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Transition to a Circular, Sustainable,  
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in a Global North/South Perspective

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**Foto di copertina**  
Detail of garment label by the upcycling  
Ghanaian brand Slum Studio, based in Accra.  
<http://www.theslumstudio.com/>  
Photo by Tora San Traoré

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# Sustainability in South African Fashion: a Case Study

Twyg is a media company that aims at shaping a fashion consumer culture in South Africa attuned to the themes of environmental sustainability and social inclusivity.

This article explores its vision of sustainable fashion, built on principles of localism, social justice, and respect for diversity.

by Enrica Picarelli



Sustainable fashion show in Cape Town. Image supplied by Twyg

Sustainability is a key concern in contemporary fashion studies (Gwilt & Rissanen 2012), as the industry is compelled to rethink its model in sustainable terms. The negative footprint of fashion is widely documented (Niinimäki et al. 2020; Anguelov 2015; Thomas 2019) and even described as one of the triggers of the Anthropocene (Brooks et al. 2017; Payne 2019). This concern has become even more relevant in the wake of the Covid pandemic (Brydges, Retamal & Hanlon 2020; Black 2020). Consequently, calls to revolutionize fashion are the order of the day. However, only a few studies exist (Ayorkor Manieson & Ferrero-Regis 2021) on the approaches to sustainability developed in what have been called the “sacrifice zones” of fashion (Niessen 2020). These are the areas of the world providing cheap labour for fast fashion that also suffer the worst consequences of the system’s relentless growth. This scenario extends to the African continent, where the trade of second-hand garments, combined with a lack of governmental support to localize production, create vulnerable economies that offer cheap labour while depending on imports. Interlinking environmental and social crises are the effects of this geopolitics of sacrifice, whose reliance on decentralization reproduces a socio-economic and cultural hierarchy that concentrates power and authority away from the Southern hemisphere (Niessen 2020). In South Africa, the ethical media company Twyg develops a vision of sustainable fashion that combines environmental justice and social equality. The following pages outline Twyg’s approach to sustainable development and contribution of a Southern perspective to the timely and important conversation on this topic.

## Luxury with a mission

Twyg began in 2018 as the blog of Jackie May, a former magazine editor based in Cape Town. May was inspired to write by the lack of attention to the environmental effects of conspicuous consumption that she perceived in her country. Positive feedback led her to convert the blog into a digital destination directed at encouraging South Africans to embrace sustainable behaviors and ethical buying choices. In February 2019, Twyg became a registered not-for-profit media company with accounts on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn. As of 31 October, 2020, it counted an average of almost 19,000 monthly page views and a global reach.<sup>1</sup> Twyg’s mission is to «tell stories with purpose» about people and organizations that work ethically and sustainably in South Africa (May 2021a). Although the platform publishes content on different topics,<sup>2</sup> its activities are devoted mainly to promoting independent eco-conscious designers within the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 12

that accelerates developing countries’ capacities to «chang[e] unsustainable consumption and production patterns» (United Nations n.d.). A small team of writers regularly produces content that educates and engages readers and, since 2019, the Twyg Sustainable Fashion Awards have further carried out this mission by acknowledging local ethical designers, students, influencers, and retail spaces. Other actions include initiating campaigns and launching events in collaboration with like-minded organizations and research institutes.<sup>3</sup> After almost three years from its launch, Twyg is recognized as a leading voice of the green South African movement, which campaigns not only for a totally environmentally-friendly industry, but for an equitable and respectful system that preserves the dignity and wellbeing of its workers and consumers.

My observations are based on an analysis of the “Fashion” section of Twyg’s website and the fashion-focused content posted to its official Instagram account that I conducted between 1 October 2020 and 31 March 2021, and on remote conversations I had with May between 2019 and 2021. These exchanges led to some collaborations, as Twyg reposted a few of my writings on sustainable fashion. As a consumer, author, and scholar

of fashion committed to living mindfully, I have been personally involved in learning from and amplifying Twyg’s message. This statement is meant to clarify my position *vis à vis* the object of analysis, which, while not promotional, points to Twyg as an actor to follow and engage with and a reference for scholars of African fashion, sustainability, and decoloniality.

