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Sustainable Luxury in South Africa: The Twyg Platform

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Abstract

This article investigates the digitisation of ethical luxury in South Africa, focusing on the case study of the media company Twyg. Twyg's online platform and social media accounts, particularly Instagram, participate in the production and circulation of a discourse on developmental fashion informed by principles of circularity and respect for diversity. The article discusses the communication strategy that Twyg employs to construct a positive discourse around luxury brands as drivers of a specific South African model of sustainability that pursues quality and craftsmanship, while preserving a local circular economy. The article is based on the author's interviews with Twyg's founder, Jackie May, and on cultural analysis of the materials published on the platform and Instagram channel. The discussion on sustainability builds on luxury studies, slow fashion studies, and the current debate on decolonialism, making a contribution to the literature on digital luxury in the global South. In particular, it expands the study of small independent actors, offering a reading that complements the more mainstream focus on big brands and international stakeholders.

Keywords: Slow Fashion; Sustainable Fashion; Digital Fashion Studies; South Africa; Ethical Luxury.

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Introduction

This article investigates the digitisation of ethical luxury in South Africa via the case of Twyg, a media company supporting sustainable luxury fashion. Since launching in 2019, Twyg has shaped a sustainable fashion culture in the country, building its online platform as a space of information and dialogue on ethical luxury based on principles of slowness, care, and interdependence. From a digital media perspective, Twyg evidences the role of online spaces such as social media in framing the visual and textual production, circulation, and consumption of luxury in an eco-conscious light. The platform presents luxury fashion as a lens to interrogate some of the assumptions of the Western paradigm of sustainability and its application to South Africa's context. It articulates its value in terms of social prosperity, as it fosters inclusivity and agency in a country with acute social disparities, itself implicated in unbalanced relations of power and influence in the context of the global fashion industry. 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.

Theoretical context

Sustainability is a key concern in contemporary fashion studies,[1] as the industry is confronted with the need to rethink its model in sustainable terms. The negative footprint of fashion has been widely documented[2] and described as one of the triggers of the Anthropocene.[3] The ecological concern has become even more relevant following the COVID outbreak.[4] Luxury fashion occupies an ambiguous position in this context, as it professes sustainable principles, while utilising an unsustainable business model. Contrasting the constant change and wasteful practices associated with fast fashion, luxury publicises sustainable values of high quality, know-how, slow time, and the preservation of hand-made traditions.[5] These claims identify luxurious style as eco-conscious, aspirational, and accessible only to a restricted community of affluent consumers.

However, for the past thirty years, luxury has been linked to wasteful and extravagant behaviours.[6] This is a result of the "abundant scarcity" marketing model that, since the 1990s, has prioritised increased

1. See, for example, Alison Gwilt and Timo Rissanen, eds., *Shaping sustainable fashion: Changing the way we make and use clothes* (Routledge, 2012)

2. Kirsi Niinimäki et al., "The environmental price of fast fashion," *Nature Reviews — Earth & Environment*, Vol. 1 (April 2020): 189–200; Nikolay Anguelov, *The Dirty Side of the Garment Industry: Fast fashion and its negative impact on environment and society* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2015); Dana Thomas, *Fashionopolis: The Price of Fast Fashion and the Future of Clothes* (London: Penguin, 2019)

3. Andrew Brooks et al., "Fashion, Sustainability, and the Anthropocene," *Utopian Studies*, Vol. 28:3 (2017): 482–504; Alice Payne, "Fashion futuring in the anthropocene: Sustainable fashion as 'taming' and 'rewilding," *Fashion Theory — Journal of Dress Body and Culture*, Vol. 23.1 (2019): 5–23.

4. Sandy Black, "Fashion in a Time of Crisis," *Fashion Practice — The Journal of Design, Creative Process & the Fashion Industry*, Vol. 12 (2020): 327–330.

5. Jean-Noël Kapferer and Anne Michaut, "Luxury and sustainability: a common future? The match depends on how consumers define luxury," *Luxury Research Journal*, Vol. 1.1 (2015): 3–17; Patrizia Gazzola et al., "L'economia circolare nella fashion industry, ridurre, riciclare e riutilizzare: alcuni esempi di successo," *Economia Aziendale Online*, Vol. 11.2 (2020): 165–174; Patrizia Gazzola, Enrica Pavione, and Matteo Dall'Avan, "I differenti significati di sostenibilità per le aziende del lusso e della moda: case studies a confronto," *Economia Aziendale Online*, Vol. 10.4 (2020): 663–676; Silvia Ranfagni and Emanuele Guercini, "The Face of Culturally Sustainable Luxury: Some Emerging Traits from a Case Study," in *Sustainable luxury, entrepreneurship, and innovation*, eds Miguel Angel Gardetti and Subramanian Senthilkannan Muthu (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2018), 1–16, and Miguel Angel Gardetti and Subramanian Senthilkannan Muthu, eds., *Sustainable luxury, entrepreneurship, and innovation* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2018)

6. Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Patrizia Calefato, *Luxury: Fashion, lifestyle and excess* (A&C Black, 2014) Kindle edition, unpaginated; Frédéric Godart and Sorah Seong, "Is sustainable luxury fashion possible?," in *Sustainable Luxury: Managing Social and Environmental Performance in Iconic Brands,* eds. Ana Laura Torres and Miguel Angel Gardetti (Greenleaf Publishing, 2014), 12–27.

profits over rarity,[7] making luxury accessible to social groups that were previously excluded from it.[8] This massification has a negative impact on luxury sustainable performance.[9] For haute couture the contradiction is clear, since this sector that preaches timelessness and exclusivity nevertheless follows the wasteful format of seasonal outmodedness.[10] As such, luxury fashion faces the same challenges as its fast counterpart, with the added complication of sustainability being key to its branding. This context, and the current, precarious conditions of the global fashion industry,[11] make sustainable concerns the main priority of luxury brands and their environmental and social externalities timely topics of investigation.[12]

The latter have been discussed by slow fashion scholars and activists, who support the transition to a model that gives environmental well-being precedence over capitalist expansion.[13] For these authors the models of sustainability currently in place in the global fashion industry are not compatible with a green transition,[14] as they preserve its dependence on capital exchange and commodity production.[15] Slow fashion proffers, instead, a radical cultural switch to a new mindset of use and consumption,[16] where emotional connectedness, relationship-making, and creativity replace possession as a framework of activity[17] and agency is returned to disempowered individuals, communities, and economies.[18] Prioritising humanist qualities over economic exchange and growth, and the social value of individual/collective abilities over commodities, slow fashion disengages from the negative externalities caused by global fashion.[19]

This points to another relevant and problematic aspect of luxury fashion, namely the set of social meanings and behaviours that it promotes, which have direct effects on social sustainability. Luxury mediates privilege; its goal being "to create social stratification"[20] and emphasise socio-economic divisions.[21] It has been shown that also online luxury reinforces and emphasises discursive strategies of exclusion that categorise users according to their proximity to communities of privilege.[22] Agnés Rocamora demonstrates that digital luxury platforms enforce discrimination and the maintenance of social hierarchies.[23]

7. Jean-Noël Kapferer, "Abundant rarity: key to luxury growth," *Business Horizons*, Vol. 55.5 (2012): 453–462.

8. Glyn Atwal and Douglas Bryson, *Luxury Brands in Emerging Markets* (New York: Springer, 2014)

9. Kapferer and Michaut, "Luxury and sustainability: a common future? The match depends on how consumers define luxury."

10. Godart and Seong, "Is sustainable luxury fashion possible", 15.

11. Taylor Brydges, Monique Retamal, and Mary Hanlon, "Will COVID-19 support the transition to a more sustainable fashion industry?" *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, Vol. 16.1 (2020): 298–308, https://doi.org/10.1080/15487733.2020.1829848.

12. Claudia D'Arpizio et al., *Luxury after Covid-19: changed for (the) good* (Bain & Company March 26, 2020)

13. Kate Fletcher, "Post-growth fashion and the craft of users," in *Shaping Sustainable Fashion: Changing the way we make and use clothes*, eds. Alison Gwilt and Timo Rissanen (London and Washington: Earthscan, 2011), 165–176.

14. Marisa P. De Brito, Valentina Carbone, and Corinne Meunier Blanquart, "Towards a sustainable fashion retail supply chain in Europe: Organisation and performance," *International journal of production economics*, Vol. 114.2 (2008): 534–553.

15. Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham, *Earth logic: Fashion action research plan* (London: The JJ Charitable Trust, 2019)

16. Fletcher, "Post-growth fashion and the craft of users," 174.

17. Francesco Mazzarella, Helen Storey, and Dilys Williams, "Counternarratives Towards Sustainability in Fashion. Scoping an Academic Discourse on Fashion Activism through a Case Study on the Centre for Sustainable Fashion," *The Design Journal*, Vol. 22 (sup1 2019): 823.

18. Hazel Clark, "SLOW + FASHION — an Oxymoron — or a Promise for the Future ...?" *Fashion Theory — Journal of Dress Body and Culture*, Vol. 12.4 (2008): 427–446.

19. Otto von Busch, " 'A suit, *of his own earning*': fashion supremacy and sustainable fashion activism," in *Routledge handbook of sustainability and fashion*, eds. Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2014), 275–282.

20. Kapferer and Michaut, "Luxury and Sustainability: a common future?" 9.

21. Calefato, *Luxury: Fashion, lifestyle and excess*.

22. Agnès Rocamora, "Online Luxury: Geographies of Production and Consumption and the Louis Vuitton Website," *Critical Luxury Studies: Art, Design, Media,* (2016): 199–220.

