

The safari suit: imperatives for recreational dress innovation in Kenya

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Abstract

By employing the concept of organizational agility, the paper explores factors that can foster scalability in Kenyan fashion startups. In a market that is inundated with South East Asian imports and a notorious albeit thriving second-hand goods not to mention fake and counterfeit items, the Kenyan fashion industry is in dire straits indeed. That is not to say that there are no successful firms in the industry but to observe that there could be much to improve to help bolster the developmental aspirations of the nation. This is an industry that often requires low capital for startups, is open to all sorts of innovation, is women and youth friendly as well as addresses a basic human need among other things. Yet, to the best of my recollection, other than the Maasai *leso* or *shuka*, the *safari suit* and the *kiondo* basket (for a short time) are probably the only Kenyan fashion items that have achieved global style. The industry needs to innovate beyond the scope of a standard business model and with a view to alleviating poverty, creating employment, reducing inequality and promoting human dignity. In order to achieve scalability in Kenyan fashion startups, one needs to consider the life cycle of product development by ensuring that enterprises are based on shortening the time between idea development to product innovation and market entry and then lengthening market presence. Using a case study of an engaged scholarship program in Kenya, I combine the three concepts of Innovation, Business Agility, and Directed Idea Generation to suggest ways of fostering scalability for startups in the industry to reinvent one of the most iconic recreational dress item to ever come out of Kenya.

Keywords: Recreational dress; Innovation; Business agility; Directed idea generation; Safari suit; Kenya

Introduction

By employing the concept of organizational agility, the paper explores factors that can foster scalability in Kenyan fashion startups. In a market that is inundated with South East Asian imports and a notorious albeit thriving second-hand goods not to mention fake and counterfeit items, the Kenyan fashion industry is in dire straits indeed. That is not to say that there are no successful firms in the industry but to observe that there could be much to improve to help bolster the developmental aspirations of the nation. This is an industry that often requires low capital for startups, is open to all sorts of innovation, is women and youth friendly as well as addresses a basic human need among other things. Yet, to the best of my recollection, other than the Maasai *leso* or *shuka*, the *safari suit* and the *kiondo* basket (for a short time) are probably the only Kenyan fashion items that have achieved global style.

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life cycle of product development by ensuring that enterprises are based on shortening the time between idea development to product innovation and market entry and then lengthening market presence. Using a case study of an engaged scholarship program in Kenya, I combine the three concepts of Innovation, Business Agility, and Directed Idea Generation to suggest ways of fostering scalability for startups in the industry to reinvent one of the most iconic recreational dress item to ever come out of Kenya. Thus, the paper addresses the following research question:

What can foster scalability in Kenyan fashion start-ups?

My childhood recollections of dress inventions include my mother altering hand-me downs from various uncles, cousins and aunts to make for my siblings and myself shirts and short trousers. Thanks to the favourable weather by the shores of Lake Victoria, it was mostly shirts and short trousers and little knit-wear in the form of sweaters as our rural area was, and still is, warm throughout most of the year. But one particular alteration has stayed with me all this time. Indeed, it is this one particular incident that I can say implanted in me the life-long fascination with dress practices and eventually led me to the practice and study of fashion enterprises.

In many primary schools in Kenya, girls' uniform consists of a tunic and a blouse. One of my sisters had a tunic that had grown old and been patched at the back and now this very patch was also wearing out. Perhaps, trying to avoid having to patch a patch, my mother decided to alter the tunic by turning it around so that the material that was previously at the back was now front-facing. This now exposed an area that was previously less-stressed to bear the burden of carrying my sister's weight as she sat on the desk during school hours, and this is an important distinction: my mother could do business, she was just not an entrepreneur! And for today, with your indulgence, we are going to explore the distinction between a start-up and a business and especially how this applies to the Kenyan fashion industry that in my humble opinion has remained stuck with a business model rather than an entrepreneurial approach. By employing the concept of organizational agility, see, for instance Sull (2009), we are going to explore the bottlenecks hampering the development of many fashion start-ups to fully scalable businesses.

