

IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON EDUCATING EAST AFRICAN DESIGNERS

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ABSTRACT

Background: For centuries, there has been a cynical view of Africa. There has always been the perception that Africa is a highly underdeveloped continent. Now that we have the tools in our hands, we can tell our stories ourselves, without the existence of a foreign and misinformed narrative. Prior to the digital age, design was not as relevant as it is now. With the growth of social media in Eastern Africa, the current young generation must keep in touch with trends and expectations of a brand on social media. It is a path that currently stays evolving and a designer needs to be conscious of these changes to excel. **Problem:** Students in design school are often taught about the creative and aesthetic part of design, but rarely how to sell it. After leaving campus, very few young designers are equipped with necessary skills on how to market and sell their product or service. Communication with clients and brand visibility is just as important as the design itself but it is not an aspect that is adequately taught in design school. No matter how good a design is, if it is not visible to the seller, it will miss out on the opportunity to sell. **Objective:** The main research objective was to identify different forms of media expression on social media and what young designers can learn from them. **Design:** Using qualitative research, the study applies the case study design research method. **Setting:** The study was carried out from observation on East African social media. **Subjects:** The subjects of this study were young adult designers on social media. **Results:** The results prove that social media is indeed a helpful tool in educating designers and improving their skill set. As the social media age grows, so will the educational aspect on designers. To understand the learning curves that can be picked to educate designers, it is important to identify and observe exemplars that have been successful in that sector. **Conclusion:** The study concluded that exposure to social media positively impacts designers. Adaptation to design on social media platforms will only develop a designer and encourage them to grow whilst taking others as their role models and learning from them. It will further develop design, innovative design, and marketing and communicating skills.

Keywords: Social media, East Africa, Designers, Marketing, Growth, Design Thinking

1.0 PROBLEM

Most often, students in design school are taught about the creative and aesthetic part of design, but rarely how to sell it. After leaving campus, very few young designers are equipped with necessary skills on how to market and sell their product or service. Communication with clients and brand visibility is just as important as the design itself but it is not an aspect that is taught enough in design school. No matter how good your design is, if it is not visible to the seller, it will miss out on the opportunity to sell.

Of late, meeting a potential client always ends up in the question, ‘Can I have your Instagram handle?’ – showing how valuable the social media aspect of marketing has become. Clients will always want to peruse through your previous work or your brand - and they are most often comfortable with accessible, user-friendly platforms that they are familiar with. These are usually Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and TikTok of late.

Due to this circumstance, designers without doubt need to employ the use of social media. This action will assist them to learn the industry trends to grow their design skill and knowledge base. Being on social media can provide insight into not only marketing, but also designing itself for budding designers. It will develop design thinking by being in an environment that is design-oriented (Nagy, 2020).

2.0 BACKGROUND

For centuries, there has been a cynical view on Africa. There has always been the perception that Africa is a highly underdeveloped continent. Now that we have the tools in our hands, we can tell our stories ourselves, without there being a foreign and misinformed narrative.

As the internet continues to make a way into Africa, so does the wave of social media. Despite there being plenty of new social media platforms coming up, Facebook stays the most popular and most visited platform in Africa. As of December 2020, there were more than 232 million Facebook users in Africa (Tony Blair Institute of Global Change, 2021).

Before the digital age, design was not as relevant as it is now. With the growth of social media in Eastern Africa, the current young generation must keep in touch with trends and expectations of a brand on social media. It is a path that currently stays evolving and a designer needs to be conscious of these changes to excel. The internet is a vast sea of millions of competing brands and designers. As much as the competitiveness can be intimidating, it can be used as a driving force that pushes a designer to keep growing their skills and design thinking.

2.1 Research Questions

- i. What are the different forms of creative expression on social media?
- ii. What are the key aspects of social media that designers need to learn?
- iii. What are some East African design exemplars that excel at social media?
- iv. In what ways can designers be educated on design from social media?

Research Objectives

- i. To identify different forms of creative expression on social media.

