

The big dreams of Skinny Sbu

 By [Lauren Hartzberg](#)

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A sock collector from a tender age, Sibusiso Ngwenya started his own homegrown accessories brand, Skinny Sbu Socks, with just R70, his mother's encouragement and the desire to be Africa's answer to Tom Ford.



Image credit: Forbes Africa

Established in April 2013, Ngwenya a.k.a. Skinny Sbu built his sock brand around three key principles: premium quality, local manufacturing and design that tells authentic African stories.

His creations soon found their way onto the feet of Tumisho Masha, Maps Maponyane and Mmusi Maimane, and onto the rails in Stuttafords department stores countrywide. The [Stuttafords closure](#) in 2017 didn't present too much of a hurdle for Ngwenya who announced an exclusive distribution deal with menswear retailer Markham early this year.

According to Markham, the culmination of this partnership is based on the retailer's development programme that aims to provide support to young entrepreneurs as they expand their commercial footprint in the highly competitive retail landscape. Skinny Sbu Socks are now available at 20 selected stores countrywide as well as online via the retailer's e-commerce platform.

The young designer described the Markham deal as a gamechanger. "It's unheard of in the South African retail or fashion space that you have a young brand, which is only focused on one type of apparel, be given so many stores in which to distribute a product. It's a big deal and I know for sure it's going to inspire the next generation of designers, the next generation of young entrepreneurs and the next generation of retailers," he said.



Ngwenya's brand-building prowess and entrepreneurial flair earned him a spot on *Forbes Africa's* ['30 under 30 list'](#) in 2017. You'll also likely find him up on stage at events and conferences around the country preaching the wisdom he's acquired on his business journey. Impressive for somebody who hasn't even approached 30-years-old.

Ngwenya sat down with us to share the humble beginnings of Skinny Sbu Socks, and the highs, lows and learnings he's experienced on the road to building his empire.

▣ **Where did your passion for socks begin?**

It comes from my mom, my gran, my aunt and my sister. I attribute my love for fabric, for clothes and colour to those four women. I remember when I was growing up, my mom used to instruct me to wash my socks inside out and by hand, and without me noticing it instilled in me a sense of attention to detail when it comes to my socks.

My mom especially was the reason why I started this sock brand. One day we were sitting together at a mall... I'd just bought a few pairs of socks for myself and she said to me 'why don't you buy more and sell them, because you love them so much?'. I remember going to a retailer where the socks were marked down to R5, I repackaged them with a golden orange string and started selling them for R25.

I also think everything happened at the right time. I'm glad that I started my business during the days of social media because those 14 pairs of socks grew my business, which is now a R4 million business. It was easy to turn my passion for socks into profit because it was something I genuinely loved.

▣ **How did you go about taking a simple concept and launching it into your business?**

What people see my brand as today, I had it in my head four years ago - from the logo to the design to the distribution. I bootstrapped my business. I just said 'how much do I have? I have 70 bucks, let me go stock, let me go sell, restock, sell, restock'. I did that for about a year.

But I really got a great boost when [CNN covered my story](#). They flew 18 hours to come to Johannesburg and they blasted my story across the world. Guys in China, in Lagos, in New York, in Abu Dhabi, and across the world suddenly knew that somewhere in South Africa there's a tall, skinny guy who's selling socks. Suddenly I was sitting down with seven different investors a year into starting my business, which hardly ever happens. That was my beginner's luck as an entrepreneur.

And that meant that now I have a partner to share my problems and stress with, to share the business with. I had someone to fund me and I had someone who helped me put systems and processes in place early in my business journey.

I believe Skinny Sbu Socks is a true case study of really just starting with what you have and where you are. And I've been learning along the way through trial and error.

▣ **As creative director and head designer, what gets your creative juices flowing?**

Everything! Everyday life inspires me. Authentic African storytelling inspires me – and authentic African stories don't end with African prints.

We are urban Africans, living in the city... we fall in love, we break up, we find a new job, we move to a new city, into a new place, we build businesses. These are the stories that I'm trying to tell. My personal experiences really influence my designs.



Image credit: Dart Photography

▣ **Can you share with us some of your career highlights?**

Woah! I've had so many. But my biggest highlight was making it onto *Forbes Africa's* '30 under 30' in 2017.

Another highlight was meeting Sir Richard Branson. That was big for me because he was my childhood hero. I read some of his books and hoped to grow up to be like him and then he bought five pairs of my socks!

And then there are small things too, like the first time I was able to buy groceries for my grandmother. From selling socks, I was now able to provide for my family.

I'm also especially proud of remaining local when it comes to our production. It may be expensive, but we're providing 60 people with jobs at a factory in Cape Town. That's one of my biggest achievements.

▣ **And what is your ultimate vision for the Skinny Sbu Socks brand?**

My ultimate vision... think Tom Ford, think Tommy Hilfiger, think Ralph Lauren, but in Africa. Telling authentic African stories. Look at how Ralph Lauren started Polo; he started with ties. Just like I did when I started with socks, he went into a department store and grew his business from there. And now he has an entire lifestyle brand.

That is what I want to achieve for myself, a global African lifestyle brand that people can look at and be like 'I'm proud to be African. It's clean, it's premium, it's beautiful and I can identify with that.'

■ **What advice do you have for other young designers hoping to crack the local fashion industry?**

Use your own formula. There is nothing wrong with what you are thinking as an entrepreneur. Most of the time, we'll wait for people who've been there before or are older than us or who we respect to validate our ideas. When I started doubting myself, that is when I started failing.

So if you are a designer or a budding entrepreneur, believe in your ideas. Go out and try them, and don't be afraid to learn through trial and error, don't be afraid to fail, don't be afraid to learn from other people's experiences.

Use your own formula as much as you can because it's what's going to set you apart. You're going to pioneer a new way and if you're patient enough, at the end you're gonna win.

But at the end of the day, for designers, this is not a school project. We're trying to make clothes that will sell. Fix your distribution, make sure that your designs have a global appeal.

Treat your art, your craft, as a business. Daily, I tell people that my task is to make sure that I continue remaining an artist, but I need to bring out the businessman so that we multiply the art, and distribute the art and make sure that we make money from that art.

Skinny Sbu Socks can be found at selected Markham stores and is also [available online](#). Connect with the brand on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

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