present theoretical framework proposes various literature sources in relation to six areas of knowledge of this research, namely brand storytelling theory, brand aesthetics theory, ready-to-wear menswear and womenswear collections, clothing as communication, the fashion business landscape – entrepreneurship, and finally, the landscape of fashion in South Africa.

2.4.1 Brand storytelling theory

Storytelling is favoured as an essential instrument which demonstrates brand values. It nurtures a space where brands can interact with consumers and cultivates strong connections between the two parties (Fog *et al.*, 2010). As a marketing concept, storytelling creates room for the brand to exist within a narrative space (Rossolatos, 2020:4). This confers brands with symbols of a semiotic nature, meaning, and reinforces

a strong brand image (Gurzki, Schlatter and Woisetschläger, 2019:401). The intent of semiotics lies in the expression of meaning. Gurzki *et al.* (2019:402) define semiotic psychology as the relationship between signs and signifiers which exists to help make sense of the world around us. Fashion designers create their art based on an acquired aesthetic. This is a form of storytelling. It tells a tale regarding different parts of the brand and enables the designer to communicate with the consumer. Fashion becomes symbolic by adding narration to attire that adorns the dresser's body. The expressive nature of clothing and dress culture itself remains significant in fashion brand communication (Gurzki *et al.*, 2019:407).

A story embeds narrative. The narrative element means the story concept is only abstract. The manifestation or performance aspect thereof happens through brand storytelling (Scolari, 2009:591). For fashion designers in particular, storytelling is a “cognitive construct”, which in the literal sense enables the conscious fashion dresser to see a designer's aesthetic and interpret what it means (Scolari, 2009:591). A contemporary fashion brand is meant to communicate this aesthetic. It is reflected in characteristics such as style, textures, online content and a basic technique such as the use of colour (Scolari, 2009:600). In fashion, it is important for the story to be expressed through such visual material, or in tangible, wearable attire (Scolari, 2009:600). It can then be argued that the art of storytelling anchors the brand around themes and characters which define the world or setting the brand exists in (Scolari, 2009:600). Clothing then attaches narrative in textile form (Buse and Twigg, 2019:1116). Narratives are accounts which define life and brands as experienced by people. These help individuals understand brands on an emotional level and contribute to forming their social and performative discourse (Buse and Twigg, 2019:1117). This in turn provides a sense of identity for the conscious wearer. It communicates an individual's style and aesthetic preference. The tactility and functionality aspects of clothing add much depth to this narrative, affording the wearer an opportunity to tell their story through attire (Buse and Twigg, 2019:1118).

2.4.2 Brand aesthetics theory

According to Chunyan and Yue (2015:126), aesthetics in fashion can be incorporated as the combination of artistic designs to enhance a brand identity. This has been previously

seen in the partnership of American fashion designer, Marc Jacobs, with Japanese mixed media illustrator, Yayoi Kusama, in their release of a joint fashion collection in 2012 (Chunyan and Yue, 2015:127). The main significance of aesthetics is to portray an attractive appearance in fashion goods (Chon, 2013:4). The brand itself is regarded as the most crucial asset or aesthetic of identifying a fashion designer (Jin and Cedrola, 2017:2). Brand, as an asset in fashion, influences the brand identity and consumer buying behaviour significantly (Jin and Cedrola, 2017:2). The strategic use of aesthetics as either tangible or non-tangible elements, can have an effect on brand performance (Efer, 2010:188). A visual brand identity aesthetic hinges on visual features of recognition and identification, where an appealing image, visuals and graphics are uniquely designed (Olăhut and Comiati, 2010:412). The concept of aesthetics has been covered through extensive literature in many different angles, and therefore, pinpointing one definitive definition still remains a challenge to date (Venkatesh, Joy, Sherry and Deschenes, 2010:460). Aesthetics and fashion evolve through time in that both concepts change according to prevailing trends (*zeitgeist*) and sub-cultural influences (Venkatesh *et al.*, 2010:460). The term aesthetics can be defined as a preoccupation with beauty in any form and themes strongly associated with the perception of art and design through sense, appeal, visual imagery, proportion, balance, form, colour, symmetry and harmony (Kuusik, 2017:9). This study argues that anything can be classified or justified as an 'aesthetic'. Furthermore, it assumes that the interpretation of art, design and beauty is not fixed, but fluid. It takes shape through subjective reasoning and a level of personal understanding.

2.4.3 Ready-to-wear menswear and womenswear collections

It is important to understand and acknowledge that labels and pronouns pertaining to people, gender and sexuality have expanded in recent years. This study in particular only focused on genderism pertinent to male and female dress, classified as menswear and womenswear. Gender binarism suggests two constructs in the fashion system. These are commonly referred to as 'masculinity' and 'femininity' (Lau, 2018:3). Menswear subsequently caters for males, while on the contrasting end, womenswear is the dress code ascribed to females (Lau, 2018:3). Womenswear and the performative nature of how females dress naturally embraces contours of the female figure. This includes the

bust area, hips, waist, and backside. Style features in pattern and garment creation are seen through softer curves and less angular panels. Menswear silhouettes on the other hand, are less form-fitting and non-voluminous. Masculine style features are more angular and structured to conform less closely to the male figure (Lau, 2018:8).

In fashion retail, 'ready-to-wear' is a fashion term given to clothing that is readily available on-demand in-store (Pérez,Queiruga-Dios, Martínez and Del Rey, 2020:3). In most cases, ready-to-wear garments are produced in a factory setting. However, contemporary fashion designers can specialise in ready-to-wear collections produced in-house within a controlled setting, in very limited units to maintain designer collection exclusivity. A designer can decide the look-and-feel of a capsule collection and number of units per design in their speciality of ready-to-wear. The clothing is pre-made and commonly retails at relatively premium price points (Pérez *et al.*, 2020:4). Fashion and aesthetic attire qualify clothing as a form of communication which helps the conscious dresser to express a sense of individuality.

2.4.4 Clothing as communication

Research which discusses fashion and garments as communication is vast and extensive in many fields (Memela, 2017:9). Memela (2017:18) states that a garment is only considered a mere object, until it reaches a fashion wearer where a sense of meaning is embedded to it by an individual or collective. Subcultural forces form part of semiotics consisting of signs and signifiers which invoke a meaning-making process to match personal values of individuals (Memela, 2017:18). Garments are considered as "visual texts," understood through semiotics. Through clothing, individuals who are active fashion participants embody garments and attach a level of new meaning to clothing (Tucureanu, 2014:8). The "negotiation of meaning" in fashion and clothing tackles personal identity according to social binaries, "femininity and masculinity, authenticity and fakeness, accepting or rejecting beauty ideals, gender stereotypes, nationality and race" (Kuusik, 2017:1). Clothing is a visual signifier which signifies where an individual falls within the confines of society as a form of "cultural capital" (Memela, 2017:9). Memela (2017:8) states cultural capital is the extent to which individuals attach labels of monetary value and social approval in their personal selection of cultural assets; and how one prefers to

portray the chosen cultural assets. Cultural assets are prevalently referred to as a person's level of education, character, dress sense, clothing and physical appearance (Memela, 2017:8).

2.4.5 The fashion business entrepreneurship landscape

The business of creating garments, fashion adornments and unique fabrication continues to build in the African continent (Kurz, 2010). The dynamism of the fashion industry constantly creates room for trends, and pushes creators to make meaningful fashion commodities. This becomes significant in the fashion design sector in particular where designers can establish and run profitable enterprises.

The rise of entrepreneurship in the apparel and fashion industry continues to bring out entrepreneur-fashion designers (Ünay and Zehir, 2012:315). It is understood that entrepreneurship occurs in varying fields and circumstances. In general, an entrepreneur can be defined as a self-employed individual who identified a gap in a particular market, then went on to establish a business which fills that gap for financial gain (Ünay and Zehir, 2012:316). For this study in particular, all 14 participants were self-employed entrepreneurs. These individuals own their fashion brands and essentially 'do their own thing' in fashion designing in a flagship studio setting, boutique or leased store.

Entrepreneurship is fundamental in the world of fashion as it comprises many small sectors which make up the entire industry. Clothing and fashion brands alike compete in the fashion market. In order to position themselves strategically, fashion designer entrepreneurs start their own clothing labels as a business. In them operating such businesses, many challenges arise within their business landscape. The fashion entrepreneur navigates through many personal and external challenges (Kurz, 2010).

2.4.6 Overview of the South African Fashion industry

South Africa's fashion industry was first established in the Western Cape in the 1900s and was later expanded to Gauteng province, "in the 1920s and 1930s" (Matsoma and Ambe, 2017:2). Adinolfi, Tichaawa and Banda (2018:250) mention that the three most fashion-conscious metropolitan cities in South Africa are Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town. Over the years, the rise of Johannesburg as one of the country's recognised

fashion capital, marked the beginning of renowned fashion designers such as Khensani Nkosi, owner and entrepreneur designer of the Stoned Cherrie womenswear brand (Matsoma and Ambe, 2017:3). In the early 1920s, French designer Paul Poiret was considered the first early adopter of the 'African aesthetic' in most of his clothing collections (Matsoma and Ambe, 2017:2). The early influence of this 'alternative' aesthetic in Western fashion gave the world a first glance of African designs which resulted in the emergence of many fashion designers within many parts of the continent, including South Africa (Matsoma and Ambe, 2017:3). The fashion economy in South Africa is driven by three major stakeholders: retail distributors, fashion designers as well as clothing production factories (Matsoma and Ambe, 2017:2). Fashion design can be defined as an artistic skill which concerns the creation of clothing and accessories through a customised design process (Matsoma and Ambe, 2017:2). In almost 20 years, South African fashion retail markets generated revenue to an approximate value of R50 billion, with the rate increasing at almost 10 percent yearly as early as the late 1990s to 2010 (Dlodlo, 2014:191). Given these figures, Dlodlo (2014:191) further explains that future prospects within the South African fashion landscape can thrive on exclusive fashion design collections to cater for specialised markets on a local and international scale.

Local designer fashion brands are purchased for various reasons. Oftentimes, some sartorial brand preferences are tied to psychological fulfilment, such as the desire to be 'different' and portray a sense of 'uniqueness' as a form of social currency (Dlodlo, 2014:193). In nearly six years, the South African fashion landscape has experienced significant growth (South African Fashion Week Annual Report, 2018:7). South African fashion designers are gearing towards being key participants in narrowing the gap between local commercial retail markets and the increasing consumer demand of local designer wear (South African Fashion Week Annual Report, 2018:7). As one of Southern Africa's biggest cities, Johannesburg's fashion design continues to develop many initiatives (Adinolfi *et al.*, 2018:249). The local fashion industry contributes through many of its various activities within the creative aesthetic economy and continues to expand clothing distribution chains in the country (South African Fashion Week Annual Report, 2018).

South African Fashion Week is considered a prominent platform that showcases local designer collections and emerging designers in many parts of the country. Currently, fashion week occurs over nearly seven days twice a year, where designers receive the opportunity to show their seasonal collections on the runway to key industry participants inclusive of commercial retail and exclusive boutique buyers, fashion editorial writers, personal shoppers and private clients (South African Fashion Week Annual Report, 2018:7). Oftentimes, seasonal collections from designers offer a well-balanced combination of both menswear and womenswear collections as tracked by the following statistics: On record, there are almost 290 existing entrepreneur fashion designer brands in the country. In the year 2018 alone, nearly 115 clothing collections were showcased at SA Fashion Week of which almost 60 were womenswear designers and almost 30 were menswear designers (South African Fashion Week Annual Report, 2018:7). The African continent has repeatedly taken centre stage as a rich hub of fashion talent (Langevang, 2011:2). In particular, the South African Fashion Week Annual Report mentions many South African entrepreneur fashion designers and spans a range of ready-to-wear menswear and womenswear, by eponymous and non-eponymous fashion designers who showcase their collections at fashion week.

The main purpose or intention of the study was to embrace the menswear and womenswear value chain to understand the range, and diversity, if possible, of how South African entrepreneur fashion designers take on the creation of clothing through sex and gender as parallel constructs which collide through the use of fashion, storytelling, aesthetics and trends. Fashion designers and fashion-oriented brands are homing in on the art of creating compelling content and telling engaging stories through narratives which instantly hook people in. When executed effectively, it opens up a whole world of creativity. Understanding the deeper meaning of fashion and clothing is achieved through channels of communication which exceed the conventional knowledge of tangible materials such as textiles and ornamentation (Inglessis, 2008:11). Studies have argued that communication in fashion design operates as a semiotic system where signifiers in clothing and fashion are embedded as a 'language' of both literal and symbolic expressions (Inglessis, 2008:11).

According to Lewis (2010:73), South Africa has a decorated historic narrative which throughout the years, has influenced many positive developments in the country, including its fashion landscape to date. Furthermore, Lewis (2010:73) explains that this continues to birth various trends in the consumption of commercial goods and services as well as the social experiments connected to the notions of sartorial style and fashion preferences (Lewis, 2010:74). Ncgobo (2016:22) states that fashion and clothing reveal societal cultural dynamics and garments as social “cultural artefacts.” South African fashion designers continue to bring much needed attention to local and intercontinental talent regardless of the many existing challenges of the industry (South African Fashion Week Annual Report, 2018:7). Amongst many major factors contributing to this, is that local designers have adapted to digital and online engagement with consumers as a way to increase their market and brand visibility (South African Fashion Week Annual Report, 2018:17). All local entrepreneur fashion designer brands are anchored around their own unique brand story which should ultimately provide a clear indication of their narrative, identity and brand aesthetic (South African Fashion Week Annual Report, 2018:28).

2.5 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This literature review evaluated seminal scholarship pertinent to this research which profiled 14 contemporary South African fashion brands. Part one as the conceptual framework reviewed empirical studies and literature which indicated how the research themes relate. It was outlined that the study falls within the taxonomy of fashion branding, communication, and storytelling. Relevant theory with regards to planned contact strategies, narrative-driven branding and brand activation was included to create a better understanding of the study taxonomy. In the conceptualisation of key constructs, four were identified in turn. Brand storytelling, aesthetic response, brand aesthetics and entrepreneurial marketing were defined and discussed through literature. Part two as the theoretical framework presented a focused theoretical scope with the goal of asserting a new understanding and disposition of fashion as a phenomenon. Theory reviewed in this section looked at six areas of knowledge in turn. These were brand storytelling theory, brand aesthetics theory, ready-to-wear menswear and womenswear collections theory, clothing as communication, the fashion business landscape-entrepreneurship, and finally,

the landscape of fashion in South Africa theory. The next chapter presents the methodology.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this methodology chapter is to present how this study was designed and conducted. It provides a framework of the steps that were taken to address the research problem and provides reasoning for all the methodological decisions chosen. This chapter begins by introducing the nature of this qualitative research, a philosophy applied in studying lived human experiences. Chapter 3 reports on the procedures and methods which informed the study. Noor (2008:1602) explains that selecting a suitable methodology to follow is largely dependent on the nature of the research phenomena. As this study was exploratory, qualitative procedures and methods were applied. Aspers and Cortè (2019:145) define qualitative research as research which has been carried out through methodological methods that are non-numerical. Moreover, Busetto, Wick and Gumbinger (2020:2) assert that qualitative research is about creating 'context' where phenomena is constantly open for interpretation as its techniques are considered more flexible than quantitative research.

3.2 RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY

This study is a qualitative research project explored through a constructivism philosophical paradigm. The guiding principles of this paradigm are largely influenced by the knowledge and subjective perceptions of human subjects assumed to have their own personal thoughts, comprehension, views, understandings and experiences of "social realities" (Al-Saadi, 2014:3). Constructivism concerns how individuals formulate their own level of interpretation by understanding their particular world and personal experiences through a self-assessment of those personal experiences (Adom, Yeboah and Ankrah, 2016:2). Creswell and Miller (2000:125) suggest that the constructivist thinker rationalises their reality through an open-ended and subjectively interpretive way of thinking. The fundamental principle of this philosophical paradigm, at its grassroots, is how the constructivist compiles learnt information by "constructing" one's own sense of meaning

(Adom *et al.*, 2016:2). Furthermore, Adom *et al.* (2016:2) explain that this learnt information is comprehended through a mental process of either “accommodation or assimilation” as a type of “new” knowledge.

The constructivism paradigm is selected as a suitable philosophy based on the following. Fashion Designers are human subjects who are involved in the zeitgeist of fashion trends. Therefore, a constructivist paradigm is informed by mental models where the mind creates knowledge through an experienced reality. An individual plays an active role in influencing that reality (Riegler, 2012:238). The study proposed brand storytelling, aesthetic response, brand aesthetics and entrepreneurial marketing as the main constructs of the research. The constructivism paradigm assists the study to explore how entrepreneurial fashion designers communicate brand aesthetics and creative brand storytelling based on the following logic. Entrepreneurial fashion designers learn and develop knowledge according to their own cognitive systems as human subjects. This all takes place through a mental model which creates one’s basic understanding of their particular world or reality. Mental models create neural creative complexes (Riegler, 2012:239) that influence the manner in which and entrepreneurial Fashion Designer thinks and perceives their work- even for complex concepts such as brand aesthetics and brand storytelling. In essence, it can be argued that an entrepreneurial Fashion Designer’s cognitive system and creative complex enable the process of building a brand aesthetic thus applying a creative way of thinking in packaging and selling their brand story.

The creative mind assimilates and accommodates new information on a daily basis. A Fashion Designer then explores this learnt information in different ways of producing clothing articles based on their levels of inspiration. Lived experiences are then translated from abstract to tangible, from an ocean of influences. For instance, pop-culture, stories, politics and music. Ultimately, this results in a designer ‘constructing’ garments as visual signifiers of this zeitgeist (Ngcobo, 2016:4). The construction of new knowledge through assimilation describes how an individual adds new information and experiences within a pre-existing index of past experiences without overwriting the old – but instead, allows them to coexist as the ‘new’ (Adom *et al.*, 2016:3). In a practical perspective, Preiholt

(2012:181) states that designers as living beings, become acculturated to many spaces and environments in society, where these influences are then made 'visual' through their work (Preiholt, 2012:181). Essentially, the designer feeds off this information and assumes a role as a "living mirror" of that world or particular society (Preiholt, 2012:181).

3.3 RESEARCH APPROACH

The research followed an exploratory approach in an effort to delve deeper into the various dimensions of the study. Carnie (2018:19) explains that an exploratory research design is undertaken in an effort to reveal missing variables and unclear nuances of an existing phenomenon. Lietz, Langer and Furman (2006: 443) suggest that establishing trustworthiness in exploratory studies occurs when findings are reported accurately as the true sentiments of the respondents. In attempt to strengthen the trustworthiness of this study, procedures of validity and reliability are discussed in-depth in section 3.7 of this chapter.

An exploratory approach aligned with the research purpose to cultivate a deeper understanding regarding the area of knowledge, where further empirical studies can expand on. Ultimately, a research approach provides a guiding framework which informs how data will be collected and analysed (Bryman, Bell, Hirschsohn, Dos Santos, Du Toit, Masenge, van Aardt and Wagner, 2017:100). Hayes, Heit and Swendsen (2010:278) define inductive reasoning as 'logic' which is established through the process of using research data to form the research conclusion. Inductive reasoning is prevalently used in formulating research assumptions in qualitative studies where the researcher 'interprets' the data in the best possible manner to report the highest level of truth in drawing the research conclusions (Sauce and Matzel, 2017:1).

This study applied inductive reasoning as it aimed to create a deeper understanding of how the entrepreneur Fashion Designers use creative brand storytelling and brand aesthetics to communicate to their ready-to-wear markets.

3.4 POPULATION AND SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

3.4.1 Population

This study explored the brands of local fashion entrepreneur Fashion Designers. Thus, South African designer fashion brands were selected as the appropriate population. It is unrealistic to extract data from an extremely large population (Van Heerde, 2018:38). In this case, a target population needs to be identified within this large population in order to pinpoint what is referred to as the accessible target population (Carnie, 2018:21). Carnie (2018:21) defines this as a population of interest to which research findings and conclusions can be applied. Therefore, local fashion design brands were selected because this research aimed to spotlight the South African entrepreneur fashion scene. Furthermore, it was done in the interest to demonstrate how South African fashion designers are now geared towards being key participants in narrowing the gap between local commercial retail markets and the increasing consumer demand of local designer wear (SA Fashion Week Annual Report, 2018:7). Moreover, close consideration to the role of brand storytelling as one of the key research constructs is also an important factor in the selected population.

3.4.2 Sampling technique

In finding suitable participants for this study, purposive sampling was used with snowballing as a strategy. Combining the two was necessary for the nature of this study. A snowball strategy refers to the process of selection where the researcher reaches out to specific individuals who are significant to the research project; and seeks help from these individuals in order to have full accessibility to a greater target sample (Bryman *et al.*, 2017:179).

Purposive sampling is a selection process where participants or units are selected on the basis of subjectivity where each do not have an equal chance of being chosen out of a large population (Van Heerde, 2018:38). In this study, it was important to find participants that have experience and are vested in fashion brands. The snowballing strategy was used because it was assumed that people who wanted to participate in the interviews, and who have knowledge of entrepreneur fashion design for ready-to-wear were not easy to identify. A snowball strategy would then assist in finding these participants whom

ultimately, turned out to be within the researcher's reach. The participant selection process involved sending all the potential respondents an email. This was done for eligibility purposes and seeing whether they fit the description, with the aim of getting to know how they understand their careers and the South African entrepreneurial fashion scene.

A decision was taken that this research project would not only be restricted to the province of Gauteng alone, and would rather look into South Africa as a whole. The researcher took into account that a large geographical location such as The Republic of South Africa is home to many established as well as up-and-coming entrepreneur Fashion Designers. Adinolfi, Tichaawa and Banda (2018:250) suggest that the three most fashion-conscious metropolitan cities in South Africa are Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town. However, with time and money being real constraints, participants were first sought where the researcher is based which Johannesburg and then in the researcher's home province, North West.

3.4.3 Sample and sample size

South African ready-to-wear designer fashion brands were selected as the suitable sample for the study. De Greef (2015:2) mentions that in recent years, the South African fashion scene has experienced "new cultural hybrids" from designers in their quest to "redefine" or "renegotiate" the face of a "new" South African fashion aesthetic renaissance. In redefining this newness, it can be argued that designers are steadily carving out new multi-cultured South African fashion identities through their clothing brands (Memela, 2017:23) and the current zeitgeist of individual sartorial choices. Furthermore, designer ready-to-wear fashion is made accessible through exclusive collections, often retailed at premium price points which in itself determines the ultimate quality of product lines. Therefore, such brands become the most suitable sample based on these fundamental attributes to communicate one's personal identity through exclusively purchased clothing brands.

Calculating the 'adequate' sample size of a study comes based on an understanding that the researcher attempts to 'predict' if a particular number will be sufficient and powerful enough to fulfil favourable research outcomes (Shorten and Moorley, 2014:32). It was

previously mentioned that this study explored the brands of local fashion entrepreneur Fashion Designers. Therefore, South African designer fashion brands were selected as the appropriate population. The chosen sample size for this research initially was 20 South African entrepreneur fashion designers who specialise in ready-to-wear menswear and womenswear fashion brands. The study targets South African-based Fashion Designers therefore, the total population from which the 20 respondents were drawn from was the Republic of South Africa. Sample sizes are unique to each case of qualitative research (Moser and Korstjens, 2018:10). Therefore, this sample pool was limited by the researchers' time available for the data-gathering process. Moser and Korstjens (2018:11) assert that the sample size can be determined by the point of "data saturation" – meaning the point where research provides rich information on the phenomena, where recurring themes arise within a data set (Moser and Korstjens, 2018:11). For this study in particular, 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted and the data saturation point was reached after the tenth interview.

3.5. DATA COLLECTION METHOD

This section reports on the methods used to identify the suitable participants for the research and techniques used to conduct the qualitative interviews.

3.5.2 Pilot test interviews

The researcher conducted two pilot tests with two Fashion Designers prior to the main data collection phase of this research in order to ensure trustworthiness, confirmability and credibility of the qualitative data collection and analysis techniques. Interview transcripts of the two pilot interviews are included as pages 129-165 in the latter parts of the dissertation. According to Majid, Othman, Mohamad, Lim and Yusof (2017:1073), piloting in qualitative studies is significant as it first 'tests' the chosen data collection technique. Secondly, it provides the advantage of preparing the researcher for the formal data collection procedure of the major study. Thirdly, it serves as a form of practice run of conducting the actual qualitative interviews with respondents (Majid *et al.*, 2017:1074).

Planning the pilot interview process began when the literature review-writing was underway. It was important for the interview questions to be anchored on all of the proposed research constructs included in chapter two. Therefore, reading relevant

literature to have an idea of the type of questions would need to be addressed with the respondents was mandatory. As this process was underway, a list of questions was compiled, whilst being mindful of each construct and its area of knowledge. After the list of questions was compiled- these were sent to the research supervisor. Feedback was attached and the questions were returned back to the researcher. The feedback indicated that more reading was necessary and changes were required to restructure the questions. Additional reading had to be done by the researcher in order to understand the most effective manner of phrasing the interview questions. After this particular process was complete, all interview questions were amended accordingly and were sent back to the research supervisor.

Once the final questions were approved, the first Fashion Designer was contacted and he agreed to a 'quick' telephonic interview which lasted for 18 minutes. *Please see Pilot interview 1 transcript on pages 129-137. The profile of the participant constitutes the following. Brand owner and designer: JB ("Brand JB"). Date of interview: Monday, 31 August 2021. Time: 12:08 PM. Means of communication: Telephonic interview. Length of interview: 0:18:30. Gender: Male (White). Specialty: Womenswear. Location: Centurion, Gauteng.