- ii. To discuss the key aspects of social media that designers need to learn.
- iii. To give examples of some East African designers that excel at social media.
- iv. To discuss the design knowledge that can be acquired from East African designers.

2.1.1 Research Design

Using qualitative research, the study applies the case study design research method.

3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This paper will demystify the learning curve for designers as a result of social media. The question it poses is: What is the educational impact that social media has on East African designers?

The following section will discuss the aspects of social media that an East African designer can learn from.

3.1 Key Aspects of Social Media Usage For A Designer

The following are some of the key factors to consider when a designer is creating a presence on social media. A designer learns to create projects that follow these guidelines in order to meet their objective.

3.1.1 Customize your content to match your demographic

One of the major aspects of social media design that a designer can learn is that the user demographic of a platform is highly significant when designing your content. For example, the users on Instagram are usually a younger generation of users, whereas Facebook has a more mature audience. This, therefore, means that an Instagram post would be more fun and youth-targeted, whereas a Facebook post would be advanced and probably with a longer message.

The following are some examples of this sort of content.

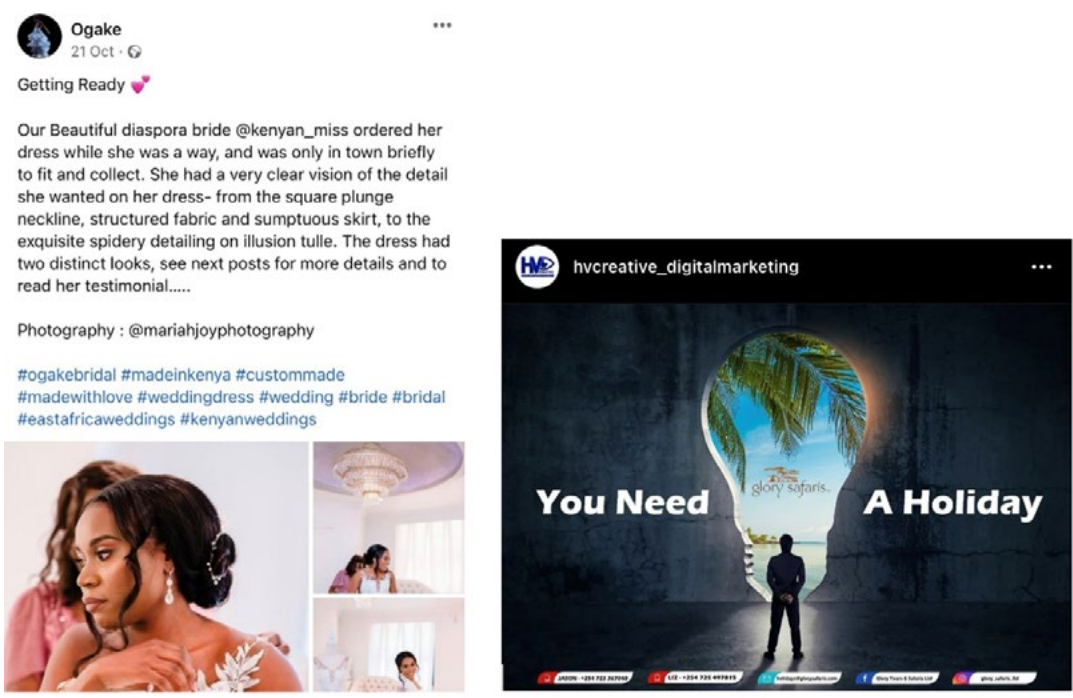


Fig. 1 & 2: Ogake, Source: Facebook, (19/11/2021) & HV Creative, Source: Instagram, (19/11/2021)

The first image shows a Facebook post by Ogake, a Kenyan bridal fashion brand. It has a longer caption and a more mature sentiment. Facebook posts are usually more descriptive as compared to Instagram posts.

