

## ESSAY/PROJECT COVER SHEET

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[Act Local, Think Global]

**The Aesthetics of Success: Race and Beauty in the Global South:**  
A Reflection on South African women content creators' online performances on  
YouTube and Instagram

[Ivy / Kigundu-Touré / KGNIVY001]

A minor dissertation submitted in *partial fulfillment* of the requirements for the award  
of the degree of Master of Global Media

Faculty of the Humanities

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**COMPULSORY DECLARATION**

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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## **REFLECTION - The Aesthetics of Success: Race and Beauty in the Global South:**

A Reflection on South African women content creators' online performances on YouTube and Instagram

### **LINK TO WEBSITE (FILM & MORE):**

<http://www.actlocalthinkglobal.org/>

Password to access website: mediaproduction

### **LINK TO FILM (ALONE):**

<https://youtu.be/Dq-wnPwv3Y>

### **Background**

This media creative project explores the experiences of South African women on social media platforms. The idea for this project stems from my personal experiences as an avid consumer and viewer of online content generated by these women. My engagement with YouTube began about ten years ago, when I started to consistently watch YouTube videos. Later, I would go on to consume Instagram posts by digital content creators. However, these consumption choices of mine were not functions of random videos or pictures promoted on these platforms. Rather my consumption was driven by a desire to see women who looked like me – black women.

From 2009 onward black diasporic women, and women on the African continent, were suddenly, it seemed, putting out content related to black women's experiences in the world, with themes relating to education, hair, beauty and all other sorts of lifestyle-related topics. I would be lying if I did not mention how the women on YouTube talking about their natural hair drove me to explore a hair routine away from chemicals. Straightening our natural hair and being 'presentable' according to Eurocentric standards were for a long time, a burden into my life. I began consuming their videos whereby the content creators were encouraging the viewers to own their natural hair and most importantly, own whatever hairstyle they seemed to

fit. The choice of how we present ourselves seemed to come back to us, and the space in which it was performed felt like a safe, communal one. Six years ago, a black youtuber called *Chizi Duru*, had cut all her hair to start all over again without any chemicals. The act of cutting off all your hair within the community was labeled 'The Big Chop': an act of rebirth, renewal and resistance for black women. I went along and did the same, following her journey and exploring my own.

The topics on YouTube performed by black women were enjoyable for me because of the representations that accompanied them; having women like me speak for and with black women via content designed and produced by them. Most importantly, as I began to consume their content, I quickly realised that I was not the only black woman consciously choosing to view their content: many other black women became fond of these digital content creators and, concurrently, the number of these producers (and their total online viewers) increased. For example, a South African Black YouTuber, *Yolenda 'Yolz' Jawe*, is "currently sitting on above 20,000 subscribers and has over 1.2 million total channel views with a 93% female audience between 18 and 24" ("6 Super Successful South African YouTubers").

### **Research Question**

The manner in which black women felt seen/viewed on these platforms gained attention. Soon, scholars and media began to note how, "engagement with YouTube videos created by and featuring Black women provides young Black women viewers with a stronger sense of ownership over their media spectator experiences" (Sobande, 2017, p.665). Sobande's study on black women in Britain and abroad consuming YouTube videos of black women from more global settings explores how this phenomenon has permitted these women to counter their media experiences, decolonising their minds on the meaning and representation of racial, ethnic and cultural or national identities (Sobande, 2017). Platforms such as YouTube became a huge success, with YouTube having earned the, "second most visited site after Google" title ("52 Fascinating and Incredible YouTube Statistics"). To this point, black women are an important part of an understanding of this state of affairs. What does it mean for black women

to be content creators on these digital platforms on the African continent itself and, more specifically, South Africa?