In a market that is inundated with South East Asian imports and a notorious albeit thriving second-hand goods not to mention fake and counterfeit items, the Kenyan fashion industry is in dire straits indeed. That is not to say that there are no successful firms in the industry but to observe that there could be much to improve to help bolster the developmental aspirations of the young nation. This is an industry that often requires low capital for start-ups, is open to all sorts of innovation, is women and youth friendly as well as addresses a basic human need among other things. Yet, to the best of my recollection, the Maasai *leso* or *shuka*, the *safari suit* and the *kiondo* basket (for a short time) are probably the only Kenyan fashion items that has achieved global style. The industry needs to innovate beyond the scope of a standard business model and with a view to alleviating poverty, creating employment, reducing inequality and promoting human dignity. Yet, as (Rovine, 2015: 6) observes, 'dress inventions abound in the field of African fashion design, a medium that thrives at the fertile intersection of dress, stories, and African cultures.'

Traditional research in the fashion and recreation domain

Fashion entrepreneurship in Kenya presents a number of challenges that should be considered when investigating strategies to start or grow an enterprise. Whereas, entrepreneurship is a broad concept encompassing a wide range of activities, from the Schumpeterian ideal associated with innovation to simply creating a job for oneself, the consideration of national contexts and hence differing institutions, often result in the emergence of different types of enterprise. I am therefore interested in developing a pattern

of growth to guide fashion enterprises in Kenya. This is an academically challenging undertaking since, as Harbi & Anderson (2010) have shown, institutional factors that determine self-employment and innovation may at times act in opposite directions: what encourages self-employment might discourage innovation and vice-versa as we have seen in the case of my mother as described previously.

Looking at fashion entrepreneurship in Kenya has the potential to provide an important critique of the current regressive dimension, with regard to performance and management of enterprises, in this industry. Our challenge is to develop progressive guidelines to help grow entrepreneurial ventures in the Kenyan fashion industry to give the country additional impetus in the quest for economic development. Both independently and together with my postgraduate students as well as in the Community Based Organizations I am involved in, we often approach this task by drawing on insights from Entrepreneurship and Innovation theories.

My interest on fashion entrepreneurship in Kenya thus endeavours to identify some of the trends and challenges in these new markets, and ultimately discuss the strategies on how Kenyan Fashion Entrepreneurship (KFE) can prosper in this rapidly changing world that is increasingly becoming global and commercialized. As my distinguished colleague, Professor Allan Munro¹ notes, traditional research in the fashion domain has generally followed a model that is perhaps closer to Consumer Sciences, Cultural Studies and related fields. Whereas these fields do provide wonderful and worthwhile research information and recommendations, our intention is to consider the integration of Practice (Design as Practice) and Theory (and more traditional research). This domain is variously referred to as: Practice-As-Research (in Britain); Practice-led Research; Practise-Based research; Arts-based research and Studio-based research (or even Research led Practice).

I find the twin concepts of 'scale' and business or organizational agility most useful in exploring Kenyan fashion entrepreneurship. Professor Sull (2009: 1), characterizes organizational agility into three distinct capabilities: strategic; portfolio; and operational. As he puts it:

In turbulent markets, organizational agility, which I define as the capacity to identify and capture opportunities more quickly than rivals do, is invaluable. Strategic agility consists of spotting and seizing game-changing opportunities. Portfolio agility is the capacity to shift resources—including cash, talent, and managerial attention—quickly and effectively out of less promising business areas and into more attractive ones. And operational agility involves exploiting opportunities within a focused business model.

In terms of its paradigmatic perspective, my research interest in Kenyan Fashion Entrepreneurship is couched on the constructivist standpoint. According to (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011: 99 - 115) the constructivist studies the reality based on individual or collective reconstructions coalescing around consensus. This standpoint has allowed me to look at KFE from a more realistic perspective in order to propose solutions that are tangible, measurable and real including a catalyst for action.

