What Should be Taught in Fashion Schools in Africa

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The Council for International African Fashion Education (CIAFE) is a non-profit organisation dedicated to improving the standards of Fashion Education in Africa, with the aim to close the knowledge and skills gap, create opportunities for future talent and contribute to economic growth. Our aim is also to support decolonising the fashion curriculum within European and North American institutions.

CIAFE is committed to uniting the fashion industry and academia. Through ensuring educators stay on top of the changing skills due to technological advancements, macro-environmental changes, and cultural influences for the purpose that the curriculum meets industry standards.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Since CIAFE's inception in July 2021, the advisory board members have participated in monthly roundtable and knowledge exchange sessions. Each roundtable discussion focuses on topics that align with CIAFE's mission and vision. During the roundtable session in July 2021, board members highlighted gaps within the fashion curriculum in African institutions and provided actionable recommendations to enhance it.

The insights from the meeting coupled with findings of our previous paper, *"Improving the Standards of African Fashion Education in Africa"*, were the basis for the December report.

This white paper highlights six subjects that can advance the current curriculum in fashion schools in Africa. These topics vary from fashion law to professional development and provide well-rounded skill sets. Fashion schools in Africa that teach these additional subjects can enhance students' knowledge and encourage students to study fashion on the continent rather than abroad.

Fashion History & Heritage

Recently, we have seen a surge in resources focusing on the History of African Fashion. However, there is still a desire for more accessible published academic content. The current state of the African fashion history curriculum contradicts the fact that the African continent is filled with rich cultures and traditions that continue to inspire the world. Telling the history of African fashion is a knowledge gap that needs to be filled and is one of the ways to decolonise the African fashion curriculum.

Very little academic literature has addressed African fashion history. It has not been recognised, acknowledged or documented as part of the teaching materials and the curricula in higher education institutions. Fashion as a whole is influenced by many factors such as African history, social, cultural and economic movements. By studying fashion history, people will understand the influences, predict emerging trends that take elements from historical fashion, and understand various African countries' fashion impacts.

African fabrics and textiles reflect the ancestral traditions of its people. However, the practice and education of many African textile designs are fading and are often being modernised.

With a number of mills closing their doors or not being visible to the public. Many people are unaware of the current landscape and the various types of fabrics that exist across the continent. The curriculum should include the evolution of African fabrics and be incorporated to help preserve the history of African textiles. This in itself could also encourage the next generation of fashion enthusiasts to pursue a career within this field.

It is evident to see that in recent years Western countries have embraced the richness and significance of African textiles in the mainstream media. Fabric weaving and printing is a skill that is traditionally acquired through informal apprenticeships or training schools. Incorporating courses such as kente weaving would be an excellent addition as kente's treatment differs significantly from other materials. This would also help alter the narrative that fabric weaving is for the informal sector and help people understand the background, materials, and fabric analysis.

When it comes to what should be taught in fashion schools, research from our previous report revealed that most African fashion institutions place a greater emphasis on design than all aspects of the fashion supply chain. Including courses on African fashion and heritage in the curriculum will encourage more students to become researchers, documenting African fashion history to decrease foreign appropriation of African fashion.

Quality Control

There is a significant gap of industry professionals who focus on quality control in fashion manufacturing and the various methods of treating different materials.

CIAFE's board members emphasised the importance of reaching out to the informal fashion sectors, as it accounts for a large portion of Africa's fashion industry.

Quality control is a set of steps or guidelines designed to guarantee that a product or service meets specific standards. The goal of quality control is to ensure that a product meets the needs and specifications of consumers.

African fashion institutions should teach students about the industry's various types of quality control to compete on a global scale. Many tailors and seamstresses on the continent are skilled in the stitching department but often lack expertise in finishing the garments. This skill gap can be eradicated through implementing quality control as a module or a dedicated short course within programmes. Through this, they will learn the fundamentals of fabric treating and finishing for products. In particular, this should be essential at vocational fashion schools focused on training.

Fashion Law

Intellectual Property and Contracts

CIAFE's State of Fashion Report 2021 highlighted that institutions often prioritise creative components of fashion design over business aspects. Additionally, several board members expressed concern about African fashion business owners' and professionals lack of knowledge on corporate contracts and trademarks.

As a result, including fashion law courses in the curriculum will familiarise prospective fashion entrepreneurs with how to protect their brand and avoid any issues. Intellectual Property (IP) plays an essential role in commercial activity from licensing, branding, merchandising, franchising, and more. Not only is this important for fashion entrepreneurs but also for fashion students who intern for companies. This knowledge will ensure they are equipped with the knowledge on their IP rights, how and when to use contracts in order to protect themselves and their work.