In the current multi-platform age women's representation in media is not solely based on traditional mediums such as magazines, film and television; a world where digital spaces have managed to renegotiate black women's restrictions on screen, as they began to produce and publish their own content online. My reason for exploring the experiences of South African women on YouTube and Instagram is to challenge the notion that this phenomenon, black women's presence on these platforms, can only be examined from a Global North perspective. When searching YouTube studies focusing on black women, the few results in my academic journals searches were those of women based in diasporic settings. Recognising that my search is not a general representation of the studies being formed around women of colour in the digital arena, studies such as the work of Sobande (2017) on diasporic women of colour in Britain and North America seem to dominate studies centering on black women in digital spaces. The implications of drawing on work about diasporic black women has been beneficial and groundbreaking for black women studies but it has also had its shortcomings. Even if answering this question means examining women of colour who have been underrepresented or erased in traditional media historically, these diasporic studies inadvertently centralise the West by way of the subjects' geographical location.

And yet, the emerging digital content spaces are not restricted to the Global North; countries on the African continent, such as South Africa, are pursuing these digital arenas: "in 2012, YouTube views in South Africa increased by 80%, whilst the number of video uploads grew by 30%", according to Jared Molko, YouTube partnership manager at Google South Africa. In Sub-Saharan Africa, YouTube views rose by 90% and video uploads grew by 40% from the previous year, with South Africa leading the region with the most playbacks" ("YouTube continues successful growth in South Africa"). As much as it is important to recognise that YouTube and Instagram are American-based entities, the digital content produced on these platforms do not only come from Global North regions but rather Southern settings and diverse

spaces globally. Furthermore, black women's experiences within these spaces can not be accounted for in the same manner as in the Global North or South, because of the historical and political specificities and differences regarding race, class and gender, such as in South Africa. The gaps in research and data from the Global South do exist, but the reasons for this must be addressed.

My arguments so far, in respect of these gaps in research, have relied on my frustration in finding relevant studies connected to the digital phenomenon of black women's presence online. Whilst forming this project, I realized, progressively, the extent of the phenomenon that black African women having a platform to represent themselves outside of the control of traditional media and the influence of the West. It quickly dawned on me that in all my media consumption beforehand – movies, television shows, advertisements were extremely westernized perpetuating the absence of black African women. YouTube and Instagram changed this for me and opened my eyes to new possibilities and systems of representation.

## **Literature Review**

### *Black Women Representation*

Black women's production agency on the platform is important because of the politics and histories of representation, as they are attached to black women in media. Iqani (2006) explains how, "for centuries, women of colour in both western and southern settings have suffered the violence of white supremacist ideas of beauty and desirability", including their having to deal with, "the continuing pain caused by persistent dominance of Eurocentric standards of beauty" (p.169). She states the ways in which women of colour's representation has been deeply dictated by the way they should look, by way of Eurocentric standards. For black African women, specifically, the extent of this phenomenon is that they have been, at times, entirely invisible in representation spaces where ideals of normative femininity are created and communicated.

Laura Mulvey (1999) spoke on women's representation and its construction in media, specifically in film, where "a woman performs within the narrative, the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film" (p.838). Consideration of this issue of gendered performance of women subjugated by men leads to the conclusion that this has, in actuality, been centered on white females' experiences in the media. As Mulvey explores, the problem for women – a reality that has revolved around white women by default – has been objectification and alignment with an image constructed and controlled by men. The reason why speaking of women's representation in media is speaking of white women by default, such as in Mulvey's text, is because black women have been primarily consigned to the margins of this frame. Bell Hooks (1992) considers women's representation in the media through the black woman's experience stating, "the prolonged silence of black women as spectators and critics was a response to absence, to cinematic negation" (p.118). In other words, Bell Hooks (1992) expresses the politics of gender and race in what has been the violent erasure of black womanhood in media as it continued to maintain white womanhood, "even when representations of black women were present in film, our bodies and being were there to serve – to enhance and maintain white womanhood as object of the phallogentric gaze" (p.119).

As such, as much as women's representation in the media has been maintained by the dominance of the male gaze, it seems that, even within women's struggle, black women find themselves further marginalised, either via subordinate or supportive roles, which themselves serve to maintain manhood and white womanhood onscreen, or by being erased from the screen entirely. *Gone With The Wind* (1939) is a pertinent example of such portrayals of black women bell hooks describes. A Hollywood performer such as Hattie McDaniel, the first African American to win an Oscar through this film presents the subservient presentations of black women onscreen. Her onscreen character in the film, Mammy, a house slave who repeatedly scolds and converses with the owner's daughter, Scarlett, largely served to contrast and facilitate the spectacle of white femininity. A striking scene out of many illustrating this is when Mammy helps Scarlett dress up for a barbecue whilst reminding her to honor the family's name Mammy cares so much about, as Scarlett frantically goes to meet a potential suiter. Mammy is present yet always as the subservient extension of Scarlett throughout the film.

