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The Business-to-Brand Era: Why Africa Is Repositioning Brand as Economic Power

Reflections and Signals from the 2026 Business to Brand Summit Hosted by ***Pat On Brands***

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Introduction

Hosted by Pat Mahlangu through Pat On Brands, the 2026 Business to Brand Summit brought together founders, marketers, creators and business leaders to unpack a critical question: what will it take for Africa to build globally recognised brands rooted in African identity, culture and innovation?

What emerged from the summit was a broader conversation about ownership, trust, visibility and long-term growth. Across multiple sessions, speakers challenged the idea that branding should sit at the end of business strategy. Instead, the brand was positioned as a growth driver capable of shaping perception, influencing behaviour and creating lasting commercial value.

The conversations reflected a continent increasingly moving from simply participating in the global economy to actively shaping it through culture, creativity, storytelling and digital influence. But they also highlighted a growing tension: while African culture continues to scale globally, ownership and economic value do not always scale with it.

At the centre of the summit was a clear shift in thinking. The future of African growth will not belong to businesses focused on visibility alone, but to those capable of building trusted, culturally resonant brands with long-term relevance.

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AFRICA IS MOVING FROM BUSINESS-BUILDING TO BRAND-BUILDING

One of the strongest themes emerging from the summit was the distinction between building a business and building a brand. Speakers across multiple sessions challenged founders and marketers to think beyond short-term sales and focus instead on emotional connection, positioning and long-term cultural relevance.

Thebe Ikalafeng reinforced this directly by highlighting that many of the world's most admired brands are still not African brands, despite African culture increasingly shaping global trends and consumer behaviour. Conversations throughout the summit repeatedly returned to the same concern: Africa has talent, creativity and innovation, but still lacks enough globally recognised brands rooted in African identity and ownership.

What these conversations revealed is that branding is no longer being viewed as a cosmetic marketing layer. It is increasingly being recognised as a strategic growth asset capable of driving trust, loyalty, differentiation and long-term commercial value. Consumers are no longer simply buying products. They are buying into meaning, identity and emotional alignment.

This shift is particularly important in a digital environment where audiences encounter brands through culture, creators and online conversation long before they experience the product itself. Businesses that fail to build emotional relevance risk becoming interchangeable very quickly.
For brands, the implication is clear. Building a strong product is no longer enough. The real competitive advantage lies in building brands that people emotionally recognise, trust and advocate for.

CULTURE IS NO LONGER SUPPORTING MARKETING. IT IS DRIVING ECONOMIC VALUE

A major thread throughout the summit was the growing commercial power of culture. Conversations around township economies, Amapiano, local football culture, basketball and creator ecosystems all pointed toward the same reality: culture is no longer operating on the edge of business. It is actively shaping growth, visibility and consumer behaviour.