After the first pilot interview was complete, two concerns were raised by the research supervisor. First, the duration of the interview being 18 minutes. It was suggested that each interview needed to be more conversational and needed to be between the ranges of 30-60 minutes. Secondly, the lack of probing needed to be addressed. In being in conversations with the participants, the researcher needed to follow up on what a participant mentioned if it was unfamiliar or interesting. It was also important to stay engaged in conversation to minimise confusion and not let a participant go off tangent. After discussing these concerns with the supervisor, a second pilot interview needed to be conducted. Participant two's profile constitutes the following. Brand owner and designer: D.F ("Brand DF"). Date of interview: Thursday, 19 November 2021. Time: 13:39 PM. Means of communication: Face-to-face interview. Length of interview: 0:45:25. Gender: Female (White). Specialty: Ladieswear, "timeless, classic pieces that will last you a lifetime." Location: Parkhurst, Johannesburg. The concerns raised with pilot interview 1

were rectified in pilot interview 2. The duration of the interview was 45 minutes which suggests that the interview was more conversational and more probing was done. Another factor to consider was that pilot interview 1 was done 'quick' were the respondent answered in haste. In order to rectify this in pilot interview 2, the researcher requested for the interview to be face-to-face. The participant agreed. Participant two's flagship boutique is located in Parkhurst, Johannesburg, therefore, the interview was conducted in-person at this particular location. *Please see Pilot interview 2 transcript on pages 138-165.

3.5.3 Interviews

It is well understood that two methodological frameworks are recognised in research. A quantitative and qualitative framework. Both quantitative and qualitative stances each provide a scope to achieve respective research outcomes and purposes of a given topic (Carnie, 2018:19). This study in particular was conducted through a qualitative approach. The researcher conducted 14 semi-structured in-depth interviews. Pathak and Intratat, (2012:4) explain that semi-structured interviews are a two-way communication exchange where two individuals engage openly in conversation through a set of questions that are posed to the interviewee. Dialogue of this nature fosters ground for information and sentiments to be discussed in-depth, all to cultivate a sense of understanding and deeper meaning of phenomena (Mojtahed, Nunes, Martins and Peng, 2014:87). In considering such an effect of this data collection method, semi-structured interviews were selected based on the premise that they would assist individuals to have better grounds of sharing information, as guided by their own way of constructive and critical-thinking. It is also an assertion of the constructivism paradigm which informs how individuals make sense of phenomena when probed. One's own interpretations and perceptions form a fundamental and elaborate understanding of their world (Adom, Yeboah and Ankrah, 2016:5). Selecting interviews as a data collection method was to extract complete, first-hand explanations regarding lived experiences that each respondent has on their fashion brand. In the course of each interview, the focus was on addressing their lived reality of being entrepreneurial fashion brand designers based in South Africa. There was a clear understanding of the primary data collection method. However, it became important to carry out a mini pilot test before the main study commenced. It seemed logical to explore

how set procedures would operate in the elaborate phase of the main interviews of the study. (*For more information on the type of questions asked during the interviews see Appendix A).

Participants were informed of the research purpose and provided written consent to the recording of audio material. The duration of each interview ranged between 30 to 60 minutes.

The interview guide constitutes 16 questions. Appendix A, which is the 'Interview Guide' is included in the latter parts of the dissertation, page 126. The opening part of the interview guide informs the participants regarding what the research is about. The first questions pertain to firmographic information of the participants. Thereafter, the questions are divided into four categories. Namely, Entrepreneurial marketing activities, Brand storytelling activities, Brand aesthetic tactics and Communication.

3.6 DATA ANALYSIS

A manual and software-generated thematic data analysis method was used for this study. In qualitative research, a thematic analysis approach posits a process of looking into and assessing qualitative data sets such as text through a lens of pinpointing important themes, patterns and ideas in an effort to construct meaning (Braun and Clarke 2006). It is a common method of analysis in qualitative research (Thomas and Harden, 2008; Guest *et al.*, 2012). This analytical method aligned with the theoretical underpinnings and the research objectives of this study. Miles and Huberman (1994) highlight a distinct 'thematic coding' method with a befitting set of processes to follow when using a thematic data analysis approach. In adhering to the principles of inductive reasoning, meaning-making in qualitative content formulates categories that explain the data. Links between such categories emerge from understanding and interpreting the data thoroughly to determine the relationship between them. Zalaghi and Khazaei, (2016:228) explain that inductive reasoning encourages a logical way of thinking where, there is an 'absence' of theory in the beginning of research. Thus, the researcher engages with qualitative data

first and then develops theories as well as conclusions according to what the data suggests. Furthermore, the inductive way of thinking is commonly linked to studies of qualitative nature (Zalaghi and Khazaei, 2016:228). The inductive approach was applied in the following manner in this particular study.

The researcher familiarised herself with the qualitative data first. Familiarisation constitutes listening, reading and studying of material. The audio-recordings of each interview were replayed multiple times, in order for the researcher to listen and understand the conversations. All audio-recordings were saved in a single folder as a way to stay organised. All 14 audio-recordings were transcribed either manually or through Otter AI which is a text-to-speech software generator. Otter AI is an American software which does not transcribe South African dialect accurately. Therefore, a clean-up for each transcript was mandatory. Each interview transcript was checked for accuracy multiple times. Firstly, this was done via listening to each audio-recording playback and simultaneously reading what the software transcribed. Secondly, when errors were spotted- these were rectified accordingly. This particular process was very time-consuming. However, generating accurate transcripts was necessary for the data analysis process. Thirdly, reading each transcript without the audio playback was done for the purposes of again- rechecking, sentence cohesion and overall grammatical order.

Moreover, to demonstrate a sound analytical process, the thematic analysis procedure outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994) were adhered to in this research, supported by the data analysis aided by Atlas ti. 8 software. Miles and Huberman (1994) propose the following. Step 1: Begin the process of coding and interpreting emerging patterns. In starting the process of coding, it's important for the researcher to familiarise oneself with the data first. A researcher can then decide which coding method is best suited for them. Thereafter, it's important to break things down through the selected coding system of choice. Step 2: Constructing themes through codes. This particular process requires the researcher to interpret each code and what it could possibly mean. This step also enables the researcher to refine all the themes at a later stage. Step 3: Creating thematic groups. This process requires the researcher to arrange themes in a logical manner and determine the final number of themes. Themes are selected through deducing and sifting

out unnecessary themes to ultimately refine all the thematic groups. Step 4: Deep exploration of established thematic groups. In this particular step, all groups are described and given final names. Step 5: Reporting. The step requires the researcher to report each group, what it represents and what it means. Step 6: In-depth analysis of coded thematic groups.

3.6.1 Unit of Analysis

The researcher intended to extract information from the personal views of individuals as their subjective reasoning in order to gain rich data from those personal sentiments (Gbadamosi, 2012:9). Huta, (2016:1) suggests that human subjective reasoning constitutes thoughts which convey intuitive meaning on a deep and personal level. Subjective reasoning pushes intuitive-thinking rather than scientific-thinking.

Therefore, the proposed unit of analysis of this research was on South African ready-to-wear womenswear and menswear entrepreneur fashion designers.

3.7 QUALITY OF THE STUDY

Research evaluation and trustworthiness of the study: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and expert evaluation strategies were taken into account. The researcher was guided by Lincoln, Lynham and Guba (2011) who proposed four-step criteria for the evaluation of interpretive research, including: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

3.7.1 Credibility

In qualitative research, credibility is defined as the level of 'truth' in the outcomes of data collection and data analysis processes (Moser and Korstjens, 2018:121). To increase the credibility of this study, the researcher utilised member-checking. Harper and Cole (2012:1) define member-checking as a process of checking, reviewing and verifying the accuracy of data as obtained from the participants themselves. Therefore, select audio-recorded material of the interviews was emailed to the respondents as evidence; and to confirm if what the researcher recorded in the manuscript was a true reflection of what they had said in the in-depth interviews.

3.7.2 Transferability

Transferability, with its relation to external validity, is defined as the length at which research findings can be generalised to certain circumstances (Connelly, 2016:435). Transferability is a common obstacle in studies of a qualitative nature. Central to this reality, is the researcher's level of involvement and subjective nature in reasoning when dealing with primary data. However, it is proposed that transferability can be improved by the qualitative researcher's efforts in journaling all the research procedures followed throughout an investigation (Connelly, 2016:436). The researcher is expected to document all the stages of the research and provide a comprehensive discussion of the selected methodology. It is important to provide a detailed account of each phase to help construct a detailed series of events. Moreover, for this study in particular, the researcher was mindful of the reality regarding the different ways in which participants understand and interpret phenomena in their own way of constructive-thinking.

3.7.3 Dependability

Dependability is comparable to reliability. It can be defined as circumstances where findings can be observed under a similar or repeated scope of research (Shenton, 2004:71). Dependability stresses the importance of providing elaborate accounts and reporting on the evolving assumptions of the research which are integral to the integrity of the research outcomes (Shenton, 2004:71). In this study, firstly, the use of independent manual and software-aided coding techniques to confirm emerging findings were applied. Secondly, member-checking was applied in sending transcript data and provisional meanings of data back to the participants to inquire about credibility and accuracy. Thirdly, peer examination of the data was applied as well. Overall, dependability was achieved through a process of auditing, which consists of the researcher's documentation of data, methods and decisions made during the dissertation-writing process, as well as its end products. The process of auditing for research dependability was done in a manner that the data and descriptions of the research are expansive and rich. Dependability was also enhanced by adjusting parts of the research methods as new meaning emerged during data collection stages – under the supervision of the research supervisor.

3.7.4 Confirmability

Certain measures are required to reinforce the research findings as information purely extracted from the critical engagement with respondents to maintain objectivity of research findings (Shenton, 2004:72). Confirmability can be defined as the extent to which research findings can be declared to be true or be confirmed as the ‘truth’ by others. It relates to objective reasoning. Objective reasoning can be defined as the level of awareness which a researcher demonstrates regarding issues of personal bias and subjective accounts – as perceived by individuals (Shenton, 2004:74). In this particular study, member-checking was applied in order to increase confirmability. Moreover, the researcher made use of triangulation, which is the process of utilising two or more vices to understand phenomena thoroughly (Korstjens and Moser, 2018:121). Furthermore, triangulation was applied in order to enhance the integrity of findings obtained from the interviews and as an additional “cross-examining process” to confirm results (Bryman, Bell, Hirschsohn, dos Santos, Du Toit, Masenge, van Aardt and Wagner, 2017:45).

3.7.5 Expert evaluation

The expert evaluation involved the supervisor and one experienced researcher. The two individuals remained involved in reviewing different stages of the research by occasionally commenting on the progression of the study. The researcher was conveniently briefing them on the goals of the study and in sharing copies of all data analysis material used early enough in the study.

3.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

Every respondent was requested to sign a consent form prior to participating which provided clear information and an anonymity clause (*see Appendix B: Consent form). In being aware of moral ethical research practices, all participants were given a participant information sheet. The sheet provided rationale regarding the nature of the research and each individual was requested to sign an additional consent form. The research ethics section in the latter parts of this chapter provide more details regarding the processes of all ethical practices adhered to.

This study followed the MRS’ (2010) code of conduct. It is a code of conduct which ensures that research was carried out on professional and ethical grounds. This Market

Research Society Code of Conduct provides key guidelines that are imperative in the procedures and processes of conducting social science studies and consumer market research. It is a 2010 revised version of its 2005 predecessor (Mouncey, 2010:179). The document outlines updated regulations surrounding research ethics, data handling privacy, participant consent, and confidentiality information pertinent to research projects of the aforementioned nature (Mouncey, 2010:179).

The principles which informed this study were the following:

- The researcher ensured that partaking in this study was on a voluntary basis.
- The researcher was forthcoming and honest throughout the study and in cultivating professional relationships.
- The researcher was open regarding the subject matter and in reasons behind the data collection.
- The researcher respected the confidentiality of information collected in this study.
- The researcher ensured that participants were not exposed to any potential harm or will at any stage be intensely affected by this study.
- The researcher was mindful of participants' needs, time and professional occupations.
- The researcher demonstrated independent and professional judgement in reporting the occupations of the research participants.
- The researcher protected the reputation and integrity of the participants' profession.

3.9 CHAPTER SUMMARY

Chapter three has reviewed how the research methodology was designed and carried out. A guiding framework outlined all the steps which were followed in addressing the research problem and included reasoning for all the selected methodological procedures behind the study. The research philosophy explained that the study was conducted through a constructivism philosophical paradigm. Through this paradigm, human subjects were studied on the basis of understanding their lived realities and experiences through

a scope of their subjective interpretations. The study used an exploratory research design to delve deeper into exploring the research topic.

It was imperative to seek respondents who have experience regarding the business of fashion entrepreneurship and are vested in their fashion brands. Therefore, a combination of two sampling methods was used in finding 14 suitable participants to partake in this research. These two methods were a snowball and a purposive sampling method. It was mentioned that combining the two sampling methods was necessary for the nature of this study as the entrepreneurial fashion designers were sampled from Gauteng and North West province. South African ready-to-wear designer fashion brands were selected as the suitable sample for this study. Two pilot interviews with two fashion designers were conducted prior to the main data collection phase of this research. This was done in order to test the Interview Guide, ensure trustworthiness, confirmability and credibility of the main qualitative data collection and analysis techniques. In total, 14 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted.

Participants were informed of the interview purpose and provided their written consent to the audio-recording of interview sessions. Interview sessions lasted between 30 to 60 minutes with each participant. The qualitative data analysis was achieved through a combination of manual and software-generated Atlas ti.8 thematic data analysis methods. The research evaluation and trustworthiness of the study were in accordance with Lincoln, Lynham and Guba's (2011) criteria, inclusive of four-step guidelines for the evaluation of qualitative research, namely credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Finally, to ensure professional and ethical research practices, the study followed the MRS' (2010) code of conduct. In the next chapter, Chapter 4, the findings and interpretations of the study are presented.

CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The chapter reports on all the findings obtained from the qualitative in-depth interviews. These findings reflect the anchor points of the thematic analysis which was the participants' experience with their fashion brands.

The essential themes in this chapter include descriptive verbatim comments collected from participant interviews. In-depth interviews gain the scientific rigour and trustworthiness from participants' sentiments which help to paint a picture of the lived experiences and help the reader understand phenomena better. It has to be noted that the data collected from the interviews was discussed, including some interpretations and conjecture in relation to the research purpose and research questions.

This is partly because of the nature of qualitative data collection methods such as semi-structured interviews. This chapter begins with reporting on theme one: fashion brands' storytelling techniques.

4.2 RESULTS

The thematic analysis process revealed seven themes. The discussion on these essential themes reveals how the participants have immersed themselves in creative brand storytelling and brand aesthetics to communicate ready-to-wear fashion for men and women's markets. Moreover, the discussion provides insight to masculinity and femininity being gender binaries behind men and women's fashion respectively.

Demographic results

Table 4.1 indicates the *Demographic characteristics of participants*. Contents of the table include the participant number, pseudonym brand name (not true name of the brand for the sake of anonymity), gender of participant, date of interview, method of interview, length of interview and province where the participants are based. The study profiled 14 fashion designers and therefore all individuals are referred to as 'Participant 1'; 'Participant 2'; 'Participant 3' etc. Participants are organised chronologically in order of the date in which each interview occurred. The 'gender' category inquired whether participants are male or female. The 'date of interview' shows the actual date, day and

year in which the interview was conducted. The ‘method of interview’ refers to the means used to conduct the actual interview. This was either telephonically, face-to-face or via written response. ‘Length of interview’ indicates the duration of each interview. The ‘province’ column indicates the geographic location in which the participants are located in South Africa. Seven of the 14 participants are female. Seven of 14 are male. Five of 14 are White participants and nine are Black participants. Three interviews were conducted telephonically. One interview was a written response. Ten of 14 interviews were conducted in-person, face-to-face with the participants at their flagship boutiques. Ten of 14 participants are located in Gauteng province, while four participants are located in North West. Three interviews’ duration was below 30 minutes. Eleven interviews’ duration was between 30 and 60 minutes. Two interviews were conducted in the year 2020. Finally, 12 of the 14 interviews were conducted in the year 2021.

Table 4.1: Demographic characteristics of participants (n=14)

Participant No.	Name	Gender	Date of interview	Method of interview	Length of interview	Province
P1	Brand JB	Male (White)	Monday, 31 August 2021	Telephonic	0:18:30	GP
P2	Brand DF	Female (White)	Thursday, 19 November 2021	Face-to-face	0:45:25	GP
P3	Brand XK	Female (Black)	Thursday, 19 November 2021	Telephonic	0:44:44	GP
P4	Brand RK	Male (White)	Monday, 30 November 2020	Written response, WhatsApp texts and	0:25:43	GP

				voice notes		
P5	Brand IdV	Female (White)	Tuesday, 15 December 2020	Telephonic	0:50:29	GP
P6	Brand KG	Male (Black)	Tuesday, 14 January 2021	Face-to- face	Part 1: 0:40:53 Part 2: 0:21:00	NW
P7	Brand MK	Male (Black)	Friday, 15 January 2021	Face-to- face	1:01:30	NW
P8	Brand SL	Male (Black)	Thursday, 14 January 2021	Face-to- face	0:43:39	NW
P9	Brand FF	Male (Black)	Friday, 15 January 2021 Friday	Face-to- face	0:45:16	NW
P10	Brand MF	Female (White)	Thursday, 11 February 2021	Face-to- face	1:07:51	GP
P11	Brand N	Female (Black)	Saturday, 10 April 2021	Face-to- face	0:42:00	GP
P12	Brand PW	Male (Black)	Thursday, 3 June 2021	Face-to- face	0:37:54	GP

P13	Brand HB	Female (Black)	Friday, 4 June 2021	Face-to- wear	0:25:13	GP
P14	Brand DC	Female (Black)	Friday, 4 June 2021	Face-to- face	0:32:29	GP
• Total number of participants: 14 • 7 Female participants • 7 Male participants • 5 White participants • 9 Black participants • 3 Telephonic interviews • 1 Written response via WhatsApp texts and voice notes • 10 Face-to-face interviews conducted at their flagship boutiques • 10 Participants in Gauteng Province • 4 Participants in North West Province • Interview length below 30 minutes: 3 interviews • Interview length between 30-60 minutes: 11 interviews • Interviews conducted in the year 2020: 2 interviews • Interviews conducted in the year 2021: 12 interviews						

(P) =Participant

4.2.1 Theme one: Fashion brands storytelling techniques

It emerged that entrepreneurial contemporary South African Fashion Designers use eight creative brand storytelling techniques in order to communicate with customers. Theme one addresses the main research question and enlists its identified sub-themes.

- **Main research question**
- Are South African fashion entrepreneur designers using creative brand storytelling and brand aesthetics to communicate ready-to-wear fashion for men and women's markets?

4.2.1.1 Timeless simplicity

A significant number of participants expressed that they try not to base their designs or creative direction on the 'latest' fashion trends. The entrepreneurial fashion designers lean more towards a preference of designing and producing timeless investment wardrobe pieces. Timelessness, in functional designed wearable garments, refers to supreme quality clothing which transcends the seasoned zeitgeist. Such clothing constructed as classic centrepieces retains an essence of distinct appeal and can last the fashion wearer a lifetime. When probed about this, respectively, Participant 9 and Participant 13 shared their views by stating the following:

"Our things are very, very easy; easy-to-go. So, it made things much very simple and very simplistic. Simplicity but still fashionable, it makes everything go well."
[P9]

"So, what we do is- as I said that we are into the timeless, vintage pieces of which we don't put too much deco into it. This is the case because we are about simplicity. So, our targets are those people that want those timeless pieces; simple but classy, you know, not too dramatic. Our brand is all about simplicity, but classy."
[P13]

4.2.1.2 Constructing clothing as a tool of emotive escape and means of self-expression

Participants believe that their design conceptualisation in clothing has a direct influence on how individuals who buy into their products perceive and express their sense-of-self. This is largely dependent on how the fashion wearer personalises basic creative elements of a design story or theme to suit their style identity. All participants believe this induces euphoric emotions. In their understanding, this allows wearers to 'break free' from the monotony of 'boring clothes' by dressing in stylised, aesthetic-dense garments. Participant 1, in particular, used the term "*escapism*" and explained this phenomenon by this view:

"I think I want people to view my fashion as a...way of...I think of escapism- almost in a way to express their individuality." [P1]

Sharing a similar sentiment, Participant 11 highlighted how her clothing should make the consumer *“feel beautiful.”*

“It's just not about money. It's about, why am I doing this? To make people feel beautiful. When people feel beautiful, it just boosts their self-esteem. You know? To me, even when you are [feeling] down, as long as you're still looking beautiful. I feel beautiful. It's just the inner changes. I want people to feel good about themselves. If they're not happy with what I've done, what I've made, I will make another one. That's why I have people coming back over and over again to the store.” [P11]

4.2.1.3 Female empowerment: Promoting individuality and women empowerment through a “don't be a lady, be a legend” mentality [P2]

As a womenswear entrepreneurial designer, Participant 2 spoke highly of women leaning into their ‘inner power’ and the mentality of becoming ‘legendary’ in their life’s pursuits. According to her sentiments, her brand storytelling technique: *“don't be a lady, be a legend”* serves as an affirmation; a mantra of power for the lady customer who consciously buys into her branded clothing. The technique encourages the female consumer to ‘own who she is’ and exist in the space of embracing her ‘individuality’ and being ‘unapologetic’ in the ensembles she chooses to wear. In her own words, Participant 2 explained the storytelling technique by mentioning the following:

“Don't be a lady, be a legend! It drives us because we don't literally make things for the “girly-girl”, but we empower women with the clothing we make. It's like, I'm a girl and I want to be proud to be that. Don't be a lady, be a legend! We want to beat all the odds, and we do. Everyday!” [P2]

4.2.1.4 Co-creation and consumer compatibility

Participant 3 spoke on the significance of accommodating her clients through active involvement. In her view, storytelling becomes a mutual co-creation effort between her, the designer as the sender of information, and those on the receiving end, which are her customers. In explaining her stance on co-creation and this consumer compatibility, Participant 3 mentioned the following:

“I think it’s like a two-way thing. You tell your story, but the customer or client will also tell you what they want. It’s about finding that middle ground. I don’t know if that’s the ‘identity’ or ‘trademark’ you’re talking about? But I find that a good brand is one that can successfully tell their story and still accommodate their clients you know? People always look at the different things and if you can listen to your clients and understand why they come to you; I think that’s one way to take advantage of that signature.” [P3]

4.2.1.5 Inclusivity

Participants 4 and 5, respectively, raised one strong conviction behind their storytelling which is ‘inclusivity’. Participant 4, who boasts two fashion brands: one high-end and the other ready-to-wear, explained the thinking behind this inclusivity technique: He posts images which show his ‘lean’ and ‘fuller-figured’ clients wearing his branded garments. Furthermore, he embraced the diversity by using a positive phrase and said “*every single shape is absolutely gorgeous.*” In his own words, Participant 4 commented the following:

“So, we as a business are very-very hectic on inclusivity. I like to make sure that even with some of my bigger clients on both my brands, I post both forms [on my social media] and any form of a woman because any form of a woman is beautiful. Whether you’re skinny, whether you’re full-figured, whether you’re peach-shaped, whether you are hour-glass shaped. Every single shape is absolutely gorgeous.” [P4]

In agreement to this, Participant 5 spoke of her inclusivity technique by referencing her “*all shapes all sizes*” brand story. In her view, “*all shapes all sizes*” is her way of broadening the narrowed spectrum as perpetuated in social media, by creating clothing which embraces all figures and all size curves beyond ‘standard’ commercial size charts. In her opinion:

“It’s very important to have a strong brand story. A collection story. A brand story. Ours is “all shapes all sizes”, so that people can invest in your brand and they tell the story. We are all storytellers. We all have this need for a story. I wanted to do

a [fashion] label for all shapes and all sizes from the get-go, and that's why I have a big size curve.” [P5]

4.2.1.6 Creative upcycling and repurposing

In Participant 10's viewpoint, upcycling waste often leads to new and innovative outcomes in her overall creative design and garment construction processes. Upcycling and repurposing fabric remnants create room for experimentation in producing her exclusive seasonal brand collections. She commented on this by mentioning that:

*“I can take you through the storerooms where we never throw any fabric scraps away. I can show you that all of that... [*here the Participant proceeded to point at garments on a rail in her design studio*] ... is made out of [...] in fact, I made this whole collection without buying a single piece of material. I've only used scraps and then redid them and reworked them. I love the craft of dressmaking. I love the patching the stripping, the tearing that you can see. I love the overdyeing. I love the detailing. I love the texture.” [P10]*

4.2.1.7 Embedding the concepts of power, beauty, and exoticism in clothing

Participant 10 mentioned that her fashion brand, with its specialty of womenswear, is deeply entrenched in the concepts of power, beauty and exoticism. Her preoccupation with such communicates the essence of her visual storytelling. It is strong, bold and captivating to the eye. As Participant 10 asserted: *“it says look at me!”*

Her understanding and interpretation of ‘power’ runs parallel with that of Participant 2's stance on Female Empowerment. For Participant 10, as a womenswear designer, it's about creating and dressing the female figure in bold clothing which allows her to embody her power. The respondent commented on this by stating the following:

“I think when it comes to the story that I communicate through my ramp. It's a very specific story, so if you don't like it, you won't come to me. It already eliminates the minimalist that only wears linen or the jeans girl that doesn't need anything else in her life. So, my brand image when I put it on a ramp is usually a very strong communication tool. It says look at me! This is potentially what I could be for you! But, come and talk to me first [as the designer] because not

everybody will like everything on the ramp, but they will like the power and the beauty and the exoticism that it communicates.” [P10]

4.2.1.8 Embracing fashion as art

Participant 7 shared that the discipline of fashion finds origin in art. This perception is particularly significant in his fashion brand due to his design philosophy: His storytelling is about being in constant motion of creating; birthing what the mind envisions; and bringing ideas to life by creating. It's about exploration and immersing the mind in the space of artistic thinking, all which qualifies the creation of clothing as a tangible, wearable art in his view. Participant 7 spoke about this, and explained the following:

“You know, fashion designing, like, I did not tell you from the onset-it's an art. it's all about what you dream and what comes to you visually. Because you see, some of us have, the way we operate is, I can look at you now. So, because of the long experience, I will not even measure you-but I can make a piece for you and know that it will fit you. Because you've used the tape measure up to the point that now it has become part of us.” [P7]

4.2.2 Theme two: Brand aesthetics tactics – A positive aesthetic response

The thematic analysis identified eight brand aesthetic tactics which are used by South African fashion entrepreneur designers. Fashion is a visual medium which invokes different responses from the wearer. This could range from positive, negative or neutral emotional reactions. Theme two addresses sub-research question two and also discusses its identified sub-themes.