The second image shows a Glory Safaris advert made by HV creatives, a Kenyan graphic designer. The message is short, and the design is simple. The illustration is also simple and straight-forward. The design youth have started developing a liking for this sort of minimalism and simplicity.

3.1.2 Establish a uniform brand design

It is important to create a coherent design for your brand. Designers can learn that by having harmonious design makes you recognizable. This can be in terms of a consistent patterns, logo, color pallet, font or design style that makes it stand out. Designers can learn that to be distinguishable, they should be able to create their design in such a way that is unique to their own brand and can be picked out easily from all the vast internet platforms. The following image is of the Instagram feed of Bole Road Textiles, an Interior Furnishing company owned by an Ethiopian designer. She has made sure that her work on social media has the inimitable colorful and linear textures, hand-woven in Ethiopia. The learning factor in this concept for designers is to have a quality in their design work that stands out from competing brands.

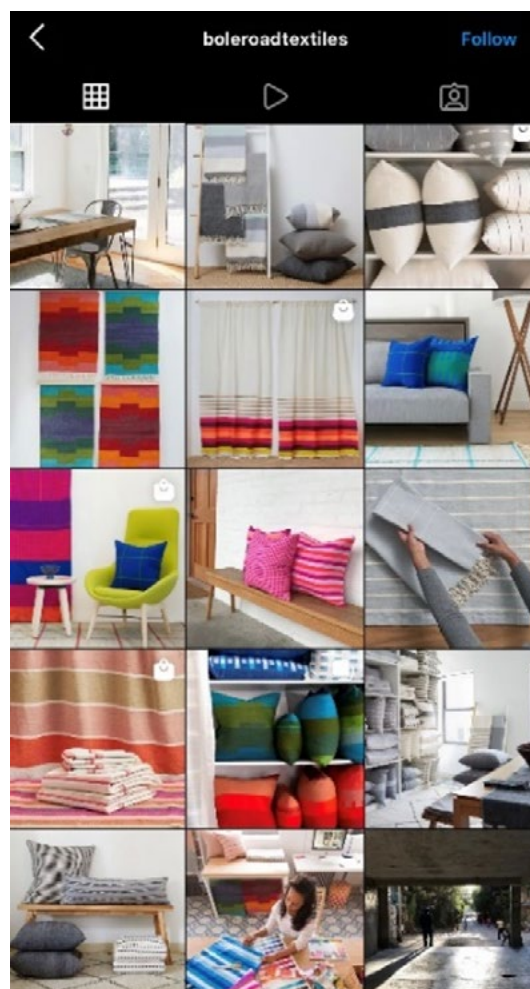


Fig. 3: Instagram feed of Bole Textiles, Source: Instagram @boleroadtextiles, (19/11/2021)

3.1.3 Staying trendy while passing the message

On social media, it is easy for a designer to get carried away with the current trends, such as memes. As much as it is important to keep the design fun and interesting, having the message of the design come across is more crucial. It is vital to find the correct balance between both the message and fun graphics. Being aware about the demographic is key in creating content as such. The designer has to possess relevant knowledge about the brand whilst being creative and attentive to the needs of the audience. The image below is an example of a brand that uses trends on social media to make sales. Punny Crafts Kenya is a product designer on Instagram that sells their products by using puns. Below are fridge magnets created by using trending Kenyan sayings. These sorts of designs get a great deal of response from social media users as most youth want to be part of a trend. The message of this aspect for designers is that you could create designs that are functional, but what sells them on social media is the trendy aspect of the design.



Fig. 4. Magnets by Punny Crafts Kenya. Source: Instagram @punnycraftske (19/11/2021)

3.1.4. Standing out from the competition

All social media users know that once you post anything, it joins a ceaseless flood of content. A single post must compete through billions of social media posts as well as different algorithm of each platform. This means that a designer needs to create and post content that is high impact, memorable and engaging.

Below are the different ways that designers use to be seen on social media.

3.2 Creative Expressions Used By A Designer On Social Media

This section will examine some of the creative ways of expression used by designers on social media. Reviewing these forms of design will help recognize some of the methods that East African designers can learn from in order to create an exceptional social media presence, whilst developing their

design skill.

