

DESIGN *and* DERMATOLOGY

Shopping local? These two brands are doing us proud. Jessika Balzer's Project Dyad creates bags you'll want to hold onto forever. And sisters Nadia and Natasha Michael are tackling hyperpigmentation and promoting skin health with Yearn Skin.

BY CHARIS TORRANCE



Project Dyad

JESSIKA BALZER

START-UP COSTS: 'The biggest outlay was on machinery and equipment, and the time spent on developing new ideas. But a lot of money is saved by wearing many hats and doing a lot of things yourself.'

CURRENT TURNOVER: 'We've had steady growth. Our turnover has grown by 100% every year in the past few years, and we got the chance to grow our team slowly.'

AT Project Dyad, design meets community under the creative direction of Jessika Balzer, who is originally from Germany but has made Cape Town her home. Project Dyad makes leather bags and accessories that blend contemporary aesthetics with functionality.

Tell us a little about yourself.

Once I completed my studies in fashion design in Berlin in 2012, I wasn't sure where to go next. In Germany all my options were very corporate, and that didn't resonate with me. I could have done an internship with any of the big fashion houses, but I couldn't afford to not be paid for months – it wasn't an option. I had come to Cape Town the year before for a five-month internship, so I decided to come back for a year and see how it went – and I've been here ever since.

How did Project Dyad come about?

During my internship I met Vincent Urbain, and I ended up working for him under the brand Urban Africa. We really hit it off. In 2015 I started to feel like I needed a change. The more Vincent and I talked about the future, the more we realised that we had outgrown Urban Africa. We did a complete rebrand, starting afresh with a new collection and a vision to build something that could continuously change and grow. We launched Project Dyad in December 2016.

How did you decide on the name Project Dyad, and what is your design philosophy?

'Dyad' is derived from an ancient Greek word that means 'a pair'; nowadays it's mostly used in mathematics. The word really resonated with me. Everything comes in pairs. We chose 'Project' because we wanted the brand to be something that could be ever evolving, giving us the freedom to do so too.

For me, Project Dyad embodies contemporary, beautifully designed items where functionality is paramount. I've never had the desire to design things that are just pretty; they need to be practical but also have something discerning.

In 2022, you and Vincent parted ways. What has it been like going from co-owner to sole owner?

Starting something together is beautiful because you have two people contributing ideas, impressions and visions. But once you realise that the visions no longer



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match, you have to be honest with yourself. Being the sole owner now feels great. I feel like now Project Dyad can be even more an expression of myself.

As a leather brand, how do you minimise waste and optimise sustainability?

People often ask why we don't use leather alternatives. The issue with 'vegan leather' is the lack of regulation. When people hear 'vegan' they think eco-friendly, but most vegan leather is just polyurethane (PU), which is essentially plastic and *not* environmentally friendly. Also, properly cared for, leather can last many years and even be repaired, whereas once PU starts to crack and wear out – that's it; you can't fix it. We're excited about future eco-friendly options, but for now they aren't viable for a small business like ours in South Africa.

So we concentrate on minimising waste and working with local suppliers. If I can support another little operation with my little operation, I will! And the beauty of this is that I aim to build long-term relationships and contribute positively to our community.

We also avoid overproduction as much as possible, so we have enough stock without excess. We're also always looking for creative uses for offcuts, turning them into items like

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coaster sets and key rings. We've even donated offcuts to prevent them from being discarded.

Take us through your process, from inspiration to final product.

My process often starts with an idea sparked by a personal need or a suggestion from a customer. The shape will come first, followed by problem-solving: how much should the bag hold, should it be flat or bulky... Once I have a clear idea, I start drawing to refine the concept. Then I create a mini version using cardboard or paper to experiment with the details, like inside pockets, strap attachments and closures.

After working out the practical aspects, I make a small version out of leather or fabric. This phase involves more problem-solving as I discover what works and what doesn't. Once satisfied, I make a leather sample using offcuts, and I will use it to test and see if it's durable and practical.

Then I'll finalise the pattern and hand it over to a small father-and-son team who make the cut-out shapes. With this, the bag is ready for bigger production runs.