### *Representation in Apartheid and Post-Apartheid South Africa*

The analysis of black women's representation in media be informed by an understanding of the apartheid and post-apartheid contexts through black South African women must negotiate their identities. Apartheid, which operated between 1948 and 1994, was a political and social system of racialized segregation supported by the National Party (NP) government. This system aggressively oppressed communities of colour (African, coloured, Indian descent) by way of law. Under the apartheid system, "the notion of white superiority was central to the ideology of the system, which in addition to entrenching white economic power also sought to obliterate black cultural aspiration" (Boswell, 2017, p.417). It is important to note that the way aspiration is perceived in this study is by the, "incentive of future rewards systems for present-day productive activities" (Duffy, 2017, p.7). In other words, the act of working now to be able to enjoy the fruits of that labour at a future date. In this context, aspiration designs the ideology that if an individual, in this present day, works and performs in a certain manner, they will be able to obtain and attain desired effects. Through apartheid, black cultural production was denied a place on media platforms and cultural industries. When examining different mediums in media, such as film, "the films made during the periods of apartheid served as tools to further the ideals and consolidate the hegemony of the colonial government" (Motsaathebe, 2018, p.381).

The foundation of black womens' representation during apartheid was the near invisibility of them in media and, if they did appear, they were fixed in narratives of underdevelopment, oppressive traditions, high illiteracy, and rural and urban poverty (Rabe, 2014). If they were shown in films, their marginalised presence was prescribed by domesticity and subservient roles, reinforcing sex-role stereotypes as well as racial and class stereotypes, by

way of contrast to black male and white female characters' roles (Motsaathebe, 2018, p.389). These negative stereotypes are closely linked to Bell Hooks' (1992) analogy of servitude from black women towards white women and men in film as she describes the ways in which early race films forced "black female spectators to develop looking relations within a cinematic context that constructs our presence as absence so as to perpetuate white supremacy" (p.118). Even through their presence on screen, black women are continuously of service to white supremacy, denying their black bodies to any sort of agency.

Historically, black South African women have had little agency in terms of how their representations were formed in media. However, some black women media figures in the post-apartheid landscape have countered this pattern. Foremost among these is former Miss South Africa, Basetsana Kumalo who built an impressive media empire running production companies such as Top Billing. Another example, Drum Magazine, a lifestyle magazine aimed at the black South African demographic was one of the first of its kind to fixate on black individuals – especially the black women. This research has allowed me to observe examples of traditional media in post-apartheid SA breaking away from oppressive representations of black women.

However, mainstream post-apartheid media did little to resolve the lengthy and dispiriting images of black bodies, as it instead prioritised a "rainbow nation" ideology in its representations. This "rainbow nation" message places national unity as the normative ideal, despite racial difference and historical inequalities (Barnett, 1999). Despite the historical censorships of communities of color in media during apartheid, post-colonial South Africa made the rainbow nation, 'one nation, many cultures', its priority. Radio, alongside television, became the front runner of an ideology which failed to remedy past inequalities and the burden of whiteness, for demographics such as black African women (Barnett, 1999). Encompassing the strides made for black women representation and ownership in media and comparing it to current black digital creatives, the traditional media figures have a reach that is mainly national whereas the YouTube producers have global reach and can attain a larger audience.

## *African Academic Landscape*

In the current multi-platform age women's representation in media is not solely based on traditional mediums such as magazines, film and television; a world where digital spaces have managed to renegotiate black women's restrictions on screen, as they began to produce and publish their own content online. YouTube may be relatively new and academic studies require time to come about, but the historical and political specificities regarding race, class and gender on the African continent, with respect to academia, are critical in understanding the gaps in research. Here, Thaver & Thaver (2018) point out the unequal relations of research production between the Global North and Global South, and how this skewed intellectual division of labour in academia is informed by the continent's particular forms of historical, pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial relations, as they continue in their present contemporary context, i.e. as the Western academy continues to assert itself.