- **Sub-research question 2**
- How is brand storytelling, including the brand aesthetic of ready-to-wear fashion for men and women, defined and practised among fashion entrepreneur designers in South Africa and in targeting consumers?

All participants confirmed that the concepts of beauty, creativity and art play a crucial part in their overall conceptualisation and execution of design ideas, which arguably would

play a significant role in soliciting a positive aesthetic response from an individual. Participants mentioned two common positive aesthetic responses which they receive through their work. Participant 1 mentioned that one of the focal points in the creative design process behind his fashion brand is cultivating a strong look of bright hues and tones. This is shown through the use of bright colour palettes in his work. Participant 1 shared that:

“We focus a lot on creating imagery that is colourful, and that is interesting.” [P1]

Participant 5, with her using the phrase ‘they connect with your story...’ mentioned the following:

“I just wing it. I really believe that if your aesthetic is strong, then you will find your cult. People will find you because they connect with your story and with your aesthetic.” [P5]

4.2.2.1 Exclusive fabric prints

Three participants mentioned that they prefer designing their own unique fabric prints from time-to-time. The process concerns recreating fabrics by designing unique motifs or illustrations which will be printed onto their materials. Participants 1; 2 and 5 commented on this as follows:

“In terms of garments, specifically-we focus a lot on colour, and a lot on volume, as well as prints.” [P1]

“Then, the prints thing is a big theme [in my garments].” [P2]

“So, we do fabric printing as well- we develop our own prints.” [P5]

4.2.2.2 Appliqué – stitchwork and threadwork

Respondents mentioned applique’, stitchwork and threadwork, which simply mean decorative stitching done on the surface or inside of a garment. Applique’ is usually done at the end of garment construction to avoid unnecessary accidents such as staining or getting filth on the clothing. As Participant 2 highlighted:

“We’re big into just a clean [look]. Then, appliqué is a big one!” [P2]

'Finishing' in garments selvages the edge of a seam to prevent fraying or unravelling inside clothing or alternatively, it's about adding non-functional decorative elements to the surface of a complete garment. Stitchwork and threadwork all serve the purpose of creating a crisp and professional look. Stitching merges clothing pieces together, e.g. sewing sleeves, front, back and side panels together. Finishes, in the literal sense, 'completes' the stitchwork, all for the integrity and professional appearance of the designer's garments. As Participant 11 commented:

"I've invested in overlocking machines, everything that I need for a beautiful finish. My finishing is on point. I don't negotiate the finishing. My finishing is on point even the stitchwork, it has to be aligned and straight." [P11]

"The fabric speaks for itself and speaks for you as well [as the designer]. These are means of storytelling relating to the market. Where, some [fabrics] you just have to do a simple touch. It could be threadwork. I love threadwork. It could be just threadwork." [P12]

4.2.2.3 Volume – Accentuating proportion and shape

To add more dimension within select clothing pieces, two participants raised that they often work with the design principle of volume. As Participants 1 and 5 stated:

"In terms of garments, specifically-we focus a lot on colour, and a lot on volume, as well as prints." [P1]

"Our tulle dresses, all the frills, that's quite strong in our brand. I mean it's 20 meters that we frill. Volume is also a big one! I think volume is also a big one. Isn't that lovely?" [P5]

4.2.2.4 Customised laser – cutting on fabrication

Participant 5 discussed how she created one of her "signature" looks and mentioned laser-cutting. The respondent suggested that this was her interpretation of Braille which is a reading method for the blind. This makes her work look "cool" and allowed her to tap into her curiosity of translating it according to her own sense of creativity. In her own words, Participant 5 mentioned the following:

“The laser-cut dresses we do for our brand? How can I say? A ‘signature’ look? That was inspired by a book I read about a girl that was blind and she was reading Braille. I got curious about Braille, I did research on it and I wanted to translate Braille onto fabric. And then we played around with the laser-cutting machine. That seemed to me like a really cool translation of Braille and that’s how the laser-cutting was born.” [P5]

4.2.2.5 Beautiful buttons

Participant 2 spoke of her appreciation for a “beautiful button.” A button is considered an intricate trim which usually completes the look of a garment. Furthermore, she mentioned that she “loves a beautiful button stand even more.” Button stands are panels which hold the alignment of buttons and are commonly placed on the centre front of men’s formal shirts and women’s formal blouses, for example. Participant 2 made the following statement:

“Well, I love a beautiful button! I love a beautiful button stand even more!” [P2]

4.2.2.6 Couture elements

Participant 4 explained that he’s an entrepreneurial designer who owns two fashion brands. One specialises in ultra-high-end couture and the other in ready-to-wear athleisure, clothing which caters for lower LSM groups who still want to buy into his brand. In his own words, Participant 4 gave the following elaborate response:

“We’ve taken the couture elements from our high-end evening wear, and we’ve implemented them into our designs with “Brand S”, the ready-to-wear business. So, with that, again, as a prime example which I gave with “Influencer M” just now with her wearing our dress with the ruffle on her shoulder, what we’ll do in order to make an affordable ready-to-wear version of that is: I mean that fabric itself-let me put it this way: That dress cost me more than R5 000 to produce-and that’s just the fabric. That’s before labour, that’s before anything else. So, with something like that, and for us to take it to our YDE market, we would break it down this way: We look at that high-end dress and say “okay cool, what sequin can we get that is under a certain budget that we can assign and get per [ready-to-wear] garment?”

We won't do feathers because feathers are too expensive. People don't know how to wash feathers, so we won't put feathers on. What can we do? Okay cool, we can do that cute small little ruffle down the shoulder? Or, we'll say, no, we cannot put a corset into that dress. That's how we sort of filter things down in my ready-to-wear brand business. We already know what people love and want. My audience and market have already seen it on a celebrity and now they want to get it at affordable price. [P4]

4.2.2.7 Colourful textiles

Participant 1 mentioned that there's a strong concentration on the use of colour in his overall fabrication and textiles by stating that:

"In terms of garments, specifically-we focus a lot on colour." [P1]

4.2.2.8 Texturing – Feathers and beading

Texturing is commonly done as a non-functional feature of interest on the surface of clothing. Participant 8, who specialises in both menswear and womenswear, explores texturing according to what each design season presents. This is normally dependent on consumer demands or what a client requests in a customised order:

"To put it in a simple way- what we normally focus on is our texturing. We specialise in that. As I told you before- we have different kinds of, you know, approaches to all our garments. It depends on the type of season we are in. That gives me an idea of what kind of garments to do for that season." [P8]

4.2.3 Theme three: Entrepreneurial social media marketing channels – online presence

It emerged that all respondents mainly capitalise on the use of social media and affordable resources. This is informed by their respective entrepreneurial mindsets' to build their platforms and maintain a consistent online presence despite budgetary constraints. Included below, are the two entrepreneurial social media marketing channels which emerged from the thematic analysis. Theme three and theme four address the first part of the research purpose as they discuss two kinds of 'entrepreneurial marketing activities' that are undertaken by South African fashion entrepreneur Fashion Designers. The

restatement of the research purpose follows below in order to address theme three and theme four with their sub-themes.

RESTATEMENT OF RESEARCH PURPOSE

This research examined the entrepreneurial marketing and brand storytelling activities that are undertaken by South African fashion entrepreneur designers, and further explored the brand aesthetics tactics used. The purpose of the study was twofold: To explore what brand storytelling and aesthetic techniques are used by South African fashion entrepreneur designers if any, in order to communicate with customers. Secondly: To understand the brand narratives used to distinguish each ready-to-wear fashion brand.

In closing the loop and pinpointing the research focus, attention was placed on two of Kakroo's (2015) pillars of storytelling, being the "plot and character" in order to confront the two critical aspects of the research purpose. The research already included the concept of aesthetics, and built on this by further incorporating two supporting constructs of 'plot' and 'character.' The study examined the entrepreneurial marketing and brand storytelling activities – plot and character that are undertaken by South African entrepreneur designers, and further explored the brand aesthetics tactics used. Moreover, the main purpose of the study embraced both the men's and women's value chain to understand the range, and diversity, if possible, of how South African entrepreneur designers take on the exploration of masculine and feminine fashion styles.

4.2.3.1 Experimental photoshoots

Participants showed a strong preference of sharing events behind-the-scenes and previewing their seasonal collections through experimental photoshoots. As mentioned by Participant 8:

"...most of the time... what we do, most of the time is photoshoots, you know? For people to be able to see and love our outfits." [P8]

It was expressed that photoshoots require a creative team consisting of stylists, make-up artists, set assistants, models and photographers. Overall, photoshoots capture the 'ideal image', where shoot sets are reimagined to mimic the designer's vision. The designer's vision projects the visuals of a given fashion story as Participant 13 highlighted:

“We usually get stock every two months and we always do photoshoots. With those photoshoots, we make sure that every week, we’ve got something new to post on our social media page, so that people can have an idea of what’s inside the store. And then, on our storyline, we post every day.” [P13]

4.2.3.2 Social media

As entrepreneurs, all participants cited factors such as limited resources, convenience, affordability, and accessibility as reasons for utilising social media as their primary brand marketing tool. Such online marketing channels are important for them in creating online brand visibility and in showcasing their work through curated content such as the aforementioned, experimental photoshoots. As a womenswear designer, Participant 2 explained that consistency maintains her online visibility in that she posts daily content. In her own words, the respondent mentioned that:

“We’re very active on Instagram. I post everyday stories.’ We always want to be top-of-mind. I’m sure you know that with marketing, most people have to see something 7 times before they convert to like, an online sale or something?” [P2]

Participant 8, with a specialty of both menswear and womenswear, also mentioned social media as his primary marketing tool by the following remarks:

“What we do is-with our marketing strategy, that we’ve put in place, is through the social media, through the newspapers, through the radio station, and then through the malls.” [P8]

In the words of Participant 9:

“So, from the fashion shows we did and the pageants, it made people to know who we are. At the end of the day, you need to grow from one place to another as a brand, so then we just diverted a bit, then we started putting our products; our designs on Facebook, and then we started having our own websites where we send our customers to go there and check what we did as the latest designs we have.” [P9]

4.2.4 Theme four: Entrepreneurial marketing activities

Theme four comprised the following entrepreneurial marketing activities: personal face-to-face interactions, and the engagement which respondents have with their actual or potential clients. Overall, this theme represents the activities which happen both on and offline in how designers promote and place their brands in a good light. The three entrepreneurial marketing activities which emerged from the thematic analysis include the following:

4.2.4.1 Communication

Participants stressed the importance of building strong communication skills within their consumer-brand relationships. This enables a degree of transparency in their sharing of information as business owners. According to three participants, respectively, communication is fundamental in order to create a better connection with consumers. These participants shared the following view expressed by Participant 1:

“Look, in speaking in terms of brand communication, I think one thing...just not specifically through the visuals, but I think one thing that I started realising in South Africa [is that] it’s very important to have...a lot of personal relationships with customers.” [P1]

Secondly, acts of sincerity and care such as checking-in with clients, year-end gifts, small tokens of appreciation and incentives to impress clients are considered important in maintaining real consumer-brand relationships, as one participant explained:

“So also, you are attending to clients, like I said to you, your relationship with them, constant checking, end-of-the gifts and small things, incentives. Make them happy to be with you, know, and that you care.” [P7]

“I make sure I communicate, though. One thing I had to learn the hard way was communication. You know, whereby you're not ready for somebody-you tell them that come at this time and you're not ready for them. You lose a lot of clients. So, basically, if you're not ready for them at an agreed time-just communicate that. I will call them.” [P11]

4.2.4.2 Flash retailing-pop up shops

Participant 1 stated that he participates in catwalk shows such as South African Fashion Week in order to promote his brand. Such events attract key stakeholders from the South African fashion industry: Stockists, retailers, fashion enthusiasts and fashion buyers alike. It's more about getting his brand into business spaces beyond the parameters of his studio. As Participant 1 stated:

“So, we do fashion week, which is in a venue. We do pop-up shops, and then we also kind of have...we do stock different stores, and we also have our own studio for customers who prefer a more personal in-store experience versus an online experience.” [P1]

4.2.4.3 Engaging in one-on-one conversations with clients and customers and paying close attention to handling them well in the process

As entrepreneurs, all participants mentioned that they interact with people every day. It is important for them to be mindful of their conduct and how they converse with clients and consumers. Participants 3 and 9 commented on this as follows:

“I think that one thing in the South African space [which is] very important for us as designers is just to communicate in-person.” [P3]

“When our customers come in and they get things according to the way they want, it makes them feel so connected to our brand. When they come into my store, they can get what they are looking for.” [P9]

4.2.5 Theme five: Narrative behind a story

Participants expressed six brand narratives which distinguish a ready-to-wear fashion brand in South Africa. Theme two addresses sub-research question 3 and explains the identified sub-themes.

- **Sub-research question 3:**
- How do South African fashion entrepreneur designers use brand narratives for a ready-to-wear market brand when targeting consumers across media platforms?

4.2.5.1 The value in the aesthetic of a garment

One participant mentioned that it's important for consumers to view fashion design as a respectable craft. The workmanship and value are what make the aesthetic of a fashion brand. In his own words, the respondent mentioned:

"We want to have people understand that there are people behind, who make these clothes, and that they are very skilled artisans. We put in a lot of effort to make sure that every garment is of a high-quality, and it will last people quite a lifetime. But, beyond that, we also want people to value the aesthetic of a garment."
[P1]

4.2.5.2 Transitional garments

According to Participant 1's understanding, versatility disrupts the monotony associated with 'boring' clothes:

"We want people to kind of find the versatility within our garments without having it become too boring." [P1]

Participant 3 highlighted that she designs for the client who values and appreciates variety in her capsule collections. This serves as a foundational "start-up canvas" which assists her clients to build a personalised stylistic wardrobe:

"That's who I create for. That person who wants that versatility in their clothing. My thing is... I design a capsule wardrobe. So, if you're going to buy the whole wardrobe as it is, I already know who you're. You're going to wear that dress that way. You're going to wear this dress that way, like five different times. Or you're going to wear that top and skirt; or that top and pants in different types of ways. But I'll give you that information, but again, it's all up to you how you present it. It's almost like I give you like a canvas, like a start-up canvas." [P3]

Participant 7 commented on versatility in the context of being a designer who produces work according to seasonal zeitgeist cues. As both a women's and menswear designer, Participant 7 explained that being versatile allows him to *"fit in everywhere."* The respondent commented as follows:

“You have to be versatile. That is the right word! Because if you are versatile which means you fit in everywhere, you do your research- you do everything every time you can change anytime and become- be stable anytime also depends on the market. So, you have to do on this level, and you find out that your research will help you to know what to produce to meet that metric. The ready-to-wear for men and women.” [P7]

4.2.5.3 Design creativity

All participants are self-proclaimed ‘creatives’ who exist within aesthetic-dense spaces rich in architecture, diverse people, art and design. They assimilate to such spaces for inspiration which feeds into their skill of design creativity. Participant 7 sees this as liberation; a form of *“creative freedom”* in being able to create *“anything you want.”* Participant 10 referred to her design career as *“the craft of dressmaking,”* whereas Participant 12 alluded to the *‘creative freedom’* mentioned by Participant 7 and stated that *“as a designer, you need to be very, very, very, very creative.”*

Respectively, participants commented on this and mentioned the following:

“There are sometimes we come in a Western form, but you put a bit of African touch to make it to look Afrocentric, do get what I mean? So, what is happening is, it's all about how you think; how you reason, you got the way to play around the way you want. You have to feed that creative freedom-that's what I'm saying. That's why we chose that name. You can create anything that you want, but then don't just create things that people will not like.” [P7]

“I love the craft of dressmaking. I love the patching the stripping, the tearing that you can see. I love the overdyeing. I love the detailing. I love the texture.” [P10]

“The different concepts that we use? Okay, as a designer, you need to be very, very, very, very creative. So, you start from your creativity and what you know people would like, of course, one man's meat is another man's poison. So, I have to come up with different concepts.” [P12]

4.2.5.4 The art of creating in fashion

Participant 7 cited the philosophy behind his brand name, and what it implies. It emphasizes the ‘art’ of making, creating and innovating. An act which brings fashion into existence. He made the following statement:

“Our name comes with creations, which means all the time, we are ready to come up with new ideas and new things. That’s exactly what we do.” [7]

4.2.5.5 Frequency of marketing strategies

Participant 3’s comment on cultivating a strong brand narrative lies in the frequency of one’s marketing strategy. It has become very important to keep one’s brand in the mind of the consumer by constantly reminding them of your fashion brand based on the logic of “the more you remind [the customer] who you are, the more they know [your brand].”

“You have to remind them who you are. The more you remind [the customer] who you are, the more they know [your brand]. [P3]

4.2.5.6 Fashion and identity creation

Overall, participants highlighted that the creative liberty of being entrepreneur designers, being ‘one’s own boss’ has helped them curate a special stylistic identity and brand narrative over the years. They are in a position where they can now confidently sell this value to consumers and allow it to permeate in places where it matters most. One participant placed this in context of her career as a womenswear designer, by commenting as follows:

“Firstly, I know that clothes are about identity. So, if you come to me and you give me your story as to why you’re here, I then understand what you’re looking for and I can give you that thing that empowers you. You will come back again and again and again, but it also has to fit comfortably [with you are]. It has to be very wearable and have some kind of relevance in your life and ultimately, you must walk out of here feeling empowered.” [P10]

Other forms of style identification are informed by their respective philosophies of what being a ready-to-wear designer means in a geographic location such as South Africa.

Participants made references to factors such as personal values, art, heritage, taste, ethnic tribes and politics. One participant who leans more on the aspect of heritage mentioned:

“Why do I lean more on the African thing? Firstly, because it's my heritage. African people, you know, mothers, I grew up in Zambia. I've been here [in South Africa] for 16 years. It's my home, like it's your home too. Yes. Mommy's here. My husband is here. So, but back home [in Zambia], we've got what we call "Chitenge." It's a cloth, an African thick cloth. When your baby wants to sleep you put your baby on the back and carry them with it.” [P11]

4.2.6 Theme six: Colour symbolism

A large majority of participants raised the significance of colour in their work and what it truly means to them. Theme six presents the three types of symbolic preferences which the entrepreneurial fashion designers gravitate towards in their designs and imagery. These are mainly influenced by the designer's individual taste and brand personality. These preferences are discussed below. Theme six addresses sub-research question 4 and also includes its identified sub-themes.

- **Sub-research question 4**
- What type of aesthetic technique is applied in South African fashion entrepreneur designers' ready-to-wear designs to attract consumers with their attire and adornments?

4.2.6.1 Royalty colours – Black and gold

One participant explained that for her as a womenswear designer, the colours of her brand logo signify “royalty,” considering that she dresses “queens and kings.” The prevalent narrative in colour psychology is that black is seen as a colour of power, rule, and dominance, whereas gold signifies wealth and status. In her opinion:

“People buy the brand. You need to work on it. Our colours are black and gold. You know, it's royalty colours. We dress queens and kings. So, it means a lot to

us. It was a colour that was chosen because we are royalty. We want everyone that walks out of the store to feel the same way.” [P13]

4.2.6.2 Creating different colour accents – Overdyeing, creating exclusive colour blends through Pantone colours from professional dyers, printing, embellishing, embroidery and laser-cutting

One participant discussed a number of different techniques available for her to experiment with, or which she is mindful of within her creative design process. It's more about exploring different elements in different seasons, then soliciting assistance from businesses which specialise in such services. As this participant mentioned:

“We all buy our fabric from the same wholesalers [as designers]. All of us. There're about 4 or 5 wholesalers, and every single designer buys their fabric from these wholesalers. So, what you can do to make it different is: you can either overdye it, you can send it to the dyers and choose a specific colour of Pantone- and dye it that colour so, nobody else has that colour. You can print on it. You can embroider it. You can laser-cut it.” [P5]

4.2.6.3 Exploring colour through fabrication and fabric versatility

It is important for participants to create multi-functional pieces which can be creatively experimented with and fit the wardrobe of the conscious fashion dresser effortlessly:

“That's who I create for. That person who wants that versatility in their clothing. I like to be able to mix-and match it how I like. If I want to dress it up, I'll dress it up. If I dress it down, I'll dress it down.” [P3]

“...using material-to-material to do something different.” [P6]

It emerged that participants emphasize the importance of pairing timelessness with the element of versatility in their overall seasonal catalogues:

“You have to be versatile [as a ready-to-wear designer] because if you are versatile, it means you fit in everywhere. You do your research; you do everything- every time, you can change anytime and become- be stable anytime and it also depends on the market.” [P7]

4.2.7 Theme seven: South African entrepreneurial fashion brands in Covid-19 times – Understanding the impact of Covid-19 on local entrepreneurial fashion design enterprises

The participants' responses pertaining to the impact of Covid-19 were two-fold. Some participants were of the reasoning that the pandemic caused severe financial paralysis in their entrepreneurial enterprises, while others reiterated that they experienced an intrinsic shift in perspective. This latter group of participants saw the effects of the pandemic as something positive; a time to regroup and reflect on their current journeys as entrepreneurial designers in South Africa. Contrastingly, the views expressed by participants whose enterprises experienced severe financial paralysis were mainly negative.

Theme seven emerged as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It indicates how fashion enterprises and entrepreneurs have navigated the reality of COVID-19 in South Africa. The local fashion industry and many other industries were affected. It was mandatory to try and understand this reality as the study progressed.

Participant 2 spoke of how her business *“thrived”* by capitalising on the zeitgeist of that time which was designing and producing masks. This is a fundamental piece of daily functional wear which many designers introduced in their product lines:

“To be honest, we didn't survive, we thrived! So, we were lucky that- in, I think like, week two of lockdown-we hopped on this mask-making thing! We hustled to make the masks and stuff. So, the mask thing... the Covid-19 thing... luckily, we were lucky enough to do that. We paid full rent and staff was paid in-full.” [P2]

Participants spoke on how their fashion careers are anchored in entrepreneurship as opposed to working “formal” corporate jobs. A large majority of the ready-to-wear designers were motivated by an intrinsic passion to start their own fashion enterprises. One participant explained this by saying the following:

“You get different business models. I prefer to work in my business, not on it. So, if I'm not here, then nothing can happen, which is not great. But I've had... in Cape Town when I was in Cape Town, I had 5 employees. And, at the end of the day, I wasn't involved in any part of the creative process or the manufacturing

process. I did the creative process, but the manufacturing process- they all did- and I had to manage people. I really didn't enjoy it. So, when I moved to Pretoria, I'm like, I'm going to make my team smaller, but stronger. That will give me the opportunity to actually work in my studio. I love doing patterns. I love cutting” [P5].

Participant 8 mentioned the following:

“It was very bad. It’s very bad because now the point is we design for special occasions. When they say most of the time, there’s no occasions, or there’s no special events, then it has a lot of effects on the business. Especially because now people don’t even think about clothing anymore. It’s affecting a lot of things in the clothing industry, because when you say you’re on lockdown, the only thing you think of is how you can buy food and eat and sleep.” [P8]

Many participants who saw the pandemic as a time to regroup and reflect on their current journeys as entrepreneurial designers in South Africa, spoke more of looking at it from a positive perspective and capitalising on some of its effects. Another participant mentioned:

“So, it also came obviously at a quite a convenient time for me as a designer working in the business for more than 40 years to start considering down scaling down a bit. Yeah, so until certainly sort of February, March last year [2020] we were sending people away. Well, it’s given me time to reflect. It’s been devastating in terms of turnover. Fortunately, all my staff managed to harvest quite a lot from here.” [P10]

Other participants spoke of going into the field due to unemployment in their original qualification specialty:

“I’m into auditing. I had no clue about fashion. I didn’t have a clue whatsoever. When I finished my articles, I was looking for work. I couldn’t find work, so I was like, what am I going to do? That was in twenty... in fact before it started, the way I started the brand- was 2013 when I finished my articles. I looked for work, and there was no work anywhere. It was quite challenging.” [P11]

“When we heard-I think it was going to be on the 25th of March 2019-yes, that we're going to be on a shutdown. It was stressful, because there's rent that needs to be paid for the store, you know. Business was not doing well that time-even way before the pandemic. So, the pandemic hit us very, very hard. I closed the store on the 25th of March and opened September. That's how bad it was. I had to make other means of getting money so that I can keep on paying for the rent of the store.” [P13]

4.3 OVERVIEW OF KEY FINDINGS

Table 4.2 provides a clear and comprehensive overview of the seven themes and subthemes that emerged from this study which were presented in detail above.

Table 4.2: Key findings

Theme No.	Theme	Subtheme	Talked by whom?	Talked about by how many?
1	Fashion brands storytelling techniques	Timeless simplicity	9 and 13	2
		Constructing clothing as a tool of emotive escape and means of self-expression	1 and 11	2
		Female empowerment: Promoting individuality	2	1
		Co-creation and consumer compatibility	3	1
		Inclusivity	4 and 5	2
		Creative upcycling and repurposing	10	1
		Embedding the concepts of power, beauty, and exoticism in clothing	10	1
		Embracing fashion as art	7	1
2	Brand aesthetics tactics	Exclusive fabric prints	1, 2 and 5	3
		Appliqué - stitchwork and threadwork	2, 11 and 12	3
		Volume - accentuating proportion and shape	1 and 5	2
		Customised laser-cutting on fabrication	5	1
		Beautiful buttons	2	1
		Couture elements	4	1
		Colourful textiles	1	1
		Texturing - feathers and beading	8	1

3	Entrepreneurial social media marketing channels	Experimental photoshoots	8 and 13	2
		Social media	2, 8 and 9	3
4	Entrepreneurial marketing activities	Communication	1, 7 and 11	3
		Flash retailing-pop up shops	1	1
		Engaging in one-on-one conversations with clients and customers	3 and 9	1
5	Narrative behind a story	The value in the aesthetic of a garment	1	1
		Transitional garments	1, 3 and 7	3
		Design creativity	7, 10 and 12	3
		The art of creating in fashion	7	1
		Frequency of marketing strategies	3	1
		Fashion and identity creation	10 and 11	2
6	Colour symbolism	Royalty colours - black and gold	13	1
		Creating different colour accents	5	1
		Exploring colour through fabrication and fabric versatility	3, 6 and 7	3
7	South African entrepreneurial fashion brands in Covid-19 times	-	2, 5, 8, 10, 11 and 13	6

4.4 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This present qualitative discussion section explains each of the emergent seven themes pertinent to this study: *An investigation of how contemporary South African fashion designers communicate creative brand storytelling and brand aesthetics*. Bekker and Clark (2018:3) assert that qualitative research findings should be conveyed and discussed with much consideration to the core anchoring points and constructs of a study. Underpinning this interpretation of findings section, is the approach of reviewing each of the seven themes and addressing them within a relevant scope of literature for the purposes of fulfilling the proposed research outcomes. This research posed the following research questions:

Main research question:

- How can South African fashion entrepreneur designers use creative brand storytelling and brand aesthetics to communicate ready-to-wear fashion for men and women's markets?