Obviously, fashion entrepreneurship in a developing country also presents unique challenges related to local histories and global networks of goods and images. For many Africans born in the 20th Century, their individual autobiographies may also be argued to match that of economic development in the continent (Cohen & Odhiambo, 2004). I will relate here a story told to us at the Wits Institute of Social and Economic Research (WISER) by Professor Lewis Nkosi, the late South African writer and essayist, slightly over ten years

¹ Personal correspondence.

ago to illustrate this point. Born in rural KwaZulu-Natal, Professor Nkosi fled the country and accepted a Harvard Fellowship in 1960 aged 24. At one point during his studies, he decided to attend a disco at a nightclub dressed in dark glasses and other bodily adornments he had copied from famous black American male role models. He then says he was accosted by bullies at the party who wanted to know why he was dressed like a Zulu boy. His truthful answer to the bullies that he was indeed a Zulu boy only made them even more angry as they thought he was lying. This particular experience serves to illustrate Rovine's (2015: 6) point that:

In designers' boutiques and ateliers, in the seats alongside fashion runways, and in conversations wherever people gather, dress is a primary expression both of deeply rooted cultural identities and, often simultaneously, of the creativity by which conventions are constantly transformed. The flexibility of dress styles – the quality by which clothing is transformed into fashion – makes this medium particularly well-suited to storytelling.

For our undertaking here, the developmental context thus forms a crucial element as it provides a comprehensible context for the issues raised in my work while simultaneously presenting us with a classical 'wicked problem.' The famed Canadian educator, Laurence Johnston Peter's famous quip that 'some problems are so complex that you have to be highly intelligent and well informed just to be undecided about them' would be indicative of the present crisis in Kenyan Fashion Entrepreneurship. The same gentleman also lent Management the Peter principle: Anything that works will be used in progressively more challenging applications until it fails (Conklin & Jeff Conklin, 2005; Head, 2008; Weber & Khademian, 2014). We need to avoid the temptation to use what has worked before when it becomes clear that present challenges may have exceeded its effective scope.

Many governance and public policy scholars now take it for granted that developing states need to play a proactive role in pursuing and defining a developmental vision to be attained in the long-term. This involves coordinating economic activities and steering them toward desired outcomes as well as mobilising and synergising class and social forces in support of the developmental agenda. This much I learnt from that great thinker, Professor Guy Mhone, during my graduate studies at Wits. Still at the same school in Wits, Professor Mc Lennan will most likely emphasize that the concept of developmental state is especially critical in understanding social, political and economic intricacies within which organisations operate, and which ultimately have a bearing on the success of an organisation. The concept of a developmental state forces us to consider and contributes to our understanding of ensuring sound financial management and application of good corporate governance principles that are both progressive in terms of bottom line and political peremptoriness (Lennan, 2007; see, also, Mkandawire, 2001).

I hope I have successfully made my case for deploying a constructivist approach in trying to understand the dynamics of Kenyan Fashion Entrepreneurship. For as Denzin & Lincoln (2011: 99 -115) state: constructivism seeks recognition and input thus offering challenges to predecessor paradigms aligned with postcolonial aspirations. There are, as yet, few examples of engaged scholarship in Kenya Fashion Entrepreneurship. Perhaps the most outstanding example is the work Moi University of Technology has done in reviving the once moribund Rift Valley Textile (RIVATEX) factory (*RIVATEX EAST AFRICA LTD YouTube*, 2016). I will now move on to characterize current dominant dress practices as well as the prevailing economic situation in the Kenyan fashion industry before tackling the triad of innovation, organizational agility and directed idea generation.

