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Clothing and other items in city-centre Joburg shops are drawing budget-conscious, trendy shoppers. And the big chains are also increasingly aware of the need to respond rapidly to changing demands

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**T**he heart of Johannesburg's central business district (CBD) is a fast-fashion haven and "on-trend" this year are ruffled shirts, perspex heels, berets and 1990s-style retro sunglasses.

Though such items may set you back tens of thousands of rand from the likes of Gucci and Chanel, fast fashion has made trends easily accessible to less wealthy consumers.

Fast fashion is a contemporary term used by retailers for designs that move from the catwalk to the shop floor, capturing fashion trends. SA's fast-fashion market ranges from catwalk-esque looks at Mr Price and H&M to entire streets of fashion stores in the CBD.

In the CBD you can find it all, from Zara replicas to Gucci knockoffs to cheaper versions of high-end make-up brands.

A shirt from Zara will set you back anywhere between R400 and R690 in Sandton, but in the CBD similar items cost a little over R60. The biggest brand in the knockoff game is a hitherto little-known player called Rainbow Nation.

Olerato Sesing, a 24-year-old student, shops in the CBD about four times a month and prefers it to malls.

"Downtown is very cheap and always has the latest clothes. You can always negotiate the amount," she says.

While a trip to a mall would get you two items of clothes for R1,000, Sesing gets 10 to 15 items for the same amount in the CBD. "I only ever shop there," she adds.

Tucked away at the end of the Smal Street Mall is a men's fashion boutique.

You'd be hard-pressed to find a cleaner store layout in Sandton or at Melrose Arch. Like many of the other stores in the Smal Street Mall, Men Express is owned by a foreigner and gives you

**What it means:**  
The fast-fashion model is not used only by the informal sector; many bigger retailers are also adopting it

bang for your buck. A three-piece suit will cost around R2,500.

The informal sector has become something of a microcosm of the malls – the same offerings, only with more palatable price tags.

But behind the on-trend shirts, the gaudy prints and the neon lights in town is a R750bn industry.

While the formal sector shed 135,000 jobs in the fourth quarter of 2017, the informal sector added 119,000 jobs.

The share of total employment in the informal nonagricultural sector accounted for only 16.5%.

**Though H&M's** recent numbers show that fast fashion may not be a strong model for its brand, Mr Price is soaring.

H&M experienced its worst sales performance in at least 15 years in the quarter through November while Mr Price reported an 8.3% increase in third-quarter sales. Its total retail sales were R6.6bn for the three months to end-December.

When it comes to fast-fashion, H&M's orders are placed well in advance for high-volume items such as fashion basics. Garments with a high trend factor, or for selected stores, generally require shorter lead times.

Amelia-May Woudstra, spokesman for H&M SA, says: "We can offer our customers the latest fashion because we have our own design [we create our own collections] and buying departments.

"The overarching collections are planned well in advance, and the very latest trends

are picked up at shorter notice."

Woudstra says H&M is ahead of the curve compared with its peers and is working on its autumn/winter 2019 collections. "We can also act fast when new trends emerge. Having effective logistics for all our collections depends on the nature of the item.

"Lead times are always a balance between price, time, quality and sustainability," she adds.

According to Euromonitor, North America and Asia Pacific are becoming increasingly dominated by fast fashion with expansion of domestic brands such as La Chapelle and Forever 21, as well as international giants H&M and Zara.

As the rest of the industry reacts to fast fashion, many apparel companies are aiming to implement more reactive supply chains, speeding up production of stock and increasing the quantity of trend-led products.

But other local retailers such as TFG have been at the forefront of fast fashion and say the time between date of order and delivery can be weeks.

Graham Choice, head of TFG apparel and Prestige, says: "The process can take up to eight weeks from the date of order to delivery to stores, depending on the complexity of the order. However, we are working towards increasing the number of orders we deliver within 28 days.

"We work with the best local suppliers including our wholly owned, world-class apparel manufacturer, Prestige [located in Caledon and Maitland in the Western Cape] to maintain their leading edge as the producer of in-demand apparel in SA."

TFG uses a quick-response (QR) process, relying on collaboration between the retailer, design teams and factory capacity to meet fast-shifting customer demands.

"The QR system allows for flexibility and importantly enables quick action when positive sales call for bestseller repeats or changes to an existing garment can be implemented to meet current trends," Choice says. **x**