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Higher education: Cultural agent to address consumer demand in the creative fashion economy

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Abstract

Higher education institutions have an ever-increasing role to play in the creative economy of South Africa. The relationship between higher education institutions and the creative economy manifests through the skills, training, and knowledge transferred to students, thereby supporting this economy through job creation, addressing Sustainable Development Goal 8. The local fashion industry is a creative industry of which the custom-made fashion designer is essential. These designers offer locally made traditional and culturally specific custom-made garments to customers in South Africa that communicate the culturally significant heritage of their wearer. This is accomplished through incorporating African fabrics into Western designs or using cultural and symbolic attire created by traditional designers knowledgeable of the features synonymous with a specific cultural dress. Although various studies have signalled the importance of custom-made fashion designers in the alleviation of poverty and job creation, the significance of these businesses as cultural custodians of traditional apparel has not been considered. The purpose of this study was to explore the importance of culturally specific fashion to the South African female consumer who employs custom-made fashion designers to achieve a desired appearance and provide insight into the role higher education institutions can play in facilitating the advancement of traditional and cultural fashion to contribute to the creative economy. An exploratory qualitative study was designed, which included participants who made use of custom-made fashion designers. Data was gathered through 11 mini-focus groups, resulting in data saturation. Transcribed interviews were thematically analysed, and three main themes emerged from the data. The findings suggest that customers attribute the importance of custom-made culturally specific fashion: 1) to be culturally responsive to their traditions and culture, 2) as enablers of economic empowerment, and 3) indicative of their local favouritism towards locally produced custom-made fashion. Through the inputs of higher education institutions where fashion curriculum is taught within Fashion Design and Consumer Sciences programmes, training should focus on the importance of preserving cultural heritage in fashion design curriculums. Higher education institutions should further initiate and support the advancement of basic sewing and cultural fashion design skills to ensure the advancement of cultural custom-made fashion design in communities and to those who have not benefitted from fashion as a creative industry to improve livelihoods. The study contributes to the cultural importance of fashion and the role higher education institutions can play in advancing the creative fashion economy of South Africa and addressing Sustainable Development Goal 8.

Keywords: Consumer Science, creative economy, creative industry, custom-made apparel, entrepreneurs, fashion design.

Introduction

Globally, higher education institutions' involvement in the creative industry (Lazzaro 2021) through intellectual agency and active participation in the implementation and development of creative industry training and educational initiatives have become evident (Bilan et al. 2019). In South Africa, this involvement remains weak as the national innovation policy predominantly supports STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) skills development (Snowball, Tarentaal & Snapsed 2021). Therefore, the opportunity for higher education institutions to contribute to Sustainable Development Goal 8 related to decent work and economic growth through the development of creative industry skills may be lost due to this mindset.

Designer fashion has long been considered part of the creative Industry, where creativity emerges from the novel and inherently creative ideas (Matiza 2020) produced through creative human capabilities, skill sets, and talent, giving life to ideas such as tangible fashion items. The expression of creativity through the production and selling of small-scale fashion products makes these creators part of the creative economy. Yet very little attention is given to the need to advocate for, or the advancement of creative small-scale custom-made fashion design entrepreneurs who can produce custom-made fashion in South Africa through which to advance the creative industry.

Moreover, these industries can produce cultural products (Matiza 2020) through which the cultural importance of apparel and the use of traditional textiles creatively combined with current Western fashion trends can be sustained. Unfortunately, the contribution of custom-made fashion designers to the cultural significance of the South African fashion wearer has not received enough attention and is potentially undervalued. Mastamet-Mason, Müller, and Van der Merwe (2017) have also alluded to the dearth of research on African costumes and textiles from different cultures and the indigenous knowledge systems that accompany African cultural dress. In order to add to the gap in understanding the significance of African cultural fashion and the role it plays in the custom-made fashion industry, this study questions the role of the custom-made fashion designer in sustaining culturally specific custom-made fashion and the role higher education institutions should play in the advancement of the custom-made fashion designer of culturally specific custom-made fashion within the creative economy. For this study, culturally specific custom-made fashion refers to the use of African print fabric to create an individually designed fashion product of cultural or traditional significance as well as the design of heritage-specific dress of specific cultural groups such as Tsonga, Sepedi, and others from South Africa. This study contributes to a better understanding of the importance of culturally specific custom-made fashion as a creative industry and necessitates the urgency to support, value, and acknowledge culturally specific custom-made fashion as an industry in the creative economy of South Africa.