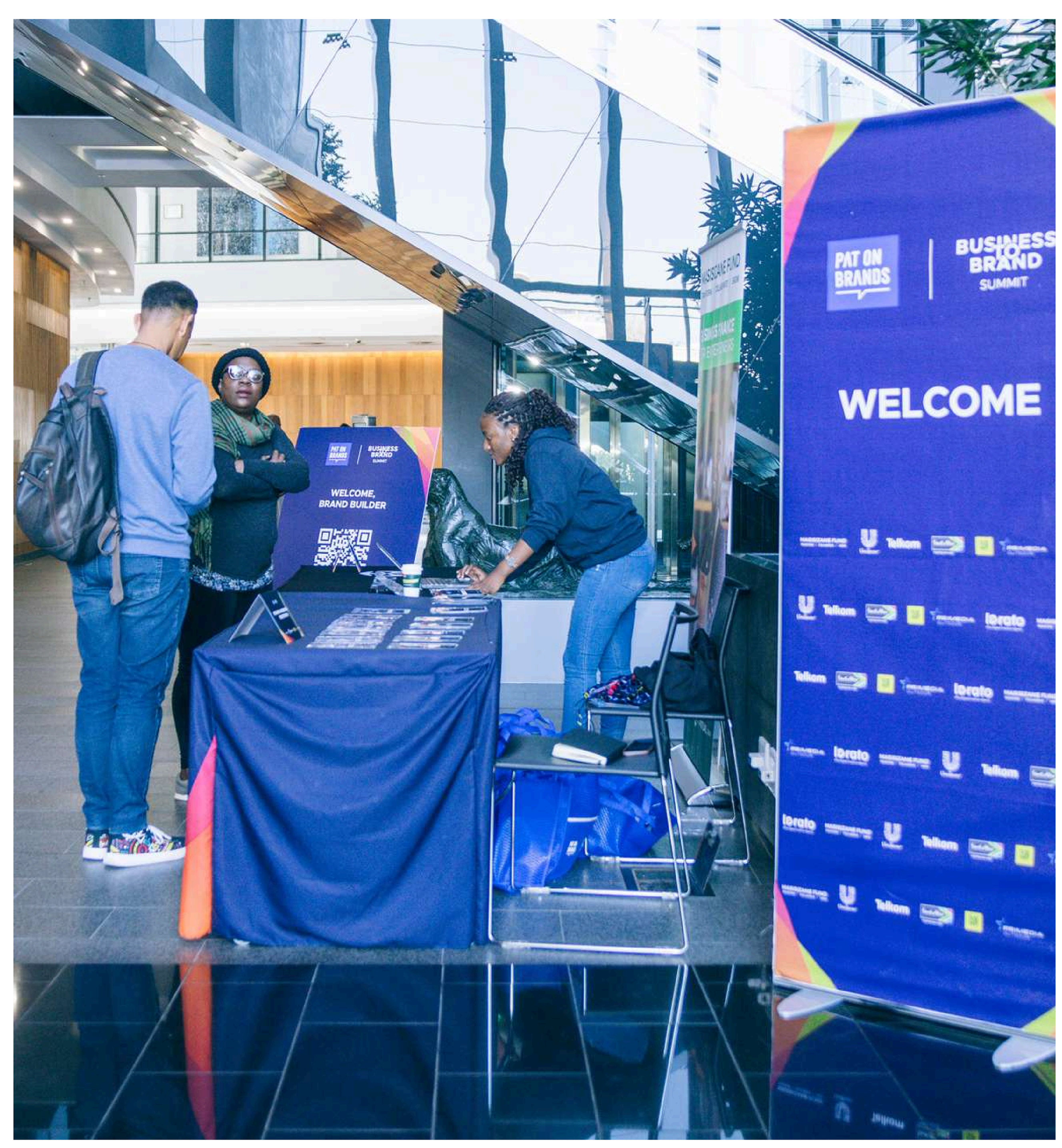
GG Alcock’s reflections around township markets reinforced how deeply economic activity is embedded within communities that traditional corporate systems often overlook. Discussions around localisation, kasi economies and consumer understanding further highlighted how culturally fluent businesses continue outperforming generic mass-market approaches.

At the same time, sessions such as “From Amapiano to Algorithms” revealed how African culture is increasingly becoming platform-native. Music, humour, language and aesthetics are now travelling globally through TikTok, Instagram and creator ecosystems, where cultural participation directly influences attention and engagement.

What became increasingly clear throughout these conversations is that African culture is no longer simply influencing the digital economy. It is becoming one of its strongest commercial drivers. Culture now shapes what audiences watch, trust, share and emotionally connect with online.

This creates both opportunity and tension. As African culture scales globally, questions around ownership, authorship and economic participation become more urgent. Visibility alone does not guarantee value capture. The brands likely to lead in this environment will be the ones capable of participating in culture meaningfully rather than simply borrowing from it.

For marketers and digital practitioners, the takeaway is increasingly difficult to ignore: the internet no longer rewards generic visibility. It rewards cultural fluency.



TRUST IS BECOMING MORE VALUABLE THAN VISIBILITY

Another major insight emerging from the summit was the growing importance of trust in determining long-term brand relevance. In an environment flooded with content, advertising and constant visibility, audiences are increasingly drawn toward brands, creators and communities that feel emotionally credible.

Nuala Harris-Morele highlighted this shift directly by noting that people increasingly trust brands more than governments, while Zakithi Mncwango reinforced the importance of listening and proximity in building meaningful connections.

These conversations reflected a deeper behavioural shift taking place across the digital landscape. Consumers no longer respond to polished messaging alone. They are looking for transparency, consistency and proof that brands genuinely understand the realities people are navigating.

This is also why founder-led businesses, creator ecosystems and community-driven brands continue gaining momentum. Audiences are responding more strongly to people, stories and experiences they can emotionally identify with. Trust is increasingly being built through familiarity, participation and authenticity rather than through traditional corporate authority alone.