Dynamics of Kenyan fashion entrepreneurship

In order to scale up the safari suit, one needs to consider the life cycle of product development by ensuring that fashion enterprises are based on shortening the time between idea development to product innovation and market entry and then lengthening market presence. When up-scaling the *safari suit*, also known as the *Kaunda suit*, one needs to find the competitive advantage and maintain it. But we are getting ahead of ourselves, we need to first explain what scalability means in the business context. Often, funders and investors alike put money into start-ups that are scalable, and ready to scale. As Zwilling (2013), reminds us, a scalable business is one that has the potential to multiply revenue with minimal incremental cost. Thus, a business is ready to scale is when it has developed a proven product with a corresponding business model that is able to grow in new markets (Hoque, 2012; Wagner, 2013).

One can barely move straight in the streets of Nairobi because of the various wares that are on sale on and the vicious confrontations that often occurs between the sellers and the county security officers. Amongst these wares are clothing items, both new and second-hand. The clothing items are sometimes hawked directly in-front of licensed shops selling the same goods. Other than the shops, they are also additional bazaars (exhibitions) licensed to sell dress items many of them within the central business district. On the fringes of the CBD, one also finds tiny rooms rented by sometimes groups of tailors and dressmakers sometimes accommodating up to six workers in a tiny ten by ten feet room working with less than four sewing machines.

Added to this milieu are the popular Toi market in Kibera and Gikomba clothing and textile flea markets within the city that attract customers nationally. Moving to the East towards the Moi Air Base in Eastleigh, a military airport, one encounters Garissa Lodge. Essentially, 'Garissa Lodge' is now the new name for the entire Eastleigh market area that houses various shopping malls built over the past two decades or so. On average, each mall is a three- or four-storey concrete building with over fifty shops mostly run by Somali traders (see, Kariuki 2008). The Garissa Lodge model has now been replicated in most other Kenyan towns. The lodges offer mostly clothing items but buyers can also find electronic goods as well as jewellery and often illegal money-changing businesses.

On the apparel production side, local textile companies that once thrived before the late 1980's such as KICOMI and RIVATEX at one time completely collapsed. There was some hope under AGOA with Kenya ranking as the third largest exporter of apparel to the US as new garment factories were established in the Export Processing Zones (EPZ). While these thrived for a while, they were mostly foreign-owned generally run by Indian and Taiwanese investors. At any rate, the entry of Chinese goods in the global market seems to have sounded a death-knell to many of these enterprises once again. This is not to forget Kenyatta Avenue and some high fashion outlets on the newly-built regular malls. There are a number of seemingly successful home-grown fashion houses but these are few in number and have been dominated by the same names for the last twenty years or so.

Kenyans have had some of the most interesting debates on the continent regarding dress practices. Soon after independence, and again sometime early in the new millennium, a debate arose about the need for a national dress. This would have been a dress-code of sorts to help rally nationalism and patriotism. Nothing much, to the best of my recollection came of this push. However, the judges of the newly created Supreme Court under the 2010 constitution ditched the colonial wigs and long robes for a more appropriate 'African' gowns. Both the National Assembly as well as the County Assemblies also once in a while initiate debates on the appropriate dress code for their members but it seems that they are still stuck with the inherited colonial attires. Similarly, school uniforms, in place since colonial times, are still with us.

So, we find ourselves in a situation where there is no Nairobi or Kenyan vibe to speak of in terms of fashion and dress innovation. In general, Kenyan dress practices have remained conservative. One would occasionally hear of such cliché terms as power dressing but there is no discernible thought leadership in Kenyan fashion entrepreneurship. There should be no doubt that Kenya's drive for economic development will provide opportunities for growth and expansion of businesses. However, businesses that will prosper in this environment will need to be agile. That is, in order to succeed, these organizations need to stay relevant and at the cutting edge of services while mitigating potential crises and consistently growing their business. The concept of business agility, is important for Kenyan Fashion Entrepreneurship because, as Christopher (2000: 37) aptly defines it:

Agility is a business-wide capability that embraces organisational structures, information systems, logistics processes and, in particular, mind-sets. A key characteristic of an agile organisation is flexibility. Indeed, the origins of agility as a business concept lies in flexible manufacturing systems (FMS). Initially it was thought that the route to manufacturing flexibility was through automation to enable rapid change (i.e. reduced set-up times) and thus a greater responsiveness to changes in product mix or volume. Later this idea of manufacturing flexibility was extended into the wider business context and the concept of agility as an organisational orientation was born.