23. Rocamora, "Online Luxury," 210.

Southern contexts are no exception, although research on the digital promotion of luxury in some markets, particularly in Africa, is still in its early phase.[24]

For example, in a study of Alara Lagos, a store for the ultra-rich in the Nigerian metropolis, Simidele Dosekun analyses the visual production of luxury on the store's Instagram page @AlaraLagos.[25] Dosekun describes luxury as performative and argues that the luxury aesthetic has concrete effects on lifestyle and social behaviour. The visual mediation of aesthetic presentation on Instagram bequeaths glamour and distinction to the fashion items, which extend to the environment and people coming in contact with them. What this entails for the viewers of @AlaraLagos is participating (often only vicariously) in a life of "insouciant play and privilege."[26] In another study, Dosekun and Ndapwa Alweendo contend that black South African women mobilise luxury consumption to counter social exclusion, luxury serving as a means to claim social distinction in a context that marginalises and disempowers this social group.[27] These examples suggest that the model of the hierarchical society is reproduced in the online and offline aesthetics of luxury.

Luxury fashion, therefore, occupies a critical position in the present conversation on sustainability. Its support of sustainable values is in contrast with a business model that keeps in place elitism and waste. At the same time, its digital identity is also evolving to accommodate multiple and often conflicting interpretations that reflect the global and growing citizen engagement with environmentalism.[28] As one of luxury's last "frontier markets,"[29] South Africa is a compelling case study to map luxury's digitisation, adding further layers to the investigations of privilege, elitism, and inequality present in the global conversation on sustainability.

The case of Twyg

Twyg is a media company launched in 2019. Its mission is raising awareness on the environmental and social impacts of unsustainable fashion in South Africa, while supporting the consolidation of the national fashion industry according to the principle of slow, sustainable development. Its regional focus, digital identity, and ethical foundations make it a compelling case study of luxury digitisation that takes into account the sector's current challenges in the eco-conscious transition.

Twyg began in 2018 as the blog of Jackie May, a Johannesburg-based green activist and former editor, writing about the intersection of environmental issues, consumer behaviour, and social justice. May eventually registered the company and launched its platform in February 2019 to raise awareness and encourage intersectional action for the sustainable transition of South African fashion. Twyg has since grown to be an authoritative voice of the movement, operating online and offline to promote change. Actions include organising events in collaboration with like-minded organisations and hosting the Twyg Sustainable Fashion Awards that, since 2019, have recognised sustainable and ethical actors of the local industry. These initiatives are carried out as part of Twyg's support of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 12 (SDG 12), which stimulates economic progress through balanced production and consumption patterns.[30] Throughout, the company has promoted a conversation on eco-conscious luxury, digitally-mediating connections between citizens and stakeholders and produc-

24. Mehita Iquani and Simidele Dosekun, eds., *African Luxury: Aesthetics and Politics* (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2019)

25. Simidele Dosekun, "The Playful and Privileged Africanicity of Luxury @AlaraLagos," in *African Luxury*, eds. Mehita Iqani and Simidele Dosekun, 93–106.

26. Dosekun, "The Playful and Privileged Africanicity of Luxury @AlaraLagos," 104.

27. Ndapwa Alweendo and Simidele Dosekun, "Luminance and the Moralization of Black Women's Luxury Consumption in South Africa," in *African Luxury*, eds. Mehita Iqani and Simidele Dosekun, 127–138.

28. John Armitage, *Luxury and Visual Culture* (London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury 2019)

29. Mehita Iqani, "The last luxury frontier? How global consulting firms discursively construct the African market," in *African Luxury*, eds. Mehita Iqani and Simidele Dosekun, 19–36.

30. "Goal 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns," United Nations, accessed March 12, 2020, https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-consumption-production/.

ing a body of work that provides in-depth knowledge of the South African context. The bulk of Twyg's activities takes place online, via content that keeps users informed and engaged with South African fashion's move towards becoming 100% sustainable.

Launched at a moment of expansion of digital and social media penetration in South Africa,[31] Twyg's digital identity includes the platform and profiles on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn. Instagram is where the company uses creative storytelling, expanding and enhancing the user's engagement with brands and the slow movement. The website is divided into four sections — "Stories", "Awards", "Projects," and "About" — each with subsections containing news about events, campaigns, and the company's education initiatives (like masterclasses and a learning hub for fashion makers).[32] The landing page features a preview of recent "stories" and "projects," complemented with pictures, along with an invitation to subscribe to the company's newsletter, a grid of Instagram's latest posts, and popular articles. The platform's content consists of articles, op-eds, guest posts, book reviews, and interviews about sustainable fashion and South African brands, although foreign ones are also featured.[33] The narrative of sustainability is presented through the editorial choice of topics and guest authors, which focuses the dialogue with users around themes of cultural exchange and socially-oriented behaviours.

To investigate Twygs's online promotional communication, between 1 October, 2020 and 15 March 2021, textual and visual analysis was conducted of the "Fashion" section of the website and the company's Instagram account. Alongside this, the content of events organised by, or featuring, Twyg's editor and the available online literature on the company was analysed. Finally, remote interviews were conducted with May herself. Read in light of Twyg's official endorsement of the SDG agenda and the criticism of its growth-focused approach, the research questions of this paper were: how does Twyg mediate the sustainable conversation? And what role does luxury fashion play in the scenario of an inclusive South African economy? The findings highlight the role of digital media in shaping a positioned, Southern vision of sustainable luxury that addresses the challenge of reconciling growth, equality, and socio-cultural justice.