With the pace that the digital market grows, it is important to recognize what method would work best for the design that one is putting out. The designer can control the amount of information being let out by any form of expression on social media.

3.2.1 Images

This is probably the simplest form of design. All social media platforms, excluding YouTube, support this design. Most designers usually face no problems with this form of expression as it is mostly effortless to create and costs nothing to post on all platforms. It therefore targets a possibly large audience. The following image is an example of a furniture set collection being advertised by The White Elephant Kenya on Instagram. It is a furniture company that refurbishes used furniture for resale. This is an example of how an interior designer can put out their products on social media to generate revenue.



Fig. 5. Image post by White Elephant Kenya. Source: Instagram @whiteelephantke (19/11/2021)

3.2.2 Product Sales

If a designer chooses to make a sale to a larger audience for a wide variety of products, social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram offer a 'shop' option. Instagram have a 'shop' whereby a designer can tag their products directly to link them to their online shop for customers to purchase. Facebook also has a 'marketplace' option whereby a designer can list their item for sale or sell it directly via a post. Below are examples of each of the items as seen in East African Design.

The first one is Shop Nanjala, a Kenyan gardening and gifting brand that supports Kenyan artisans. The image is of its Instagram shop. The second one is the Facebook shop page of an African fashion and beauty brand, Shop Zetu. Both have created a prominent product sale base on social media, teaching designers that shopping does not always have to be physical. This educates designers on the importance of creating sales on social media platforms.

3.2.3 Videos

There are various types of adverts that designers can create of their products or services. These include YouTube videos, TikToks, Instagram Reels, Snapchat and Facebook videos, and so on. These have proved to be very effective and popular as they are usually entertaining, fun and interactive. A

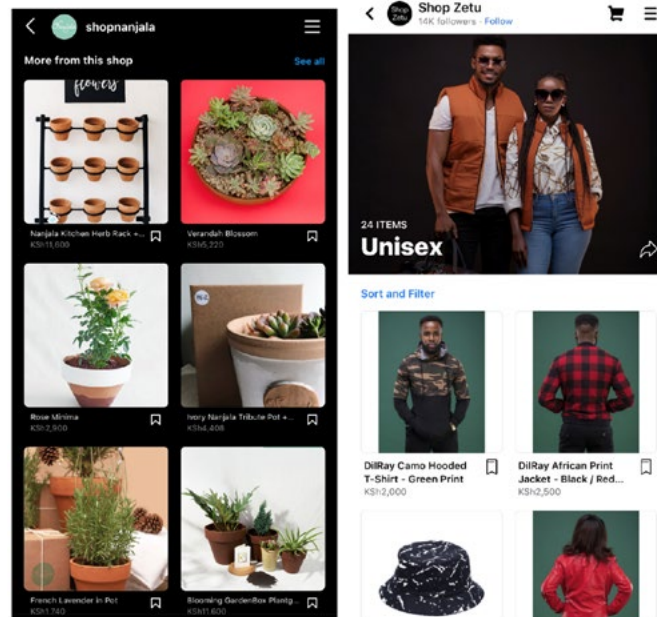


Fig. 6 & 7. Shop Nanjala Instagram Shop, Source: Instagram @shopnanjala (19/11/2021) & Shop Zetu Facebook Shop, Source: Facebook @ Shop Zetu (19/11/2021)

designer’s audience could view them from anywhere in the globe therefore, creating a large audience for the designer. The videos are usually mobile-friendly, therefore most of the time they are in a vertical format.

The images below show videos of two Interior Designers based in Mombasa Kenya. The first one is a screenshot of an Instagram reel by Pulsaris Design, an Interior design company owned by Khairdin Akbar. The second video screenshot is of a Real Estate agent/ Interior designer, Mohsin Gawi. The takeaway is that even with a practical design job such as Interior Design, a designer cannot stick to only getting the job right without creating a market online.