It is important to highlight that the subject of fashion law courses should be taught at both higher education institutions and training schools. Many fashion entrepreneurs often study through informal apprenticeships and training schools with the aim of becoming sole proprietors. Unfortunately, sole proprietors are targets for having their work stolen by established organisations.

Developing law courses, modules and supporting resources will help build an effective IP protection system and create an enabling environment for innovation and creativity to flourish in the African fashion industry.

Fashion Technology

Technology is an integral part of many careers and businesses in different industries. As this continues to accelerate in the African market, industry professionals and companies require new-age digital skills. The fashion industry as a whole is known for implementing technology slower than other industries. This often trickles down into education providing fashion professionals with trouble understanding the technical and analytical aspects of a business.

Within the fashion landscape, new trends arise each day. Fashion companies need to have the ability to make the right decisions quickly and stay on top of competitors. Data analytics and machine learning are being used to help make business decisions. Additionally, Artificial Intelligence (AI) based applications create efficient fashion design, merchandising, and marketing strategies.

Each season, fashion businesses manage the distribution of their collections, which can range from various sizes, colours, and styles. When brands send their items to retailers, they have to create a successful SKU with the right colours and sizes and deliver it to the retailer's location within a specific timeframe.

This elaborate process can frequently lead to inventory misalignment, ultimately missing sales opportunities and causing costly markdowns.

With many variables to factor, fashion businesses and retailers struggle to make effective decisions. Data analytics can help fashion players better manage inventory, profitability, consumer targeting, and more, making collection planning more streamlined and precise than in the past.

For example, if a brand wants to launch a new dress collection with two style variations in mind. Through trend forecasting, the brand can determine which exact jacket to produce for their upcoming collection. Data analytics takes into account their brand identity, trend behaviour, and target audience.

Fashion schools on the continent need to feature courses that teach data analytics. This will educate fashion entrepreneurs, brands, and retailers on using analytics to improve their pricing and forecasting strategies. This will also support students with learning upcoming technologies such as NFT's, 3D digital design and more.

Professional Development

From our research, we noticed that the majority of fashion schools in Africa offer fashion design-focused courses. Although some students want to be designers, there are many other alternative fashion careers outside of design.

The fashion industry is widespread with hundreds of job options. However, we noticed that many students are unaware of these areas due to the lack of exposure. Professional development should be an essential module implemented across all programmes.

Holding such programmes can provide students with the opportunity to discover new exciting fashion careers, review various job overviews and learn what it takes to become a fashion professional. Introducing a variety of job options outside of fashion design can help students identify their passion within the industry. Allocating time to get fashion career counsellors to help students choose courses that match their interests is just as important.

To add to this, it is not fundamentally about different job roles but learning soft skills required as a professional. In turn, this will improve the balance of fashion professionals across the continent and create more employment opportunities.

Business and Entrepreneurship

In academic communities, there are discussions on teaching the creative mind business-focused subjects. Some academics believe that it is futile and limits creativity. Irrespective of this fashion is a business first and foremost and business should certainly be taught.

Whether students decide to become their own bosses and launch their own businesses or students may choose to work in an organisation with the ambition to become a manager. They need to understand business. Fundamentally they will be responsible for running a business therefore they need to have the knowledge and skills to do it effectively.

Core areas that need to be taught are finance, operations, management, distribution, marketing and market research. Institutions need not worry about trying to make students masters of entrepreneurship but to provide them with a solid foundation on which they can build on and prepare them for different phases in business.

This will enable budding fashion leaders to gain ground and achieve a sustained position in the fashion sector. Introducing business and entrepreneurship courses to the fashion curriculum will not limit the creativity of fashion students but provide a full scope of how to run a fashion business.

Conclusion

The fashion curriculum on the continent is predominantly design focused. Many subjects ranging from African fashion history to entrepreneurship are missing from the curriculum. These subjects are essential as they will enhance the current curriculum and equip students with the business acumen skills needed to start and run fashion businesses on a global scale.

There are resources available to augment the courses taught in fashion schools in Africa. One of the goals of CIAFE is to improve the standards of fashion education on the continent by closing the knowledge and skills gap. We are committed to creating an online knowledge repository of all things African fashion through our upcoming Knowledge Bank Initiative. The Knowledge Bank Initiative provides free resources and tools for academics, researchers and students to use and implement within the classroom.

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