This means that all organizations of all sizes operating in the Kenyan fashion industry must find ways to successfully establish and nurture new relationships with the stakeholders upon which they are economically and socially dependent if they hope to succeed and introduce a new vibe. As we discussed earlier, three distinct types of business agility will be crucial in this venture moving forward namely: strategic; portfolio; and operational. As an engaged scholar, my work strives to move away from popular theoretical proclivity and attempts to imagine skills required to grow Kenyan Fashion Entrepreneurship as an economic venture in a developing country keen to create jobs, reduce poverty and fight inequality. Thus, and this goes without saying, an understanding of the agility critical for fostering entrepreneurial success in Kenyan Fashion Entrepreneurship will put the country in good stead in the pursuance of socio-economic transformation as part of its developmental requirements.

Over the years, I have repeatedly employed insights derived from Entrepreneurship and Innovation theories as well as the concept of business agility to nudge students as well as various organizations involved in fashion enterprises to make appropriate plans for the future. In this way, I have endeavoured to identify some of the trends and challenges in Kenyan fashion entrepreneurship in order to propose some success strategies for the industry in the context of a developing country. The concept of a developmental state has a long history, dating back to the protectionist measures of Germany and other now developed countries, orchestrated to promote infant industries with the potential ultimately to compete with British manufacturing supremacy.

And now, back to our key question: what can foster scalability in Kenyan fashion start-ups? I propose three key tenets namely:

- Innovation
- Business Agility
- Directed Idea Generation

I am convinced that this combination is critical for success of in Kenyan fashion entrepreneurship. As (Teece, 2010: 174) asserts, 'a good business model yields value

propositions that are compelling to customers, achieves advantageous cost and risk structures, and enables significant value capture by the business that generates and delivers products and services.'

Introducing business agility in Kenyan fashion entrepreneurship

Innovation in the industry is required in order to develop scalable businesses. It is difficult to engender a culture of innovation in an organization that is not agile. Business agility, as Hoque (2012) observes, is the means to achieve economies of scope as it enables business leaders to flex their management muscle and extend their longevity in order to stay in the game. He explains three capabilities of an agile enterprise as: sense and respond; improve and innovate; and the ability to make distributed and collaborative decisions. We will now look at each of these facets as they apply to Kenyan Fashion Entrepreneurship (KFE).

Domestic fashion enterprises in Kenya have often failed to master the agility test by not always seeking new profitable opportunities. Many enterprises keep on doing more of the same things. For instance, ever since I joined the university as an undergraduate student, I have often bought the same type of Bata shoes similar to what I am wearing today that normally takes just under two years to wear out. I am often amazed by the lack of creativity in this regard. Indeed, it does not surprise me that many second-hand shoes sold in Kenyan mass markets are more expensive than Bata shoes. Why Bata Shoes?

For those who may not know, Bata, officially known as Bata Shoe Organisation worldwide, is a family-owned global footwear and fashion accessory manufacturer and retailer with acting headquarters located in Lausanne, Switzerland established in 1894. Globally, they serve about one million customers a day, according to the company website.² The Kenyan operation, officially known as Bata Shoe Company Limuru, began operating in the country slightly over eighty years ago. Bata is interesting to consider here as it offers an example of how local dynamics may impinge even on multi-nationals. I believe that the fact that Bata has not seen the need to alter the safari boots much is not because they are converts to the slow fashion movement but rather it is a response to local dynamics. My hunch is that their dominance of the market has prevented them from actively considering shifts in product or service needs, customer tastes, technology, socioeconomic factors, and cultural mores.