Sub-research questions:

- How is brand storytelling, including the brand aesthetic of ready-to-wear fashion for men and women, defined and practised among fashion entrepreneur designers in South Africa and in targeting consumers?
- How do South African fashion entrepreneur designers use brand narratives for a ready-to-wear market brand when targeting consumers across media platforms?
- What type of aesthetic technique is applied in South African fashion entrepreneur designers' ready-to-wear designs to attract consumers with their attire and adornments?

The next section provides an elaborate discussion of all seven themes. Each theme cluster comprises several concepts and ideas, all which informed the naming of each particular theme. In the interest of outlining each theme cluster in much detail, the discussion draws on literature and relevant past studies which have explored similar convictions as this present study.

4.4.1 Theme one: Fashion brands storytelling techniques

The next discussion is on timeliness simplicity.

4.4.1.1 Timeless simplicity

As mentioned previously, a significant number of participants expressed that they anchor their overall creative design process and garment construction on principles of timeless simplicity, despite occasional experimental deviations. The motivation is mainly to retain the essence behind their ready-to-wear collections as classic ‘investment’ or staple wardrobe pieces which guarantee lifetime wear for the customer. A study by Wallner, Magnier and Mugge (2020) confirmed this by investigating if two respective elements of design which are classified as ‘timeless’, in repurposed upcycled products, would increase the consumer preference of the particular upcycled goods. First, the research focused on ‘vintage-retro’ design elements, which resemble an antique look-and-feel and are reminiscent of the past. Secondly, they focused on ‘simplistic’ design elements, which are mainly informed by a look of contemporary aesthetics that do not conform to fad trends, thus remaining ‘timeless’ or ‘classic’ through all seasons. Wallner *et al.* (2020:1) concluded that both vintage-retro design elements and simplistic design elements, respectively, evoke a positive aesthetic association and echo the visual appeal of ‘timelessness’ in tangibles. In turn, this increased the likelihood of purchase and consumer preference of the repurposed upcycled products.

It is important to try and understand the principles of timelessness and simplicity in the discipline of fashion and the art movement of minimalism. Befitting is examining these against the backdrop of postmodernism and ever-evolving trends of fashion consumerism in the 21st century. A study by Karg (2015:1) investigated the concept of minimalism in ready-to-wear fashion by profiling eight fashion bloggers who dress in simplistic minimal ensembles. Additionally, Karg (2015:1) observed 30 fashion blogs which specifically focus on minimalism-driven content. Another element of the research was to determine whether such individuals feel a sense of heightened ‘emotional freedom’ in opting to prioritise essentialism over being hyper-focused on having or buying the latest ‘trendy’ clothing. Results revealed that minimalist fashion practices are mainly tied to practicality, simplicity, and emotional contentment. Karg (2015) further argues that minimalistic design

favours 'cleanliness', solid lines and dimension in objects, fabrication and silhouette. Minimalism, as the predecessor art movement of timelessness and simplicity also pivots from trend cycles and focuses more on elements rooted in product workmanship and contemporary aesthetics (Karg, 2015:5). It is understood that the evolution of fashion is signified by tides of pop-cultural and socio-cultural experiences tied to human subjects. This is inclusive of style, expression, and identity either as individuals or as part of a collective in society. The minimalism art movement speaks the 'less is more' language in fashion, based on the logic of simplicity at its grassroots. Simplicity concerns the removal of 'clutter' and allowing objects or elements to exist in a space of harmony without having too much 'noise' or too many moving parts within a design. Timelessness instils an equal balance of units; a co-existence without elements overpowering each other. Timeless designs are classic and never obsolete. The idea is to have supreme quality clothing which a wearer needs to have forever. Classic designs live through the zeitgeist and are usually 'borrowed' in mass produced fast fashion design. The element of 'timelessness' in fashion counters this through the concept of slow fashion, sustainability and designing according to more mindful processes of reducing the carbon footprint of the fashion industry.

In a case study on 'Filippa K' which is a ready-to-wear Swedish fashion brand, Mayer (2019) concluded that the Filippa K female customers create a style identity through the scope of minimalism, conscious buying, and opting for overall sustainable simplicity in their products of choice of the brand. The clothing collections behind the brand have an aesthetic feel; a strong sense of minimalism and timelessness to reinforce the quality of longevity and lifelong wear. Ensembles of the fashion brand educate their market through a story of timelessness, sustainability, mindfulness and slow consumption of fashion (Mayer, 2019). Through focus groups with the brand's design team, it was established that circular consumption, simplicity and sustainability are central in the brand story and in the creation of a dress identity for the Filippa K female consumer (Mayer, 2019). Overall, slow sustainable fashion consumerism plays an integral role in the circular consumption of commodities and improves consumer awareness. It can be argued that principles of timeless simplicity in fashion attempt to shift away from 'conventional moulds of fad trends even in times of an entrepreneurial designer's experimental tangents.

Timelessness never goes out of style. Therefore, designers who create classic timeless pieces create brand longevity. Ready-to-wear is commonly classified as fast fashion. Contemporary entrepreneurial fashion designers seek to challenge this reality by aligning their fashion brands with circular, more sustainable fashion practices. It is now becoming clear that ready-to-wear fashion can also adopt less gratified, more sustainable consumption practices based on how fashion designers manoeuvre their foundational creative design processes. Considering that entrepreneurial fashion designers invest intellectual creative ideas into their work, they do not favour the idea of consumers discarding their brand's clothing. It has now become essential for ready-to-wear clothing to have essence, longevity and retain a strong sense of classic appeal even years after purchase.

4.4.1.2 Constructing clothing as a tool of emotive escape and means of self-expression

Respectively, Participants 1e and 11 pointed out how they believe garments and dress are functional tools, which in the literal sense enable their conscious fashion clients to dress how they feel based on ensembles they 'love'. According to their understanding, this enables wearers to have an experience with the clothing they wear and truly embody their own style, image and identity. Such intrinsic motivations tied to fashion and people dressing how they feel, can arguably be linked to what Maslow's hierarchy of needs highlights in the human aspect of self-esteem and belonging. Research which probed the concept of 'Brand Love' by Abrar, Baig, Hussain and Umar (2020:322) concluded that self-expression, consumer brand awareness and the psychological drive of 'needing to belong' all play a fundamental part in portraying 'love' or a 'deep appreciation' for fashion brands. This is further reinforced by how individuals display it through social media in fashion-oriented social media content (Abrar *et al.*, 2020:322).

Using self-administered questionnaires, nearly 300 female respondents in Pakistan participated in their study from various online pop-cultural social media pages. Furthermore, the study unpacked some of the pressing motivations linked to how women come to love clothing fashion brands and buy into the products thereof. It is evident that having an outlet to express the essence of self is important. There is now increased

awareness in how individuals choose to dress and partake in fashion to express who they desire to be (Abrar *et al.*, 2020:316). Conscious fashion brand consumers now gravitate towards clothing brands which allow room to dress-up in ways that communicate their personality and sense of uniqueness. In line with the thinking of Abrar *et al.* (2020), expressing oneself is then translated through mediums where an individual or group can convey their emotions and the perception of who they are through how they dress. Abrar *et al.* (2020) confirm this by exploring psychological factors such as emotions, feelings, and seeking external validation from others. These can drive individuals to communicate or show their love for a fashion brand through public outlets such as social media. Abrar *et al.* (2020) explored the concept of 'brand love', and it emerged that psychological factors could drive individuals to portray their 'love' or a 'deep appreciation' for fashion brands.

A scientific review by Kudžoman (2019) which looked into nearly 30 empirical studies which focused on meaning-creation behind dress and clothing verifies and outlines this narrative further. The correlation between garments and expressing layers of self and the state of being exists with much credit to fashion, dress and clothing as a form of cognitive social 'currency'. Contemporary fashion choices have become symbolic; a chance to step into a state of 'otherness' as a way to become one's own style avatar in every waking day of life. According to Kudžoman (2019:90), understanding psychological associations related to clothing and fashion funnels through three lenses, namely colour association psychology – meaning creation in a social context and gender as a socially perpetuated construct. Body image, dress and fashion garments are all integral in how wearers exist as fashion subjects within social circles and society at large. When the body is adorned in a specific manner through vices of modification such as body art or aesthetic clothing, an exchange of messages happens between the wearer and their immediate external environment (Kudžoman, 2019:90). As Kudžoman (2019) posits, psychology literature reiterates that feelings connected to preconceived notions of self can justify fashion brand preference and taste.

An exploratory study carried out in the United States of America by Mrad, Majdalani, Cui and El Khansa (2020) looked into consumer 'Brand Addiction' in two fashion brand

categories: Fast fashion brands and Luxury fashion brands. Through 21 in-depth interviews, Mrad *et al.* (2020) focused on understanding the reality behind addictive brand-buying behaviour pertinent to fast-ready-to-wear and luxury fashion respectively. Mrad *et al.* (2020) found that in consumer-brand relationships, individuals can develop obsessive buying behaviour of a brand, either in their preference of ready-to-wear or luxury fashion brands. In a similar psychological stance as Abrar *et al.* (2020), which focused on how individuals develop their 'love' for brands, Mrad *et al.* (2020) concluded that love and intrinsic consumer motivations are interlinked. Such psychological components can lead to the development of a 'brand addiction' associated to repeat purchasing of one's favourite brand products. Reasons which emerged in the buying addiction of luxury fashion brands were identified as brand exclusivity, self-expression and love for superior textile quality. On the opposite end, reasons which participants provided behind their fast, ready-to-wear fashion brand buying addiction surfaced as: value for money, constant trend cycles and affordable product variety. Expressive characteristics of a fashion brand add dimension to a person's sense of style and identity. This creates grounds for individuals to have an emotional pull towards brands. As a result, this echoes one's fashion sense, or indicates who one yearns to be through garments, further creating meaning beyond what the eye can see.

4.4.1.3 Female empowerment – Promoting individuality and women empowerment through a “don't be a lady, be a legend” mentality [P2]

As a woman, female womenswear entrepreneurial brand owner and designer, Participant 2 advocates for women empowerment and individualism. “*Don't be a lady, be a legend*” is a mantra behind the brand, deeply engraved in the entrepreneurial designer's personal story in how she crafted and continues to manoeuvre her career to date. For Participant 2, being a womenswear designer means owning a fashion brand which specialises in 'feminine' collections. However, she further explained that the idea of femininity behind her brand is connected to ideals of 'power' and 'strength' without excessively borrowing from attributes of masculinity.

In exploring the idea of women empowerment, the purpose of a US study by Kordrostami and Kordrostami (2021:99) was two-fold: To examine whether portraying the image and subject matter pertaining to women sexual empowerment in fashion adverts played a part

in creating a positive perception in how people view fashion brands. Secondly: To determine whether this can influence the decision for consumers to buy into these fashion brands. Their research concluded that the portrayal of women empowerment in fashion advertising has a significant influence in receiving positive feedback from consumers. This can persuade the fashion consumer to actively buy into the fashion brand. Furthermore, they confirmed that the positive perception of such consumers also creates a positive attitude towards fashion brands in the US. This increases the willingness or purchase intention of the consumer (Kordrostami and Kordrostami, 2021:99).

The male gaze theory asserts that females are constantly portrayed in sexually charged roles and mostly fall prey to being type casted as 'meek' beings. The study of Kordrostami and Kordrostami (2021) challenged this perpetual narrative by looking at it from an angle of 'empowerment'. They describe "female empowerment" as a state of being, where a female demonstrates ownership of her conduct, emotions, morality, and principles, all which she proactively channels in enhancing her quality-of-life (Kordrostami and Kordrostami, 2021:103). Similar to the storytelling technique of *"Don't be a lady, be a legend"*, the findings of Kordrostami and Kordrostami's (2021) study places empowerment into positive effect. The shift lies in depicting and echoing women as strong figures. Furthermore, in Participant 2's viewpoint, it serves as an affirmation which reminds women to look within and tap into their 'inner power.' The narrative herein is cultivating a mindset of becoming a 'legend', not only on merit of becoming famously iconic but also striving to be a 'legendary' in overcoming life adversities.

4.4.1.4 Co-creation and consumer compatibility

Participant 3 highlighted co-creation and consumer compatibility. In her viewpoint, it's important to have a sense of interactive energy and the element of collaboration with individuals. This applies more especially to consumers who actively buy into her fashion brand as a womenswear designer.

An exploratory mixed-method study by Testa, Bakhshian and Eike (2021:569) probed some of the reasons behind why consumers engage with fashion brands who advocate ethical and sustainable fashion subject matter on a social media platform such as Instagram. There's an understanding that co-creation can improve consumer-brand

relationships when individuals contribute and where channels of shared-value exist (Testa et al., 2021:570). Such a level of consumer compatibility encourages engagement between individuals and brands for the purposes of extracting new ideas for the brand and to improve certain business functions.

Overall, Testa *et al.* (2021) argue that on a social media platform such as Instagram, consumers showed increased interest and engagement in fashion and lifestyle-oriented content in the nearly 30 fashion brands which they profiled. Furthermore, Testa *et al.* (2021) suggest that interaction increased in instances where online content was engaging and exciting, where layouts are beautiful and aesthetically-appealing to the eye. It can be argued that co-creation in consumer-brand relationships is more about discovering a 'sweet spot', the balance in sharing the story with an audience, while simultaneously being mindful of the consumer's role as an important stakeholder. This promotes active involvement, the circulation of information and ideas between a brand and clientele – all in an effort to bring in new-value through co-creation and consumer compatibility. It's important to be aware of consumer needs, as such information serves as data which can be used strategically to improve consumer-brand relationships.

4.4.1.5 Inclusivity

The fashion dresser has become hyper-exposed to unrealistically altered imagery in social media, which fuels many psychological and mental health issues related to body and self-image. People want to attain what the media portrays, which can cause significant damaging effects to their well-being. The world of fashion advertising often promotes the 'utopian figure' where body perfectionism is glamorised. Extremely lean models who have the 'perfect bodies' are what is commonly seen on catwalks and runways, with no sign of inclusivity for larger body types in some instances. Over the years, many international fashion brands have received much backlash in their lack of inclusivity and representation. Fashion imagery often overlooks what lies in-between the spectrum. Imagery in fashion is usually shown in one extreme form or another without necessarily paying attention to the plethora of body sizes and figures which lie in-between the spectrum.

A study done by Lai and Perminiene (2020:685) concluded that contemporary fashion brands have shown and increased deviance from socially-constructed narratives which romanticise the idea of body and image perfectionism. Lai and Perminiene (2020) probe the concept of inclusivity from an angle of looking into fashion brands which 'normalise' imperfectionism in their fashion advertisements. They argued that this is a recent paradigm shift in fashion advertising which 'accepts' human flaws that are normally rectified through the portrayal of picture-perfect imagery in fashion.

Participants 4 and 5, respectively, highlighted their storytelling technique of 'inclusivity' behind their fashion brands and entrepreneurial business enterprises. This is their deliberate action of representing and including different body types and sizes in their clothing collections and overall brand image, as womenswear entrepreneurial designers. Against the backdrop of social media which fuels unrealistic body 'standards' and prevalently favours certain figures over others, it became important for them as designers to disrupt this notion and challenge these narratives. They've arrived at a point where they include previously marginalised body types and represent them through their brands.

4.4.1.6 Creative upcycling and repurposing

Due to the wasteful and environmentally damaging effects of the fashion industry as a whole, Participant 10 explained that circular production methods are quite strong as one of her multiple storytelling techniques. She referenced her upcycling and repurposing of fabric remnants as a way of reimagining and limiting the disposal of post-production waste in a creative way.

A study which investigated interior upcycling by Bridgens, Powell, Farmer, Walsh, Reed, Royapoor, Gosling, Hall and Heidrich (2018) concluded that this approach in design is about instilling new meaning in tangibles through waste material. In order to understand how Western consumers behave towards upcycled goods, through experimentation, they created a café set-up from discarded materials, mainly targeted at a wealthy Western community. It emerged that upcycling can be a method which elicits positive reactions regarding 'green spaces' from consumers. Bridgens et al. (2018) argued that creative upcycling yields product longevity and aligns value with meaning, more especially in promoting circular and sustainable consumption in design goods. This disrupts linear

cycles to aid the adoption of slower consumerism. Clothing is designed to become obsolete. This perspective of regarding waste as a reusable resource has become significant. According to Participant 10, as well as Brigdens *et al.* (2018), creative upcycling has become more about innovating production waste remnants into new commodities. Furthermore, the respondent professed her 'love' for her entrepreneurial fashion career by referring to it as "*the craft of dressmaking*." This love for repurposing material scraps all filters down to deconstructing materials through a story of craftsmanship. In her explaining this storytelling process, Participant 10 used expressions such as '*patching*'; '*stripping*'; '*tearing*'; '*overdyeing*'; '*detailing*' and '*texture*', all of which are fundamental principles in hand craftsmanship.

4.4.1.7 Embedding the concepts of power, beauty and exoticism in clothing

Stories can become of tangible nature as seen in clothing, which can ultimately be interpreted on an open-ended basis. According to one participant, embedding these concepts in her work deviates sharply from minimalism and takes shape through elements of '*exoticism*', '*power*' and '*beauty*', all which naturally communicate her '*strong*' and '*bold*' brand story visually.

An exploratory study which was done on a British cycling clothing brand 'Rapha' by Glover (2018:19) found that storytelling in brands creates a conversation with its audience. It is when the brand values, and how the brand can be functional in the life of the consumer is strategically and authentically communicated. The purpose of the study was to examine how the brand makes use of the 'story' element across its multiple brand dimensions and its branded clothing. Qualitative data such as interviews, writings, cycling clothing gear and subjective experiences were all used for the purposes of mapping out the main brand story of Rapha. It emerged that the brand story 'Quest' describes the Rapha cyclist consumers as 'Questers'. The Quester wears Rapha not only as a cycling brand, but also buys into the holistic brand story which advocates the value of health across many areas in their life (Glover, 2018:17).

Story marketing has been a prevalent approach for many years in spaces of contemporary brands in fashion (Glover, 2018:17). Stories create meaning and have the ability to connect people through meaningful emotive experiences. It is widely accepted

that designers as creative beings produce work as guided by imagination, subject matter, infinite inspiration and stories. Participant 10 gave insight on this by explaining her take on 'power', 'beauty' and the 'exoticism' in her work.

4.4.1.8 Embracing fashion as art

The storytelling technique of embracing fashion as art was highlighted by Participant 7. The respondent explained that his career as an entrepreneurial fashion designer finds roots in art. Research by Collins (2016) confirmed that a strong connection exists between art and fashion. In studying the Avant-garde fashion brands of four Australian fashion designers, Collins (2016:165) asserts that looking at fashion through the lens of art is based on exploring layers of design beyond 'conventional' aesthetics. It is informed by probing the principles of visual art in order to create a 'new' artistic appearance through fabrication as tangible wearable garments. According to Collins (2016:169), art is given life through fashion according to an understanding that in the literal sense, clothing is tangible. It adorns the body through a design which becomes the 'art'. Art and fashion respectively, have their own autonomy. It's about imagery and visuals, all of which the eye can see. In the understanding of Participant 7, it's about creating work through what the mind envisions. Furthermore, his many years of experience have placed him in a position where bringing his art to life has become second nature.

4.4.2 Theme two: Brand aesthetics tactics – A positive aesthetic response

The thematic analysis indicated that the profiled entrepreneurial designers use eight different brand aesthetics tactics to cultivate a distinct brand allure. In the discipline of fashion design, a positive aesthetic response has strong links to how conscious fashion wearers perceive the design and beauty of objects and products (Pittard, Ewing and Jevons, 2007:459). Clothing is seen as the facilitator of aesthetic appreciation in the design. Customers expect garments to satisfy their needs in terms of aesthetic criteria, sizing and being comfortable with how an ensemble fits. The conscious decision for the entrepreneurial fashion designers to work around the notions of beauty, creativity and art is to seek a positive reaction from the conscious fashion dresser. It's important for them to hear a garment described through positive adjectives such as 'stylish', 'glamorous',

‘comfortable’, flattering’ and ‘beautiful.’ All of these imply a ‘positive’ response to what the wearer sees in their aesthetic as designers.

4.4.2.1 Exclusive fabric prints

Fashion studies suggest that an aesthetic criterion influences the designer’s choice of fabric in garment design (Gürcüm, 2017). Basic aesthetic criteria include: colour, texture, lustre, pattern motifs and fabric handle (Carr and Pomeroy, 1992).

Three participants explained that they experiment through fabrication by designing their own exclusive fabric prints depending on a theme or design concept in a given season. Textiles are bought from wholesalers and suppliers. However, in an effort to customise a fabric anew, the designers come up with their own art illustrations which are sent through to professional printers. These are generated through computer-aided software, where printers translate the print design onto fabrics. An exclusive design cannot be ‘bought’, therefore, creating unique designs is more about strengthening a signature look and gaining competitive edge. An example of a basic ‘print’ in the context of understanding art principles could be drawing a cluster of a flowers; then adding colour; shading techniques; and lines or dimension through gradient effects to achieve a repetitive pattern or motif throughout a single A4 or any sized layout. In modern society, common prints seen in clothing retail stores are vertical stripes, florals, camouflage, and polka dots.

4.4.2.2 Appliqué – stitchwork and threadwork

Applique’ is ornamentation synonymous with needle and threadwork which is normally seen on the surface or internal structure of garments. Three participants mentioned that this brand aesthetic tactic in particular is very evident in their designs. A study by Koca, Vural and Koç (2013:54), where a survey done on over 400 consumers living in Turkey who were selected at random, found that customer choice and perception in retail shopping are largely influenced by two factors: Hedonistic pleasure-seeking and practical functionality – although applique’ is a non-functional decorative feature of design achieved through threaded motifs and patterns. The conscious act of a consumer to seek out such elements of ‘beauty’ in designs can be argued as a form of hedonism. All of which are strategically designed to bring out depth and distinct appeal of clothing.

4.4.2.3 Volume – Accentuating proportion and shape

Participants 1 and 5 spoke of how they routinely explore shape according to the design principle of volume. According to Pittard, Ewing and Jevons (2007:460), proportion can be defined as the relationship and harmony of stagnant or moving units. Yim and Istook (2017:103) commented on the concept of volume by referring to it as modern “deformation” of the body through fashion. Considering that ‘deformation’ may imply disfigurement, contrastingly, Yim and Istook (2017) reconfigure it’s meaning by arguing it as a powerful symbol of beauty. In their understanding, volume ‘morphs’ the original silhouette into a state of otherness; making garments appear either much more androgynous, feminine or masculine. It’s a tailoring aesthetic effect which through ‘added’ fabric fullness accentuates the silhouette of a garment without distorting size and fit. It’s a prevalent aesthetic feature which ‘adds-onto’ a specific area of the body, morphing the figure to appear larger than it actually is. Overall, Yim and Istook (2017) assert that volume communicates significant messages about the design depending on the selected focal point on the body. Moreover, a garment with volume appears ‘exaggerated’ through fabric, all with the intention of adding creative edge and visual interest onto the garment.

4.4.2.4 Customised laser-cutting on fabrication

In fashion, laser-cutting refers to heat-treating fabric where intentional decorative cuts are made on the textile. This creates patterned holes without any damage on the fabric but rather, creates an aesthetic look. Research by Rosnan and Enomae (2021:69), which explored the idea of recyclable laser-cut gift packaging, concluded that laser-cut technology adds aesthetic value to products of utility, more especially in product packaging. According to Rosnan and Enomae (2021), laser-cut technology creates a unique dimension in the look-and-feel of products based on its inherent properties of scaling, spacing, layout and design ratio. It innovatively ‘engraves’ the story onto a fabrication story and brings out its intended meaning for the fashion dresser.

4.4.2.5 Beautiful buttons

Aesthetics demonstrate the designer’s take on art and design which is mainly anchored on preference and creative flair (Niinimäki, 2014:3). The selection of buttons in clothing demonstrates the designer’s taste, as trims or detailing of functionality which helps the

wearer open and close a garment (Lee, Chung and Jeong, 2003). They can either be used to secure or loosen the fit of a garment. In their research about the evolution of buttons in fashion, Lee *et al.* (2003:597) posit that buttons echo the significance of intricate, often overlooked aesthetic features in garments. They are normally designed in various sizes and shapes, all of which tie into the process of storytelling.

4.4.2.6 Couture elements

Fashion is structured according to a pyramid-like structure. At the highest point of the pyramid, lies haute couture. These are griffe-like, high-fashion designs which are designed on a once-off basis. Garments in this tier are extremely expensive and are normally produced by famous fashion designers (Dhurup, 2014:169). Underneath the high-fashion tier, comes the ready-to-wear clothing segment which retails at relatively high price points. Designer ready-to-wear clothing in this tier are oftentimes limited-edition. Furthermore, fashion brands in this tier are labelled ready-to-wear based on how they are created to mimic high-end wear at slightly affordable prices (Dhurup, 2014:169). In order for Participant 4 to instil the high-end look within his ready-to-wear garments, the respondent mentioned that he ‘borrows’ couture elements from his high-end wear, then recreates them into more affordable versions for his ready-to-wear fashion brand.