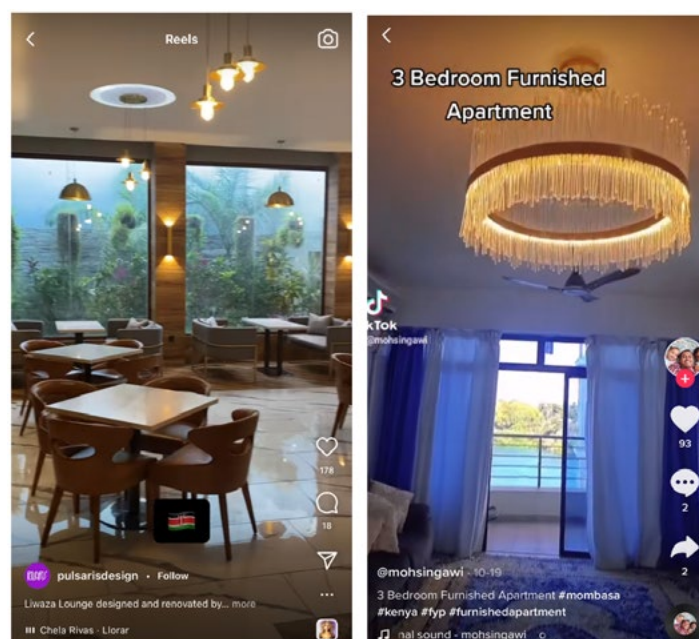


Fig. 8 & 9. Instagram Reel by Pulsaris Design, Source: Instagram @pulsarisdesign (19/11/2021) & Tiktok by Mohsin Gawi, Source: Tiktok @mohsingawi (19/11/2021)

In the following sections, some east African designers will be mentioned who do an exemplary job by developing their design skill on social media. They have created quite the brand for themselves and have publicly grown their design skill and thinking over the past couple of years.

3.3 Designer Exemplars On Social Media

To understand the learning curves that can be picked to educate designers, it is important to identify and observe exemplars that have been successful in that sector. In this section, some of these designers will be described as well as their outstanding qualities on social media.

3.3.1 Eugene Ngugi – Planning Interiors

Ngugi is the CEO at Planning Interiors, Nairobi. He began his career with a Bachelor of Arts in Design degree from the University of Nairobi in the 90s. Planning Interiors was previously called Planning Systems, which was one of the top architectural firms in Kenya. Ngugi used to work at the firm in the design team together with his colleague, Fatema Keshavjee who is the design director. In 2003 they found a buying opportunity and called the firm Planning Interiors.

It is without doubt the leading interior design firm in Kenya, as well as one of the first ones to be created. Their clientele usually consists of major prestigious clients such as JKIA, Coca Cola, Deloitte and most banks in Kenya.

Eugene Ngugi has around 3500 followers on its social media. They post their design work on a regular basis together with helpful design tips for the readers or the audience. Planning Interiors' social media reflects their ability to work with any and every sector in any industry. From restaurants, hospitality, commercial and formal sectors, they stop at nothing to show that a designer needs to be flexible and versatile to stand strong in the industry. That is the educational aspect that Ngugi has displayed with his firm (Construction Review Online, 2016).

Below is Ngugi followed by his business presence on Instagram.