When Twyg officially launched in early 2019, there were no digital destinations promoting ethical fashion in South Africa and sustainability was not yet the industry «imperative» it would become post-Covid (BOF & McKinsey 2020). The context was that of a slowly, but steadily growing local industry that was making a global impact with ethically-made garments that express a cosmopolitan aesthetics by showcasing local stories and artisanship (Holland 2020). Twyg supports locally-made luxury, which it presents as the best channel to address the social, economic, and environmental interconnections underlying the shift to a sustainable industry in a country from the South of the world. At present, South Africa is the largest luxury market in Africa, where ethical consumer behaviors are not yet widespread. In the country, luxury carries with it an aura of distinction, sophistication and worldliness. A number of studies focus on the preference that local consumers express for foreign heritage brands and «bling» - something that May confirmed in our conversations (May 2020) - which are sought and displayed to mark status<sup>4</sup> and economic empowerment, particularly by formerly marginalized subjects (Alweendo & Dosekun 2019). Alweendo and Dosekun, for example,

\*  
At present, South Africa is the largest luxury market in Africa, where ethical consumer behaviors are not yet widespread. In the country, luxury carries with it an aura of distinction, sophistication and worldliness.  
\*



see performances of conspicuous consumption by black middle class women as centered on neoliberal values of «individual and internalized effort» and luxury as the means to «profit» socially from it (2019: 133, 134). The disproportionate presence of international names like Gucci, Louis Vuitton, and Prada on the market is explained also as an effect of geopolitical developments (Crosswaite 2014), as the anti-apartheid trade sanctions that the international community adopted in the 1980s halted exports, causing a sharp decline in local production and the eventual closing of factories (Evenett 2002). This latter aspect negatively impacted occupation and social prosperity in the country, as thousands of workers lost their jobs in the 1990s and 2000s. The long tail of localized production decline is still felt today in the staggering unemployment rate of South Africa, which is being tackled by growth programs that have begun to yield positive results.<sup>5</sup> In parallel, the South African fashion industry has expanded its international outreach enjoying two decades of rising visibility and global recognition, as national brands like Thebe Magugu, Laduma, and Lukanyo Mdingi garner coveted prizes and accolades.

Twyg's mission of changing consumer habits involves presenting luxury in a socially and environmentally sustainable light, that is as a market that can have a positive effect on the environment and on social prosperity.

So much of the sustainable fashion I love is made by small, independent brands who select their materials carefully, think about the impact of their design practice, and impart beautiful stories through their work. These are the brands we want to promote and support in South Africa. For too long, their work has been drowned out by international fast and luxury brands, and by cheap imports sold by our retailers (May 2020).

This statement lays down Twyg's visions of luxury with a mission and the values inspiring its Manifesto (May 2021b), those of «care» - for the Earth and South African communities - ingenuity, and fairness. Relying on factual reporting, reader-friendly information, and visually-pleasing material, the company attaches values of respect and concern for the world to luxury, making sustainability not only a founding principle of South African fashion, but a mindset that consumers can adopt and exercise in their daily life. The main communication strategy that Twyg mobilizes to carry out this mission is sharing the stories that draw potential buyers into the worlds behind the items, resignifying consumerism as knowledge-building and agential, a force that centres communal values and empowers both South African producers and consumers. The «outliers [...] who break from the herd» (May 2021a) are the subject

of hundred of articles and social media posts mapping the grassroots activism de-centring the mainstream discourse of conspicuous, imported luxury.

Localised storytelling gives visibility to the sustainable work that emerging and acclaimed local stakeholders often carry out behind the scenes and that receives little global attention. An example is the feature on Sindiso Khumalo of 18 February, 2021, penned by contributor Binwe Adebayo (2021). In 2019 Khumalo was a shortlisted for the LMVH prize and won Twyg's Trans-Seasonal Sustainable Award. She is the only globally recognized South African fashion creative who identifies as a sustainable designer, working closely with NGOs to develop eco-friendly textiles created by women artisans in Burkina Faso and South Africa. The commitment to serving natural and human needs is what singles her out for Twyg, which empha-