Findings

Twyg uses fashion as a critical lens to explore biological and social interdependencies in a national and international context characterised by deep inequalities. May's definition of luxury contains many of the themes that Twyg develops in its digital communication:

> A luxury item is something that has been thoughtfully crafted and made to last. It's something that would cost enough money for me to want it to last, for me to respect it. ... I don't like the idea of luxury being exclusive, or of fashion being symbolic of status. I prefer to use the term luxury when referring to something made with intention and with care. 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.[34]

This definition puts Twyg's expression of luxury at a distance from the widespread preference in South

31. Simon Kemp, "Digital 2019: South Africa," *Datareportal*, January 31, 2019, accessed December 21, 2020, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2019-south-africa.

32. 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.

33. Other topics include food, places, and beauty.

34. May, personal conversation with the author.

Africa for 'bling' and foreign heritage brands,[35] whose consumption reflects a possession-centered mindset and a disregard for collective advancement.[36] May, instead, frames luxury as a marker of ethical authority and discriminates between profit-driven and community/socially-oriented definitions of value. She emphasises its power to inspire collective change that has interrelated socio-cultural and environmental impacts, not least promoting plurality by embedding local stories in the global conversation.

The Manifesto, the company's mission statement published on the platform, details a holistic vision, where sustainability is achieved by simultaneously fostering environmental and social "regeneration."[37] The "Social" entry reads: "An inter-sectional approach to sustainability is best suited to what we want to achieve: we need to address gender inequality, racism, economic transformation and climate change simultaneously."[38] May contends that these concerns call for creating a local model of sustainability, as the one developed in the advanced economic context of the global North does not fit the reality of a country with a 40% unemployment rate.[39] She speaks of the "conflict of interest" of "promoting slow fashion when many people are hungry"[40] and incorporates it in her editorial practice. "We want to scale back and slow down our hyper consumer society, but we acknowledge that South Africa has to grow its economy on its path to transform the economy. We are interested in how we can grow the economy with sustainable and regenerative practices."[41]

The ethical probing expresses the goal of turning Twyg into a space of critical thinking, where factual content enables the questioning of ideas and assumptions about what sustainable fashion and post-capitalist development *mean* for South Africa. Through the analysis, three key inter-related themes are identified: care, interdependence, and pluriversality.

Care

Slow fashion advocates a change in system thinking imbued with an ethics of care that rejects functional notions of value, in favour of "a set of practices animated by concerns for others," including other life forms.[42] "Care" is the first keyword of Twyg's Manifesto: "Caring for people and the planet are fundamental to everything we do. In South Africa, we have to pay particular attention to the nexus of human need and environmental risk as we work with partners to promote equity and sustainability."[43] This principle inspires Twyg's communication of sustainability as a worldview and set of practices with positive environmental and social impact. It also grounds the company's work in the socio-economic geography of South Africa, where fashion's positive performance in the past twenty years has driven modest, but steady growth in employment.[44] In the post "Fashion in the time of coronavirus," May situates care in the framework of the emergency scenario unleashed by the pandemic, asking: "How do we support African creatives and fashion designers at the same time as reducing carbon emissions? How

35. Inka Crowsswaite, "Afro Luxe: The Meaning of Luxury in South Africa," in *Luxury Brands in Emerging Markets*, eds. Glyn Atwal and Dougles Bryson (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2014), 187–200.

36. Alweendo and Dosekun, "Luminance and the Moralization of Black Women's Luxury Consumption in South Africa."

37. May, "The Twyg Manifesto".

38. May, "The Twyg Manifesto".

39. Jackie May, "UCRF 'Member of the Month' Jackie May," *Union of Concerned Fashion Researchers*, July 13, 2020, https://concernedresearchers.org/ucrf-member-of-the-month-jackie-may/.

40. May, "UCRF 'Member of the Month' Jackie May".

41. May, "The Twyg Manifesto".

42. Kate Fletcher, "Other Fashion Systems," in *Routledge handbook of sustainability and fashion*, eds. Kate Fletcher and Mathilda Tham (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2014), 21.

43. May, "The Twyg Manifesto".

44. See Catherine Del Monte, "Transcript Interview with SACTWU's Etienne Vlok about the retail and textile masterplan," *Twyg*, June 8, 2020, https://twyg.co.za/transcript-interview-with-sactuws-etienne-vlok-retail-clothing-and-textile-masterplan/.

do we employ people while we reduce the quantity of clothes produced?"[45] These questions suggest that Twyg views care as implicating the taking and performing of responsibilities and the managing of businesses that address the multiple meanings of luxury value as a positive element for society, culture, and the economy.

