Africa Fashion Futures: Creative economies, global networks and local development

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Abstract
This article reviews existing literature and approaches to the current study of fashion and economic development to rethink the interconnection between creative producers and global production and trade networks in relation to sustainable local development. Focusing on the work of independent fashion designers on the African continent, we first consider their positioning as cultural (micro) entrepreneurs and drivers of economic development. Next, we discuss the wider relationship with the global markets and value chains which impact their work and local context. We conclude with a call for further interdisciplinary research that takes fashion designers as a key point from which to engage critically with global value chains beyond prioritising the lead firm in the global North, so as to position African fashion designers as micro-entrepreneurs with potential for value creation and as leading smaller local or national markets with concomitant international reach.

KEYWORDS
Africa, creative economy, entrepreneurship, fashion, global networks, local development, value

1 | INTRODUCTION
This article reviews existing literature on and approaches to the study of fashion and economic development to rethink critically the interconnection between creative producers, global production and trade networks, and local development. It belongs to a wider research project, Africa Fashion Futures, which explores the cultural and economic dimen-
sions of fashion in Africa through the work of fashion designers in Lagos and Nairobi. Starting with the work of fashion designers on the African continent, we bring together literature on creative economy development agendas (African Development Bank [AfDB], 2018; HIVOS, 2016), fashion designers as creative entrepreneurs (Langevang, 2017) and studies of global value chains (GVCs; Gereffi & Memedovic, 2003) to explicate the economic and spatial dimensions of contemporary fashion in Africa.

We begin by examining literature positioning the fashion industry and fashion designers as cultural agents (Rovine, 2015, 2009) and drivers of economic development (HIVOS, 2016), in their home cities and regions as well as internationally (Langevang, 2017). We then consider the challenges faced by fashion entrepreneurs in connecting with global markets and exchanges (Hansen, 2014; Mangieri, 2006), specifically GVCs for their attentiveness to how firms and localities interact, organise, and are governed below and outside of global North networks (Gibbon & Ponte, 2005) and how positioning can change over time (Humphrey & Schmitz, 2002).

In conclusion, we call for further interdisciplinary research on fashion designers not just in terms of garment production, but as creatives, cultural producers, and centres for value creation; so as to mobilise their critical engagement with GVCs beyond prioritising the lead firm in the global North (as with Global Production Networks [GPNs]). By paying attention to domestic, regional and continental dynamics that also connect with global structures, we extend debate on lead firms beyond global North actors.

2 | FASHION DESIGNERS AS CREATIVE ENTREPRENEURS IN AFRICA

Studies of fashion designers as entrepreneurs and their relationship to geographical context have predominantly addressed global North or Westernised contexts (McRobbie, 2016), Australia (Heim et al., 2021; Tuite, 2019), New Zealand (Larner et al., 2007), and Canada (Brydges, 2018). Research on fashion entrepreneurs in the global South – including China (Ferrero-Regis & Lindgren, 2012), Hong Kong (Skov, 2002) and Bangladesh (Khan, 2019), as well in Africa (Jennings, 2011; Langevang, 2017; Pather, 2015) – reflect wider attempts to de-Westernise studies of creative labour (Alacovska & Gill, 2019), questioning who can be ‘creative’ (and accrue associated economic value) in fashion as a globalised creative industry (Khan, 2019). This fashion entrepreneurship literature, focused on designers and brands largely working independently for domestic and international markets, rather than large global corporations, contributes to our understanding of the national contexts and global connections influencing creative entrepreneurship (at the micro and small and medium-sized enterprise [SME] level), economic development and innovation. We present this literature as most relevant to the African context (HIVOS, 2016; Langevang, 2017).