Literature

Creative economy and the creative industry

The creative economy is not yet exhaustively defined (Levickaitė 2011) and reflects the economic activities associated with the creative industry where new ideas, thoughts, and innovation are synonymous with this economy (Surodjo, Stuty & Lukman 2022). The creative economy is acknowledged as a dynamic sector in the economic development of developing countries and is thought to be the solution for economic and cultural growth in Africa (Comunian, Hracs & England 2021). This is because creative resources form part of this economy through which growth and development (Guilherme 2017), as well as cultural, societal, or educational value, is generated

(Comunian, Hrac & England 2021). Therefore, the creative economy is often associated with the inclusion of the cultural (industries associated with symbolic outputs such as fashion products of cultural significance) and creative industries (knowledge-based industries) (Snowball 2016). Guilherme (2017) refers to it as an “economy of abundance”, as creativity and knowledge contributing to this economy is inexhaustible. Through this economy, jobs are created that give rise to income-generation opportunities with the potential to address youth unemployment in South Africa (Snowball 2016) and provide income and employment for women from rural and metropolitan areas (Snowball & Mpuma 2021), thereby generating an additional income for financially strapped individuals or families.

As this economy covers a wide range of creative businesses and is inclusive of culturally creative enterprises (Comunian, Hrac & England 2021), to which culturally specific custom-made fashion can be added, it is instrumental in sustaining livelihoods and improving the well-being of many (Abisuga-Oyekunle & Sirayi 2018). It is important to acknowledge that the creative industry within the creative economy not only contributes to the economy of a country but is also significant in advancing culturally important heritage within the creative economy. This can lead to a novel approach to cultural entrepreneurship where “skilled cultural operators” can creatively use cultural resources, such as knowledge and skills, to design and produce culturally specific custom-made fashion, to advance the creative economy (Lounsbury et al. 2019). Thus, the creative becomes enshrined in the customs and symbolic nature of the traditions and culture of those who know of and apply the skills within this economy and the custodians of culturally significant items resulting from the creative ideas of actors, such as custom-made fashion designers, who contribute to this economy.

Importance of custom-made fashion designers

Custom-made fashion designers in South Africa have been featured as drivers of the informal economy in various papers by Kempen, Strydom and Tobias-Mamina (2021), Strydom, Kempen and Tselepis (2022), and Maliwichi, Manenzhe-Tamarope and Strydom (2023). In many instances, these designers happen to stumble upon the custom-made fashion industry by chance, through need (Kempen & Cornelissen 2023), or spurred on by the many retrenchments in the South African clothing manufacturing industry (Rogerson 2000). However, their role in the creative economy and creative industry has not been acknowledged for the contribution they make to sustain and advance culturally specific custom-made fashion within these informal business contexts. Much of the culturally specific custom-made fashion is designed and delivered to customers requiring unique, individual, purpose-specific cultural fashion items. From a cultural perspective, these custom-made fashion designers bring about the revival of local textile traditions and artisanship (Langevang 2017). The potential of custom-made fashion designers to advance cultural heritage through culturally specific custom-made fashion cannot be ignored, as it can give rise to the creation of cultural entrepreneurship within the creative economy in Africa. This stems from the creative economy being considered an expansion of the cultural economy inclusive of culturally based sectors such as the fashion industry (Guilherme 2017). Irrespective of the potential of the custom-made fashion designer industry in South Africa, it will not have an impact if the value and contribution of this creative industry are not recognised and addressed. It is here where the role of the higher education institutions comes into play.