To facilitate discussion, care will focus on the content relating to green practices, although care, pluriversality, and interdependence mix and overlap in all of the content. The material (textual, visual, and hypertextual) pertaining to this theme refers to the best practices implemented by luxury designers and brands to limit pollution. These include recycling, reusing, and regenerating, waste reduction, local recruitment, design for longevity, extended producer responsibility, and use of low impact materials. Examples of care-themed posts abound in the platform and on social media. "Circular design" — which develops products for closed loops — also features in the company's profile description on Instagram, along with "sustainability" and "SDG12," which is the acronym of Sustainable Development Goal 12. As of 31 March, 2021, "circular design" and "circular economy" are the second and third most-frequent tags on the website. This suggests that the company identifies wastefulness, pollution, and energy inefficiency as three of the most pressing issues to tackle to achieve the shift to an eco-conscious business model, as stated in a post from 6 November, 2020 that summarises the main findings of the Ellen MacArthur report "Vision of a circular economy for fashion."[46]

The posts tagged "circular design" are case studies of brands and designers from South Africa and, occasionally, elsewhere. They describe the solutions that these actors, who are mostly small and emergent luxury players, implement to reduce their environmental footprint, highlighting their positive impact on the environment and people. Some of these posts appear in the form of interviews, where Twyg's authors ask designers how they implement sustainability in their practice and business. The interviews are preceded by an introduction that outlines the respondent's history and alignment with the company's values, using rhetorical means that celebrate the ingenuity and meanings infused in these practices. The majority of the featured brands apply circular models of waste minimisation, like Research Unit, which reportedly "use every little piece of fabric and leather where [they] can."[47] Organic and natural materials are often utilised, as with the Simon & Mary heritage millinery that makes hats with biodegradable cactus leather and employs recycled materials for packaging and parts of the manufacturing process.[48] This is the focus of *plasticity*., an upcycling company based in the Eastern Cape region that makes bespoke vanity and clutch bags out of discarded plastic, featured in a post from 19 June, 2020.[49] Designer Fezokuhle Dimba from Durban, who uses plastic for her handmade garments, was introduced in a post from 8 May, 2020.[50] Contributor Catherine Del Monte describes these as "exciting" and "edgy" examples of circularity that apply the ethic of care to garment and accessory making. This choice of words reflects May's goal of "changing the understanding of sustainability," from intimidating to accessible and positively-challenging.[51]

On Instagram, Twyg uses a similar rhetoric to signify inventiveness, determination, and the promise

45. Jackie May, "Fashion in the time of coronavirus," *Twyg*, March 17, 2020, https://twyg.co.za/fashion-in-the-time-of-coronavirus/.

46. Ellen MacArthur Foundation, "Vision of a circular economy for fashion," accessed February 08, 2020, https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/assets/downloads/Vision-of-a-circular-economy-for-fashion.pdf. The work of the British foundation is referenced in several posts, providing a research basis for Twyg's advocacy. Its reports are included in the "essential resources" of the "Learning Hub", a section of the website that directs users to external destinations providing educational material on sustainability and sustainable fashion practices.

47. Catherine Del Monte, "Q&A: Research Unit takes a long view on sustainability," *Twyg*, July 31, 2020, https://twyg.co.za/qa-research-unit-takes-a-long-view-on-sustainability/.

48. Catherine Del Monte, "Simon and Mary takes shape with natural fabrics," *Twyg*, July 13, 2020, https://twyg.co.za/simon-and-mary-hats-take-shape-with-natural-fabrics/.

49. Catherine Del Monte, "Q&A with designer Tessa O'Halloran on rethinking plastic waste," *Twyg*, June 19, 2020, https://twyg.co.za/qa-with-tessa-ohalloran-who-practices-circular-design-in-the-karoo/.

50. Catherine Del Monte, "Q&A: Designer Fezokhule Dimba wants to make the world a better place," *Twyg,* May 8, 2020, https://twyg.co.za/qa-designer-fezokuhle-dimba-wants-to-make-the-world-a-better-place/.

51. May, "The Twyg Manifesto."

of a better world attached to "caring" brands, and to elicit user engagement. A post published on 8 January, 2021 features a shot from the "Ambo mhlaba" lookbook, promoting designer Gugu Peteni's Spring/Summer 2020 collection.[52] The image is a low-angle portrait of a bearded and dread-locked young man, standing with his feet wide apart near a metal container. His meditative gaze and straight-backed posture suggest coolness and poise. The inside of the container is shadowed, but we recognise the outline of a wooden table strewn with several implements. The model's hands are deep in the patterned pockets of an otherwise white wool cape, the geometric design of the lower half of the garment is in warm colours — red, yellow, orange — with long, apricot-hued fringes hanging from the hem. Under the cape, the model wears a knitted azure jumper, jogger jeans, rubber sandals, and what appears like a shopping bag strapped to his chest. The body language and contextual cues of the bag and container's inside signify purpose and industriousness, values that are indexed also in the post's caption:

> What's your intention? What are your goals? Are you hoping for life to go back to normal? Are you working towards a better future? Join us in our strive for a sustainable, regenerative and circular economy! Design is leading the way! Eastern Cape designer @gugupeteni uses one of SA's premier sustainable fibers — mohair — in her work. A natural, animal fibre loved by designers and consumers.[53]

Care-themed posts encourage user discussion on the actors who ensure that positive economic performance yields environmetal and social benefits across the whole of the supply chain. Care is the value underpinning the "just transition" that Twyg advocates for fashion as a system in need of a "revolution" that invests not only its business model, but its set of beliefs. Care is thus described as a mode of practicing and consuming fashion and a goal in itself, as the industry is called upon to improve the quality of the relationships that it fosters across species, locales, and cultures.