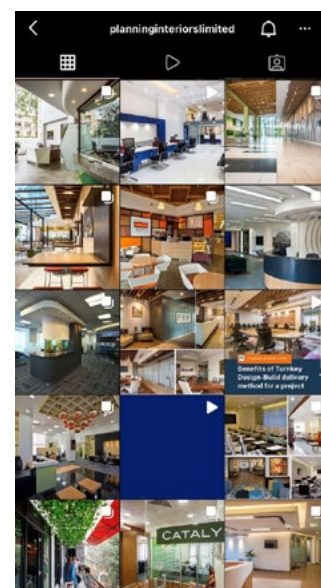
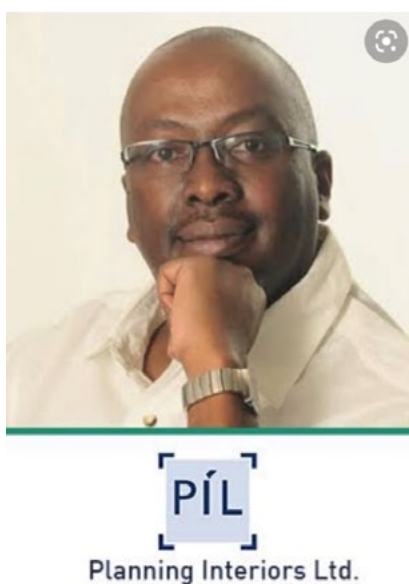


Fig. 10. Eugene Ngugi, CEO Planning Interiors Keya. Source: www.googleimages.com (19/11/2021)

Fig. 11. Planning Interiors Instagram page. Source: Instagram @planninginteriorslimited (27/12/2021)

3.3.2 Mwaura Dennis - DENRI Africa

DENRI is a fashion bag brand created by Dennis Mwaura. He is a commerce graduate from Strathmore University who was brave to delve into the Kenyan fashion industry. DENRI was pioneered by Mwaura in 2015 as a means of income generation, whereby he convinced a few of his university friends to join in on the business idea.

The brand provides a variety of bags from bags for travel, backpacks, briefcases and handbags. The bags previously had only one distribution outlet in 2015 – the Star Mall, Nairobi, but it has since grown massively.

The social media platforms for DENRI Africa (Instagram, Facebook and Twitter) have a collective follower count of almost a whopping 200,000 users. This digit shows how much effort and time the brand puts into its social media usage. They have also created shopping options on the platforms, showing that it is definitely an essential tool for their sales, as well as the importance of a strong social media presence for a fashion brand.

The educational aspect for designers is in the guidance by the founder himself when he spoke in an interview with The Standard. Mwaura's advice for young and blossoming designers is the following, in his own words, "Different skills can give you an advantage but to succeed in this industry, you must be obsessed with your craft- that's the only way you get to move ahead of the herd."

Below is an image of the personality and his brand:



Fig. 12. Dennis Mwaura, CEO DENRI Africa.
Source: www.googleimages.com (19/11/2021)

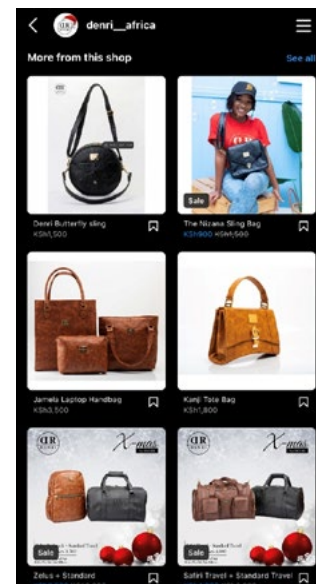


Fig. 13. DENRI Africa Instagram Shop
Source: Instagram @denri__africa (27/11/2021)

3.3.3 Anne Gaitho – Siri Studio

Siri Studio is a Kenyan fashion design house founded by Anne Gaitho in 2016. Her driving force was the fact that she could not find stylish clothes for her age group. She feels that all the clothes that she saw were uninspired. In a Standard Media interview conducted in March 2021, she reported that all local Kenyan brands that she saw were made of Kitenge fabric, targeting older women.

Anne recognized the market gap and decided to create stylish, contemporary clothes. She began

her business from an online blog where she got her initial clients. She believes that her rapid growth was as a result of social media, as that is where she gets new clients.

Siri Studio has around 26000 followers on Instagram and Facebook, with Instagram being the major social platform for the fashion house.

Anne's advice for young designers is to just go for it. In her Standard Media interview she said. "The risk is in getting started. Everything can be figured out along the way. The courage to start even if you can't see the whole staircase is what distinguishes a successful entrepreneur from a non-starter." The images below show the designer followed by some of her designs.