sizes her ability to operate intersectionally to improve quality of life for the people and nature of Africa. Khumalo uses old techniques that are respectful of the planet and of indigenous dress practices to make hand-painted garments using exclusively organic cotton. This choice ensures that she sticks with the global sustaina-

ble goal of limiting her material footprint and negative externalities on the environment. She is also a social activist, involved in a number of community projects across the continent, including providing free training to former sex workers in South Africa that will help them achieve economic self-sufficiency. This is another aspect that makes her a positive example of a local creative promoting SDG 12, which in fact aims at implementing access to decent jobs and better quality of life along the supply chain. When Adebayo describes Khumalo's eco-conscious Spring/Summer 2021 collection, emphasising that it is made sustainably and to last, the focus on product accentuates the social impact of the designer's work. The collection in fact honours black «sheroes» like Harriet Thubman, who overcame racial violence and committed to the uplift of their peers. Adebayo describes this choice as educational, a way to give contemporary women an example of resilience to look up to as they «reclaim the land that we should be walking freely in» (2021).

The feature suggests that the «good» in Khumalo's practice goes beyond a positive economic performance. Significantly, the author references quality markers like «female empowerment», which identify the designer's value in terms of her ability to create interconnections between the sites and histories of the black diaspora (Adebayo 2021). Khumalo is in fact described as a maker, not only of organic garments, but of *worlds*, for disadvantaged women and her clients, who she educates on the values of empathy, solidarity, and affirmation.

**Relying on factual reporting, reader-friendly information, and visually-pleasing material, the company attaches values of respect and concern for the world to luxury, making sustainability not only a founding principle of South African fashion, but a mindset that consumers can adopt and exercise in their daily life.**

#### #Fashion4Development

Several more stories by Twyg spotlight the commitment of local stakeholders to SDG 12 and its mission of fostering social well-being and possibilities. These stories present examples of social responsibility that stray from the corporate practices of big fashion brands, as their bring in multiple configurations of community and practices of resilience in informal contexts. For example, on 6 April, 2020 Twyg shared an invited contribution by Zola Boo, a fashion designer and ambassador of the National Youth Development Agency (2020). The post promoted Khayelitsha Fashion Week that showcases community-based designers from one of Cape Town's biggest townships. The township is known for its high crime rate, but is described as a hub of resilience where fashion making re-positions the collective narrative around an emancipatory and life-affirming set of values. The post describes the fashion week as an opportunity to create agency through practices that draw inspiration from traditional cultures. An Instagram post from 17 March, 2021 follows up on this thread of social regeneration. The multiple-image post captures scenes of small clothes and

**Khayelitsha is a volatile reality existing in a country that has not achieved the level of industrial development that would make implementing SDG solutions smooth.**

textile shops and their surrounding urban setting (@twygmag 2021). The caption reports the findings of a survey by UNISA Press and Township Entrepreneurs Alliance (TEA) on the impact

of Covid on textile and garment businesses in South African townships. It reads: «The survey found that 77% of enterprises reported on an average income below R5000 per month during lockdown with only 23% of enterprises reported an average income more than R5000 per month». Following are the hashtags #townshipeconomy #clothingandtextiles #SDG12 #Fashion4Development #sustainabledevelopment #sustainableliving #southafrica #afrika #regeneration #recovery #economicrecovery.<sup>6</sup> This view of fashion for development is grounded in the specificities of the South African social and industrial landscape. As situated practice, it sits uncomfortably within the prescriptions of bottom-up models of sustainable growth that presuppose, and work towards producing, a homogenous context of reference. Khayelitsha is a volatile reality existing in a country that has not achieved the level of industrial development that would make implementing SDG solutions smooth. It therefore calls for exper-



Jackie May, founder and director of Twyg, with the late Nicholas Coutts. Image supplied by Twyg



imentation grounded in context and for progress to reflect its individual characteristics.

A number of scholars argue for diversifying and localising sustainability policies, describing widespread models of technoefficiency and circularity as protective of the capitalist beliefs responsible for fashion's economic, social, and cultural inequalities (Fletcher & Tham 2019; Ehrenfeld 2014; Payne 2019). May is cautious too. In an interview with the *Union of Concerned Fashion Researches* (May 2020b), she speaks about the ethical questions that she faces and the difficulties she encounters navigating sustainability models developed in the Northern hemisphere.