Yet internationally as we learn from the literature, responding quickly to changes in consumer taste is one of the reasons that enabled Zara, the Spanish clothing chain to buck the retail industry's trend of transferring fast fashion production to low-cost countries successfully (Cappetta, Cillo, & Ponti, 2006: 1277). As opposed to my experiences with Bata in Kenya, Zara continuously designs and manufactures new merchandise. I am therefore not surprised by the calls from industry captains in the Kenyan fashion industry decrying the influx of cheap imports against which they are unable to compete. We still observe the same dismal practices regarding innovation. Many are the customers who approach dressmakers with unique designs only to find that the same product is unethically reproduced and often with poor finish to justify either unrealistically low price or simply to make a killing from an unsuspecting client. They are usually in need of Hoque's (2012) injunction warning that business agility is about more than improving an enterprise's current operations or seeking greater performance through innovation. He advises enterprises that seek to genuinely add value to their customers to focus on the speed of improvement and innovation.

Hence we find that many organizations including most sole proprietorships in KFE are often opportunistic in the sense that they emphasize improvements, but often fail to foster innovations. As the example of Bata in Kenya illustrates, it would appear that they follow best practices, listen to the customer, and are good at improving current capabilities but are

² <https://www.bata.com/>

not truly innovative in the sense warranted here. To develop this capability, they would have to concentrate on innovating processes through new technologies, services, and strategies. At present, an observer may be forgiven for thinking that they have mainly focused on fine-tuning current operations. To adopt Hoque (2012) terminology, most enterprises in KFE appear to be fragile organizations that lack the ability to identify and explore opportunities, as well as the ability to innovate. As he observes:

All enterprises typically engage simultaneously in the improvement of operations and the innovation of processes and products. The level of emphasis on these two activities will determine an enterprise's ability to respond to changes in their competitive landscape. Speed is a key factor, and the combined level of emphasis on operational improvement and innovation is a direct reflection of it.

This is not to say that there are no success stories in Kenya Fashion Entrepreneurship. Indeed, as Opoti (2015) neatly summarizes, a number of personalities and enterprises have kept the fashion scene alive. Veterans in the industry include Lucy Rao, Rialto Fashions, Wandia Gichuru (Vivo), Sally Karago (founder and designer Sally Karago and fashion school, Mcensal) and Anne McCreath (founder and head designer KikoRomeo and FAFA). Equally, fashion journalist Carol Odero has contributed enormously and done tremendous work to keep Kenyan fashion alive on national media. The pioneering and pretty much the only, award winning fashion journalist in Kenya, Carol Odero, has consistently made contributions to FKE often by the depth, breadth and analytical input of her writings and television presentations. I would be remiss were I to omit nationally renowned Kenyan stylists such as Connie Aluoch (pioneer fashion stylist in Kenya), Sunny Dolat, as well as Wambui Thimba. On enterprises, Sandstorm Kenya, is the oldest locally produced luxury label and is popularly understood to be owned and supported by members of the British Royal family. It is no exaggeration to say Sandstorm has become a successful luggage brand globally.

It can be argued that the successful names have adopted effective forms of governance in their entrepreneurial efforts thus enabling them to translate vision and inspirations into information that can easily be interpreted and thus, as someone of them have managed, land very prestigious assignments. For instance, it was Deepa Dosaja, a veteran designer with over 20 years' experience, who dressed Lupita when she came to Kenya. I have also been reliably informed by industry insiders that KikoRomeo dressed Lupita's mother once on the red carpet. Even though Lupita Nyong'o is originally Kenyan, landing such an assignment is not easy as most of these celebrities are often paid to adorn certain fashion items as McCreath (2015) explains. (What Ann seems to overlook here, and was indicated by Lupita's stylist, Michaela Erlanger, at a press conference in Kenya, is that many Kenyan designers are untraceable online, and she and Lupita tried their best to find African designers to dress her, but they kept hitting walls because design houses locally and in Africa generally do not have media savvy structures in place. Basically, it would seem, as Carol Odero³ graciously pointed out to me, they struggle with self-promotion and marketing from the most basic level, an online presence.