Interdependence

The theme of interdependence foregrounds the social value of luxury as an expression of social justice, intersectionality, community resilience, and wellbeing. An Instagram post from 25 January, 2021 features a portrait of African American poet laureate Amanda Gorman. The lower half of the image has the quote "We will rebuild, reconcile and recover" that she pronounced at the inauguration of President Joe Biden. Twyg's caption reads:

> Besides the material suggestions of #reduce #reuse #recycle there are a multitude of social adjustments to be made to ensure we achieve sustainability. This is a small reminder from US poet laureate's magnificent inauguration poem delivered last week that our approach needs to be an #intersectionalenvironmentalism one.[54]

The caption refers to Twyg's commitment to supporting actions in fashion that improve social wealth in the post-COVID world.

The reality of South Africa's deep inequalities is a topic raised in multiple platform posts. Ufrieda Ho writes on 12 August, 2019:

> There's a cappuccino divide — the worlds of those who can fork out for a fair trade cuppa and those who produce or serve up the brew but can't splurge on foam masquerading as milk. But what if these worlds could collide and not collapse? What if cutting through the froth made it possible to imagine economy and profit not based just on production and sales, and value could be counted in something other than rands and cents?[55]

52. Twyg (@twygmag), "What's your intention?" January 8, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CJyZjhqJYZ7/.

53. Twyg (@twygmag), "What's your intention?"

54. Twyg (@twygmag), "We will rebuild, reconcile and recover. Three R's @amandascgorman," Instagram photo, January 25, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CKebctXp4K4/.

55. Ufrieda Ho, "The wellbeing economy offers seeds of hope at Victoria Yards," *Twyg,* August 12, 2019, https://twyg.co.za/the-wellbeing-economy-offers-seeds-of-hope-at-victoria-yards/.

Paramount to Twyg's vision is fostering local perspectives, which, while supporting the growth of a local industry, ensure the fair treatment of workers. Designing and consuming ethically-made clothes are presented as forms of quiet activism that enable emancipation and egalitarianism. A post from 18 February, 2021 offers one such example, focusing on the "social activis[m]" of Sindiso Khumalo, the recipient of Twyg's Trans-Seasonal Sustainable Award 2019, who "bring[s] together the political and the aesthetic."[56] Khumalo is an internationally-renowned designer, shortlisted for the prestigious LVMH Prize in 2019. Her organic, hand-painted garments, crafted with old techniques, tell African stories of heritage and female identity. The brand proclaims that it gives equal importance to serving the natural world and "chang[ing] the lives of marginalised people."[57] Khumalo collaborates with organisations that teach skills and uplift marginalised women in several African countries and has created collections inspired by the accomplishments of black female heroes. Twyg's article shares a statement by the designer: "We have to understand that it can't just be about materials. It has to be about your value chain. It has to be about people."[58] For Khumalo, value lies in social abundance and in a woman's right to a good life. Twyg's profile of this designer contributes to building an empathetic discourse of sustainable luxury that presents social responsibility not as a corporate goal, but an expressive mode of socialisation.

Development through self-empowerment and place-making inspire several other posts.[59] For example, on 6 April, 2020 Twyg published an invited contribution by Zola Booi, a fashion designer and ambassador of the National Youth Development Agency. The post promoted Khayelitsha Fashion Week, an event spotlighting community-based designers and fashion enthusiasts from one of Cape Town's biggest townships.[60] 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.[61] An Instagram post from 17 March, 2021 follows up on this thread of social regeneration in Khayelitsha. The multiple-image post captures scenes of small clothes and textile shops and their surrounding urban setting.[62] 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.[63] Through this and other posts, Twyg mediates knowledge about the other side of the "cappuccino divide," where growth is "highly dependent on community engagement," writes Booi.[64]

These examples call attention to the quality of the relations that form around the making and handling

56. Binwe Adebayo, "Sindiso Khumalo uses fashion to tell stories of women's empowerment and global sheroes," *Twyg*, February 18, 2021, https://twyg.co.za/sindiso-khumalo-uses-fashion-to-tell-stories-of-womens-empowerment-and-global-sheroes/.

57. Sindiso Khumalo, Official website, accessed March 12, 2021, https://www.sindisokhumalo.com/.

58. Binwe Adebayo, "Sindiso Khumalo uses fashion to tell stories of women's empowerment and global sheroes".

59. For example, the Question & Answer session with Daniel Sher of Good Good Good, a menswear ethical streetwear label, presents the brand as "an agent for transformative social change within the South African clothing industry" committed to sustaining the livelihoods of local people in all the manufacturing process, sharing their resources with other independent brands, and, for their SS2021 collection, supporting young musicians, who received 10% of the sales profit. Questions concerning the socially-sustainable practices of brands and designers appear in the majority of the interviews published on the website.

60. Zola Booi, "Pending: Khatelitsha Fashion Week celebrates Africa fashion heritage," *Twyg,* April 6, 2020, https://twyg.co.za/pending-khayelitsha-fashion-week-celebrates-african-fashion-heritage/.