The key question I grapple with is: How can a fashion industry play a developmental role? This relates to the context within which I work: a developing country with a very high unemployment rate (roughly 40%). Is there not a conflict of interest between the indisputable social need for job creation and the environmental imperative to reduce the volumes of clothing produced? (May 2020a).

Indeed, to practice sustainability from the South African perspective entails reframing the meaning of policy keywords like «growth», «development», and «progress», which inform the common global vision formulated by the United Nations in documents like

the Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development (2002). In a scenario marked by deep inequalities, which Twyg contributor Ufrieda Ho describes as the «cappuccino divide» of destitute service/good providers and affluent users/consumers (2019), sustainable insight and practice come from engaging with local actors and contexts, generating change that works in an *unfolding* world (Fletcher & Tham 2020: 33).

Twyg offers an interesting case study of the negotiations between worldviews and systems of knowledges informing the sustainable debate in the South of the world. In an interview, May pointed to the lack of Southern perspectives in this debate, contending that excluding indigenous voices is an act of epistemological colonisation. She pointed me to *Indlela Yethu - Our Way of Being*, an art film directed by Simbi Seam Nkula that was premiered at the Future of Fashion x Twyg Awards event 2020. This film explores the sustainable practices of South African indigenous communities, claiming that they «should inform the future of ethical slow fashion» (AA.VV. n.d.). According to May, these views de-center the Western narrative of sustainability as «a relatively new concept», presenting it as constitutive of century-old ways of community survival (2021a). Twyg's communication amplifies these locally-relevant narratives, supporting sustainable solu-



Jackie May visiting a landfill. Image supplied by Twyg

Sustainable South African fashion on Twyg's website

tions that have meaning and value for these communities. In this respect, it applies decolonial principles to fashion's sustainable development. Decolonial activists/scholars invite us to be suspicious of «universal» epistemologies and solutions, since they mask global relations of power and geographies of inequality (Mignolo 2018), always «acknowledging who is speaking and wherefrom» (Jansen 2020: 817). Fashion, more so its so-called global configuration, is the scene of exploitation and discriminations based on an «ethnic/racial bias» that strip disadvantaged communities of agency (Niessen 2020: 861). This industry, as the agent of colonialist modernity, reproduces the system of dispossession that enabled the latter in the first place. To be sure, those communities are predominantly found in areas that are peripheral to the big fashion hubs located in the Northern hemisphere and the African continent is no exception (de Greef 2019).

Speaking from a position of proximity to decolonial practice, Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham offer a critical reading of the universal notion of growth that drives this industry. «The economic growth logic simultaneously and cumulatively stages sexism, racism, ablebodyism, lookism, ageism, speciesism, as well as hierarchies of knowledge, prioritising theory, quantitative methods. In total this system of oppression enacts a vicious cycle of single focused monoculture, homogeneity and monopolies» (2019: 32-33). This

quote exposes the social and cultural effects of fashion un-sustainability and the intersectional basis of radical eco-conscious practice. Twyg aligns with this position acknowledging the need to «address gender inequality, racism, economic transformation and climate change simultaneously» (May 2021b). Its stories mediate knowledge about the other side of the «cappuccino divide», where growth is «highly dependent on community engagement» (Booi 2020) and development entails negotiations between bare necessities, cultural beliefs, individualism, and collective advancement.

Read in the light of the Covid crisis and of the pressing global need to switch to sustainable living by 2030, Twyg offers a vantage to look at the evolution of discourses of luxury fashion on social media from the global South and the potential for brands to harness it to reframe themselves, and the fashion industry at large, according to principles of inclusivity and sustainability.