Equally impressive, is the fact that others, like Sally Karago, have gone ahead to establish feasible and reputable fashion colleges. Nevertheless, a whole case is yet to be made as to how feasible these students are once they exit school. I am unaware of any alumni worth toasting just yet. Those who are making it in KFE, in the sense of having scalable businesses and as few as they are, seem to have found innovative ways to facilitate coordination and collaboration with partners, suppliers, distributors, and customers. Such arrangements help entrepreneurs access and use valuable source of information and ideas.

³ Personal correspondence.

As has been pointed out to me in the field, the best example of an innovative fashion house in Kenya currently seems to be Vivo Activewear. Whereas John Kaveke showcased at the London Fashion Week in 2011, one of his close associates intimated to me that he later burnt out and took a sabbatical and is presently re-negotiating his return.

Both in my work with postgraduate students as well as my involvement with community based organizations, as part of directed idea generation, I have striven to empower individuals and groups with the autonomy to improvise and act on local knowledge, while employing best-practices available worldwide. I am increasingly finding it worthwhile to incorporate economic development ideas into the realm of fashion business. As Hoque (2012) quips, businesses do not operate in a vacuum. He uses the case of Berlitz Corporation, a global leadership training and education company, as an enterprise that operates on the belief that developing cultural agility starts with an open attitude, which leads to self-awareness, awareness of your relationship to the world, and the skills to apply this knowledge to learn and grow. Thus, I continually strive to develop leaders in KFE that would be agile enough to correctly diagnose industry imperatives needed to exhibit scalability. In this regard, I have decided to share with you briefly, our activities at Lake Indigenous Fashion Ensemble (L.I.F.E.); a community-based organization by the shores of Lake Victoria, Kisumu, Kenya in the form of concluding remarks.

Conclusion: Engaged scholarship in action

Many scholars trace back the concept of innovation in relation to entrepreneurship by the German economist Joseph Schumpeter in his 1934. Schumpeter defined innovations as product, process and organisational changes that do not necessarily originate from new scientific discoveries but may arise from a combination of already existing technologies and their application in a new context (see, for instance, Ács, Autio, & Szerb, 2014). Indeed, innovations are not limited only to technical and technological changes and improvements, but also cover practical applications most of which originate from research. As my colleague, Mr Jooste (2005: 3) of Iscor Innovation Centre puts it: 'Product development ideas may be differentiated between the primal creativity ideas, defining the concepts for a new product or service, and targeted creativity ideas that solve particular development problems. Ideas originate either accidentally, through a mechanism known as serendipity, or as a result of deliberate effort.'

Applied research is therefore crucial in the quest to harvest the result of deliberate creativity. Similarly, intensified human capital development as well as rigorous applied research are essential in the pursuit of economic development. To play our part in this noble quest, engaged scholarship must be imbued with innovative approaches to the solution of community problems. As Seeliq 2015: xi) emphasizes:

Creativity can be enhanced by honing your ability to observe and learn, by connecting and combining ideas, by reframing problems, and by moving beyond the first right answers. You can boost your creative output by building habitats that foster problem solving, crafting environments that support the generation of new ideas, building teams that are optimized for innovation, and contributing to a culture that encourages experimentation.

The particular passage quoted above highlights aspects that my work explores and seeks to entrench in the realm of Kenyan Fashion Entrepreneurship. As numerous studies show, innovative activity of organisations significantly influences competitiveness which is based on inimitable skills and abilities. I can attest to this observation having watched various Chinese and Malaysian garment workers in action and compared the same to my experiences in Kenya. One frequent example of lethargy I frequently meet is the delay

caused when a tailor has to quickly change materials he/she was handling to impress passing-by customers just to show them that their order is being attended to. Of course there are numerous other causes of lost production time such as time spent away from work when the premises are closed due to non-remission of rent, incessant use of mobile phones, poor storage, poor bookkeeping and financial literacy, and so on and so forth.