4.4.2.7 Colourful textiles

Colour directs the eye instantly and has a naturally strong visual appeal. Colour has always been a significant feature which adds character to the total aesthetic look of a garment (Gbetodeme, Amankwa and Dzegblor, 2016). It should be highlighted that there is no universal rule about which colour is meant to flatter a single form and figure. Colour preference is deeply personal and therefore, colour appreciation will always be a single individual's choice. Colour has an effect on mood and reflects the way people may feel. Colour psychology asserts that warm earthy tones, such as bright reds, oranges, and purples stimulate feelings of euphoria. This makes one feel happy and joyful (Gbetodeme *et al.*, 2016). Softer colourways such as blues, greens and white communicate cool and calm energy. Moreover, darker and deeper hues and tints such as greys and black induce sombre, more depressing effects. The visual aspect is the most critical property of the garment in determining consumer preference because vision and colour are the dominant

of the human senses (Ceballos *et al.*, 2021). Consequently, the consumers' decision related to the selection of apparel products by their visual aesthetic product properties becomes pertinent.

4.4.2.8 Texturing – Feathers and beading

Texturing is a visual characteristic. Feathers and beading can be regarded as feminine aesthetics, which are prevalent in the work of designers who specialise in womenswear. Gestalt psychology asserts that 'beautiful' or 'aesthetically acceptable' designs are primarily influenced by people's subjective perceptions of beauty (Pittard, Ewing and Jevons, 2007:460). It is suggested that masculine elements take shape through more 'angled' cuts and sharp lines in clothing. On the opposite end, feminine clothing is designed according to 'softer', curvier contours to accommodate the natural silhouette of the female figure (Pittard, Ewing and Jevons, 2007:460). Similar to applique', stitch and needlework, texturing such as feathers and beading are non-functional but act as important elements of beauty. It is done on the outer shell of garments, mainly to add aesthetic interest, a unique look or elevated beauty to garments.

4.4.3 Theme three: Entrepreneurial social media marketing channels – online presence

4.4.3.1 Experimental photoshoots

Participants spoke of showcasing some creative content behind their brands through photoshoots. Through creative-thinking, experiments imply that designers test different elements on the basis of discovering what works in portraying their visual story content to the consumer. In experimental photoshoots, a series of images are captured to show moments in time. Models dress in the designer's branded clothing as a way to communicate the entire look-and-feel of the brand. Photoshoots are about taking the consumer on the journey in revealing what happens behind-the-scenes. For example, a glimpse of the brand creative team, or seeing the different design processes which take place pre- or post-production. Ultimately, these series of events engage the brand with its online community through likes, comments and shares (Geissinger and Laurell, 2017:37).

4.4.3.2 Social media

Social media describes “owned” digital spaces and content that enables fashion enterprises to create and showcase this owned content in marketing their brands and products. Entrepreneurial enterprises work around constraints such as limited financial aid and finding the balance to maintain a professional brand image, whilst also competing with bigger retail fashion brands. This requires much effort and an entrepreneurial mindset to maintain consistent online brand visibility. ‘Social media’ is a conglomerate term and comprises a variety of online platforms that aid marketing practitioners and brand managers with tools to achieve objectives (Lee, Hur and Watkins, 2018). In recent years, social media platforms have expanded into different categories. There are social networking platforms such as Facebook, image-sharing sites such as Instagram clip-sharing sites such as Tik Tok and Youtube, business networking platforms such as LinkedIn, micro-blogging platforms such as Twitter, and Wiki sites such as Wikipedia (Lee, Hur and Watkins, 2018). Image-sharing sites such as Instagram, Pinterest, and Snapchat have millions of users, and are deemed the fastest growing sites (McNely, 2012). This indicates the significance of visual content as an integral feature for social media-driven marketing.

4.4.4 Theme four: Entrepreneurial marketing activities

Communication, flash retailing pop-up shops, and engaging in one-on-one conversations with clients and customers, as well as paying close attention to handling them well in the process are discussed in this section.

4.4.4.1 Communication

The internet-of-things has presented progressive advancements in the use of technology, with the emergence of online platforms that continue to be part of daily life (Rienda, Ruiz-Fernández and Carey, 2021:117). Fashion operates on cycles of trend seasons and needs marketers to be forward-thinkers in the same light as commercial marketing strategies. Evolving trends push businesses to keep searching for innovative methods of engaging with customers. Brands can engage the consumer with certainty – without any restrictions, poor timing or at the wrong place (Kim and Ko, 2012). In order to promote clothes or brands, businesses use a number of equivalent denominations such as

producing a meaningful logo design for identification (Pittard, Ewing and Jevons, 2007:459).

4.4.4.2 Flash retailing-pop up shops

Fashion weeks bring the importance of flash retail pop-up stores to a heavy foot-traffic venue. Due to the reality of novel experiences, fashion marketers always need to update visual retail arrears to attract foot traffic (Pomodoro, 2013). Flash retailing is rooted in the present (Pomodoro, 2013). This has cultivated an improved way of reimagining fashion retail spaces, through active-learning experiences (Carú & Cova, 2003). This marketing concept has diversified the concept to the physical store, aiming to create controlled spaces that fully engages customers within real-time experiences (Pomodoro, 2013).

Flash retailing concerns experimentation, which creates a multisensory stimulus and further activates the element of surprise within the temporary setting (Surchi, 2011). The concept of flash retailing capitalises on limited time offers within busy and scenic locations.

In essence, temporary stores can be dismantled at any time. It is a concept which thrives on surprising consumers with the unexpected (Spire, 2013). Literature concurs that flash retailing holds four advantages, being choice in location flexible time frames, real-time consumer engagement and exclusive product offerings (Pomodoro, 2013:5). The choice in location needs to be unexpected, yet accessible to the public. Second, the fashion entrepreneur needs to decide on the time frame in which the store will exist. Third, the event itself (for example fashion weeks) needs to be creative and well-coordinated. Finally, product offerings need to be limited-edition to maintain exclusivity. Ultimately, flash-retail spaces need to be imaginative and unexpected (Pomodoro, 2013:5). As a marketing strategy, the temporary space is considered an opportunistic and cost-effective move (Alexander, Nobbs and Varley, 2018). The reasons retailers choose fashion weeks with pop-up stores could include improving awareness and creating brand exposure. This strengthens brand image and markets the retail brand commercially to create a 'buzz' and leverage word-of-mouth within the industry (Alexander *et al.*, 2018).

4.4.4.3 Engaging in one-on-one conversations with clients and customers as well as paying close attention to handling them well in the process

Emotional intelligence plays an integral part in how individuals develop basic communication skills to communicate with others (Petrovici and Dobrescu, 2014:1406). Therefore, all participants mentioned their daily encounters with clients and consumers. All concurred that they engage with everyday people with different personalities. This all requires them to have good interpersonal skills and tact in how they interact and behave when having conversations with clients.

4.4.5 Theme five: Narrative behind a story

All participants spoke strongly of having a meaningful brand story which should echo an even stronger narrative to their consumer. At the heart of their narrative(s) lies what a contemporary South African fashion brand truly stands for. Storytelling continues to be a significant marketing practice which helps the brand exist within a realm of narratives. This appeals to many audiences and becomes imaginative to the mind and hearts of the consumer (Kim and Sullivan, 2019; Pulizzi, 2012). Expressive and meaningful stories are remembered better than logical facts (Escalas, 2004). The 'narrative' component encourages engagement which can affect how the consumers reason and feel emotionally about the story (Kaufman, 2003). The six brand narratives which communicate an entrepreneurial, ready-to-wear fashion brand in South Africa are discussed below.

4.4.5.1 The value in the aesthetic of a garment

Fashion ought to be about expression and narrative (Sarkar and Karim, 2019) because modern customers are accustomed to the idea that clothes come-or-go, in-and-out of fashion. This also implies that fashion styles are fleeting and ephemeral. According to De Klerk and Lubbe (2004), a complete aesthetic experience of clothing is embedded in its most basic properties such as functionality, quality and texture. The garment appearance relates to the aesthetic value that consumers assess during the perception process (Ceballos, Hodges and Watchravesringkan, 2021).

4.4.5.2 Transitional garments

The findings show that designers create capsule wardrobe collections. With regards to ready-to-wear fashion, versatility emerged as an important element within the overall design process, as indicated by the participants. Versatility enables multi-wear functionality, where dressers ‘mix-and-match’ their ensembles from time-to-time. It’s an element which enables wearers to explore and be playful in creating their wardrobe looks. This is consistent with the statement that the capsule wardrobe lifestyle embraces a minimalist wardrobe – a simpler take on fashion and how to feel and look good with less (Mak, 2017). A capsule wardrobe is a ‘mix-and-match’ wardrobe that creates multiple outfits from just a handful of pieces (Mak, 2017).

4.4.5.3 Design creativity

Understanding design creativity is complex (Munford and Gustafson, 1988). Designers come up with different concepts that bring creativity to life. As alluded by Gürcüm (2017), textile designers seek understanding and inspiration from many spaces. Design concepts could emerge from anywhere. This ranges from print media, digital media, expos, historic sites, art galleries, artistic movements, performance art, cinematic spaces, scientific materials, books, architectural landscapes, mainstream media, and to real-time life events (Gürcüm, 2017).

4.4.5.4 The art of creating in fashion

Fashion is the newest creations of textile and accessories (El-Demedash, Wagdy and Hassan, 2017). Fashion has art origin. It is not only about beauty. Art can be described as the skilful use of inspirational themes which drive the creative imagination especially in creating aesthetic dense work and projects (El-Demedash *et al.*, 2017). Fashion becomes significant in art as it gives shape and form to what the mind envisions.

4.4.5.5 Frequency of marketing strategies

Brand identity is essential in fashion design and in communicating physical and non-physical features. Such elements include identification features pertinent to style; abstract materials and visual details linked to the story, values and narrative (Conti, Mazzola, Motta and Pillan, 2020). The designers’ emphasis on continuous marketing of their brand

is an essential part of their brand survival. This is alluded to in previous studies regarding the reality of immediate online information from different businesses as well as customers. This reality alone has altered the manner in which fashion trends are understood (Conti *et al.*, 2020). Digital technology provides the tools and also increases the need to constantly evaluate consumer needs. Fashion entrepreneurs should consider this instrumental to their success: The need to create evident strategies with many channels at their advantage. This is put in place to market products, online platforms, social networks, blogs and online businesses as some of the key areas which entrepreneurs can capitalise on (Conti *et al.*, 2020).

4.4.5.6 Fashion and identity creation

Fashion brands are embedded with signifiers and expressive elements which communicate one's way of living and social standing (Ridgway and Myers, 2014). Monroe (2021) confirms that fashion brands have always been used as markers which indicate aspirations and insecurities and the innate desire to portray the ideal self through clothing. The local and global fashion industry epitomises the use of self-identity brand personality. Previous studies suggest that a brand has become more prominent on people's self-image (Kim and Sullivan, 2019). Hence, innate emotional attachment becomes dependent on the reality at which consumers perceive the brand and in it reflecting who they are (Kim and Sullivan, 2019). Two forms of self-concepts are "actual self" and "ideal self." The 'actual self' refers to how an individual sees themselves right now, in the present. In contrast, the 'ideal self' romanticises who an individual perceives themselves to be in future, such as a higher, more conscious self (Kim and Sullivan, 2019). Fashion brands have used such strategies continuously in an effort to connect customers to their products. Ultimately, fashion then represents multidimensional symbolic values which are evident in various socio-cultural spheres. The individual and societal values which are intrinsic to fashion are integrated in the beauty and functionality of products and accessories (Conti *et al.*, 2020).

4.4.6 Theme six: Colour symbolism

Some design elements within a garment could be less tangible and may not be amendable to dissect and easy to understand (Rahman, Liu and Cheung, 2012). Their

findings show that designers felt that people buy emotionally into the brand. This expressed that consumers favour fashion brands for their semiotic nature. When brand signifiers are meaningful, their innate qualities become inspirational to the consumer (Scheide and Marques, 2018).

4.4.6.1 Royalty colours – Black and gold

The colour black represents seriousness, distinction, elegance, boldness, power, sophistication, and premium cost (Ewald, 2010). According to Cerrato (2017), black is the colour of authority and power, stability, protection, comfort, seduction, mystery and strength. Gold refers to richness, value and prestige (Ewald, 2010). Cerrato (2017) indicates that in business, gold signifies wealth and prosperous energy, supreme quality, luxury, affluence, superiority, joy, beauty, brilliance, prestige, opulence, and wisdom. Therefore, gold and black suggest extreme opulence, elegance and wealth (Cerrato, 2017).

4.4.6.2 Creating different colour accents: Overdyeing, creating exclusive colour blends through Pantone colours from professional dyers, printing, embellishing, embroidery and laser-cutting

Colour accents play an important role in the overall design and aesthetic properties of textile products (Kodžoman, 2019:92). Textile manufacturers achieve motifs through textural art and colourways. This can be achieved through stitching methods where panels are interwoven together or crochet using different coloured threads, yarns and fibres. Surface design techniques which are also applied to textiles after production include dye-staining, 3D printing and sewing processes (Camira, 2015). Distinct dye-staining of textiles creates ‘new colours’ such as gradient effects and ombre’ effects on fabric via heavy-duty machinery. Ultimately, these are created by using different yarns and fibre technology in mass production (Morgan, 2018).

4.4.6.3 Exploring colour through fabrication and fabric versatility

Fashion design contexts reveal the importance of fabric. As suggested by Burns (2021), fabric is mandatory in the design process with its infinite options in terms of flexibility, colour, weight, quality, pattern and texturing. In the discipline of fashion design, fabric can

be described as woven material which can be stitched, pleated, cut and folded into multiple designs (Burns, 2021).

4.4.7 Theme seven: South African entrepreneurial fashion brands in Covid-19 times – Understanding the impact of Covid-19 on local entrepreneurial fashion design enterprises

Fashion thrives with events. Special events are profitable to the fashion industry; however, during Covid-19 lockdown, this impacted the South African industry. Sarkar and Karim (2019) alluded that fashion commodities such as clothing, shoes and accessories are designed for seasonal categories, significant events and oftentimes for different parts of a given day.

4.8 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter addressed the research questions through a comprehensive discussion of all the findings obtained from the qualitative in-depth interviews. Findings reflected the core focus of the thematic analysis which was the sentiments of participants and the experiences they have with their fashion brands. Overall, the thematic analysis revealed seven themes. These themes demonstrated how the profiled participants have explored creative brand storytelling and brand aesthetics to communicate ready-to-wear fashion for men and women's markets in South Africa. All essential themes in this chapter included descriptive verbatim comments collected from participants' interviews.

The discussion of **theme one**: 'Fashion brands storytelling techniques' discussed eight creative brand storytelling techniques which the profiled entrepreneurial contemporary South African fashion designers use to communicate with consumers. Namely, timeless simplicity; constructing clothing as a tool of emotive escape and means of self-expression; female empowerment: promoting individuality and women empowerment through a "*don't be a lady, be a legend*" mentality; co-creation and consumer compatibility; inclusivity; creative upcycling and repurposing; embedding the concepts of power, beauty and exoticism in clothing; and lastly, embracing fashion as art. In **theme two**: 'Brand aesthetics tactics – a positive aesthetic response', eight brand aesthetics tactics applied by South African fashion entrepreneur designers, were discussed. Namely, exclusive fabric prints; appliqué- stitchwork and threadwork; volume- accentuating proportion and

shape; customised laser-cutting on fabrication; beautiful buttons; couture elements; colourful - bold and exciting textiles; and lastly, texturing, e.g. feathers and beading.

Theme three: 'Entrepreneurial social media marketing channels-online presence' discussed the two entrepreneurial social media marketing channels used by the participants. First, experimental photoshoots and second, social media. **Theme four:** 'Entrepreneurial marketing activities' discussed three entrepreneurial marketing activities which are favoured by the profiled participants. These activities speak more of the personal face-to-face interactions and online engagement the designers prefer to have with their actual or potential clients. Namely, communication, secondly, flash retailing pop-up stores and thirdly, engaging in one-on-one conversations with clients and customers as well as paying close attention to handling them well in the process.

In the discussion of **theme five:** 'Narrative behind a story', six brand narratives which distinguish a ready-to-wear fashion brand were presented: The value in the aesthetic of a garment; transitional clothing; design creativity; the art of creating in fashion; frequency of marketing strategies; and fashion and identity creation. **Theme six:** 'Colour symbolism' discussed the three types of symbolic preferences which the entrepreneurial fashion designers gravitate towards in their designs and imagery. Firstly, royalty colours – black and gold; creating different colour accents: overdyeing; creating exclusive colour blends through Pantone colours from professional dyers; printing; embellishing; embroidery and laser-cutting; and lastly, exploring colour through fabrication and fabric versatility. The discussion of the final theme, **theme seven:** 'South African entrepreneurial fashion brands in Covid-19 times', was based on understanding the manner in which Covid-19 impacted the profiled entrepreneurial fashion designers and their respective enterprises. Chapter 5 as the final part of the dissertation presents the conclusion.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter five reflects on the main anchor points of the research. As the final part of the dissertation, this chapter comprises the restatement of purpose, conclusion on research objectives, summary of findings, possible explanation of research findings and implications of research findings. In the latter parts – an overview summary of dissertation chapters, limitations of the study as well as recommendations for future studies, and practical applications are provided.

5.2 RESTATEMENT OF RESEARCH PURPOSE

This research examined the entrepreneurial marketing and brand storytelling activities that are undertaken by South African fashion entrepreneur designers, and further explored the brand aesthetics tactics used. The purpose of the study was twofold: To explore what brand storytelling and aesthetic techniques are used by South African fashion entrepreneur designers if any, in order to communicate with customers. Secondly: To understand the brand narratives used to distinguish each ready-to-wear fashion brand.

In closing the loop and pinpointing the research focus, attention was placed on two of Kakroo's (2015) pillars of storytelling, being the "plot and character" in order to confront the two critical aspects of the research purpose. The research already included the concept of aesthetics, and built on this by further incorporating two supporting constructs of 'plot' and 'character.' The study examined the entrepreneurial marketing and brand storytelling activities – plot and character that are undertaken by South African entrepreneur designers, and further explored the brand aesthetics tactics used. Moreover, the main purpose of the study embraced both the men's and women's value chain to understand the range, and diversity, if possible, of how South African entrepreneur designers take on the exploration of masculine and feminine fashion styles.

5.3 CONCLUSIONS ON RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This segment provides an overview and reflects of the research objectives in relation to the research findings. This includes discussions on how each one was achieved for the study overall.

5.3.1 Conclusion on main research objective

The main research objective for this research was to determine how South African fashion entrepreneur designers use creative brand storytelling and brand aesthetics to communicate ready-to-wear fashion for men and women's markets.

Two themes and all their respective sub-themes address the main research objective:

- Theme one: Fashion brands storytelling techniques and all its 8 sub-themes
- Theme two: Brand aesthetics tactics – A positive aesthetic response and all its 8 sub-themes

It is determined that ready-to-wear clothing is made available for immediate purchase. Designer ready-to-wear collection pieces enable the fashion designer to sell them on-demand. Given this advantage, it is also important for designers to invest deeply in the creative design process. The essence of creative brand storytelling lies in the designer's deep exploration of meaning in the story and narrative. This exploration often leads to expressive themes which guide the designer in crafting the story and their efforts to communicate to their consumer in expressive attire. It is equally important for the ready-to-wear clothing to be designed according to a meaningful brand storytelling technique. Essentially, story and aesthetic techniques are rooted in visual appeal, functionality and timelessness to accommodate both men's and women's markets.

5.3.2 Conclusion on sub-research objective one

1. To understand how brand storytelling, including the brand aesthetic of ready-to-wear fashion for men and women is defined and practiced among fashion entrepreneur designers in South Africa when targeting consumers.

In this study, the term 'defined' denotes phrases, words, references and descriptions. These were used by designers in expressing what brand storytelling and brand aesthetics signify or mean in their work and brands as commercial commodities – all in their subjective understanding. The 'definitions' are abstract, existing purely through words and concepts. In providing the 'words' with meaning, the definition is then 'practised' when it's translated through visual design elements. There's an understanding that participants

perceive brand storytelling and brand aesthetics as both abstract concepts and as physical instruments.

Two themes and all their respective sub-themes address sub-research objective one:

- Theme three: Entrepreneurial social media marketing channels – online presence and its two sub-themes
- Theme four: Entrepreneurial marketing activities and its two sub-themes

When targeting consumers, two marketing strategies are followed. Firstly, entrepreneurial social media marketing channels. Secondly, entrepreneurial marketing activities. The former speaks more about channels which maintain brand visibility through an online presence. Two such channels are experimental photo shoots and the use of business social media pages.

5.3.3 Conclusion on sub-research objective two

2. To explore how South African fashion entrepreneur designers use brand narratives for a ready-to-wear market brand when targeting consumers across media platforms.

South African fashion entrepreneur designers expressed six brand narratives which distinguish a ready-to-wear fashion brand in South Africa. Story and narrative content should always connect and be put into a 'logical' or 'creative' sequence across media platforms. The very nature of creative brand storytelling calls on the designer's deep exploration of 'meaning' in the element of story. Meaning takes an imaginative, often artistic flow to attach a narrative that is equally as deep as the story before it's shared. This exploration leads to expressive online content and themes which guide the designer in their efforts to communicate expressive attire. When targeting consumers across media platforms, two marketing strategies are effective, as suggested in research objective one. Entrepreneurial social media marketing channels. Secondly, entrepreneurial marketing activities. Two themes and all their respective sub-themes address sub-research objective two:

- Theme three: Entrepreneurial social media marketing channels – online presence and its two sub-themes
- Theme four: Entrepreneurial marketing activities and its two sub-themes

5.3.4 Conclusion on sub-research objective three

3. To understand the nature of aesthetic techniques applied in South African fashion entrepreneur designers' ready-to-wear designs to attract consumers in their attire and adornments.

The nature of aesthetic techniques can be classified as visual aesthetic techniques. This is what the eye can see at first glance which is meant to induce a positive aesthetic response from the observer. A design needs to capture the eye and therefore the nature of visual aesthetic techniques is seen in the designer's use of colour symbolism and aesthetic criteria. It is determined that brand aesthetics tactics should always invoke a positive aesthetic response from the conscious fashion dresser in turn.

Two themes and all their respective sub-themes address sub-research objective three:

- Theme two: Brand aesthetics tactics – A positive aesthetic response and all its 8 sub-themes
- Theme six: Colour symbolism and all its 3 sub-themes

A fashion consumer can genuinely be interested in what they see in a designer's media platforms. This could be an article of clothing which looks 'beautiful' or which appears to be their 'taste' based on the appearance and visual aesthetic techniques. It therefore important for a contemporary clothing fashion brand to be anchored around concepts rooted in beauty, art, and creativity – all of which invoke a positive aesthetic response from the consumer.

5.4 OVERVIEW OF KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS CONCLUSIONS

The qualitative thematic analysis revealed seven themes, each inclusive of supporting subthemes. In Chapter 4, a comprehensive discussion of the seven themes and subthemes that emerged from this study was presented in detail. The discussions thereof reviewed each of the seven themes and addressed them within a relevant theoretical

scope of literature. In this section, based on the aforementioned literature reviewed, it is determined whether the research findings align with or differ from the convictions brought forth by the literature in Chapter 4. The proposed research objectives include the following.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Main research objective

- The main research objective for this research was to determine how South African fashion entrepreneur designers use creative brand storytelling and brand aesthetics to communicate ready-to-wear fashion for men and women's markets.

Sub-research objectives

- To understand how brand storytelling, including the brand aesthetic of ready-to-wear fashion for men and women is defined and practised among fashion entrepreneur designers in South Africa when targeting consumers.
- To explore how South African fashion entrepreneur designers use brand narratives for a ready-to-wear market brand when targeting consumers across media platforms.
- To understand the nature of aesthetic techniques applied in South African fashion entrepreneur designers' ready-to-wear designs to attract consumers with their attire and adornments.

Theme one: Fashion brands storytelling techniques

Relevant research objective achieved with theme one: Main research objective

Main research objective

- The main research objective for this research was to determine how South African fashion entrepreneur designers use creative brand storytelling and brand aesthetics to communicate ready-to-wear fashion for men and women's markets.

Timeless simplicity

Ready-to-wear clothing needs to sell for the fashion brand to remain relevant. The design principles of timelessness and simplicity are rooted in minimalism. This storytelling technique grounds a designer collection in a pure yet symbolic state of minimalism. In essence, retaining the necessary elements and 'removing clutter' in the process of design is key.

In agreement, Wallner *et al.* (2020:1) concluded that the use of pure simplicity and retro-vintage design elements induce a positive aesthetic response from individuals. These add the element of 'timelessness' in physical objects, such as furniture and clothing. Both design elements communicate beauty and can increase consumer purchase intention. This becomes significant in that some participants expressed that they create work rooted in timelessness and simplicity. This still remains even in the course of a designer's experimental tangents. A brand storytelling technique such as 'timeless simplicity' promotes a less-is-more approach and helps designers to produce wardrobe 'staples' which guarantee that a consumer will have such ready-to-wear designs for years.

Constructing clothing as a tool of emotive escape and means of self-expression

This technique connects emotion with expression. It becomes a designer's way of helping the male and female dresser interrogate their dress identity and sense-of self the tactility and functionality of clothing. In using this technique, the perception of self in relation to self-expression in turn, can be observed in how the fashion dresser becomes aware of who they are through attire.

The construction of clothing as a tool of emotive escape and self-expression also allows room for the designer's experimentation. Elements such as fabrication, colour, and shape serve as inspiration for a look-and-feel. It is on this premise that the fashion dresser sees clothing as an instrument of expressing their identity. It can be argued further that conscious fashion dressing induces emotions where the fashion consumer can interpret a design story and experiment parts of it with their sartorial dress sense.

Female empowerment

Female empowerment, more especially for womenswear designers, represents a very unique dimension of the brand and its clothing specialty. For Participant 2 in particular, who's a female womenswear designer, the hallmark of her brand is anchored around her *"don't be a lady, be legend"* storytelling technique. For her lady customer, the technique is also a 'command' for her to become 'legendary' in her life endeavours. It also serves as an affirmation which reinforces power-dressing. Through this technique, designing 'feminine' clothing as womenswear designer means the conscious female dresser can use it to express her individuality. Ultimately, female empowerment exists within a space which allows the female consumer to embrace her 'individuality' and 'empower' herself through dress.