Cultural contribution of custom-made fashion designers

Africa is known for local dressmaking artisans developing African fashion through traditional know-how, during which local trends are creatively captured and preserved (Bello 2019). Clothing has long been considered the cultural communication mechanism of its wearers. In so doing, the cultural distinctiveness of the identity of the society is represented through the creative and artistic way in

which clothing is designed and worn (Adade 2023). As a result, clothing captures the cultural values, ideologies, customs, beliefs, and many other aspects that give meaning to society (Anyanwu & Chiana 2022) and visually represents the culture as a shared meaning of society. Custom-made fashion designers are creative artisans who can give life to cultural fashion thereby becoming the custodians of the cultural heritage of their customers. Cultural dress is specific to a cultural group in South Africa, such as Tsonga, Sepedi, and many other cultural groups that have prominent cultural dress elements that are used to depict their cultural appearance. In this way, through the design and production of culturally specific items, fashion is also given a cultural value (Abdullayeva 2022) that plays a significant role in ensuring the continuation of the cultural dress of various cultural groups. According to Darku and Akpan (2020), by producing cultural products of local relevance, such as culturally specific custom-made fashion, custom-made fashion designers from Africa can become globally and locally recognised, which may impact their future as custom-made fashion designers. Therefore, the importance of culturally specific custom-made fashion for the small-scale custom-made fashion designer should not be overlooked as it holds the key to the success of the creative economy in South Africa.

Higher education institutions in the creative industry

Gilmore and Comunian (2016) suggest that higher education institutions have found it difficult to define their role in the creative economy and the development of the creative industry. Higher education institutions can mould students to make necessary contributions to their local societies and economy through the creative subjects offered at higher education institutions (Comunian, Hrac & England 2021). These institutions are responsible for the intellectual development of the creative arts as much as it is responsible for the sciences by remaining responsive to the socio-economic advancement of the society they serve (Alemu 2018). However, the creative industry may be nested within specific fields at higher education institutions (Flew 2019), such as in a limited number of Consumer Sciences programmes in South Africa or limited to a few higher education institutions offering fashion design programmes. Yet there are higher education institutions where the creative industry is undervalued and as a result, fields such as fashion design, clothing-related, and apparel construction courses have been closed, thus derailing such contributions to the creative economy of South Africa.

Furthermore, higher education institutions are central to the knowledge economy of South Africa in how knowledge of relevance to economic growth is produced (Cloete, Maassen & Pillay 2017). As a result, the opportunity to engage in the development and support of sewing skills training to fashion design as a creative economy contributor should not be frowned upon by higher education institutions. The reason is that higher education institutions can play an all-important role in contributing towards Sustainable Development Goal 8 through the encouragement and enrolment of students in the creative industries and more so in the construction and development of fashion per se, as these can offer opportunities for future employment and job creation in South Africa. Higher education institutions can develop and release creative practitioners (Comunian, Gilmore & Jacobi 2015), such as custom-made fashion designers, that can serve a community or cultural group. The impact of higher education institutions at an economic and cultural level will be evident by becoming involved in fulfilling the mandate to be more socially and economically responsive (Lazzaro 2021; Cross & Ndofirepi 2016). Therefore, the influence of higher education institutions within an African context has become apparent (Comunian, Hrac & England 2021) as educational opportunities are needed to deliver more entrepreneurs for the creative industry (Abisuga-Oyekunle & Sirayi 2018), making the delivery of custom-made fashion designers, able to produce culturally specific custom-made fashion, even more important.

Methodology

An exploratory, descriptive qualitative study was designed to gain more insight into the importance of culturally specific custom-made fashion generated from custom-made fashion designers as viewed within an inductive approach to this study. Purposeful sampling, specific to exploratory, descriptive research (Sandelowski 2004), was used to recruit participants who made use of custom-made fashion designers as the only inclusion criteria for this study. For this study, this is a small-scale custom-made fashion designer that produces once-off culturally specific fashion commissioned for a special occasion or event. Convenience sampling was further used to recruit female participants employed at a university in South Africa who complied with the inclusion criteria.

Data collection was facilitated through small group focus groups, which provided an opportunity for participants to concurrently engage in discussing the commissioning of culturally specific custom-made fashion designed and produced by a custom-made fashion designer that would not be achieved without this group interaction (Doyle et al. 2020). Eleven digitally recorded group discussions, with between 2 and 4 participants, facilitated by an experienced moderator, resulted in 31 female participants participating in this study. Participants shared their experiences by addressing the question “*Why do you approach a personal fashion designer*”. Responses from the participants were further probed for clarity and explanation, resulting in group sessions of approximately 60 minutes. The sample size was determined through thematic saturation that allowed the researcher to develop conceptual categories until a detailed understanding of the ideas and thoughts regarding the commissioning of custom-made fashion designers for culturally specific custom-made fashion was achieved. The participants were between 18 and 65 years old, although age was not a criterion for study inclusion. Before data collection commenced, ethics clearance from the College of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences Health Research Ethics Committee (2018/CAES/114) was obtained.