I have been working with and in LIFE trying to develop scalable fashion business enterprises among young people who are already working as tailors, dressmakers, hair stylists, pedicurists, beauticians and so on. My only interest in working with them is to ensure that their businesses are scalable. In the absence of scalability, what normally happens is that businesses implode. That is, if for example, one opens a successful carwash down the street, by the end of the year one would probably find more other similar businesses established in the same locale thereby overwhelming the market. Businesses thus become ready to scale only once they have developed a proven product and a proven business model (Zwilling, 2013). This what can enable them to expand to new geographies and markets. It is important to mention here that we are not aiming at expanding all businesses. What we are emphasizing here is the fact that these businesses should have the option to expand at minimal costs. The ideas should also be transferable such that, for example, someone getting married and re-locating to a different part of the country should be able to move with the idea. Too many times, re-location or getting married or a childbirth often spells a death sentence to Kenyan fashion start-ups.

At L.I.F.E, we have a dedicated group of experts and patrons who help source and build viable business plans and models that are attractive to banks and government financing bodies whether at the national or county level. Many fashion start-ups tend to confuse product plans for customers with a business plan. For instance, the often long waiting times are as a result of inability to offer booking options as well as the inability to choose clients because of low margins. As Zwilling (2013) points out, scalable businesses have high margins (over 50%), low support, and minimum staff. Enterprises only become viable for scaling when the owners can demonstrate that the products are working. That is, the business has multiple customers paying the full price, to validate the business model. We have made a strategic decision to develop scalable fashion businesses at L.I.F.E. Our passion is to change the face of Kenyan Fashion Entrepreneurship. We are driven by Goldman & Nalebuff's (2013) idea of a mission-driven business. We are continually exploring ways to avoid direct marketing knowing that marketing and indirect channels offer more realistic paths to scalability. To give a hypothetical example, it would be extremely hard for a group of young men and women living in Kisumu, Kenya to have the connections to secure a contract to manufacture Burundi army uniforms. And even were they to procure such a contract, the labour-intensive approach traditionally employed by Kenyan fashion start-ups may not be able to cope. For these reasons, we are promoting production automation and proven process technologies as well as catalyzing the enterprises by building and fostering critical relationships.

The concept of engaged scholarship has added additional impetus to my involvement at L.I.F.E. The Centre for Higher Education Transformation (CHET 2003 cited in Mtawa, Fongwa, & Wangenge-Ouma, 2016: 126) proffers the following definition of community engagement:

[A] systematic relationship between Higher Education [institutions] and [their] environment [communities] that is characterised by mutually beneficial interaction in the sense that it enriches learning, teaching and research and simultaneously addresses societal problems, issues and challenges.

Whereas universities are compelled, through research, to continually push back the frontier of human knowledge, Mtawa et al., (2016: 127) asserts that 'the scholarship of discovery pushes the agenda of collaborative research between universities and communities' for effective Community Engagement (CE). One of the most challenging tasks we face is how to document processes to allow us train a wider group of people. We realize that there is a limit to how many fashion colleges that can be established out there. All the things we have set our sights on cannot be achieved by organic growth. We hope to continue building and fostering relationships with other strategic partners and avoid over-reliance on the support of the national and county governments beyond the desire for a conducive policy environment. Our vision is to see members' enterprises develop into businesses that are open-ended and continuously improving.

To name but one source, we are inspired by the Go Down Arts Centre, where Ethical Fashion Africa are based, and where they make accessories for Stella McCartney and Vivienne Westwood for sale in the UK market. They are a source of credible measurable deliverables and realistic demonstration of skill for any would be fashion start-up in Kenya. They also employ about one hundred Kenyans. They have gone way beyond perfecting hand-making skills across various trades such as bead-work, stone cutting and jewelry making. *In a word, they have achieved scalability.* Building on this foundation, we believe L.I.F.E can produce more for the Kenyan fashion industry by leveraging quality in order to stand out and reap financial rewards. We are thus continually striving to discover ways by which local fashion entrepreneurs can thrive in the market regardless of the present challenges.

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