Instagram: @projectdyad
Website: projectdyad.com



Yearn Skin

NADIA AND NATASHA MICHAEL

START-UP COSTS: 'Getting our business off the ground meant splurging on our initial eight products. But we were careful with our resources. Our goal has always been to grow sustainably and build a brand that'll stick around. And yeah, marketing expenses are our biggest ongoing cost – but worth it to get our name out there!'

CURRENT TURNOVER: 'Yearn Skin has experienced steady growth since we launched the brand in 2021.'

is compounded for women of colour, whose skincare concerns are often overlooked. Enter Yearn Skin, founded by sisters Nadia and Natasha Michael. They are dedicated to tackling hyperpigmentation and promoting skin health with their products that blend natural and lab bioactives, and are free of harmful chemicals, are not tested on animals, and come in eco-friendly packaging.

How did Yearn Skin start?

NADIA: As women of colour who struggle with hyperpigmentation, we found existing products expensive and treatments inconvenient due to their downtime. We spent two to three years developing an affordable yet effective line, collaborating

Navigating the skincare aisles can be daunting; sometimes it feels like you need a science degree just to choose the right serum! This challenge

closely with chemists to ensure our products meet our standards.

NATASHA: In a crowded market, we chose to specialise in hyper-pigmentation. We debuted with eight targeted products, including cleansers, serums, masks, exfoliators and creams, in 2021.

What makes Yearn Skin unique?

NADIA: Efficacy is our top priority. We genuinely believe in the effectiveness of our products, which contain scientifically backed, clinically tested ingredients. We want to simplify skincare, avoid upselling, and emphasise a straightforward approach.

How do you approach the formulation of products?

NADIA: Anyone can use our products, but, as we mentioned, hyperpigmentation is the key issue we aim to address. We aren't experts in formulation, so we rely heavily on our chemists and formulators to guide us.

NATASHA: We want to develop products that work for South Africans. There are a lot of fads in the industry, but with our unique climate and diverse skin types they aren't always suitable here. And we know how frustrating it can be to try everything and still not find a solution. Skincare is a journey, not a quick fix. Educating our customers is also crucial. We want them to understand why we do things the way we do, and how to best care for their skin.

NADIA: The market frequently relies on single actives per formulation, leading people to layer multiple products and spend more money. Our formulations stand out for their active ingredient emulsions. Unlike many other brands, we blend multiple actives to maximise effectiveness.

NATASHA: On our website, you'll find three-step kits that we've curated for specific needs. These kits provide a complete three-step routine, so you won't need to use anything else.

What are your go-to products?

NADIA: Right now there are two products I cannot live without: I use the Niacinamide and Turmeric Brightening Cream during summer because it has a less oily base, which suits my oily skin better in the hotter months. During winter, I use our Active Brightening Facial Cream. It's a richer formulation, which is perfect for the tight, dry skin I get during Joburg winters.

NATASHA: I love our Salicylic Cleansing Gel because I suffer from hormonal acne and it really targets breakouts effectively. I also love our exfoliating masks; they're great for acne-prone skin. And whenever I stop using our Active Brightening Cream, my skin loses its glow.

What are some of the biggest transformations using Yearn Skin products?

NADIA: We'd have to start with our own success stories. We personally struggled with uneven skin tone and dark marks, and using our products has helped our own skins a lot.

NATASHA: We stay in touch with our customers. One user said her pigmentation faded in a month after starting to use our Active Brightening Facial Cream. Another customer with oily, acne-prone skin uses our peel once a week and it helps to keep her acne at bay.



'Skincare is a journey, not a quick fix.'

What advice would you give potential customers?

NADIA: It's important to understand the underlying causes of your skin concerns. Everyone's skin is different. Identify what is causing your hyper-pigmentation. Next, determine your skin type, such as oily, combination or dry. Then add actives that will treat your skin concern and are suitable for your skin type.

NATASHA: Many people use too many products, which can be counterproductive. Begin with the basics and add products as needed. ❖

Instagram: @yearnskin
Facebook: YearnSkin
Website: yearnskin.co.za

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