Data were transcribed verbatim, after which inductive thematic analysis was performed, whereby an emic approach was used. In order to address the importance of rigour and quality in qualitative research, Johnson, Adkins and Chauvin’s (2020) trustworthiness criteria summarised by Nowell et al. (2017) were applied. Kempen, Strydom and Tobias-Mamina (2023) previously explained the use of these criteria for the broader study related to custom-made fashion designers, which applied to the data presented in this paper whereby *credibility* was achieved through prolonged engagement with the data and the participants in the study; peer *debriefing* during code generation; *member checking* during the focus group interviews; thick descriptive data obtained ensured *transferability*; through a logical, traceable, and documented research methodology, *dependability* was addressed, which contributed to the *confirmability* of the data; *authenticity* was achieved through audio recording and the verbatim transcription of the interviews with quotations specific to the responses of the participants as presented in the data.

Findings and discussion

The importance of culturally specific custom-made fashion designed and produced by custom-made fashion designers can be characterised in three ways: 1) responsiveness to the traditions and culture of the participants, 2) economic empowerment, and 3) locally produced fashion favouritism.



Figure 2: Stipe-like fabric for Venda traditional design (Design by Khosi Nkosi)

and grieving, thus signifying the role custom-made fashion plays during these events by using African print fabric to feature current Western fashion trends.

The importance of designers who can work with this fabric emerged because *“some of them (referring to the designers) is better (than others) [...] some of this material (referring to African print) they have edges and I want somebody who is able to recognise this edge and know where to put it. I go for the guy (referring to a specific designer) because I know he will [...] know that this is an African print”*. Therefore, custom-made fashion designers who are *“good with the traditional material (referring to African print)”* are highly sought after and required to be competent in producing the designs suited for African print fabrics. Amankwah and Howard (2013) found that most African prints do not meet the requisite composition standards in fabric width and include pattern layouts and intricate motifs that pose challenges to garment designers when using these fabrics. Subsequently, custom-made fashion designers who are not familiar with African print fabric may disappoint customers who believe that *“because she (custom-made fashion designer) was using*

Responsiveness to the traditions and culture of the participants Custom-made fashion designers are typically approached for what participants referred to as *“traditional clothes”*, of which the design is about *“the fabric not necessarily that it’s the correct attire for a certain culture”*. Traditional designs feature *“African print [...] which is not traditional, but all of us, just love embracing that”*, where *“the tradition in the sense of fashion nowadays is just using African print in whatever style you want [...] it is not necessarily culturally correct”*. The African print fabric mentioned by the participants symbolises Africanness (Lasisi, Oridola & Oligbide 2022) as illustrated in Figure 1. African print is a 100% printed cotton fabric widely used in Africa, known to have African tribal-like signs, symbols, and motifs as communicating elements in the design and not socio-economically specific (Adeloye 2022). African print is used in designs for special occasions such as *“weddings, graduations, special parties where (there is a theme)”*. According to Lasisi, Oridola, and Oligbide (2022), clothing within the African context is used to honour through celebrating

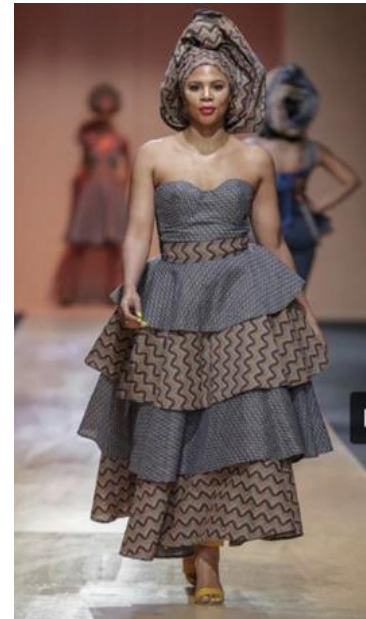


Figure 1: African print material used in traditional design (Design by Khosi Nkosi)

that Botswana fabric (waxed texture) she's not well trained in it so she struggled" and as a result, customers would "rather go to somebody who knows". Custom-made fashion designers are also required to recognise the cultural significance of the fabric they are required to work with as "it is more about the fabric [...] the Vendas, they have the Muvenda which is very specific (a stripe-like fabric)" as indicated in Figure 2.