Co-creation and consumer compatibility

Cultivating a strong sense of co-creation and consumer compatibility is about making the consumer feel involved in the brand and strengthening the element of collaboration. Co-creation recognises the role of the consumer as important stakeholder. This also enhances the consumer-brand relationship. It was argued that co-creation can improve consumer compatibility based on the element of contribution. In co-creation, the level of input from the consumer's end is controlled by the brand. With a constant rotation of feedback, ideas happen as shared value between the brand and consumer as an important stakeholder.

Inclusivity

Inclusivity emerged as another significant storytelling technique behind ready-to-wear fashion brands in South Africa. At the heart of inclusivity lies the conviction of embracing marginalised body types. The importance of inclusivity as part of the overall brand story is in it challenging ideals attached to beauty, dress and fashion. For the designers in particular, it's about designing and producing clothing which caters to a larger spectrum of body sizes and figures.

Creative upcycling and repurposing

It was determined that creative upcycling and repurposing is a storytelling technique which encourages circular consumption. This is a way to manage post-production waste. It is mainly applicable to fabric remnants. Depending on the aesthetic of a designer,

remnant materials are 'recreated' using artistic and innovative-thinking. Creative upcycling and repurposing thus are an integral part in product craftsmanship. Discarded waste is reimagined into 'new value' which, in most cases, can be priced at a much higher value than original first line products of the brand. Overall, this storytelling technique aids slower fashion consumption and reduces the rate of fashion obsolescence significantly.

Theme two: brand aesthetics tactics- a positive aesthetic response

Relevant research objective achieved with theme two: Sub-research three

Sub-research three:

- To understand the nature of aesthetic techniques applied in South African fashion entrepreneur designers' ready-to-wear designs to attract consumers with their attire and adornments.

Embedding the concepts of power, beauty and exoticism in clothing

For a womenswear designer, themes of power, beauty and exoticism provide the designer means to communicate a story from a very unique perspective. 'Power' is about designing for and dressing the female dresser in garments which make her feel a particular way. The feeling is intrinsic and induces an elevated sense of confidence for the wearer. Beauty is reflected in the overall look-and-feel of clothing. It is mainly attributed to visual qualities such as fit, colour, silhouette, shape, detailing and texture in garments. The very essence of aesthetics is beauty and its perceived effects on the human senses. Exoticism reflects the designer's fascination with experimenting with foreign, almost unusual styles. It is mainly seen through 'borrowed elements' or 'appropriation', which adds a sense of ambiguity and hybridity in the art or design.

Embracing fashion as art

The storytelling technique of selling fashion as art confirms that the interplay between art and fashion revolves around art and design principles. These help designers explore 'new' or 'unconventional' areas of fashion through what the creative mind envisions. It's about merging artistic mediums and 'bringing them to life' through clothing as tangible wearable pieces.

Exclusive fabric prints

Creating exclusive fabric prints is about illustrating and customising fabric through a specific design. This is meant to make fabric look unique, considering that an exclusively designed fabric cannot be store-bought, but can only be created by the designer. The designer adds their 'personal touch' to textiles in designing the print. The overall aesthetic criteria, pertinent to colour, texture, motifs and the feel of the fabric all add rich depth to the print.

Appliqué – stitchwork and threadwork

Decorative and neat stitching are fundamental in ensuring that garments look appealing and professional. Neatness in appliqué' is also an indication of the designer's workmanship. It is a non-functional element which brings out distinct appeal from garments. It shows a high level of quality and gives clothing a professional, well-finished look.

Volume – Accentuating proportion and shape

It is understood that volume is a tailoring aesthetic principle which enhances the shape of clothing through added fullness without disrupting size and fit. As a timeless aesthetic feature, volume adds creative edge and a unique feel to garments.

Customised laser-cutting on fabrication

With its inherent uniqueness of scaling, pattern and cut-out spacing, customised laser-cutting on fabrication engraves the aesthetic of a story on the fabric.

Beautiful buttons

Intricate, yet commonly overlooked trims such as beautiful buttons are an essential and functional aesthetic feature in garments. It's important for such trims of functionality to complement the story and overall style of a garment.

Couture elements

Couture elements enhance the quality of ready-to-wear clothing by adding a premium feel. Ready-to-wear fashion can emulate high-end fashion when couture elements are 'borrowed' and then recreated into more affordable articles, to cater for suitable target markets.

Colourful textiles

Colour attracts the eye when noticed from a distance. It is regarded as the most significant element which enhances the design of clothing. Colour has a significant impact on feelings and mood – all of which reflect how people are and feel.

Texturing – Feathers and beading

Gestalt psychology asserts that the perception of beauty and art is primarily controlled by subjective reasoning. The element of texturing adds visual interest. This creates dimension on the surface of a garment, as opposed to it having a flat, clean conventional appearance.

One such channel is experimental photo shoots. As creative content, this requires creative-thinking and experimentation where designers post their work on all their business social media platforms. Another channel which the designers make use of is social media in itself. Reasons cited here were mainly attributed to cost-effectiveness, convenience and wide consumer reach.

Theme three: Entrepreneurial social media marketing channels – online presence

Relevant research objective achieved with theme three: Sub-research objective two

Sub-research two

- To explore how South African fashion entrepreneur designers use brand narratives for a ready-to-wear market brand when targeting consumers across media platforms.

Experimental photo shoots and social media

Creative content photo shoots require creative-thinking and experimentation where designers post their work on all their business social media platforms. Another channel which the designer's make use of is social media in itself. Reasons cited here were mainly attributed to cost-effectiveness, convenience and wide consumer reach.

Theme four: Entrepreneurial marketing activities

Relevant research objective achieved with theme four: Sub-research objective two

Sub-research two

- To explore how South African fashion entrepreneur designers use brand narratives for a ready-to-wear market brand when targeting consumers across media platforms.

Three activities are effective, namely communication, Flash retailing through pop-up stores and lastly, engaging in one-on-one conversations with clients and customers as well as paying close attention to handling them well in the process. In terms of communication, the convenience of social media helps designers reach their customers swiftly. Posting engaging content such as 'new arrivals' or 'limited edition' encourages online consumer interaction and creates brand awareness. Considering that participants are self-employed and operate their own entrepreneurial businesses, dealing with clients is their daily reality. The latter activity suggests that having a strong sense of humility and emotional intelligence are two soft skills which participants need to have. It's important for them to have conversations with people in a respectful tone and also be mindful of their body language.

Theme five: Narrative behind a story

Relevant research objective achieved with theme five: Sub-research objective two

Sub-research two

- To explore how South African fashion entrepreneur designers use brand narratives for a ready-to-wear market brand when targeting consumers across media platforms.

The value in the aesthetic of a garment

At the heart of a narrative, lies what a contemporary South African fashion brand truly stands for. Exploring how South African fashion entrepreneur designers use the element of narrative for a ready-to-wear market brand revealed six ways. First, the value in the aesthetic of a garment needs to be measured according to its level of quality. Fashion

styles constantly rotate; therefore, placing more value in the aesthetic of attire makes clothing more timeless.

Transitional garments

Transitional garments and versatility enable multi-wear functionality. Designing transitional garments is significant in ready-to-wear. This enables the consumer to have essential 'daily staples' – clothing which functions as daily wardrobe essentials. The conscious fashion dresser can look and feel good with less.

Design creativity

Design creativity is seen in the designer's ability of interpreting and exploring different art and design principles in their work. It is a practice which exists in phases or moments of experimentation. The designer explores, and actively immerses themselves in an ocean of inspiration.

The art of creating in fashion

In connection with design creativity, the art of creating in fashion sees designers producing work which translates their vision, their ideas and essence of creative-thinking.

Frequency of marketing strategies

Frequency of marketing strategies is a significant factor in marketing a fashion brand. The term frequency implies that marketing efforts need to be continuous and consistent. This creates brand awareness and accessibility and creates a bigger online audience for the brand.

Fashion and identity creation

The fashion and identity creation narrative serves as confirmation that fashion brands are true markers of self-identity and self-expression in their very nature. The conscious fashion wearer dresses the 'actual self',

Theme six: Colour symbolism

Royalty colours – Black and gold

Colour psychology suggests that black and gold represent power and prestige. It was established that black and gold also allude to elegance and authority. One participant

references the use of black and gold in her brand logo. Moreover, the participant mentioned that such a colour combination shows that she dresses ‘*Queens and Kings.*’

Creating different colour accents: Overdyeing, creating exclusive colour blends through Pantone colours from professional dyers, printing, embellishing, embroidery and laser-cutting

Exploring the use of colour symbolism is also seen in a designer’s approach of creating colour accents. Accents imply shades, tones, hues, tints and colour-mixing. Textural art is seen on the surface of materials through embellishing, embroidery and laser cutting. Ultimately, these artistic elements create and reinforce a designer ‘signature look.’

Exploring colour through fabrication and fabric versatility

Exploring colour through fabrication and its versatility allows room for play and experimentation. Fashion textiles normally retail according to weight assortment, ranging from light-weight and medium-weight to heavy-weight fabric. A designer buys according to preference, as textiles come in a large variety of patterns, colour, prints and texture.

Theme seven: South African entrepreneurial fashion brands in Covid-19 times: Understanding the impact of Covid-19 on local entrepreneurial fashion design enterprises

The pandemic resulted in huge losses in the local fashion industry and many others. Lockdown regulations restricted events which impacted local fashion enterprises. Fashion truly thrives through prominent social events held between two of the country’s ‘fashion capitals’ being Johannesburg and Cape Town. These include SA Fashion Week, Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week and SA Menswear Fashion Week, where designers showcase their seasonal collections. Such events are profitable to the local fashion industry and are critical for fashion brand exposure. The unforeseen pandemic prompted designers to be creative in surviving the time. Participant responses pertaining to the impact of Covid-19 in their enterprises were mainly two-fold – positive or negative with little to no room of neutrality. In their negative reality of things, some designers rationalised that the pandemic caused massive financial paralysis in their businesses, resulting in temporary closure. In a positive reality, others experienced an intrinsic shift in perspective – seeing the pandemic as a ‘good thing.’ The former perspective saw the effects of the

pandemic as an extreme negative, which in the literal sense resulted in a complete shutdown of their SMME businesses. The latter, as a positive, became a time for the designer to 'regroup' and 'reflect' on their current journeys as entrepreneurial designers in South Africa.

5.5 POSSIBLE EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

It can be argued that storytelling of this nature leads a ready-to-wear designer into a deep exploration in search of meaning for the story and narrative thereof. Crafting a story often immerses the designer in a well of inspiration, where one can envision and come up with expressive concepts and themes. Thus, the creative design and conceptualisation becomes personal and imaginative for the designer in turn. The storytelling itself is made practical by the outcome of the design process as capsule or seasonal collections. Brand aesthetics tactics should always connect cohesively with the story and collection. An aesthetic cultivates a sense of uniqueness, a distinct brand allure. In contemporary ready-to-wear, brand aesthetics need to be visual and often tangible in the clothing. The beauty of the design is seen in the aesthetic of the designer. As a result, expressive concepts and themes are made visual through the following fundamental design aesthetics: Designing exclusive fabric prints, applique', accentuating proportion and garment shape, customisations such as laser-cutting, beautiful buttons as intricate details, seeking inspiration in couture elements, investing in colourful textiles, and texturing, as an element of adding visual interest and dimension. These basic yet fundamental elements all help a consumer develop a deep appreciation for a fashion brand. This becomes indicative of a consumer's positive aesthetic response towards the look-and-feel and style of a ready-to-wear designer's aesthetic.

Entrepreneurial social media marketing channels mainly speak of a designer's efforts in maintaining online visibility and creating brand awareness. It's important for their online content to be colourful, pleasant to look at and interesting. These elements also encourage engagement from their online brand community. Considering that entrepreneurs rely on the convenience of social media, creative content is mandatory. An entrepreneur communicates their story visually using such creative content as a convenient way to market their fashion brands. Fashion operates in cycles and trend

seasons which require designers to be proactive in their marketing activities. The internet-of-things has made it convenient for entrepreneurs to reach the masses. Independent fashion designers need to be ahead in searching for innovative ways of communicating and selling to their target markets.

In close relation to theme one, a narrative behind a story often emerges when the designer is in search of meaning in the story and narrative thereof. The narrative behind a story communicates what a South African fashion brand truly stands for in a ready-to-wear market. The narrative becomes imaginative to the consumer in how it relates to their life. As part of the aesthetic criteria, colour symbolism often solicits emotional reactions from the fashion dresser. Colour captures the eye first, depending on its shade, tint or gradient effect. Prioritising colour symbolism as a significant part of the aesthetic criteria asserts that designers truly value colour psychology. Brighter colour palettes suggest quirky and playful energy. Muted darker colour palettes suggest that a designer caters for mature often older target markets. The clothing manufacturing industry became very significant in the outbreak of Covid-19. Industries became reliant on fashion and textile sectors which produce essential protective clothing and masks. As important daily protective wear, masks became small items which designers and clothing factories alike produced in bulk quantities. Stringent lockdown regulations at the time saw sectors experience massive financial paralysis. This resulted in the complete shutdown of many businesses within and beyond the fashion industry.

5.6 OVERVIEW SUMMARY OF DISSERTATION CHAPTERS

This section reviews what all the chapters of this dissertation comprised. It presents a brief summary of Chapter 1 to Chapter 5.

Overview of Chapter 1

The first part of the dissertation as Chapter 1 introduced theory which contextualised and provided the research background. Scholarly efforts indicated that the study falls under the discipline of fashion communication and branding. Theory in this section further indicated that the exploration of creative brand storytelling and brand aesthetics deems fashion, dress and attire appropriate as a result. These were important variables to investigate in understanding the manner in which designers use them to communicate a

contemporary ready-to-wear fashion brand to consumers. Moreover, the chapter provided motivations which explained reasons why the research was conducted. Motivations included the problem statement, purpose, questions, objectives, methodology, definition of terms, delimitations and dissertation outline.

Overview of Chapter 2

Chapter 2 is the Literature Review. Relevant literature and empirical studies related to the research constructs were reviewed. Part one as the conceptual framework which was organised by theme began with introductory theory. The theory herein is pertinent to planned brand contact strategies, narrative-driven branding and brand activation theory. The conceptualisation of key constructs comprised literature which defined and discussed the four themes of the study, namely brand storytelling, aesthetic response, brand aesthetics and entrepreneurial marketing. Part two as the theoretical framework reviewed empirical studies and literature in six areas of this research. These were brand storytelling theory, brand aesthetics theory, ready-to-wear menswear and womenswear theory, clothing as communication theory, the fashion business landscape- entrepreneurship theory, then finally, the landscape of fashion in South Africa theory.

Overview of Chapter 3

Chapter 3 as the methodology, reported all the research procedures and methods for the investigation that was conducted. This included fundamentals such as the research philosophy, approach, population, sampling technique, data collection methods, data analysis, validity, reliability and ethical considerations.

Overview of Chapter 4

The findings and interpretation reported and discussed the main findings which emerged from thematic analysis. The analysis revealed seven essential themes. All were reviewed within a relevant scope of literature with an intent of fulfilling research outcomes. Chapter 4 further explained each theme cluster in great detail engaging relevant literature and previous studies which brought forth similar convictions as this present research.

Overview of Chapter 5

This final chapter, Chapter 5 has reflected on and discussed the main anchor points of this study. The chapter included the restatement of purpose, conclusion on research

objectives, summary of findings, possible explanation of research findings and implications of research findings.

This chapter concludes the dissertation. As the final parts, Chapter 5 has provided a brief overview summary of dissertation chapters, which is followed by the study limitations with recommendations for future studies and practical applications in the discipline.

5.7 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Theofanidis and Fountouki (2018:156) suggest that every study is subject to limitations – areas of weakness which are imposed by factors that may be beyond the researcher's control. This study acknowledges the following two limitations.

Geographic location in relation to research design and demographic imbalances

Table 4.1 indicated the demographic characteristics of participants. In this research, participants were either located in Gauteng or Northwest. This was mainly attributed to the factor of convenience as the researcher resides in Johannesburg North and travels to North-West on occasion. As the study focused on South Africa as a geographic location, only two of nine provinces were actually taken into consideration. The study was exploratory in nature, which implied that participants could have emerged from more areas around the country and not only Gauteng and North-West provinces. In analysing racial groups with regards to the challenges faced by different racial cohorts, a quantitative study could be undertaken. A census could investigate the ratio of Black fashion entrepreneur designers compared to their White, Coloured or Indian counterparts in South Africa. The study acknowledges that there's an imbalance between the male and female participants in terms of race. Five of the 14 participants are White and nine are participants of colour. This research disregarded race, creed and colour and relied mainly on participants who helped willingly and voluntarily.

Sample: Profiling ready-to-wear fashion brands only

Results are restricted to ready-to-wear fashion brands and cannot be generalised to other brand specialties such as high-end or bespoke wear. It can be assumed that other brand specialties operate on different entrepreneurial SMME business models. Thus, the research results are only applicable to entrepreneurial ready-to-wear fashion brands in

South Africa only. Considering that the study is restricted to South Africa only, a more continental approach could be explored. In this instance, storytelling could be explored into different tiers of the fashion pyramid to examine higher LSM cohorts beyond ready-to-wear. For example, Griffe, pure-creation wear or high-end luxury fashion brands could be investigated further. This could create a much broader understanding semiotics of storytelling and aesthetics as fundamental signifiers of beauty and art in the postmodern fashion consumption era. Fashion brands revolve around cycles of trends and seasons. Designing timeless menswear and womenswear collections can ultimately slow down the rate in which designer wear is discarded or becomes obsolete. Timelessness in fashion allows the conscious fashion dresser to own articles of clothing for years on end. It can be proposed that contemporary fashion designers should always be mindful of their design direction. This particularly becomes important in ensuring that each seasonal ready-to-wear collection is inspired by simplistic yet classic elements which guarantees lifetime wear for the fashion consumer. Seeing clothing as a tool of emotive escape and means of self-expression helps the fashion dresser to exist within an emotionally charged and expressive space of dressing. Fashion becomes a way of showing up to the world and helps to create a self-identity. The fashion wearer is able to explore story meaning on their own terms, using specific elements such as colour combinations, accessories and shoes. Experimentation with abstract story content requires visual elements which can, in the literal sense, 'bring a story to life.' Fashion is an everyday phenomenon observed in different hierarchies of society. It is important to then anchor a storytelling technique around strong pop-cultural and socio-cultural markers of dress, style, identity and status. For womenswear designers in particular, it's very important to embed an element which signifies 'power' or 'individuality' in clothing. For example, this becomes significant in the current plight of gender-based violence. Womenswear designers especially are inspired to work around semiotic concepts and themes which signify elements of 'power' dressing – essentially being unapologetic in one's choice of attire etc.

5.8 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND PRACTICAL APPLICATION

“An investigation of how contemporary South African fashion designers communicate creative brand storytelling and brand aesthetics” is an empirical study which can be extended to future research in many ways.

Exploring the concept of fashion entrepreneurial marketing

The world of fashion is often portrayed through glitz and glamour. It's about selling the 'perfect' image to consumers. It involves stylish clothing and models strutting the runway in the latest first-piece designer wear collections. This ultra-glamorous side is commonly favoured in mainstream media and continues to be one of the most effective techniques in fashion marketing and advertising to date. Exploring fashion entrepreneurial marketing through practical business models proves mandatory for this success of a contemporary fashion brand. It is important for fashion marketers to build on this practice in keeping fashion brands relevant. It also needs to include clear steps which can be followed in the day-to-day running of a fashion design business. The step-by-step can be an essential tool which can be followed by novice or even experienced fashion designers as a manual which improves current business resources controlled.

Transitioning from a designer to a flagship boutique owner

It should be highlighted that some of the profiled entrepreneurial designers either work from their personal homes, leased studios or leased premises. This reality also makes their career progressions interesting terrain to study further. For example, a self-employed designer takes years to establish their brands and business to an equal level. Many start off from a creative, somewhat eccentric stance of making clothing for themselves. This progresses to a 'learning as I go' mentality in business, building a clientele then renting small spaces to set up shop. It is for this reason that fashion design entrepreneurs could be profiled in case study research. A case study would investigate their knowledge base or level of competence regarding the required skillsets in the transition of owning a flagship boutique. This 'learning as I go' approach could be researched in a formal way to share insights to how this acquired business acumen continues to influence and define their evolving careers as entrepreneurial fashion designers.

Brand-oriented vs business-oriented fashion entrepreneurship

Many studies hold contrasting convictions in seeing the brand as a business; or seeing the business as a brand; or even seeing them as one entity. This 'unclear' typology can be interesting to look into within the discipline of fashion design and fashion marketing as a whole. An exploratory study could be carried out in finding a definitive typology which can help clarify this prevailing confusion, specifically in fashion entrepreneurship. The investigation could specifically examine the extent at which fashion entrepreneurship can be a 'stepping stone' in establishing the brand, the business or an entity which operates as both a brand and business. Key variables are also essential to conceptualise here – brand authenticity, fashion business knowledge and true expertise on fashion branding.

Evaluating the formerly trained fashion designer vs the self-taught

Many fashion designers go into fashion entrepreneurship for many reasons. The manner in which each acquire their skillsets poses many interesting questions. In varying circumstances, some undergo formal training and receive formal qualifications. In others cases, some go the explorative route and acquire skillsets through self-teaching and experiential learning on their own accord. With close relation to the 'learning as they go' mentality, studying this acquisition of skillsets through a longitudinal study could generate interesting findings. Fundamental research questions could be posed in turn. How did they become qualified? Which steps were followed in their brand to business transition? Which steps were followed in building their brand audience over the years?

Self-preservation: Building a personal brand in fashion entrepreneurship

Fashion entrepreneurship also involves personal branding. This study in particular, could expand on its element of self-preservation. Many designers start off their entrepreneurial endeavours using their personal brands first as a foundation – their point of departure. This transition is challenging. A designer needs to develop their fashion enterprises from infancy. It is on this premise that self-preservation is deemed fertile ground in fashion entrepreneurship. A mixed method study could be used. Data collection methods could include surveys and large focus groups with questions centred on key variables in turn, such as personal brand development, customer retention, creative idea execution and fundamentals involved in ensuring consistency in the transition from a personal to a

business brand. This could also be looked at from the perspective of brand managers and marketing professionals. There could be the helping of young professionals present a professional brand image. This could be evaluated in looking at the designer's efforts of having full ownership over shared content on their social media pages. To share or not to share? It could be beneficial to understand the integral role of self-preservation within entrepreneurial social media marketing activities.

Quantifying brand value: Clients or fans?

A brand is made by its people and people make the brand. This logic continues to permeate within many brands of the 21st century. A business cannot thrive without clients and a fan base. A quantitative study could be undertaken in quantifying this as brand worth, specifically focusing on the views of clients and or its followers. Measuring the value of consumer opinions. Can consumer views – either from a follower or client be credible in quantifying the brand worth? Posing such questions would create a deeper understanding regarding brand worth in fashion entrepreneurship to learn how 'worth' and 'value' are influenced by clients or followers as stakeholders.

Fashion influencing and social media subscriptions

A quantitative fashion study focused on fashion influencing within fashion entrepreneurship could be undertaken. Many entrepreneur designers pivot to being influencers for other brands. Influencing revolves around numbers. Analysing and measuring numbers required to hit certain targets and benchmarks proves interesting to explore as another area of fashion entrepreneurship. Interesting findings would emerge with regards to the amount money the designers make based on their influencing projects. Additionally, an online survey could be conducted, with questions focused on understanding consumer motivations in subscribing to the social media pages of their favourite designers.

Developing a brand name

A designer brand name bears much sentiment to the designer as an individual, their background, life experiences and overall essence in their aesthetic as creative beings. A study could be undertaken to explore the significance or impact of their brand name. Focus could be placed in unearthing the grassroots. Designer names are inspired by an

ocean of concepts. A name could be eponymous, mononymous or pseudonymous. It would be interesting to discover how brand names are 'true' to the designer's identity and what goes into the thinking of bestowing a name to a fashion brand.

Paying creatives their worth

An exploratory study could be undertaken to investigate how designers and fashion influencers quantify their worth in creative collaboration projects when working with same-brand businesses. Exploration could delve deeper in posing questions related to quantifying and paying fashion entrepreneur designers their worth. This is pertinent in projects such as ambassadorship, sponsorships, collaborations and paid partnerships.

Establishing the typology for fashion aesthetics

Contemporary fashion aesthetics could be researched further to determine what classifies fashion aesthetics by definition or a specific typology. It could be explored more specifically in relation to gender binaries in clothing, classifying masculine and feminine fashion aesthetics by a definitive typology.

5.9 PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Working through this project involved many emotional highs and lows, but one constant factor was that it remained extremely interesting. Many surprising feelings and emotions emerged when I was in the company of the fashion designers. They narrated each of their individual stories with such deep and expressive conviction. I had the privilege of being invited into their personal spaces, studios or homes when I had to interview them face-to-face. This provided me the additional opportunity to see and experience these very spaces that bring all their 'design magic' to life. They spoke with so much excitement when explaining their careers and in showing me their different styles of working and times of being in their element. I didn't expect many of the emotions I experienced when connecting with the fashion designers as storytellers, giving elaborate and expressive accounts. As a result, the participants profiled in this study continue to occupy my thoughts to date. I studied fashion, received my qualification and still remain a student to this discipline. Observing and practising this phenomenon first-hand, liberates me to exist within social spaces and ever-shifting realms where I see dress and fashion as a daily

performative art. People dress the way they want to. I believe that this performative often expressive nature of clothing, fashion and dress is rooted in pop-cultural influences: music, art, celebrity culture and social media. I'm intrigued that this zeitgeist continues to feed South Africa's collective fashion energies. This also feeds into my passion of seeing local fashion brands experience paradigm shifts through brand storytelling and aesthetics. I still find it very challenging to consciously detach myself from monitoring how their careers continue to progress. At this particular stage of the project, a strong sense of attachment theory consumes my thoughts regarding human behaviour of this nature. It continues to permeate how I connect with the people in my life. It is also seen in how everyday people interact with each other; their responses and in how meaningful relationships can emerge from these interactions. I am extremely grateful that I 'discovered' this 'dormant' area of knowledge and its practices. It is mentally stimulating which required me to ponder and meditate deeply on what my mind was feeding on. Essentially, I believe that discovering such a rich body of thought will always be against the backdrop of me navigating through contemporary fashion phenomena as I observe and experience it in daily life.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

The study will examine the entrepreneurial **marketing and brand storytelling activities** that are undertaken by South African entrepreneur designers, and will further seek to explore **the brand aesthetics tactics** used. The main purpose of the study is to explore how South African fashion entrepreneur designers communicate creative brand storytelling and brand aesthetics in line with ready-to-wear for men and women's markets.