Despite the dominance of China and Bangladesh (McKinsey and Business of Fashion, 2019), there is increased global awareness of growing fashion and garment production in Africa (Berg et al., 2015; Manson, 2014). The Africa-situated global fashion industry’s market value is estimated at $1.3 trillion (African Development Bank [AfDB], 2019a); the developing fashion industry (including textiles and apparel sectors) is positioned as potentially accelerating economic growth and industrialisation, building new trade and export options and GVCs, and enhancing regional and global integration (Jiménez-Zarco et al., 2019). However, compared to other creative industries emergent continent-wide, including film (Lobato, 2010) and music (Pratt, 2008), fashion has received relatively little policy attention. As wages rise in Asia (AfDB, 2018), initiatives have tended to focus on enhancing productivity and capitalising on cheaper labour in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA)’s textiles and apparel sector, primarily associated with producing basic clothing items in Export Processing Zones (EPZs) (Kobia et al., 2017). There is, nevertheless, increased interest in fashion designers as cultural and creative entrepreneurs engaging with higher value activities in the fashion value chain (HIVOS, 2016).

Fashion entrepreneurs contribute to Africa’s creative industries through tradeable cultural and creative products and services that support economic development (Langevang, 2017; UNCTAD, 2010). Because the emerging fashion industry is a site where ‘personal, cultural and socioeconomic development converge’ (Langevang, 2017, p. 893), they are also crucial in defining and redefining cultural heritage (Allman, 2004; Rovine, 2015). For Jennings (2011, p. 14) developing African fashion industries are most impacted by ‘basing socially responsible production on the conti-
nent’ through, for example, creating jobs for local artisans and supporting farming communities. This convergence is particularly important when considering alternative, more inclusive, ethical and sustainable visions for value chains beyond the typical global North dominant model, and to developmental objectives connected to the creative economy (UNCTAD, 2010). For example, designers and brands can provide fair employment and support sustainable income sources for local artisans and farmers, use locally sourced materials produced through sustainable farming methods, and reduce the environmental impact of their supply chains and production processes through local sourcing, recycling and so on (Ericsson & Brooks, 2014; Moreno-Gavara & Jiménez-Zarco, 2019).

Designers are not isolated workers, but deeply interconnected with creative and non-creative professions (Cunningham, 2011) supporting production and retail across the creative economy. In the African context, designers’ reliance on tailors to construct their garments (Hansen, 2019) enhances the contribution of both professions to domestic and global manufacturing and retail (HIVOS, 2016). The value of connections between fashion entrepreneurs and marketing, finance and other professionals within the fashion design field (Vallone, 2008) highlights the role of intermediaries in providing business support to the sector (Comunian et al., 2022).

Following the rapid expansion of digital technologies (especially mobile) across Africa (James, 2009), a growing use of global social media and e-commerce platforms among designers (Jennings, 2011) alongside wider growth of ‘electronic mass media, international travel and transnational migration’ (Gott & Loughran, 2010, p. 2) enables African designers to produce an ‘African style’ for global markets (Rovine, 2009), and African and diaspora audiences to disseminate African fashion globally (Jennings, 2011). The increasing presence of African designers and African styles at international fashion weeks and other events confirms interaction on the global stage, alongside interest in developing previously underexploited local and regional markets by promoting ‘African fashion for African people’ (AFDB, 2018, p. 5).

Important questions arise regarding connections between fashion designers and the processes of designing and making integral to garment production, including their relationships with actors at different stages in the production process and along global, domestic and regional value chains (Hivos, 2016). Such interactions indicate that African designers operate within GVCs, albeit at a different (lower and less profitable) level than would typically be acknowledged in GVC literature, as we elaborate later.

2.1 Challenges for fashion entrepreneurs in Africa

Scholarship acknowledges tensions between hoped-for economic development and empowerment (especially for women) through fashion entrepreneurship (Moreno-Gavara & Jiménez-Zarco, 2019) and global forces which perpetuate workforce precarity and hierarchical perceptions of cultural value (Khan, 2019). The consequent economic and labour environments limit creative entrepreneurship’s transformative potential (Langevang, 2017). Literature charts several challenges to developing sustainable enterprises at local, national and regional levels, including: accessing training and resources; working in informal, fluctuating economic markets (Hansen, 2019; Langevang, 2017; Pather, 2015); privileging basic skills development in the EPZ over fashion design education and training (England et al., 2021); ‘volatile shifts in the global economy [including...] competition from online players and decreasing foot traffic, and the speed of changing consumer preferences’ (McKinsey and Business of Fashion, 2016, p. 18); the informal structure and operation of local fashion markets (Hansen, 2019; HIVOS, 2016). However, the ways in which fashion designers move between and engage with these multiscalar levels remains unexplored.