For brands, this means trust can no longer be treated as a soft metric. It is becoming one of the strongest drivers of loyalty, advocacy and long-term relevance.

For consumers, it reflects a growing expectation that brands should contribute meaningfully to culture and community rather than simply market themselves within it.
For digital practitioners, the implication is equally clear. Visibility may drive attention, but trust is what sustains relevance over time.

DISTRIBUTION IS BECOMING MORE IMPORTANT THAN INNOVATION ALONE

One of the most commercially grounded conversations at the summit came from Melvyn Lubega, who argued that distribution often matters more than innovation itself.

The point was simple but important. Products and ideas only create impact if they can scale consistently and reach the right audiences effectively. Across multiple sessions, discussions around partnerships, collaborations and ecosystem-building reinforced the idea that accessibility is increasingly becoming the real growth differentiator.

This is particularly relevant within the African context, where infrastructure, connectivity and consumer behaviour remain highly fragmented across different markets. In this environment, the strongest businesses are not always the most innovative. They are often the ones capable of distributing effectively and embedding themselves naturally into everyday consumer behaviour.

The conversations also reflected a broader shift away from isolated growth thinking toward ecosystem thinking. Partnerships are no longer being viewed as optional campaign tactics. They are becoming critical structures for scale, credibility and reach.

What this ultimately reveals is that accessibility is becoming just as valuable as innovation itself. Businesses capable of simplifying access, integrating into existing systems and building strategic partnerships will likely scale faster than businesses focused purely on novelty.

For brands and founders, the implication is significant. Distribution planning can no longer happen after product development. It needs to be built into a growth strategy from the start.

THE CREATOR ECONOMY IS BECOMING BUSINESS INFRASTRUCTURE

The summit conversations around creators revealed another major evolution taking place across the digital landscape. Creators are no longer being viewed simply as influencers or promotional tools. They are increasingly operating as businesses, distribution channels and media ecosystems in their own right.

Sessions featuring voices such as Sibu Mabena, Robot Boii and Mpoomy Ledwaba reinforced how creators are building communities and attention systems that brands cannot easily replicate on their own. At the same time, discussions around conversion, sustainability and structure reflected growing pressure for creators and campaigns to demonstrate measurable commercial value beyond engagement numbers.

This signals a maturing creator economy. Brands are no longer only looking for reach. They are increasingly looking for creators who can drive action, trust and long-term community engagement.

The conversations also highlighted a larger redistribution of media power. Traditional gatekeepers continue losing influence while creators build direct audience relationships across platforms. As a result, creators are no longer functioning as supporting marketing assets. They are becoming media businesses with influence, infrastructure and economic power of their own.

For brands, this means creator partnerships need to evolve beyond transactional campaign work toward longer-term alignment and shared value creation.

For creators, the opportunity lies in building sustainable ecosystems around audience trust, intellectual property and ownership.

For digital practitioners, the shift reinforces the growing importance of strategy, conversion and community-building over vanity metrics alone.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Africa is shifting from building businesses to building culturally rooted brands with long-term commercial value.
- Culture is no longer supporting marketing efforts. It is increasingly driving attention, trust and economic participation.
- Consumers are placing greater value on trust, authenticity and emotional credibility over visibility alone.
- Distribution, accessibility and strategic partnerships are becoming stronger growth drivers than innovation in isolation.
- Creators are evolving from influencers into businesses, media ecosystems and infrastructure for modern brand growth.
- The future of African branding will depend on ownership, localisation and the ability to turn cultural influence into sustainable economic value.

Conclusion

The strongest message emerging from the Business to Brand Summit hosted by Pat On Brands was that Africa’s next growth era will not be driven by visibility alone. It will be driven by ownership, trust, localisation and the ability to build brands that carry both cultural and commercial value.

The conversations revealed a continent actively repositioning itself, not simply as a participant in the global economy, but as a producer of influential culture, powerful businesses and globally recognised brands.

For brands, the opportunity lies in building with greater intentionality, cultural fluency and long-term thinking.

For consumers, it reflects a future where local brands increasingly shape identity, aspiration and trust.

For creatives and digital practitioners, it signals growing demand for work that is not only visible, but meaningful, strategic and commercially effective.

The question is no longer whether African brands can compete globally. The real question is whether Africa is ready to build the systems, partnerships and ownership structures needed to support the influence it is already generating because the future of African branding will not be built through imitation. It will be built through belief.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