1. What kind of attire does your fashion brand/business specialise in? (Industry)
2. When was the fashion brand started?
3. How many employees does the fashion brand have? (Size)
4. Gender _____
5. Describe your job to me as a South African fashion entrepreneur designer.

Entrepreneurial marketing activities

6. What are the entrepreneurial marketing activities that your fashion brand has undertaken? (Probe who is responsible for these activities? Do you hire someone or you do it yourself? How does this essence of uniqueness- with the marketing activities you spoke of- work in the favour of your fashion brand? Has it created your identity? Or has it developed your trademark?)

Brand storytelling activities

7. How do you define brand storytelling of ready-to-wear fashion for men and women when targeting consumers?
8. What are the brand storytelling activities that are undertaken by your fashion brand/business? What elements do you add in crafting your own brand story? In what way do you show it through your fashion brand?

Brand aesthetic tactics

An "aesthetic" can be defined as any "visual form of objects and sensory experiences associated with, texture, harmony, order and beauty" (Venkatesh and Meamber, 2008:45). Brand aesthetics refers to your workmanship, style, design, appeal and

signature on your fashion garments or types of style- as the design and artistic flair required in fashion. Fashion and clothing require a skilled mind in the use of visual effects: (proportion, silhouette, shape, volume) as well as aesthetic features (**scale, garment construction, texturing, colour, placements**), which when combined, create an aesthetic.

9. How do you define the brand aesthetic of ready-to-wear fashion for men and women in targeting consumers? What are the types of style; designs and artistic flair tactics do your fashion brand/business use? (What level of value do you want to express to your customers with your attire and fashion adornments?)

Communication

10. What stories do you use to communicate ready-to-wear for men and women's markets?
11. What style and adornments do you use to communicate ready-to-wear for men and women's market?
12. What technique do you apply on ready-to-wear designs to attract consumers in your fashion branding attire and adornments?
13. How does your fashion brand as a business make use of storytelling narratives for a ready-to-wear market when targeting consumers across media platforms?
14. What business communication channels do you use to keep your fashion brand in the forefront?
15. What impact has the unforeseen Covid-19 pandemic inflicted on your fashion business?
16. In closing, is there anything else you would like to share with regards to what we've discussed in this interview?

That concludes our interview, thank you very much.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

Research project title: **An Investigation of how contemporary South African fashion designers communicate creative brand storytelling and brand aesthetic**

The interview will take approximately an hour (60 minutes). We don't anticipate that there are any risks associated with your participation, but you have the right to stop the interview or withdraw from the research at any time.

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of the above research project. Ethical procedures for academic research require that interviewees explicitly agree to being interviewed and how the information contained in their interview will be used. This consent form is necessary for us to ensure that you understand the purpose of your involvement and that you agree to the conditions of your participation. Would you therefore read the accompanying points and then sign this form to certify that you approve the following;

- The interview will be recorder and a transcript will be produced
- You will be sent the transcript and given the opportunity to correct any factual errors
- The transcript of the interview will be analysed by the researcher
- Access to the interview transcript will be limited to **Muntu Qwelane and Dr. Abyshey Nhedzi** as well as academic researchers who might collaborate as part of the research process
- Any summary interview content, or direct quotations from the interview, that are made available through academic publication or other academic outlets will be anonymised so that you cannot be identified, and care will be taken to ensure that other information in the interview that could identify yourself not revealed
- The actual recording will be destroyed two months after the dissertation is submitted and approved
- Any variation of the conditions above will only occur with your further explicit approval

By signing this form, I agree that;

1. I am voluntarily taking part in this project. I understand that I don't have to take part, and I can stop the interview at any time;
2. The transcribed interview or extracts from it may be used in the dissertation;
3. I have read the information sheet;
4. I don't expect to receive any benefit or payment for my participation;
5. I can request a copy of the transcript of my interview and may make edits I feel necessary to ensure the effectiveness of any agreement made about confidentiality;
6. I have been able to ask any questions I might have, and I understand that I am free to contact the researcher with any question I may have in future.

email questions to



Participant Signature

_____/2020/2021

Date

Printed Name

APPENDIX C: ETHICAL CLEARANCE

14 April 2020

Student name: M. Qwelane

Student number: xx xx xx xx

Campus: Vega Bordeaux

Re: Approval of Master of Arts in Creative Brand Leadership (MACB511) Proposal

Thank you for submitting your proposal titled:

An Investigation of how contemporary South African fashion designers communicate creative brand storytelling and brand aesthetics

We are pleased to inform you that the Research and Postgraduate Committee considered and has approved your research proposal. Ethics clearance has also been granted. The Research and Postgraduate Studies Committee made some further suggestions that can assist you with your study. These should be attended to under the guidance of your supervisor. The committee confirms that Dr. A. Nhedzi has been appointed as your supervisor. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the campus staff or your supervisor directly. All the best with your research.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Brenda van Wyk

Dean: Postgraduate Studies

PILOT INTERVIEW 1 TRANSCRIPT

PROFILE

Brand owner and designer: JB (“Brand JB”)

Date of interview: Monday, 31 August 2021

Time: 12:08 PM

Means of communication: Telephonic interview

Length of interview: 0:18:30

Gender: Male (White)

Specialty: Womenswear

Brand location: Centurion, South Africa

THE INTERVIEW COMMENCES AS FOLLOWS:

JB: *J hello...

Muntu: Hi *J! How are you?

JB: I’m good and yourself?

Muntu: Good thank you. You’re speaking to Muntu, I sent you an email last week, asking to interview you?

JB: Oh! yes, yes.

Muntu: Is it a good time to talk? Right now?

JB: Yes, yes, we can quickly do it. Sorry I haven’t sent your form back yet, I’ll do it after our, chat is that okay?

Muntu: Ya, that’s okay. Okay thank you so much okay, I’m excited. Well...

JB: Ya, ya thank you.

Muntu: Okay so thank you so much for doing this, and please feel free just to ask me to repeat, or explain any question you may not understand.

JB: Okay cool.

Muntu: Okay so, just to briefly explain myself: My name is Muntu Qwelane and I'm a Master's student at Vega School Bordeaux Campus.

JB: Wow, congratulations.

Muntu: Thank you. So, at this point, I'm pursuing this Master's in Creative Brand Leadership.

JB: Okay.

Muntu: And, I'm conducting research about, the use of brand storytelling and brand aesthetics really in the South African fashion industry.

JB: Cool, that's really cool.

Muntu: Alright, so thank you. So, this is an audio-recorded interview with you as my participant...

JB: Okay cool.

Muntu: ...being a ready-to-wear South African designer. So, are we still together so far?

JB: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

Muntu: So, just to explain my premise very briefly, just to let you know what the study is-in essence what it's about, so the main purpose of my study confronts 2 aspects right so number...

JB: Okay.

Muntu: Number 1 is, what brand storytelling and aesthetic techniques are used by South African entrepreneur designers if any, really, in order to communicate with their customers, then the second aspect, is to understand the brand narratives used to distinguish each, of their respective ready-to-wear brands'. So, are still together so far?

JB: Ya, okay cool.

Muntu: Alright so...just remember, there are no wrong answers really. Just feel free to speak your mind, I'm just here to learn from you and just to...I'm a complete novice, at this so...

JB: (Laughs)

Muntu: ...just to learn, and just gain knowledge really.

JB: Okay perfect!

Muntu: Right, okay so, to start off, the interview officially, I'll first start with your biographic information, which is a total of the 1st 5 questions of the interview.

JB: Okay cool.

Muntu: (Interview officially starts here) Right, okay so question number 1: How old are you?

JB: I'm 24.

Muntu: Right, I'm 26. And question number 2: What is your gender?

JB: I'm male.

Muntu: Question number 3: Describe your job to me as a South African entrepreneur designer in 3 words.

JB: Mmm. Just describe my job?

Muntu: Ah, yes ya...describe your... ya, your job to me as a South African fashion entrepreneur designer using 3 words.

JB: I would say...sho! Using 3 words? Wait, wait let me get it. Okay, I would say my job involves creativity;

Muntu: Okay...

JB: It involves business, and it involves customer relationships.

Muntu: Okay great! Very interesting. Then question number four: How many years of experience do you have? As an entrepreneur fashion designer?

JB: I would say about ya 4 years.

Muntu: Right. Alright. Then question 5, what kind of attire does your brand specialize in?

JB: Sorry, say again?

Muntu: What kind of attire does your brand specialise in?

JB: What kind of clothing?

Muntu: Ya, like clothing your...

JB: Oh ya... womenswear. Womenswear.

Muntu: Right. Okay, so, thank you for that information. That was your biographic information which was the first 5 questions of the interview.

JB: Okay cool.

Muntu: ...of the interview. Now, moving on to the final 6 questions of the interview which will be "Brand Storytelling" and aesthetic information, which is just simply, just me again asking about your personal brand storytelling...

JB: Okay

Muntu: ...and aesthetics as a ready-to-wear fashion designer in essence. So, are we still together?

JB: Okay.

JB: Yes, perfect.

Muntu: Okay, so question number 6: How do you want people to view your fashion?

JB: I think I want people to view my fashion as a...think of escapism almost in a way to express their individuality. I think for me it's very important to create clothes that make people happy; and make people feel excited...

Muntu: Ya

JB: I think it's very important. We wear clothes every single day of our lives.

JB: I think it's a very powerful tool, we can use to influence our mood. So, I really want people to view clothes as a way to uplift their mood and to express themselves; and I also I want them to recognise also, the amount of work that goes into it; and the quality; and the thought behind every garment.

Muntu: True, true, wow okay. That's so powerful. Okay, question number 7: How do you see the role of storytelling in fashion?

JB: I think...you know I think it's very important to create a connection with people, I think...

JB: ...the fashion industry is so large at the moment because there's so many things out there. Storytelling has become very important, to find that people buy into a story more than they buy into a physical garment these days and people want to feel a connection with the clothing that they wear, So for me, its very important to communicate how... what I'm doing with the clothes and why its important; and why I would like people to wear my clothes, because I want people to feel a connection with my brand on a deeper level, because I also believe that's what would create a returning customer.

Muntu: Ya...

JB: ...which is like one of the most important things for me.

Muntu: Okay, wow, that's very interesting. Then, question number 8: How do manage to really single yourself out from your competitors, through the visual elements of your brand like for example, in terms of what can be seen first like your workmanship; your style; your design; your appeal; your signature-which in essence, is your overall brand aesthetic.

JB: In terms of garments, specifically-we focus a lot on colour, and a lot on volume, as well as prints.

Muntu: Okay.

JB: I think that colour is a very powerful tool, especially if you look at things like social media, where people are scrolling. A colourful image is a lot easier to catch someone's eye, if I can say it like that...so we focus a lot on creating imagery that is colourful, and that is interesting.

JB: ...and we also do focus a lot on quality and a lot on fabric, and we try to make it as natural as possible, and the whole idea is just to create stories that make people stop; and that make people read captions on social media; and like convince them to go onto our website. I think the whole idea is to create something that is colourful and bold; and energetic; and exciting.

Muntu: Alright. Then question 9: What level of value do you want to express to your customers with your clothing and your overall like, fashion adornments?

JB: I think in terms of value...I think there's 2 things. Number 1: You want people to understand that there is quality and thought behind a garment. We want to have people understand that there are people behind the clothes that make these clothes, and that there are very skilled artisans to make clothes and that we put in a lot of effort to make sure that every garment is of a...of a high quality, and it will last people quite a lifetime. But, beyond that, we also want people to value the aesthetic of a garment. We want people to understand that our garments are there to make them feel good and make them feel happy, and help them, and to express themselves in a creative and an interesting way. We design things to specifically make sure that you can dress it up-and you can be as crazy as you want...

Muntu: Ya...

JB: ...but you can also throw on a sneaker and a jean if you want to, and you can dress it down in that way. We want people to kind of find the versatility within our garments without having it become too boring.

Muntu: Alright. Now, just to feed off, off what you just said, I'm going to put you on the spot a bit...what would you say...

JB: What would you say, which is question 10...What would you say is the ideal if there's such in ready-to-wear fashion right now, which you want your customers to have of your brand, or to associate...

JB: I'm sorry, can you repeat that?

Muntu: Oh so, what would you say is the ideal image in ready-to-wear fashion right now-which you want your customer to have of your brand?

Muntu: I think the ideal image...if you have something that is very-very...kind of easy-to-wear...

Muntu: Ya..

JB: ...something that you don't have to think a lot about. I think we are so busy-that you...most people just kind of want to grab something and throw it on, and get done with their day. So, we want to make sure that things are as accessible and as wearable as possible, without being boring, but we're still trying to add enough interest without making the garment too complicated for people to wear. So, it's important to-in ready-to-wear fashion especially-to do something that is *just* enough interest-and its not boring without losing its wearability-if that makes sense?

Muntu: Ya, it does, oh okay.

JB: Okay cool.

Muntu: Right then, question 11: What are your communication channels with your customers, to keep your brand in the forefront? In essence, to keep it alive... and just in the public space?

JB: So, I think we need to...If I can split it into 2 categories. We have kind of our online presence...

Muntu: Okay.

JB: ...and the online presence, mostly is Instagram, Facebook, and then our own website.

Muntu: Great.

JB: ...and we also do quite a bit of Instagram Marketing and things like that to attract customers to spend time online...customers to spend time online...but we do a lot of in-person things-that's very important. So, we do fashion week, which is in a venue. We do pop-up shops, and then we also kind of have...we do stock different stores, and we also have our own studio for customers who prefer a more personal in-store experience versus an online experience.

Muntu: Right, okay. Then the final question, which is question 12: And in closing, is there anything else, you would like to share with regards to what we've just discussed in the interview?

JB: Look, in speaking in terms of brand communication, I think one thing...just not specifically visuals, but I think 1 thing that I started realising in South Africa...its very important to have...a lot of personal relationships with customers.

Muntu: Okay.

JB: It's a bit different to overseas, where you go onto a website, and then shop, but from our customers... are more willing to buy and understand who the designer is and that you have a kind of personal kind of relationship with them, and they can kind of come in and meet you, and talk to you. I think that one thing in the South African space is very important for us as designers just to communicate in-person. I find that it makes us more trustworthy and it'll also build a strong bond with our customers, I can say so that...

Muntu: Okay...wow. I didn't...I just learnt something new.

JB: Ya. It's actually... you see a lot of designers do a lot of events and they invite their special clients, to...to their studios, and they create experiences where they get gift bags, they can try on clothes, and take pictures, and be kind of more... "chat-while-experiencing" ...are becoming very, very important...

Muntu: Okay. Also because of using a purposive-snowballing method, is there anybody of your caliber, you'd like to recommend? Just names I can just...or sort of like brand names or designers I can just snowball to and include them in my study?

JB: In terms of someone to do an interview with? Sho, I don't know...most of my friends are still quite like working all over the place. I don't really have a lot of friends that have their own brands at the moment.

Muntu: Oh okay.

JB: I don't know if you'd like to speak to someone maybe...who has his own brand, but he works more with a lot of different brands and does like production for them and things like that. I don't know if that's something you'd be interested in?

Muntu: Well... its more of...my focus is more of, sort of like entrepreneur designers who have their own thing going on.

JB: Ya

Muntu: And ya, so no but its okay because I'm also just searching online, using the SA Fashion Week Annual Report, just to pick up local fashion brands there so its okay really. I really-really appreciate your time and...

JB: It's a pleasure. I think what you can do is just see what designers show at fashion week and just send them an email. Most of us are really nice. I'm sure anyone would be able to help you with that.

Muntu: Okay. Right.

JB: Okay perfect.

Muntu: This marks the end, and again... thank you so much for your time.

JB: Pleasure.

PILOT INTERVIEW 2 TRANSCRIPT

PROFILE

Brand owner and designer: D.F (“Brand DF”)

Date of interview: Thursday, 19 November 2021

Time: 13:39 PM

Means of communication: Face-to-face interview

Length of interview: 0:45:25

Gender: Female (White)

Specialty: Ladieswear, “timeless, classic pieces that will last you a lifetime.”

Location: Parkhurst, Johannesburg

THE INTERVIEW COMMENCES AS FOLLOWS:

Muntu: So just to kick things off. So, the study... just to give a brief... just explain what it's about...

DF: Do you want us to cut the music off, can you hear me?

Muntu: Ya. I think it'll pick it up. So, that's fine.

Muntu: So, the study will examine the entrepreneurial marketing and brand storytelling activities that are undertaken by South African entrepreneur designers, and will further seek to explore your brand aesthetic tactics. The main purpose of the study is to explore how South African entrepreneur designers communicate creative brand storytelling and brand aesthetics in line with their ready-to-wear fashion for men and women's markets.

Alright, so...what kind of attire does your fashion brand/business specialise in?

DF: Timeless, classic pieces that will last you a lifetime.

Muntu: Why is that important to you? Why that particular...

DF: I'm a very timeless girl.

Muntu: Okay.

DF: So, when I got into the industry...like if you look at Fashion Week-it's very like "Glitz and Glam". I've never been that person. I'm a lekker "Plain Jain"- I've always thought. And, I really wanted to dress that girl because that girl can't really find...because maybe she wants to support local and so on and its difficult to find just like...plain, simple everyday wear...

Muntu: ...functional, wearability yet stylish?

DF: Yes! Also, from a business perspective, that is what sells. You know...it's very seldom that the very glamorous things are going to sell.

Muntu: Like Avant-garde or?

DF: Ya. It doesn't. Although to be honest, I don't think I've ever designed anything Avant-garde because like I say- I'm very practical. I'm a very practical person. So...

Muntu: ...and its convenient as well...

DF: Yes! And then... for the... I want it to last you because its sustainability and...We also only make like sometimes more, but I'd say like max 10 per garment so that its all more exclusive even though it is like simple-wear and everyday-wear. We'll just add something like... We love fabrics. So, we'll do it in like a wild fabric but it's still very ready-to-wear. I hope that answers your question.

Muntu: Ya. It does. When was the fashion brand started?

DF: It's so tricky because when do you say you started? Like the day you printed your labels? Or had your idea?

Muntu: Like...

DF: ...or got into a store?

Muntu: ...from...I'd say from conceptualisation when you said. Okay, my...

DF: This is happening?

Muntu: Ya. This is it!

DF: So, I think it was like...4 years ago.

Muntu: Okay.

DF: Because that IS... 18' 19'...ya. I think about 4 years ago. I think we were only established in 2017.

Muntu: Okay. That's where your name...like...

DF: Became a thing!

Muntu: Became a thing, yeah.

DF: Well... I don't know if it's a thing yet.

Muntu: It is a thing.

DF: Ya.

Muntu: Why the decision to name it after yourself and not like just...you know how designers are- just find a cool adjective or...

DF: Do you want to know the full personal story or do you want to know the short version?

Muntu: The full personal story.

DF: Are you serious?

Muntu: Ya.

DF: Okay, first of all-short story, I get bored. Very easily. So, I was going to name it like what? Sunshine? I was going to get very bored, very quickly whereas my name- I wasn't going to get bored of. Also, I got divorced when I was 25 and I got my surname back. So, I was like yay! You know...I've got my surname back! I am woman! Yummy! Raw! That whole thing! So, that's why I actually named it [the brand] after my name.

Muntu: After yourself...

DF: Ya!

Muntu: Because, also, I feel like when you name it after something, there's always something out there like, that matches that.

DF: Also... no. Ya! My name is never going to be taken. It's a very... it's also like a very not well-known name. I don't know anyone who has my surname-so that also. The only thing is that having it named after you, ya has its issues. But ya...we'll get to that later.

Muntu: Alright. How many employees does your fashion brand have? Like the size of your company?

DF: Right now, we're only 3. Yeah. So, what we do is that...that's now direct employees right?

Muntu: Yeah.

DF: So, we're here every single day. If we do a wholesale order and we need like a lot of units, then we'll outsource like a small factory.

Muntu: Okay, like for production purposes? And?

DF: Yes. For production. But for ...but for direct employees, it's just the 3 of us. We are a little family.

Muntu: Keeping it nice and close-knit...

DF: Yes! It's a very...and it's a very...running a small business-it's a very like...you don't have...we don't have like a "cutter" and a "seamstress" and an "admin." Everybody here is like...you know...you are not a one-trip-pony, you can do everything...

Muntu: Like...you're multi-skilled...

DF: Everyone has to be on board, doing a lot of things...

Muntu: ...like a team player, you know...?

DF: Yes! And learn very quickly! So ya. So, it's just the 3 of us. I don't know how we do it, but we do it.

Muntu: Alright, so, based on that, can you just literally describe your job to be as a South African fashion entrepreneur designer who operates in this industry.

DF: So, my job as in my day-to-day? Like...what do I actually do?

Muntu: Ya...your day-to-day, from doing things like SA Fashion Week, where I saw...where I picked up your name and just-how you operate your brand as an entrepreneur fashion designer.

DF: So, the thing is, as an entrepreneur, you're the tea lady; the admin lady; the seamstress; the tailor; the...

Muntu: The all-rounder.

DF: ...the pattern-maker, the...the everything! Ya! What do I do? Everything.

Muntu: In terms of your...like your... what's this...creative design process, when you conceptualise...

DF: It's so organic. I think if we were like in a bigger, okay maybe a different country, maybe a bigger brand, then I would really sit and play with fabric and draw pictures all day, and design, and conceptualise, and make mood boards. But- we don't do that because there isn't that kind of time. And, so...it becomes such an organic process. We'll see two fabrics on the table, and we'll be like: "that's such a good combo" and that's what will...

Muntu: ...and then it clicks? Into the story?

DF: And then it clicks! And like, we'll be making a dress and then we'll look at each other and be like: "Oh my God, no let's do this...make it lower back, or whatever." So, it's never really like this whole... a collection's never really like...

Muntu: ... like, you sit down, you sketch...

DF: No!

Muntu: ...you look for images? Pinterest, Pinterest all day and...

DF: No. That's not what it is at all. Also, because...because you've got to make money unfortunately.

Muntu: Ya.

DF: It's also...you know, you've got to think about all these things: How much does the fabric cost? Is it going to work? If it's really like...that's why I really love doing Fashion Week because we can actually play. Its like a nice time to design and play. Otherwise- you don't really do that stuff because you just...you like do, do, do. You've got to produce and make money and ya. So, you don't often...Like, this is like a final project for an Indian lady...

Muntu: Okay...

DF: But ya...that. It's not really a whole conceptual [process] you know... [where] you saw a leaf, then boom! You know? It's not. Ya... and mood board? No.

Muntu: I understand.

DF: It's very, very organic. It just happens. So, like, we live it also. I wake up in the morning and I'm like "I need to buy press studs... you know what I mean? Like 24/7. For all of us.

Muntu: It's your life.

DF: Ya. Like, Lesego [the store manager] dreams that parcels get lost... for online orders... and like, you know... you live it. We don't have lives. Sorry Lesego. (laughs)

Muntu: So. its also the same when prepare for SA Fashion Week? Like for example, when you showcase there...how often do they require...like what's the process in that for you? For me to see those beautiful images that I saw of your collections?

DF: Thank you. The process of Fashion Week?

Muntu: Ya.

DF: So that...that we will obviously conceptualise a little more. And we'll feel what our mood is. We're always focused on something like... [for example] I think that 2018 collection that was the one that was...that there was a lot of collars. So, it's the sharp lines and like feminine... masculinity. I like making pieces like work shirts, collars and stuff that are masculine, and then we'll put that on dresses...and bigger collars...

Muntu: Ya. I really like that. I love...

DF: So, that... We will think through. It usually happens at my house and there's just clothes hanging everywhere. My poor partner. We'll start with a vision, and it will die, and you'll have 40 other visions, and eventually the collection will come together. But, it's very seldom what you thought.

Muntu: Wow.

DF: It's often better though. You never really like it.

Muntu: What? The process of...

DF: The collection. In the end. You never really like it. You always think you could've done more.

Muntu: More...better... It's always that way.

DF: Ya.

Muntu: Self-critiques.

DF: Yes.

Muntu: As a creative, you want...because you're so invested emotionally and...

DF: Exactly! You know? You had a vision, but sometimes it comes out even better. That's also the beauty of it. I think always people think like "ah it's pretty and it's clothes" and stuff... but like for us it's the moment of "that thing fit perfectly." It's when we saw the spot in that green-brown fabric. That's the fun moment. It's not really the runway.

Muntu: ...all those... the nuances of just putting it all together.

DF: Ya. The tiny little things that actually make this for us.

Muntu: So, what are the entrepreneurial marketing activities that your fashion brand has undertaken so far? From inception? I know you evolve as the years go by...

DF: Ya.

Muntu: Okay.

DF: To help myself understand it more and so on... I was very lucky, because you know like Facebook advertising and Instagram advertising... all that stuff?

Muntu: Ya.

DF: I hopped on that so quickly! Like now, there's a sponsor-first ad hitting you in the face every 5 minutes whereas 2...3 years ago it wasn't a thing. Not a lot of people were doing it. So, I try to do like constant...always. I'm always like, reading an article, trying to figure out how to get our name out there more, being in another store, so that traffic can come here and ya. Obviously, like you're saying, that things have changed...so, now-we also have someone who does PR, so they try to get us into magazines...that kind of thing.

Muntu: Oh. So, you said you're outsourcing where you can, and also because there's 3...

DF: ...also because it's expensive hey, for other people to do it. I still do all our...because we do like a weekly mailer...I built the website. We still update everything on our website, all the products. We do all our Facebook ads. We still do everything because to pay somebody that [amount] is insane.

Muntu: It's a lot.

DF: Especially when you're small. Maybe in a few years...but I... It's also something that I really love. Marketing. I think it's such an amazing thing.

Muntu: Ya, because you have to. It pushes you to get your brand out there.