In respect of the period of segregation in South Africa, Thaver and Thaver (2018) express how, "during the first four decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the segregationist political administration (1910-1948) formed eleven institutions which were almost exclusively designated for the section of the population officially classified as white" (p.o). What this means is that academia was rooted in marginalising communities of colour (subdivided into African, Coloured and those of Indian descent), thereby negating cultural production informed by people of colour (Thaver & Thaver, 2018).

Moreover, it is important to note that even in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, this segregationist pattern prevailed as, "the identification of the ideal and typical academic subject who was deemed to teach, research and develop certain scientific fields of study overlapped with the politically exclusive social frameworks of racial discrimination" (Thaver & Thaver, 2018, p.P). The South African academic landscape continues to be, "transitioning from an apartheid, isolationist and closed university, to a democratic, open and integrative one", but the Thaver & Thaver's (2018) study and debate of the increased number of African scholars in South African universities is not limited to this general statement (p.o).

Importantly, one of the study's observations, following examination of data concerning incoming African scholars in South African universities, is how the number of African scholars entering the universities has increased from 898 African scholars to 4,214, between the years 2005 and 2014 (Thaver & Thaver, 2018). Nevertheless, despite there being a steady increase in African scholars entering the South African academy one is hardly in a position to make any firm pronouncements or guarantee that epistemology will now become more African-centered rather than Western (Thaver & Thaver, 2018). In other words, the increase of these scholars does not necessarily entail the decrease of Western scholarship and, further, it cannot confirm that these African scholars do not continue to perform within the discursive traditions and practices of the apartheid and Western-focused systems (Thaver & Thaver, 2018).

Indeed, the realities of academia in the continent are still informed by its colonial and post-colonial conditions, resulting in, amongst other things, fewer African academics. The by-products of this lack of African academics include less resources toward, and research conducted upon, African-centered stories, weakening the possibility of Africans becoming cultural producers.

### *Consumption and Aspiration in Post-Apartheid South Africa*

Not only are the gaps in academic research evident, but the practices of consuming and producing aspirational media culture are relatively new to black communities, because of the apartheid system. Posel (2010) explains that, during colonial rule, the "making of racial order was, a way of regulating people's aspirations, interests and powers as consumers and the desire and power to consume was racialized, at the same time as it was fundamental in the very making of race" (p.160). The interconnected social, political and racial makings of apartheid resulted in black communities failing to develop the capacities and tools to aspire or consume (Posel, 2010).

Consumption, as Posel (2010) describes it, is "the acquisition and use (including the display) of durable and nondurable goods, along with the cultural, political and psychological antecedents and effects thereof" (p.161). Consumption also includes aspirations to consume

which are closely linked to the making and performance of selfhood – that which, under apartheid rule, was denied to black and communities of color (Posel, 2010).

Posel (2010) observes the relationship between race and consumption in South Africa through apartheid's efforts to regulate people's access to money and goods, depending on their race. The colonial rule of South Africa through white supremacy and its regimes of race, have co-produced regimes of consumption denied to black individuals, meaning that consumption has become part of the discourse surrounding black liberation and freedom. As such, South Africa has a profound history against black consumption, wealth and aspiration, and therefore it is "no surprise that consumption has become an important arena of post-apartheid black self-making and self-representation, and aspiration imbricated with freedom and citizenship" (Alweendo & Dosekun, 2018, p.131).

When examining these various tropes in respect of black communities in South Africa, consumption becomes more than the mere acquisition of goods. Posel's definitions of consumption, especially the descriptions around the display of consumption, remain extremely relevant, when analysing the rise of digital creators on YouTube and Instagram. Through this reflection and my video piece, I explore the online performances of digital creatives as political statements, tied to values surrounding cultural production, consumption and agency in the post-apartheid space. As a first impression, it is not difficult to perceive how these women, via the production of online videos and photos, display their acquisitions, and how these behaviours disrupt the racial order and the regulations imposed on them by the colonial and apartheid order. These women disrupt their representations at a national level. Their performances are global in their address because of the international reach of YouTube and Instagram. Thus, while they respond to specific contexts of post-apartheid consumption, these women also position themselves as global in their influence which explains why the term 'local and global' is a persistent theme in my video documentary. Their performances, self-stylization and consumption has significance in terms of local and global politics of black femininities.