61. Booi, "Pending: Khatelitsha Fashion Week celebrates Africa fashion heritage".

62. Twyg (@twygmag), "About 7% of the formal and informal entreprises in townships are in fashion and textiles," Instagram photo, March 17, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CMg88bhpC-g/.

63. Twyg (@twygmag), "About 7% of the formal and informal entreprises in townships are in fashion and textiles".

64. Booi, "Pending: Khatelitsha Fashion Week celebrates Africa fashion heritage".

of garments, a theme that, as we saw earlier, is at the core of the ethics of slowness. Twyg digitally mediates and re-mediates these relations by enabling critical dialogue online and concrete action in the physical world through initiatives that encourage consumers to make direct, material experience of natural environments and sustainable communities.

Pluriversality

Twyg is committed to defining luxury as a medium of inclusive development. The concept of "pluriversality" refers to the idea of a "world in which many worlds ... coexist," where new knowledges and practices are created to supersede the supremacy of the Western epistemology.[65] This theory inspires the movement for decolonialising fashion, a school of thought that influences Twyg's communication and May's own practice. Decolonial activists oppose the neocolonial and neocapitalist workings of the global fashion system. They call for the emergence of a plural and non-exploitative landscape of dress systems that can return agency and power to marginalised/disappearing cultures.[66]

In South Africa, scholar-activist Erica de Greef adopts this interpretive lens to advocate for a sustainability paradigm that links development to a radical restructuring of the fashion industry, based on cultural self-determination and plurality. Describing fashion as a "core institution of modernity," she invites to acknowledge and take action on the mechanisms that have excluded South African cultures of dress from the discourse of fashion.[67] de Greef has been involved with Twyg's activities since the company's early days and May acknowledges her work as a source of inspiration.[68] The scholar has developed the theme of pluriversality in multiple events sponsored by the company, including at the "Future of Fashion" symposium held in Johannesburg in 2019, where she presented culturally-sustainable fashion through a decolonial lens.[69] Cultural sustainability is the policy framework developing relationships between cultural producers, workers, and the communities they support, which it posits as drivers of development.[70]

As an industry embedded in unequal relations of power and capitalist redistribution, South African fashion is developing cultural narratives of empowerment and self-assertion that re-center agency away from fashion's hubs in the Northern hemisphere. Pluriversality and the critique of the Western fashion monoculture are thus embedded in Twyg's communication of luxury. These emerge particularly in the company's focus on the hidden stories of marginalised or endangered South African dress cultures. These stories map a South African culture of ecosystem harmony and regeneration that pre-dates Western environmentalist models. During an interview, May discussed the fashion film *Indlela Yethu — Our Way of Being* (2020) directed by Simbi Seam Nkula and produced by Zizipho Ntobongwana, a local entrepreneur committed to decolonising sustainability.[71] The film, screened at the "Future of Fashion" event organised for the 2020 edition of the Awards, interprets sustainability as a value of the South African fashion ecology. Twyg subscribes to this view and directs its efforts at changing the "asso-

65. Walter D. Mignolo, "Foreword. On pluriversality and multipolarity," in *Constructing the Pluriverse: The Geopolitcis of Knowledge*, ed. Bernd Reiter (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 9.

66. Sandra Niessen, "Fashion, its Sacrifice Zone, and Sustainability," *Fashion Theory — Journal of Dress Body and Culture*, Vol. 24.6 (2020): 859–877; Sandra Niessen, "Afterword: Fashion's Fallacy," in *Modern Fashion Traditions: Negotiating Tradition and Modernity through Fashion*, eds. M. Angela Jansen and Jennifer Craik (London, Oxford, New York, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 209–217.

67. Toby Slade and M. Angela Jansen, "Letter from the Editors: Decoloniality and Fashion," *Fashion Theory — Journal of Dress Body and Culture*, Vol. 24.6 (2020): 813.

68. Jackie May, personal interview with the author, November 2020.

69. Erica de Greef, "Long Read: Fashion, Sustainability and Decoloniality," *Twyg*, December 7, 2019, https://twyg.co.za/long-read-fashion-sustainability-and-decoloniality/.

70. Michael Atwood Mason and Rory Turner, "Cultural Sustainability: A Framework for Relationships, Understanding, and Action," *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 133.527 (2020), 81–99; David Thorsby, "Culturally sustainable development: theoretical concept or practical policy instrument?," *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, Vol. 23.2 (2017): 133–147.