Africa-specific economic, logistic, social and political challenges for the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) that form 90% of African fashion businesses (African Development Bank [AfDB], 2019a, 2019b) have been identified: difficulty in accessing capital within largely informal economies (Hansen, 2019) for start-ups, scaling up production and bulk-buying materials/equipment (Fianu & Zentey, 2000); lack of legal clarity, financial resources, government support, and formal unified representation (Fianu & Zentey, 2000; Jennings, 2011) around intellectual property and copyright; limited availability of skilled labour (Pather, 2015), graduate employment opportunities (Muhammad...
et al., 2018), and provision and access to formal fashion design education with relevant curricula (England et al., 2021; Jennings, 2011; Miyo, 2013). The lack of equipment and limited local industrial capabilities (AfDB, 2019b; Fianu & Zentey, 2000) complicate production of small orders that meet international quality standards, timeframes and price points (Jennings, 2011). These challenges coexist within broader financial and industrial contexts: fluctuating foreign currency and foreign exchange rates, high taxes, tariffs and licensing fees, high transport and shipping costs combined with international competition and import/export regulations (AfDB, 2019a; Jennings, 2011; Pather, 2015); and unreliable or irregular energy, Internet, communication and transport provision and infrastructure to support business activities, currency fluctuations, economic recession, high labour costs, limited access to technology, raw materials, funding and support services (Fianu & Zentey, 2000; Pather, 2015).

Such challenges impact capacity building and scaling up production within the fashion industry, and the distribution of the industry and supporting infrastructure beyond urban clusters (i.e., education/training facilities, availability of materials, production facilities and skilled labour). Irregular access to technology and reliable Internet services also inhibits the competitive development of African markets given the emergence of ‘digitally mediated fashion creation, distribution, and representation’ (Crewe, 2013, p. 762) globally, and its facilitation of sustainable fashion (Scaturro, 2008). Designers thus face overall challenges in navigating economic divisions in the continent’s consumer markets – a very small wealthy elite and a growing middle class with purchasing power, but a large poor population with limited means (Hansen, 2019). Brooks (2018) highlights the uneven distribution of benefits and opportunities associated with economic growth across the continent and critiques the positioning of a ‘middle-class consumer’ as being internationally transferrable (see also Melber, 2016). Understanding the different consumer markets for fashion (locally, nationally and globally) is key to understanding fashion designers’ capacity for market development.

Trade discussions and the development of value chains for the textiles and clothing sector are also prominent and sensitive areas for negotiation, particularly with respect to expanding regional value chains, continental free trade agreements, preferential tariffs and rules of origin (Kobia et al., 2017; Morris, 2006; Phelps et al., 2009; Staritz et al., 2017; UNCTAD, 2019). Both international trade agreements such as The Multifibre Arrangement (withdrawn in 2005)\(^2\) and the African Growth and Opportunity Act (USA), and policies initiated by developing countries, including those limiting foreign exchange (forex) resources on textile imports or bans or heavy taxation on fashion and textiles imports (Botti, 2019; Jennings, 2011) impact domestic production, imports, market capacity, and local, regional and continental trade (Frederick & Gereffi, 2009). International trade agreements have enhanced market access, and subsequently employment and poverty reduction for qualifying SSA countries (Morris, 2006; Portugal-Perez, 2008; Staritz et al., 2017). However, a historical ‘prevalence of developed-country protectionism’ (Gereffi & Memedovic, 2003, p. 5) alongside wider de-industrialisation, economic downturn, the marketisation of public services and declining infrastructure eroded the viability of the African textiles industry (Brooks & Simon, 2012; Ericsson & Brooks, 2014). The volume of imports and the second-hand market, together with perceptions of quality divergence between local and international products also challenge the growth and sustainability of local fashion production (Brooks & Simon, 2012). These conclusions reflect scholarly tendencies to fit analyses of contemporary trade to the historical pattern of unequal exchange rooted in the continent’s colonial legacy, whereby Africa exports raw materials to the global economy and imports high(er) value products from the global North and increasingly other developing economies (Taylor, 2016). The Covid-19 crisis has reinforced these structural and geographical inequalities – although most significantly for high volume garment producing Asian nations – an outcome seen as reflecting the industry’s ‘natural order’ that ‘relies on a contrast between the ‘first’ and ‘third’ worlds’ (Khan & Richards, 2021, p. 434).