### Conclusions

This article has discussed the sustainable activism of the South African media company Twyg via references to its website and Instagram account. The analysis reveals that Twyg presents luxury as both a tool *and* a mode of living mindfully that shifts attention from consumerism to the social and environmental benefits of ethical buying. In so doing, Twyg engages with



the global conversation on sustainability, creating stories of «luxury with a purpose» that reflect Southern and indigenous modes of ecological resilience. In the course of almost three years, Twyg has gathered a community of activists, industry stakeholders, and scholars committed to problematizing the notion of sustainable development, while experimenting with solutions tailored to the specificities of a developing fashion economy. This makes Twyg an interesting case study for a future research on decolonizing sustainability in Africa and digital environmental activism.

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NOTES

- 1 - Figures provided privately by Twyg.
- 2 - The platform has sections also on food, tourism, and beauty.
- 3 - On the website readers can connect with and participate in the South African sustainable fashion community, from attending online classes to joining clean-up initiatives and, of course, keeping abreast with the evolution of the sector as national actors develop ways to support the sector’s green transition.
- 4 - May says: «In the shopping malls currently, there are queues outside the Gucci stores, while the South African luxury stores are quiet» (May 2021a).
- 5 - For further information on these programmes see Del Monte 2020.
- 6 - According to Twyg: «About 7% of the formal and informal enterprises in townships are in fashion and textiles» (@twygmag).

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**ABSTRACT**   **ENG**

Twyg is a media company founded in 2019 by writer Jackie May. It aims to shape a fashion consumer culture in South Africa attuned to the themes of environmental sustainability and social inclusivity. Twyg works towards this goal in the physical and digital realm by developing its context and content to encourage responsible consumption and further the growth of the South African luxury economy. This article outlines Twyg’s vision of sustainable fashion, built on principles of localism, social justice, and respect for diversity.

Un caso studio sulla moda sostenibile in Sudafrica

Questo articolo tratta della piattaforma sudafricana di moda sostenibile Twyg. Questa *media company*, lanciata nel 2019 dalla giornalista e attivista per il clima Jackie May, nasce con l'obiettivo di incoraggiare società civile e consumatori locali ad adottare comportamenti etici e ambientalisti. A questo scopo, si muove in ambito sia fisico che digitale per lanciare e prendere parte a iniziative divulgative, pubblicare materiale informativo, tessere nuove relazioni, ecc. Dal 2019 Twyg organizza i *Twyg Sustainable Fashion Awards*, una manifestazione che premia gli attori sostenibili del territorio: designer, giovani studenti, ma anche spazi espositivi e influencer. Ad oggi, grazie anche a questo impegno che unisce stakeholder, realtà emergenti e un pubblico vasto e molto eterogeneo, Twyg rappresenta un punto di riferimento per il movimento *green* sudafricano all'interno del quale svolge un'importante funzione di mediazione orizzontale. L'articolo si concentra sulla produzione di contenuti digitali, con un'attenzione particolare alla piattaforma [twyg.co.za](https://twyg.co.za). Questo spazio – visivamente curato e sempre aggiornato, suddiviso in sezioni tematiche dedicate non solo alla moda, ma anche al *lifestyle* nelle sue molte manifestazioni – riflette la filosofia del gruppo, facendosi veicolo di un'interessante e quanto mai necessaria ridefinizione di alcuni concetti chiave della sostenibilità, tra cui proprio quello di sviluppo sostenibile. Pur supportando l'Obiettivo di sviluppo sostenibile 12 del programma delle Nazioni Unite che promuove la transizione verso un consumo sostenibile nel Sud del mondo, Twyg ne propone una lettura critica a partire dall'esperienza del territorio, dove disoccupazione e fratture sociali impongono di affrontare la transizione ecologica in chiave intersezionale. Twyg dà quindi visibilità ai piccoli e grandi protagonisti che, in Sudafrica, radicano il proprio impegno per il futuro nei principi della cura, della giustizia sociale e del rispetto delle tradizioni ancestrali del territorio, molte delle quali offrono soluzioni immediatamente attuabili per una produzione di moda a impatto ambientale zero. L'impegno per la tutela della natura e delle popolazioni del paese si accompagna a quello a favore della promozione di un'industria della moda che fino ad oggi ha risentito di stereotipi orientalisti che l'hanno esotizzata e ne hanno spesso fatto un oggetto di appropriazione culturale. Twyg offre un buono spunto di analisi anche per chi studia la decolonizzazione delle discipline.