Fig. 14. Anne Gaitho, CEO & Founder, Siri Studio. Source: www.googleimages.com (19/11/2021)

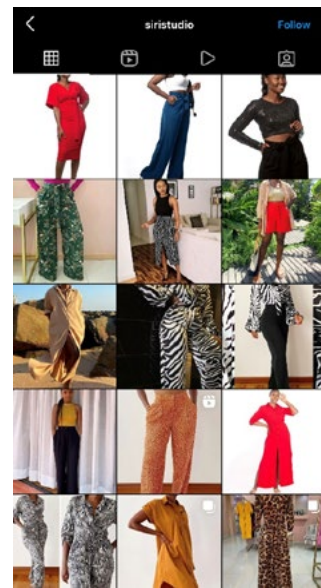


Fig. 15. Siri Studio Instagram Profile Source: Instagram @siristudio (27/12/2021)

3.34 Ally – Ally Rehmtullah

Ally of the Ally Rehmtullah fashion house is a Tanzanian fashion designer. He was studying graphic design and fine arts at the Baum School of Art in Pennsylvania where a lecturer advised him to take a fashion class because of his 'flamboyant choice of dressing.'

He went back home to Dar Es Salaam in 2006 where he designed his first outfit – an evening gown for an emcee. The rest he says, is history. Due to his Indian heritage, Tanzanian life and American education, he is able to merge the best of three worlds into his work. However, the basis of his fashion work is the 'Makonde' carvings of Tanzania.

In a mere two years in 2008, he was the first Tanzanian fashion designer to appear in London Fashion Week which was a huge milestone for him. Since then, he has appeared in several local and international shows, and has even hosted his own fashion night galas.

He has recently opened a fashion school – AR101 - to equip young designers with short learning courses (The East African, 2021).

Ally has a following of 88000 users on his Instagram platform only. There he shares his fashion journey, fashion events that he attends, as well as his designs.

Below are images of his work on social media:



Fig. 16. Ally Rehmtullah, CEO & Founder of Ally Rehmtullah Fashion
Source: Instagram @allyrehmtullah (27/12/2021)

Fig. 17 & 18. Instagram posts by Ally Rehmtullah of his designs

3.4 Educational Aspect For Designers

From the discussion in this paper, it is certain that social media plays a crucial role in the life of a designer at this age and time. It is a helpful tool in the growth of a designer and the design industry in general.

This section seeks to explain the means in which social media educates budding designers to develop their skill.

- i. Designers experience creative growth. A growing designer could benefit from exploring social media to learn elements of design, trends in design and various different perspectives that they may have not considered before. It could widen their point of view, due to witnessing various diverse perspectives in design from designers across the globe.
- ii. The business side of design could be identified and explored by designers to bridge the gap between design and marketing. This could in turn develop a designer's skills as they would be producing and selling more work and meeting clients that give various specifications for designing different elements. By doing this, a designer can flourish in their skills.
- iii. By being on social media, a designer understands his/her demographic. This ensures that the design produced meets the needs of the audience. Eventually, the designer is able to provide products or services that polished to satisfy the needs of the client or user.
- iv. The developing designer also understands the content to create to match the corresponding social media, therefore developing design thinking. For example, the content to create for Instagram may not be the same as the one created for Facebook due to the user age and demographic. By understanding this concept, a designer is able to

create user-friendly and relevant content.

The above facts prove that social media is indeed a helpful tool in educating designers and improving their skill set. As the social media age grows, so will the educational aspect on designers.

4.0 CONCLUSION

It is clear from the study that exposure to social media positively impacts designers. Adaption to design on social media platforms will only develop a designer and encourage them to grow whilst taking others as their role models and learning from them. It will also develop design, innovative design, and marketing and communicating skills. Ignorance of design on social media could potentially hinder growth of a designer due to the fact that the world is an online village. Therefore, social media does impact the education of a designer, especially ones that are still being nurtured.

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