71. Jackie May, personal conversation with the author.

ciati[on of eco-consciousness] with former colonisers and with the global north,"[72] creating knowledge about independent labels to educate users on local histories of eco-consciousness.[73] May says:

> While the concept of sustainability seems to be a relatively new concept to many of us living in a largely Western world, many indigenous groups in Africa and across the globe have been living in harmony with the environment for thousands of years. We believe there is much to learn about sustainability, circularity, the shared-economy, sustainable material sourcing and more from these communities who's sustainable practices have stood the test of time.[74]

Twyg's communication amplifies these locally-relevant narratives, supporting sustainable solutions that have meaning and value for these communities. Designer Katekani Moreku is a representative example of this. Moreku was first featured in an article written by May from 7 June, 2019 that describes him as an upcycler who applies the SePulana culture's method of "borrowing elements from other art forms."[75] For his debut collection, presenting mix-and-match styles in a palette of warm colours, Moreku employed scraps of discarded fabric and plastic salvaged from a factory's rubbish bin. The garments' inserts made with plastic bear the material traces of their past life. A second article comments on the relevance of his work for developing a model rooted in local ways of life. The opening line of the post significantly remarks:

> In South African indigenous cultures, the surrounding land and resources become part of the people. With a metaphysical connection to the natural world, it is no surprise that Mpumalanga-born Katekani Moreky would bring his culture and surroundings in his signature colorful creations.[76]

The cultural roots of this designer's sustainable praxis hark back to the regenerative culture of SePulana women: "Katekani was exposed to the ways in which local women use sacks, recycled bags and other easily-accessible materials to make otherworldly creations, and ultimately, express their joy."[77] Here, as in the other examples mentioned in the previous sections, the semantic choice imbues sustainable work with qualities of self-fulfilment, resilience, and biophysical harmony that produce cultural capital and social wealth. Describing hand-crafting as a joyful act of bringing "otherworldly" creations to life within the tight circle of a matriarchal society, author Bwine Adebayo envisions the kind of material pleasures that make sustainably-made products luxurious and Moreku's work a red arrow unveiling the possibilities of using culture as a framework for interpreting development.[78]

Twyg describes luxury as a means for disempowered subjects to reclaim agency. This marginal status applies to both South Africa *vis a vis* the global fashion system, and the indigenous actors within the country who have limited freedom to express their dress sknowledge and make a dignified living out of it. Giving priority to people and community over growth and consumerism, and interdependency over alienation, the company's communication of luxury encourages users to act as "guardian[s] of diversity,"[79] implicating fashion in practices of community-making and community-preservation. Mobilising the website and social media to accumulate knowledge on the possibilities of harnessing fashion

72. May, personal conversation with the author.

73. May recognises that she occupies a complex position, that of a "white, South African woman whose cultural heritage stems from [British] colonisers", and claims that it motivates her to call attention to issues of ownership and privilege in the industry to contribute building a more equal system. May, personal conversation with the author, November 2020.

74. May, personal conversation with the author, November 2020.

75. J Jackie May, "Why Upcycling Suits Katekani Moreku's Design Style," *Twyg*, June 7, 2019, https://twyg.co.za/upcycling-suits-katekani-morekus-design-style/.

76. Bwine Adebayo, "The student becomes the teacher: Katekani Moreku shows the way with his slow fashion," *Twyg*, February 8, 2021, https://twyg.co.za/the-student-becomes-the-teacher-katekani-moreku-shows-the-way-with-his-slow-fashion/.

77. Adebayo, "The student becomes the teacher: Katekani Moreku shows the way with his slow fashion".

78. Thorsby, "Culturally sustainable development: theoretical concept or practical policy instrument?".

79. Fletcher, "Slow Fashion: An Invitation for Systems Change," 264.

to push for culturally-sustainable fashion, Twyg emerges as a new type of "luxury authority" shaping modes of digital consumption that align economic development with social change.[80]

Conclusions

Twyg was created to mobilise grassroots consumer activism to encourage an environmentalist and sustainable position for South African fashion. Since its launch in 2019, it has informed users on the negative impact of fast fashion and supported the growth of the independent, slow-fashion scene. It achieves this through researched communication and events that imbue luxury with symbolic values integrating environmentalism, community uplift, and intersectionalism. Throughout, it has situated itself in the international conversation, collaborating with foreign actors to build an understanding of luxury that downplays material value for socially- and culturally-driven prosperity.

This article has analysed Twyg's communication and digitisation of sustainable luxury fashion in the framework of critical luxury studies and slow fashion studies, which highlight the sector's contradictory support of sustainable principles and unsustainable business operations. It has shown its social media strategies to inform and educate citizens on independent, eco-conscious luxury fashion options in the specific context of South Africa. Three key themes were idientified — Care, Interdependence and Pluriversitality — discussed, and explained with examples. The findings demonstrate that Twyg's slow ethic posits socio-economic growth as an effect of new ways of connecting with the local world that envisions a post-consumerist future where the environment and the economy are integrated. Acting as a signifier of reciprocal engagement and a facilitator of transformational change, ethical luxury is, for Twyg, a site to negotiate power and mediate agency at the intranational and international levels, but also to enjoy pleasure, making a statement with beautiful clothes and accessories.

This article makes a contribution to the literature on the digitisation of ethical luxury in the Global South. In particular, it expands the study of small actors, offering a reading that complements the more mainstream focus on big brands, highlight the role of digital media in shaping a Southern vision of sustainable luxury that strives to reconcile growth, equality, and socio-cultural justice However, the article is limited to one case study and therefore provides only an introduction to the operations of independent stakeholders in the region. Future research will continue in this direction, analysing other independent voices of sustainable, ethical luxury across the African continent.

80. John Armitage, *Luxury and Visual Culture* (London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury 2019)

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