The overall inability to address structural foundations of inequality and poverty (Khan, 2019) makes creative economy discourse around these challenges impact significantly entrepreneurial activity. In contrast, we want to ask why, so far, African designers and brands have not typically been thought of as potential lead firms in the fashion industry. The current GVC (and GPN) approach to lead firms (in the fashion industry and beyond) represents, to us, an exclusionary economic determinism; it gives inadequate consideration to micro-enterprises who nevertheless engage with main parts of the (apparel) value chain: raw material supply; component networks; production networks; export channels; and marketing networks (Gereffi & Memedovic, 2003) and can leverage and control of resources that de-
note lead firm behaviour, albeit at a different scale. It also risks masking and devaluing innovation and wider cultural and social value generated by these smaller actors operating in the periphery.

3 | FASHION DESIGNERS, GLOBAL NETWORKS AND LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

Assessing the work of African fashion designers in relation to local development necessitates an understanding of their relationship with global networks of production and value construction within the fashion and textile industry (Khan, 2019). Fashion’s global remit encourages scholarly engagement with the interaction between networks of value and production on international, regional, and national levels (Whitfield et al., 2020), particularly through its connection with the textiles and clothing industry as a first-stage development in light-manufacturing as part of industrialisation (UNCTAD, 2019).

Global value chains and GPNs participate in an interdisciplinary discourse around international trade, international business, politics, power and innovation and their interface with industrial transformations and uneven development (Coe & Yeung, 2019; Neilson et al., 2014). While supply chains or production networks are common frameworks for analysing the fashion industry, our review focuses on the position and role of African designers in value chains vis-a-vis those in the global North. The value chain approach, useful within studies on apparel production in developing economies (Gereffi & Memedovic, 2003; Gopura et al., 2019) aids analysis of the influence (direct or indirect) of globalisation, especially the intersection of global power and geographical structures on the economic development of fashion designers (Godart, 2014). Value chain perspectives increasingly illuminate studies on ethical, sustainable and local fashion production and markets (Jiménez-Zarco et al., 2019; Pal, 2014; Pal et al., 2016; Rinaldi & Testa, 2015).

Through GVCs we can explore global interconnections of linkages between the production, distribution and consumption of products in and from Africa (Tallontire et al., 2005) and question ‘how local firms can participate as well as upgrade and capture value in the context of asymmetric power relations between buyers and suppliers in apparel global value chains’ (Whitfield & Staritz, 2021, p. 3) (see also Bair & Werner, 2011). This approach prioritises consideration of the value of African creative products over volume (of labour and product), and its optimal increase.

3.1 | Fashion designers and value chains in Africa

Global value chain is a frequently used analytical framework for literature on the apparel industry, that, while recognising its limitations with regard to specificity of dynamics and actors (Coe & Yeung, 2019), also overcomes them through particular attention to lead firms as an entry point to analysis (Coe & Yeung, 2015, 2019). For us, GVC is a useful framework, enabling assessment of fashion designers as creatives, innovators and cultural producers beyond mere apparel production and the concomitant significance of value creation. The framework’s attentiveness to production linkages is pivotal to discussions on fashion as a context for industrial development using domestic primary products/raw materials in Africa (Raei et al., 2019), especially with the advent of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). Our key locale of interest, the global South, is currently limited by an overarching focus on lead firms located in the global North. Yet the GVC framework encourages consideration of how lead firms recalibrate their relationships with firms in developing contexts due to growth and transition in some global South contexts (Gereffi, 2014). Such approaches mesh with our critical interest in reimagining how lead firms can participate in more complex South-South exchanges.

