

Tough as leather: Leather shoe market growth trends, and sustainability

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Finding the right shoe, is like reuniting with an old friend you have not seen for a good number of years. Having that comfy fit come from an ethical and sustainable materials source instils a further sense of comfort, knowing that you can tread lightly on this planet. The Portuguese footwear market has seemed to strike this balance perfectly, producing comfortable, sustainably sourced and highly durable footwear. These standards resulted in exponential growth in the export market, especially in South Africa.



With a spike in exports to South Africa, the Components & Leather Goods Manufacturers' Association (APICCAPS) are looking at capitalising on this market growth in South Africa. "South African market indicators show that consumers specifically prioritise durability, comfort and sustainability as drivers to purchase; this is what the Portuguese footwear market is built upon," says Paulo Gonçalves, APICCAPS director of communication. "We want to establish and build mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders in the South African shoe market."

By the September of this year, Portuguese footwear exports to South Africa reached 2,2 million Euros, a 97% increase when compared to last year (2021) and already 13,3% more than 2018, the previous record-breaking year of footwear exports to South Africa.



This wasn't restricted to a handful of players, in fact, 55 Portuguese manufacturers export footwear to South Africa, and 96% of the total was footwear, including leather uppers, Portugal's principal footwear category. "It is clear that the leather shoe category is a preference in the South African market. Portuguese shoes can also be manufactured at a price point that is affordable to the South African market, taking the export costs into account," says Gonçalves.



As it stands, Portugal is the third biggest European footwear manufacturer, after Italy and Spain. Its footwear industry differs from its competitors in several ways, showing Portugal as a still-growing industry. "A major factor in our industry is the sustainability of our products, with a large focus being placed on sourcing ethical materials and creating a shoe that is highly durable to last longer. Longer lasting shoes means that we throw less away," says Gonçalves.

Various role players within the Portuguese shoe manufacturing market are collaborating to create a bioeconomy – a better manufacturing and supply chain system for footwear to fulfil its sustainability targets. "A bioeconomy intends to improve production technology that is more efficient and cleaner, to source biomaterials, and to create a circular economy with waste material and by-products," says Gonçalves.

Research has suggested that the South African footwear market will see volume growth of 23.5% in 2023, across all the different footwear categories, including leisure, safety, textile footwear and waterproof footwear. "The sector in South Africa with the steepest growth trajectory is athleisure. This shoe category is defined by comfort and durability, with this shoe type predominantly being used during periods of high activity. To meet these requirements, a combination of leather combined with other materials, allowing for a highly durable shoe," says Gonçalves. "Along with prioritising sustainability, the South African market is also very brand loyal. Once consumers select a brand based on experience, they tend to stick with that brand for future purchases. This is all the reason to ensure that footwear is produced sustainably, is comfortable and durable."

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