On the other hand, custom-made fashion designers are also picked for their skillset and artisanship of cultural-specific or heritage-specific fashion belonging to different cultural groups. In this regard, participants believed that "they were taught by somebody how to make that according to the culture, and they understand the cultural background of the different colours and why you should have certain colours". These designers show a sensitivity to the culture of the customer whom they are designing for and, therefore, "I go to her because I am Tswana Barolong, so she will have to not stray away from my culture [...] so she will say [...] I know you are a Tswana how about [...] and she will do this and that [...] because she is from the DRC". This sensitivity towards different cultures is important to participants because "we have the same fabric (referring to Africa print) but the way the clothes are made are different" for different cultural groups.

For example "Leteise (or Letoitse) is a fabric we use in Batswana tribe mostly for weddings" (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Example of Leteise (Design by Khosi Nkosi)

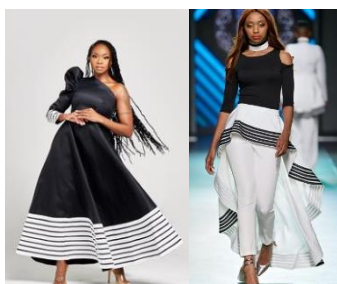


Figure 4: Example of a modern Makoti (Design by Khosi Nkosi)

Mukwevho and Khosa (2018) found that by wearing cultural attire, the self-image, confidence, self-worth, and dignity of Tsonga female youths resulted in social cohesion and cultural identity. This is confirmed by this participant who says "it represents you [...] It talks about the inner someone [...] and you feel content when wearing this". The importance of custom-made fashion designers who have become cultural designers gain a reputation through their skills, knowledge, and experience of the requirements for these designs "especially those Makoti outfits (Figure 4), I know she's the person to go to" because "If you want a traditional outfit (referring to culturally specific dress) go to the person who sews the traditional outfit because, with our Xhosa outfit (Figure 4), you cannot go anywhere (meaning that not every designer can be used).

The specificity of the most experienced custom-made fashion designers seems to point to the areas known to be occupied by specific cultural groups and, therefore, "if I want a proper Xibelani (as indicated in Figure 5) is in the Tsonga tradition it's like a skirt [...] I would not go to anyone in Joburg I would actually prefer to go all the way to Limpopo to find people who have been doing it for years to get a proper one" because the authenticity of the craft is within the region of the culture and therefore "you go specifically to Venda, not people around Gauteng because they will never [...] they will do something fakey so



Figure 5: Example of traditional Xibelani (Design by Lotsha Onaka)

when you go to Venda you will find genuine cloth and also the design will be exactly as how Vendas are". Therefore custom-made fashion designers who are for example "specialised in Sepedi wear" play an important part in sustaining cultural fashion heritage. The affirmation of obtaining the correct cultural dress dispels some concerns expressed by Mukwevho and Khosa (2018) who found that some Tsonga youths are abandoning their customary dress for fashionable Western clothing. The consumer demand for culturally specific custom-made fashion is apparent. Custom-made fashion designers who can upskill themselves to deliver culturally specific custom-made fashion can play an important role in ensuring the future of culturally specific custom-made fashion in South Africa.

Economic empowerment

Although not broadly communicated, customers of custom-made fashion produced by local small-scale custom-made fashion designers, support these designers since it is a "little contribution that I am making to change the situation" of the designer. "By supporting them, you are putting food on the table [...], which is a nice thing to do" because for many of these custom-made fashion designers "it's survival". Emanating from this stance was "the reason why I support it (referring to locally produced fashion from a small-scale custom-made fashion designer) is job creation [...] that everything [...] done in the country which is job creation [...] also boosts the economy of the country". As a result, the commissioning of culturally specific custom-made fashion can ensure the economic empowerment of small-scale custom-made fashion designers, which can result in sustained income and a contribution to the creative economy. A creative economy is recognised as a job-creating industry that sustains the livelihoods and well-being of people (Abisuga-Oyekunle & Sirayi 2018).