The academic literature on textiles and apparel value chains applies Hirschman’s (1958) theory of backward linkages to garment industries and the production of textiles and related materials, including agricultural production of raw materials in Africa, with added emphasis on production for the global economy (Morris, 2006; Phelps et al., 2009; Staritz et al., 2017). Gereffi and Memedovic (2003) associate both backward and forward linkages in the apparel industry with high levels of industry employment and identify five main parts to the value chain: raw material supply;
component networks; production networks; export channels; and marketing networks. Value is added and jobs created at each stage of the value chain with global interaction present throughout.

Fashion value chains are prominent examples of buyer-driven chains (Gereffi & Memedovic, 2003). Here key decisions about activities and actors in the chain are made by lead firms, often large retailers or brand-name (typically Western) companies who do not own any manufacturing facilities (i.e., H&M, Primark, Zara etc.) but retain control over higher value activities such as design, marketing and distribution (Jiménez-Zarco et al., 2019). Both tangible profits and control over the intangible, symbolic value of fashion, and thus the brand value (Gopura et al., 2019, p. 467) are thereby located outside of manufacturing nations which remain remote from the end-consumer (Aspers, 2010). While outsourcing of design activities to supplier firms (Palpacuer et al., 2005) is increasing, outsourcing is often limited to lower-value manufacturing activities (Botti, 2019; Whitfield et al., 2020) by pre-existing transnational production networks, international mistrust, and uncertainty in financial systems. To develop a more diverse, sustainable and ethical fashion industry, we must understand and address these challenges and opportunities posed by GVC participation and how African nations can avoid being restricted to providing labour intensive, lower value linkage activities that perpetuate exploitative models and extend colonial legacies of unequal exchange. For Selwyn (2015), the GVC structure alludes to the scope for developing country firms to upgrade along the value chain while ignoring the global lead firms’ control and dominance of innovation across the world system. Herein lies a challenge for fashion designers as cultural producers and innovators from below.

The need to examine lead firms in Africa within GVC and GPN analysis has been raised (Krishnan, 2018; Oqubay, 2016) and a case made for reconceptualising elements of GVC and GPN, including lead firms, on account of multi-layered public and private governance regimes and simultaneous multiple roles (lead and supplier) for firms serving local, regional and global consumer markets (Horner & Nadvi, 2018). Pasquali et al. (2020) and Goger et al. (2014) offer scope for considering lead firms from below in value chain analysis of South-South exchanges, which are outstripping North-South exchanges especially in the apparel subsector. What is also distinctive about this regional pivot is the attention to smaller batches as well as a higher fashion content and greater complexity and intermediating between smaller assembly operations (Goger et al., 2014; Pasquali et al., 2020). This shows the scope for creativity, innovation, sustainability and associated value retention on design and brand by designers within this context.

Within GVC structures, fashion designers can provide ‘creative, commercial, technical and leadership skills’ that act as a source of competitive advantage and contribute to industrial upgrading (Gopura et al., 2016, p. 103). Rather than being limited to the ‘design’ segment of the fashion value chain, we suggest that fashion designers working as micro-entrepreneurs or establishing small to medium companies (HIVOS, 2016; Jennings, 2011; Langevang, 2017) can connect across multiple levels of the value chain. By designing, producing and retailing a range of products, including custom designs/made-to-measure, small batch or mass-produced garments and accessories in local, national, regional, continental or even international markets facilitated by physical and online retail platforms, Africa’s fashion designers connect with the design (their own), raw materials (i.e., cotton), production (of textiles and garments), logistics/export networks (for transport and production of materials/textiles and finished garments for retail), marketing (of brand and designs/products) and sales/distribution (of designs and garments both physically and online) components of the value chain. As discussed earlier, fashion designers as creative entrepreneurs are also interconnected with creative and non-creative professions in the creative economy that support production and retail across the sector (i.e., artisans and tailors, textile manufacturers, retailers, marketers and other professionals) (Hansen, 2019; HIVOS, 2016; Vallone, 2008). In this way, fashion designers on the continent can become dominant players (Pasquali et al., 2020) in a market – especially domestic and/or regional markets in Africa where they service a growing ‘middle class’ (Brooks, 2018; Melber, 2016) as well as global markets (especially through diaspora networks – Jennings, 2011) – and generate both economic, cultural and social value (AfDB, 2019a; Jennings, 2011). Horner and Nadvi (2018, p. 227) also suggest that domestic and regional markets are shown to provide more scope for functional upgrading in ‘design, marketing and branding’, further highlighting the potential for fashion designers in local development.

