

- Mebala is a local startup company that makes custom leather bags in Maboneng, Johannesburg.
- The company was founded by Tlhalefang Moeletsi who started it by mistake after creating a bag that he struggled to find in Johannesburg in 2019.
- Moeletsi, who is a PhD scholar at Wits University, has always known he would be an entrepreneur given his background in economics, but never thought he would become immersed in the world of fashion design.
- The company has signed an agreement to ship its products to a wholesaler in the US.

Finding the perfect African-print back pack with leather trimmings was a nightmare for Tlhalefang Moeletsi back in 2019, so he bought material to have it custom made - little did he know that that moment would lead to owning a leather bag design company of his own.

[Mebala](#) is a local small business that makes custom leather bags in Maboneng, Johannesburg. The company was founded by Moeletsi, a PhD economics student at Wits University.

The company was founded unintentionally, and due to demand, the growth of the business has exceeded expectations.

In 2019, Moeletsi was on the hunt for a certain type of bag but simply couldn't find it anywhere in Johannesburg.

The existing leather brands weren't offering what he wanted at the time, so he took it upon himself to buy the material needed to make it from scratch.

"There was a gentleman who was fixing my shoes who had experience with leather", said Moeletsi. "I gave him the material and he made the back pack for me in the design that I wanted."

The 28-year-old enjoyed seeing the shoe repairer create the bag he asked for and came back for more custom-design bags. The pair worked on more leather items together and sold them to their newly found customers.

"I saw that there weren't a lot of leather brands where you can craft things according to the design that you want, so I decided that we would try and fill the gap," said Moeletsi.

Demand for the bags grew and the duo made more bags in the shoe repairer's gazebo in town. They later rented a room in Johannesburg and started operating on a full time basis.

Written by Editor

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Another crafter was added to the team and a few months later, they moved to a bigger manufacturing facility in Maboneng, Johannesburg.

Today, Mebala - which means colours in Sesotho - consists of a team of seven.

Over the years, the company has developed various designs ranging from bags shaped like the African continent, bucket bags, laptop bags, cases, fanny packs, and card holders among others.

To craft the products, different kinds of genuine leather are used depending on the kind of design a customer is looking for.

"For a ladies bucket bag, we use soft genuine leather which you find when cutting into the skin of an animal.

"If it's something like a briefcase, then we use full grain leather - the outermost part of the animal skin," said Moeletsi.

They also make provisions for vegan customers on special request. Prices for the genuine leather products range from R390 to over R2,000.

"We took the common startup strategy of entering lower than the market [price] so that we could try and gain traction. We're still relatively lower than the market, although prices have increased gradually," said the scholar.

Moeletsi, who comes from a small village in the North West province, came to Johannesburg in 2011 to study.

The business owner said he always knew he would become an entrepreneur, but never thought he would do so in the fashion design industry.

Last year February, Mebala got the opportunity to participate in [Design Indaba](#)'s emerging creatives platform. The programme has previously featured the likes of [Maxhosa Africa](#), a popular South African clothing line.

One of the wholesalers there liked their products and contacted them regarding exporting products to the US. Mebala signed the agreement and will start shipping items internationally during the festive season.

"We've been getting so much love on social media from Nigeria, Kenya, Malawi, Uganda, and America.

This SA leather bag business started by fluke - now its bold designs are making wave

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"We will be shipping a lot of stuff to those parts of the world," said Moeletsi.

[Phumi Ramalepe](#) , Business Insider SA