DF: You've got to market! Ya! I don't know how, ya. Also, luckily, we're in this generation where I was... where I grew up with social media and so on. It wasn't really... I wasn't really a grown-up when it came out, you know? We're on it. Whereas- I think for an older brand that must be really difficult to now all of a sudden...

Muntu: Ya... be bombarded with like, all these advancements, and break into certain...

DF: Ya. I think that must be really hard. You've got to read articles. You've got to stay on top of it 24/7.

Muntu: Then, like, how does that essence of uniqueness, you know... you doing like, sometimes you outsource, sometimes you don't, sometimes you-do-it yourself, you know? It really adds to... How do I put it? The workings of your brand you know?

DF: So, why I like to do-it-myself is because you know like your brand storytelling?

Muntu: Ya...

DF: Every time we use someone, nobody gets the wording like me. Nobody speaks about the brand like we do.

Muntu: Because they don't see the vision.

DF: They don't. Yes. Whereas, we play. We're also like a very fun, playful brand. Everyone who comes in here becomes our friend. It's always a party! Whereas other people don't bring that across. It's very tricky. Especially when your name is on the door!

Muntu: Right?

DF: You know...that's really like...

Muntu: ...because it has in essence created your identity.

DF: Ya. Because, as much as I don't want to be the brand, I am the brand!

Muntu: You are!

DF: And, I don't want to be the brand! I like to be more behind-the-scenes and not be seen! But! At the end of the day, people love people. People buy from people. People support people. So, you've got to. That's why I like doing everything myself, usually because it's me.

Muntu: I think it's you because you leave sort of like your DNA in.

DF: Exactly!

Muntu: ...even, like, I know not literally but... (laughs)

DF: Sometimes it feels like it's literally. But yeah.

Muntu: So, it has developed that trademark? That name trademark?

DF: Yes! We're also known for being stupidly honest. You know like, with lockdown, everyone was doing positive things. Our first mailer, I was like, "well, we just employed someone new and we have no money. It's really bad."

Muntu: Just played open cards.

DF: Yeah. So, we were just like guys, its really rough.

Muntu: Just put it out there...

DF: Ya. We...

Muntu: How did they... how were they receptive to that?

DF: Oh, our people love it!

Muntu: ...because it shows your transparency.

DF: Like I say, people buy from people and ya! A lot of people I think-they just like us. Because you're always going to make mistakes. You're always going to make a hem too short. You're always going to. It's life. But, if you just handle it nicely and in a fun way, people are okay. So yes. I think they like it.

Muntu: ...because you're invested in storytelling...

DF: ...yes

Muntu: How do you define brand storytelling of your ready-to-wear seeing that you're a womenswear...

DF: You need to elaborate. What do you mean?

Muntu: Okay. How do you...because brand storytelling differs right...

DF: Ya. I don't even know what that means...

Muntu: For example...

DF: ...and I use that hashtag a lot. I don't even know what it means. But, often I'm like, hashtag fashion, hashtag brand storytelling.

Muntu: How do you interpret that? Based on the process of your design? I don't know...how you conceptualise... how you put a brand range together (as you mentioned it's very organic) that's your story. So, how do you define it through your clothing? Your womenswear clothing... that we see it that... oh...that's...that's...

DF: No idea. That you can see that's us?

Muntu: Ya! You know... because I don't want to reference other brands, it's not about them right now.

DF: So, we're becoming very known for our prints.

Muntu: Okay.

DF: ...Because, we're very...and our combinations! So, if you look at some of our pieces, we'll match very odd combinations. We'll throw spots and floral together and still make it look very corporate, kind of clothing. So, I think that's how people see and know its us. But ya! I don't know how else sorry.

Muntu: So, it's like... I'm just trying to understand it a bit because its quite complex.

DF: Ya!

Muntu: You know because an aesthetic is also quite... and to put a story together- you're trying to make it as original as possible.

DF: Yes!

Muntu: ...against the backdrop of so many others...

DF: ...and I also think we're not even trying to tell a story. I think it just happens. I think our story is more...about the team itself. We're always...a "we did it together team" and everyone. It's not just like... this designer sitting and drawing pictures.

Muntu: Ya.

DF: I always...I'm always like to Andrew (the tailor) and Lesego (the store manager) like guys: "this trim with this?" and then they're like: "no" or "yes", "what about this kind of thing?" I think that's our whole brand.

Muntu: So, like the creative input comes from anyone...everyone? Everyone?

DF: So, its everywhere. All the time. Like...you might leave and we might be like “she was wearing a really cool t-shirt.” You know? ...” we should look into something like that”- and then we think of something interesting.

Muntu: Okay.

DF: So ya, it’s a very tricky thing.

Muntu: It is.

DF: Especially being creative and having a brand. You’re trying to be creative, but you’re also trying to be business-like. But, ya...you must want to make pretty things.

Muntu: I know...

DF: ...then you make money...

Muntu: But, not really.

DF: Ya. It’s just...

Muntu: ...but, you have to eat so...?

DF: Ya! It’s like a cluster of...I don’t know...ya, it’s just wide! But we love it! We keep doing it.

Muntu: Okay.

DF: Does that answer your question?

Muntu: Page 8...number 8, really needs you to elaborate like the specifics because it says: What are the brand storytelling activities that are undertaken by your fashion brand/ business?

DF: So, do you mean like our mailers and stuff? And we tell like how something came about?

Muntu: Ya.

DF: Like how we made a piece?

Muntu: That could be your story.

DF: And we've also... before we've done an infographic of how we cost items. Because- people think they're buying a dress for a R1000, now this designer is a 'millionaire'. No! We make like 20 bucks (R20) of that R1000. **So., I think transparency is really our thing-for brand storytelling.**

Muntu: Okay. Just to put it into more perspective, Like, you see Nike? Their storytelling is... they use athletes, their stories of resilience; excellence...

DF: I've always said "our thing" is like the "no nonsense woman" and she's very real. We're dressing the Tannie in Groblersdaal...

DF: You know what I mean? She's real. She's living her life.

Muntu: ...and can be pin-pointed in time!

DF: And! Like I was saying...she's the no-nonsense woman, because she wants to still look good, but she's not going to wear that Avant-garde bow on her head.

Muntu: It's not who she is.

DF: Practical! So, I think she is...really also...that's what we bring across. Ya. Sorry.

Muntu: But, also like you know...

DF: I suck at this question.

Muntu: I just need to... which means, I just need to go and just define it more, and simplify it.

DF: Next time.

Muntu: Okay so, how do you define the brand aesthetic of ready-to wear fashion in targeting consumers? Because I think all these questions...they look like the same thing but...

DF: I was about to say. Haven't we done this?

Muntu: Storytelling is one thing. An aesthetic is the sort of...like tangible. The tangible aspects, like your garment construction, your texturing, your colour...

DF: Oh okay!

Muntu: Placements, scale, proportion, silhouette, shape volume...

DF: What was the question again?

Muntu: How do you define the brand aesthetic of your ready-to-wear fashion for your womenswear brand when targeting consumers? Like, what are the types of styles, designs and...

DF: We'll, they're always crisp. Crisp, clean and lines. I was always taught at university, when I was studying...well college or whatever that... and this is something I've carried through with me forever- and the brand. My one lecturer used to say that the inside of your garment needs to be more beautiful than the outside. And, we still very much look into that. We look at our insides all the time. So, lots of quality! We want it to be perfect. Like I say, that it must last you a lifetime.

Muntu: Because the inside is the whole integrity of the structure...you know? The seams?

DF: We love a pretty lining! You buy the coat online, and it will arrive, and the lining is so pretty that it's like a beautiful surprise from the inside. That kind of thing.

Muntu: ...and, some are even interchangeable. You can wear it inside out.

DF: The reverse cami!

Muntu: Yeah!

DF: You've done your research!

Muntu: What level of value do you want to express to your customers with your attire and overall fashion adornments? You spoke of quality. Quality is very important to you so; would you say that's the value?

DF: What now? Sorry.

Muntu: What level of value do you want to express...

DF: Oh ya! I also want people to feel good in the clothing. That's also the most important part. We always say, when woman tries on a piece then she's like "Ya, I don't" and then we're like... "you look so good." But ya, you have to feel good. I can't tell you- you must buy it because you look good... you know? So even if...I'm like "your knees are great, come one! They've got to feel good! Somebody walked out this morning and she did like twirl in the changing room when she walked out..."

Muntu: That's nice!

DF: That's like our little "happy place." That's the most important thing. The customer. At the end of the day, the customer is the most important thing!

Muntu: No matter the tantrums, no matter the little fits?

DF: Ah! Check Lesego's face! She's like... It depends on the... depends on the customer. Ya. Luckily, our business has got to a point where we're fortunate enough to choose who we work with.

Muntu: Nice!

DF: So, if you throw too much of a tantrum...

Muntu: Bye Felicia!

DF: Yeah, bye Felicia! You're too funny!

Muntu: Alright so, now just heading onto communication...the concept of communication...

DF: What does that mean?

Muntu: Through your brand? Also, speaking of marketing...

DF: Mhmmm?

Muntu: You know... okay...communication. How do I put it? For example...on Instagram...

DF: ...Ya, because someone spoke to me about it the other day. I want to know what that actually mean. Communication.

Muntu: Like, for example...your online presence?

DF: Yes!

Muntu: ...through your...

DF: ...social media?

Muntu: The... I don't know. The chats that you might have on your website?

DF: Ya! Oh like, with the customer and so on?

Muntu: Just the communication to just... push the brand in the forefront and just to keep it alive and keep it relevant. So, what....

DF: Wait. What was the question again?

Muntu: What stories' do you then communicate? Through your ready-to-wear?

DF: I'm so confused. Am I communicating this with a person or?

Muntu: With...with...the...

DF: Is this like, through the clothes?

Muntu: Ya! Through the clothes, through your target market...like, your LSM.

DF: What the hell is an LSM?

Muntu: You know like, LSM- is like...okay...How do I...How do I explain it? LSM. It's, it's a...

DF: What does it stand for?

Muntu: Living Standard Division? Because there are brands that like...the high-end brands', the Louis Vuitton's? And, then there's like the premium brands? Then there's the luxury brands, and then... It's like a whole... I read this the other day and it makes...it makes so much sense to me because...

DF: It does make sense. So, what are we?

Muntu: Premium. Fashion brands are classed. I think you guys are premium.

Muntu: Like, premium just after Griffe?

DF: What's that?

DF: Griffe? Exactly. She didn't say that but... yes.

Muntu: Griffe is like, artisanal.

DF: Griffe. That sounds like the riff-raff. That's what it sounds like. It sounds like the flea market.

Muntu: Ya, you guys are premium. Like, premium-luxury brand.

Muntu: ...because you said...you spoke of exclusivity? Where you just do 10 then that's it? You can't have... you can't have it again.

DF: It's done now. Sorry. Okay.

Muntu: It's done. So, it's a premium-luxury brand.

DF: I must... I must research that and look into that. Okay. Ya.

Muntu: It's just a... it's a whole lot...it's so overwhelming because...

DF: Especially like...you're doing a whole dissertation on this...?

Muntu: Dissertation ya.

DF: You know what I mean? People think like this is just like a simple little thing, but it's so much more... which is crazy. I mean, I don't even know these things.

Muntu: Because... I just... I just need to get this down and then make it make sense because it's so much info. And, you know it has to make... there has to be a golden thread that literally runs... through.

DF: Like cohesiveness.

Muntu: You know...?

Muntu: Just so... you get a good mark and to really show that you did put in....

DF: You've got a lot of work to do. Like, you've just asked the same question in different wording.

DF: What was the question? I feel like we digressed.

Muntu: So, what stories... stories then, because it's... because they differ all the time based on your collections? Just take me through the stories that you've used to communicate your ready-to-wear designs, for your womenswear markets.

DF: Can I say... timeless, classic pieces handmade in Johannesburg again? Is that not good enough?

Muntu: No, that's fine. You did define it. And then, what style and adornments do you use to communicate ready-to-wear? Style?

DF: What?

Muntu: What... what... what style, and adornments do you use to communicate ready-to-wear? The common theme here is ready-to-wear because you're a ready-to-wear designer. So, ready-to-wear is literally...

DF: Care to elaborate on that? They're going to listen to this and they're going to be like "this designer is so dumb. She doesn't understand any of the questions..."

Muntu: No. They won't say that because we're learning. It's open conversations about your brand you know?

DF: Okay, so come again...

Muntu: So, what style... what style...

DF: Right! Ya, you need to explain it to me like I'm like a 5-year-old.

Muntu: Okay. I'll just read the question, then I'll just break it down. So, it says... What style of adornments do you use to communicate, ready-to-wear for men and women's markets- but, because you're a womenswear brand... so, style could be literally...? We spoke of it earlier... the...

DF: What the hell does adornments mean?

Muntu: This! Like, what you're doing.

DF: Haberdashery?

Muntu: When you say something is adorned in glitter or whatever... its... are you checking it online?

DF: I have no idea. "A thing which adorns or decorates." Okay! Did you know that? Yeah...did you know that before this? Wow! Nobody did. Okay, so, so what is our signature thing?

Muntu: Yes!

DF: Okay! We... okay... again... the prints thing...

Muntu: I basically suck at like breaking this down but...

DF: It's okay. So, the prints thing [1] We're big into press studs [2] like press studs. Like, these press studs? (proceeds to show me the press studs on the dress she's wearing). Sorry... I'm just undressing but do you know what I mean? Just like, press studs. It goes back to the clean crisp line. Well, I love a beautiful button. I love a beautiful button stand even more. So, like, we're big into just 'clean.' Then, appliqué is a big one! Like, hand...

Muntu: Handstitched?

DF: Yes.

Muntu: Craftsmanship and all that?

DF: ... is a big one! And, then the prints thing is a big theme. Ya. Are those enough adornments?

Muntu: Ya. Do you... like what is... what the... the prints as well, is it... what strikes you about them? Would it be the colour? The scale? The lack-of-whatever like ill-alignment or geometry or?

DF: It's so hard. Like, I say, again- that's like a totally organic thing. You'll look at it and you'll be like no "it's a very personal preference thing." But, at the same time, we know

our client by now. We'll look at it and be like "she's probably not going to wear that because it's too busy or whatever?" So, I also... my favourite thing is not only a print, but combining a print. So, like, if you look at that dress there (*proceeds to show me an example of a dress made with a printed fabric*) you can see there's like... the line work with the floral, with a stripe.

Muntu: Okay.

DF: So, while I love prints, I like different prints and like... the one she's busy with now... (*proceeds to show me the dress Lesego is working on*) with spots and different florals? Combining these is my favourite thing. Like this... (*Proceeds to show me examples of printed fabrics in some of her collection) with the... these are new. I think that's the thing we do. **Very odd combinations.**

Muntu: Oh, like juxtaposing?

DF: Ya. **You're not... like things that you're not going to just "put together."** I love **mixing-and-matching print and so on.** I feel like I've totally gone off topic.

Muntu: Because, it also leads to my next question. It's your technique. It's that. It's the juxtaposition, the mix-and-matching...

DF: And also, a lot of the juxtaposition like you're saying... of like I said earlier, with femininity and masculinity? So, we'll throw in a lot of like.... Those jackets... (*Proceeds to show me a jacket as an example*). They're very boxy, but very... like, with a dress... It's going to be very feminine.

Muntu: How does your fashion brand and business make use of narratives for ready-to-wear... the ready-to-wear market? When targeting customers across media platforms, like your social media?

DF: What?

Muntu: You know like.... People use hashtags and...

DF: Yeah! Doesn't everyone?

Muntu: Does yours? Based on the collections does... Like what kind of.... Let's say the hashtag that's your narrative, that you're driving through that particular series or range.... Like...

DF: Sustainable and ethical. Could that be one?

Muntu: Ya! Ya. Ya.

DF: So, we're going to focus way more on ethical. As much as we want to be sustainable and use fabrics that are ***“only made in South Africa,”*** we've also got to be realistic. Also, **sustainability** is such a weird thing because apparently cotton is sustainable, but polyester uses less water to make? So?

Muntu: Really? But, isn't it like... synthetic? A synthetic fabric?

DF: Ya! So, synthetic fabric is going to be laid in a landfill, but to make the cotton costs millions and you've used so much water, so and so. So, “ethical” is a...

Muntu: Like a double-edged sword type thing?

DF: It's like vegan leather and leather. It's so tricky. **So, really like bringing across always-in a brand is- ethical,** which is more for me-how your staff is treated; story behind the brand. Nobody is...

Muntu: It's starts internally first.

DF: Ya. Nobody is sitting in a corner sweating, and their fingers are bleeding. You know what I mean? Mine are almost bleeding... but you know what I mean? So, I think that's also something? Still don't know if I answered your question?

Muntu: It does. It does.

DF: Okay.

Muntu: Because, you know... some.... I don't want to say “most brands” disregard that... but...

DF: ...it's literally one of my biggest things.

Muntu: ...they're... they are not really....

DF: I think like... so my parents, had a business since I was little, and they taught me. And, I've always like, the first thing you do is look after your staff. You pay salaries; then you can do anything. So, I think at the end of the day, everybody also... people come into the store; and they greet the staff; and they know everyone by name. I don't want to be like: this is "my brand" and just like, "me" because without them, I'm nothing.

Muntu: Teamwork.

DF: ...makes the dreamwork. Ans, without them... they are... without me, they're nothing.

Muntu: That's so sweet. Did you hear that?

DF: Without you I'm nothing, but without me you're nothing. So, that's really... ya.

Muntu: What business communication channels do you use to keep your fashion brand in the forefront? That we spoke of? How many like... for example... social media pages are you actively... do you actively post?

DF: We're very active on Instagram. Post everyday stories.' We always want to be top-of-mind. I'm sure you know that with marketing, I think it's... most people have to see something 7 times before they convert? To like, an online sale or something?

Muntu: Before they make a decision to purchase?

DF: Ya. Because I think 1% is ready to purchase, 5% will purchase one day. What's that thing? Do you know?

Muntu: No.

DF: Yeah. So, like... it's probably like 2% of people who see you-your marketing campaign are ready and they're going to buy now. 5% will buy one day and the rest are just looking at it. So, that's why Instagram is top of mind, 24/7. You want to be everywhere. You want to like, wherever people go, they need to see you. **So obviously, a lot of: Instagram, a lot of Facebook; we don't do Twitter. E-mail marketing, every single week-when I remember, or have something to write about.**

Muntu: Do you have like a... that subscription?

DF: Ya.

Muntu: ...thing, where you send out newsletters? And just to keep...

DF: Yes. So, that's the weekly mailer and... we also, there's like quite a few. Now, we've got... because the store has only been open since June. So, now that we have the store; we've also had... we had an event the other day and we're going to have Christmas events again. And then, we have like... we had a GinBox, and we'll do that again and... so, we're trying to incorporate all those kinds of things as well.

Muntu: just to keep the brand alive, because that's important...

DF: Ya. Because what happens is... I'm sure you know of marketing and stuff? **The days where I'm quieter on social media, our online sales drop. It's like they forgot about us.**

Muntu: Because there's so many like....

DF: Ya. like, sponsored ads, are like hitting you in the face... So ya.

Muntu: Shew, wow.

Muntu: And then earlier you mentioned the covid 19 pandemic, right. So, what impact has that unforeseen... eish that bus though, let me flourish... please, that bus!

DF: Everyday! Sorry.

Muntu: What impact has the covid 19 pandemic inflicted on your fashion business like, you know, it was so sudden...

DF: To be honest, we didn't survive, we thrived. So, we were lucky that- in I think like, week two of lockdown-we hopped on this mask-making thing. We were working in... how to the levels work...?

***Lesego:** Level 5.

DF: We were working in level 5; we were back already. So that saved us. And the.... some of the... like people don't realise, and it's so important. Now you know there's this, whole thing after COVID- "support local" and all? It's so important because now you can

buy a mask at CottonOn right? You couldn't then. Who was here for you? The local people. We like... hustled to make the masks and stuff. So, the mask thing... the COVID thing... luckily, we were lucky enough to do that. We [had] just moved in here, so we had to make a range- we haven't even built our store and we needed to open in April.

Muntu: So, you were operating from somewhere else?

DF: From here. We moved in, in March.

Muntu: Okay.

DF: We were meant to launch our shop in April and then lockdown [happened]- so we didn't. So, this became our mask factory. And that's what we did and it was horrible; and terrible and evil and we still have PTSD. But we were really fortunate because like we, paid full rent. We don't get like...[power] cuts. Our landlord didn't... you know. We paid full rent; staff was paid in-full. Andrews bought a fridge...

Muntu: Nice!

DF: Thing is they were... and what happened... what also happened was... it taught us so much. We dealt with so many customers because masks... it's not like... like now you know, we're more niche' whereas masks- everybody bought one. So, we dealt with a lot of different customers and different people. And that also helps our brand because some people would buy a mask and then; they love their masks so they came to the store and they landed up buying clothing. So, we make COVID work. Ya, we crushed COVID. We didn't... ya. Well, we had to. We have staff. We were full back then so ya, we had to. We had to hustle.

Muntu: ... and make it work.

DF: ... and we did.

Muntu: ... and you did. So, the masks also- are they... do they also follow sort of like the same aesthetic; design or...

DF: They did, but then eventually when we made like 7000 [units]- I think it was just making masks. No really like... they did. In the beginning it was like a whole thing but it very quickly... ya.

Muntu: ...it just had to be about getting quality...

DF: ... and getting masks out. Basically. That's what it was.

Muntu: ...out...

DF: Eventually we became a factory, it was gross...

Muntu: Dispatching, dispatching, dispatching.

DF: Ya. It wasn't what we.... We are very... like online orders. I can tell you're their names right now. I mean we've got to dispatch what they've ordered, whereas that mask thing-you were just a number, and that's not our business. We like to... its very personal. So, ya, that is... that was Covid.

Muntu: Sure.

DF: ...which is still a thing by the way.

Muntu: Ya. And some of us-myself included-okay-let me speak for myself, I actually forgot about it.

DF: Ya. No, we do. We all do. All the time.

Muntu: Forgot about it because at some point, I stopped listening to the news because it's depressing you know?

DF: But you have... as I was saying... you had to... you couldn't just. Unfortunately, we all had to carry on.

Muntu: Ya. That's the sucky part like...

DF: ...I know...

Muntu: You're depressed, you still have to go on.

DF: You've got to. So, you've just got to make it work you know? Cool.

Muntu: Alright. Then, in closing, is there anything else you'd like to share with regards to what we've just discussed in the interview? About your brand and storytelling? Your aesthetic? And, ya, Covid if you want.

DF: No. Covid is... not a thing, even though we've just said the story. I don't know. Is there anything you want to add? Nothing? (The question is directed to Lesego who's the right-hand woman and store manager).

Muntu: Anything. Anything.

DF: Anything? I don't know. I think we just need to add that...

***Lesego:** ...don't be a lady, be a legend.

DF: Don't be a lady, be a legend!

Muntu: Nice! So, that's your like... is that your mantra? Or your... or... the...

DF: I think it...

***Lesego:** It is. It drives us because we don't literally make things for the "girly-girl", but we empower women with the clothing we make.

DF: ...and look at these flowers... for the "girly-girl."

Muntu: ... but it is empowering.

***Lesego:** It is. It's like, I'm a girl. And I want to be proud to be that.

Muntu: ... to be a boss-babe.

***Lesego:** Exactly.

DF: Boss-b*tch. Sorry.

***Lesego:** That is exactly what it is.

DF: And, ya, like... Lesego said, don't be a lady, be a legend-like, we... ya... we want to beat all the odds, and we do. Everyday.

***Lesego:** And, ya, we don't box ourselves. That's the thing. We're very...

Muntu: ...like, multi...

***Lesego:** Ya.

DF: ...also, it's very hard to answer these questions.

Muntu: No.

DF: Oh sorry.

Muntu: Is it?

DF: Ya, like, I think that it's so interesting because it's making me like... think about these things. Because, like I say, if you're asking maybe someone like an entrepreneur with more business... like a business-they would know these things. Whereas, we, like I said-we just want to make pretty things, but then also eat, you know? So, it's really like... with the creative entrepreneur, it's a whole different ballgame because we are so like... flouncy, you know? But you've got to like... put your foot...

***Lesego:** ...make it.

DF: You've got to put your foot down. So...

Muntu: Ya, So, it's actually very interesting. I'm thinking about, you know... making a...but it's also nice to do these interviews because we get so lost in it. And then like, meeting someone like you, and you ask these questions, and I'm like... we're such a big deal. You know? I'm a big girl now.

Muntu: You are. If you are... like, I feel like, when I saw the report. The SAFW report- because it lists so many names, and not all of them replied. I understand, you guys are so busy. You're pushing you know? You're pushing and pushing...

DF: Ya.

Muntu: ... so, it's really also... I just appreciate your time so much because I didn't think you'd reply. I didn't think anyone would reply so, it's really...

DF: No. It's also... It's important that you see these things you know? And that you hear these things; and how... what it's actually like. It's also nice that you're coming like-into

store to do it with us; and you see that we're actually doing stuff-we're not drawing little pictures all day. That's really like a common belief.

Muntu: Ya.

DF: ...that we're drawing pictures and sewing dresses. And then, selling them for a thousand-five hundred rand (R1500) and making a thousand-four hundred rand (R1400). No sweetie. It's not the way it works. So, ya. But it's a... ya... so, as I say, it's very... its actually cool answering all these questions. Makes me feel proud.

Muntu: ...because of how far you've come and how you've grown... you know?

DF: Oh ya, from when I used to sew...

Muntu: ... so sewing isn't your thing? Or?

DF: I did sew for the first year of the brand. I did all the sewing myself, and I used to set aside an hour- at 13:00 o'clock-everyday, eat my lunch, and cry for ½ an hour because I hated it so much. But like, I couldn't afford to hire someone, and I had to like get clothes into the shop, so I just had to do it. So, ya, when I think of the team now... I'm feeling really proud of myself and of them.

Muntu: ...because it's something I want to perfect like, Yoh! My sewing...oh my God. I'd just rather like...

DF: Get someone to do it.

Muntu: ...But, the thing is... it's better to know it as well you know?

DF: So, did you learn? Are we allowed to be speaking about this stuff now? I think we're done. Are we done?

Muntu: Ya. Thank you, we're done.