We therefore argue for applying the lens of lead firms to South-based domestic fashion designers and brands (particularly those with a high-profile who generate significant sales – Pasquali et al., 2020), as they control access
to major resources (such as product design, new technologies, brand names or consumer demand)’ (Gereffi & Mededovic, 2003, p. 8). Those that ‘source from and supply to international markets that cross substantial geographical boundaries’ (Horner & Nadvi, 2018, p. 222) participate in GVCs. We consciously break with the common understanding of lead firms that cannot accommodate domestic designers and with the GVC framework – in its current manifestation – that does not fit fashion designers in the global South at the level (micro-enterprise/SME and predominantly domestic markets) in which they typically operate and the different types of value (cultural, social and economic) generated. Thus, development literature passes over those working below the global North lead firms, at the micro level and independent of international brands. They nevertheless connect backwards and forwards from the local to the global level through sourcing raw materials (e.g., textiles from China but also Dutch Wax fabric from Europe) (Hansen, 2019), outsourcing production (HIVOS, 2016) and engaging with international markets increasingly facilitated by global marketing and e-commerce platforms (Jennings, 2011).

An adapted GVC lens that considers end markets beyond the global North while integrating activities across at least two continents (Barrientos et al., 2016) (i.e., South-South and even South-North, in addition to North-South and North-North chains and trade networks – Horner & Murphy, 2018) could elevate the conceptualising of GVC (Horner & Nadvi, 2018). Further research that examines that the work of fashion designers within such structures, could, therefore, better explicate how low-income countries can transition from lower value Cut, Make, Trims (CMT) assembly and Original Equipment Manufacturing to higher value Original Design Manufacturing (ODM) and Original Brand Manufacturing (OBM), to experience exporting’s economic benefits (Gopura et al., 2016). Thus value adding pathways impact the integration of fashion designers in the Fibre to Fashion (F2F) value chain – ‘an end-to-end apparel offering, from growing or producing the raw materials (often cotton) to assembling, finishing, and shipping the garment’ (HIVOS, 2016, p. 23). However, in many SSA countries, efforts to boost labour intensive (employment generating) but low value-adding operations such as CMT, are offset by limited attention to developing higher value activities such as ODM and OBM (Staritz, 2012); an imbalance that has led scholars to overlook designers as potential lead firms in Africa’s fashion industries.

| AFRICA FASHION FUTURES – DESIGNERS LEADING FROM BELOW |

Having addressed the growing acknowledgement of the role of fashion designers in the creative economy and the industry's potential to support economic development, and having reviewed the literature highlighting challenges and opportunities facing both designers and the wider industry, we note a lacuna in scholarly debates on fashion value chains in Africa: the position and role of domestic fashion designers and their connections within and across different networks, particularly those unaffiliated with international companies. As such, ‘local designers and small operators are left out of the emerging F2F value-chain’ (HIVOS, 2016, p. 23). We further note a disconnect between the literature on fashion designers as entrepreneurs operating within specific global structures and systems, and the national and transnational policies which influence their work.

Despite calls to integrate design into the development of National Value Chains (HIVOS, 2016), it remains unclear how African fashion designers located across the continent connect with and are impacted by their relationships with producers, manufacturers, suppliers and intermediary organisations working at local, national, regional and global scales, and how they may act as lead firms. Some African nations, specifically Mauritius and South Africa (and also emerging in Ethiopia), that focus more on high value addition ODM and OBM activities involving stronger integration of designers both upstream and downstream (HIVOS, 2016, Staritz, 2012), present an opportunity to probe their work and relationship with GVCs while rethinking lead firms in the periphery and from below, particularly small-scale actors and entrepreneurs who contribute to local development while acting as cultural agents, and are thus relevant for fashion as well as wider (creative) industries.