When considering the entrepreneurial initiative of small-scale custom-made fashion designers to produce income-generation fashion the risk and perseverance of these designers are admirable because "your old designers most of them just came from home with a sewing machine and they taught themselves how to do it". Higher education institutions' instructional support in sewing and design skills can provide a foundation for prospective custom-made fashion designers on which to build a successful custom-made fashion business. The custom-made fashion business could benefit future generations because when "I think of the next generation [...] so the next child [...] can inherit it and make it better [...] it boosts the economy of the country". Customers' support given to the younger generation of custom-made fashion designers emerged as a conscious effort because "if I don't support the youngsters that are growing in the industry now, who would support them [...] so then they become good businesspeople also". The contrary also emerged where younger custom-made fashion designers were concerned because "sometimes you will go and support them (referring to the younger custom-made fashion designers) and then you'll be sorry. It's like they are doing ourselves a favour although we are doing them a favour". Creative industries are sensitive to economic changes (Snowball 2016) and, therefore, must ensure customer retention through an appropriate business ethic. Prospective custom-made fashion designers can benefit from higher education institutions' business management training, allowing custom-made fashion designers to manage the custom-made fashion business and its customers. The findings suggest that customers of custom-made fashion designers are aware of the role they play in the economic development of these designers. Higher education institutions' support for custom-made fashion designers will allow better business acumen with which to build the creative economy.

Locally produced fashion favouritism

The support of custom-made fashion designers was further embedded in the understanding that the items produced by custom-made fashion designers were locally produced and, therefore, a proudly South African product. Favouritism in terms of locally produced custom-made fashion was found in

words such as *“I love to support the country”, “this designer is South African [...] just to support”, “we are supporting our fellow South Africans and designers”, “it’s a plus for me”, “a plus factor”* which made them *“very proud”*. The continued support of custom-made fashion designers is linked to a consciousness of the contribution to the local economy as *“it boosts the economy of the country, we don’t lose the value of our rand because [...] we create within”*. Therefore, the support of local small-scale custom-made fashion designers can have both a positive effect on the economy of the country and on the local custom-made fashion designer who benefits from the support of the local customer, thus becoming locally relevant to South Africa (Darku & Akpan 2020).

Conclusion

This study has contributed to furthering the importance of the creative economy in South Africa by focusing on the small-scale custom-made fashion designer who produces culturally specific custom-made fashion and how this creative industry can contribute to the creative economy. The importance of the custom-made fashion designer to produce culturally specific custom-made fashion is evident from this study as the Africanness of the heritage and tradition of specific cultures remains the driver towards culturally specific custom-made fashion. Higher education institutions should acknowledge the importance of training and providing educational opportunities for skills development in working with traditional fabrics and the design and production of specific cultural garments for various cultural groups. Not only should this be part of the fashion design curriculum, but further educational opportunities should be created for those with limited design and sewing skills. This will open many more opportunities for economic development stemming from the creative industry that has support from consumers who need culturally specific custom-made fashion. The creative economy can, therefore, make a much bigger contribution to job creation and poverty alleviation in South Africa if the importance of culturally specific custom-made fashion is acknowledged and supported by higher education institutions in South Africa.

Fashion design, including basic sewing skills in South Africa, should not be limited to degree programmes but extend to the potential small-scale custom-made fashion designer who can become part of the creative economy through the production of culturally specific custom-made fashion. If the potential to develop local small-scale custom-made fashion designers with limited skills is not encouraged to enter the creative industry, South Africa stands to lose the opportunity to address Sustainable Development Goal 8, which is about creating decent work and economic growth. It is the task of higher education institutions to encourage and engage with those who have been exposed to basic sewing and clothing design either through Consumer Studies offered at schools in South Africa or those taught basic skills through family members or parents to develop these skills for custom-made fashion design. In this way, higher education institutions can make a meaningful contribution to the creative economy of South Africa. Without the assistance and influence of higher education institutions to encourage the development of basic sewing skills, fashion design and its contribution to the creative economy, where it is most needed, will remain undervalued and unable to change the lives of potential custom-made fashion designers through culturally specific custom-made fashion. More research is needed to understand the pathway of custom-made fashion designers from secondary-level training to a career in custom-made fashion and culturally specific custom-made fashion.

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