Fashion designers are global South actors and cultural agents. Their absence from the debate so far limits their usefulness for investigations into how nascent lead firms control and access resources and generate profit in the glob-
al context. Thus, prioritising a core-periphery structure intrinsically privileges international global North actors and occludes – inadvertently or otherwise – the scholarly and applied potential of local, national and regional dynamics and their interconnections. Excluding designers from Africa’s fashion value chain also undermines the representation (and possibly preservation) of different cultural traditions, themes and designs within African fashion production. We, therefore, call for further research that deepens our understanding of systems and structures (i.e., trade policies) that can challenge (rather than perpetuate) unequal exchanges rooted in colonial legacies, by investigating the organisation of alternative forms of value, such as cultural and social value.

As African nations manoeuvre themselves out of the lower rungs of the value chain as sites of mass production (with associated exploitation and ethical implications) (Khan, 2019) we need the tools to understand the role of designers within sustainable creative economies, and the policies and infrastructure required to support them. We call for interdisciplinary research taking fashion designers as a key point from which to engage critically with GVCs, that extends the discussion beyond prioritising the lead firm and end markets in the global North (Horner & Nadvi, 2018), to activities between Southern continents (Horner & Murphy, 2018) whereby value can be generated in and for the global South. We thus emphasise looking from below at fashion designers as creatives and cultural producers with potential to be dominant actors (Pasquali et al., 2020) in national, regional and GVCs, leading aspects of domestic, regional and international markets and generating value, particularly through design, marketing and branding activities (Horner & Nadvi, 2018). We advocate expanding the debates on lead firms beyond global North actors by utilising the lens to examine domestic, regional and continental dynamics and its relationship to the global.

We see African designers, especially those working within priority development areas such as AfCFTA (HI-VOS, 2016; UNCTAD, 2019) as the starting point for analysing forward and backward linkages across the fashion value chain in connection with GVCs, including global power relations (Khan, 2019), and their development of national, regional, and continental value chains. Through fashion designers, we can examine how local actors disrupt existing patterns and ask whether fashion (and other) export channels and marketing networks are also dominated by African actors and the extent to which African designers are able to complete value chains domestically. We note significant opportunities to investigate the development and growth of intra-continental, regional and national trade (UNCTAD, 2019) and the relationship of African fashion designers with localised supply and value chains, including their current engagement with local resources (i.e., revived factories) and markets, their development of more localised production and retail/distribution opportunities, and the impact thereof on their designs, production processes and market access (domestic, regional and international). With the continent-wide focus on developing domestic capacity and intracontinental trade, and with increased recognition of the creative economy, including the fashion industry, as a growth and employment driver (AfDB, 2018), research that seeks to understand how fashion designers can support local development through the creation of value added products that draw from and represent Africa’s rich cultural heritage and diversity will be increasingly important for both policy and practice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
The authors would like to thank King’s College London for their support for the Africa Fashion Futures project through the King’s Together Seed Fund.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
There is no conflict of interest to report.

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ENDNOTES
1 Lead firms are small, medium or large firms operating in formal and informal economies which have a significant number of commercial linkages (forwards or backwards) with MSMEs. They include buyers, traders, input suppliers, exporters and processors and training providers and others. Lead firms are often associated with value adding activities, innovation and international market engagement (USAID, 2008, p. 1).

2 An international trade agreement limiting the import of textiles and clothing into (developing) countries where high volumes of imports were damaging domestic industries (WTO, n.d.). The withdrawal is positioned as ‘wiping out’ apparel manufacturing industries as exports fell while imports from Asia into African markets increased (Ayoki, 2017).

3 ‘The labor-intensive part of apparel manufacturing, meaning the factories cut the fabric, sew the pieces together, and add any trims and packaging. They do not have responsibility for design or materials’ (HIVOS, 2016, p. 23).

4 In Original Design Manufacturing supplying firms provide design services to buyers, in Original Brand Manufacturing firms also own the brand (Whitfield et al., 2020).

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