As a result of the historical complexities of race, access and class, the perception of women grasping the cultures of (and improving skills in connection with) aspiration, consumption and

independent production is heavily debated, and has remained so throughout the post-Apartheid era.

“the challenge is to frame the terms of debate in ways that transcend simplistic moral binaries: on the one hand, an outright dismissal of African consumerism as simply crass and vulgar, a betrayal of the true project of liberation and capitulation to the forces of capitalist markets and class interests; and on the other, a naively romantic celebration of rampant consumerism, evading or denying wider questions of global exploitation along with the more local politics of class, power, deepening inequality and poverty” (Posel, 2010, p.173).

Posel explores the routes of the debates concerning black South Africans, consumerism and aspiration, focusing on what it is that black South Africans aspire to and how this is digested at a national level. Borrowing Posel’s exploration of black consumerism above, liberation and freedom are not synonymous with the rise of consumption and, in other ways, this conclusion seems to deny the realities of what increasingly constitutes South Africa. For example, as noted above, the increasingly stark reality in South Africa is that it is the leading country in the number of views and uploads on YouTube in Sub-Saharan Africa. If we ignore the fact of the increasing magnitude of digital consumption, we neglect a growing trend from and by South Africans which might assist in explaining the new forms of liberation and freedom discoverable via a digital medium. Posel explains how African consumerism is at times, deemed vulgar, foreign and inappropriate because many black individuals do not belong to equal standards of class, power and access. As much as this may be true, Posel claims that denying such acts to black communities is refuting an act that is currently present. Posel’s statements spoke to me as I investigated the digital phenomenon of black women online. Of course, the cohesiveness of the concept of “digital consumption as freedom” can be debated, insofar as some may still perceive the full freedoms (which accompany this technological advance) as inaccessible to many who are not part of the middle or upper class communities; as well as those who are unable to access, or do not have the technological literacy to use these platforms.

Not only is the black South African confronted with his/her racialised history through consumption (which they he/she must bear even in his/her modern consumption) but, also, for women, there is an added layer of confrontation and resistance. This is what makes the black women on YouTube all the more relevant, when examining the ways in which they use these social media platforms. Whilst performing online, embodying consumption and aspiration ideals, these women have had to face resistance from viewers complaining of the same observations Posel (2010) has made about the “naively romantic celebration of rampant consumerism” (p.173).

Despite the increasing realities of black women from South Africa on YouTube and Instagram, Pumla Gqola (2013), for example, explains the ways in which women’s value remains connected to how they adhere to the expectations of domesticity. The expectations of domesticity are compounded for South African women by a racially divided and sexist society in post-apartheid South Africa. Gilbert Motsaathebe has examined the prevalent trope of the domestic servant in the South African film industry. Motsaathebe argues that this trope is based on the racial inferiority stamped on black women because of the need to uphold and support white supremacy. My film is an exploration of how women have erased this trope and have in many ways challenged it by directly speaking about it on their platforms.

Nthabiseng Motsemme (2002) inspects the previously silenced voices in the new South Africa by referring to black women claiming how, “the particularities of black women’s experiences have historically been shaped within a cautionary framework, which has sought to threaten an imagined black solidarity” (p.648). The priority in the racially and patriarchally-marked South Africa has been for blacks to progress collectively, independent from white influence, resulting in women prioritising black men’s power for the sake of the wider black collective (Motsemme, 2002). Borrowing Leclerc-Madlala’s (2001) interpretation of women’s position in post-Apartheid South Africa, women are more likely to celebrate the growing changes in gender dynamics brought by the propagation of post-feminist ideologies, whilst men are more likely to strictly impose and demand ‘tradition’. This is especially so, in respect of the

examination of women's position in society – something which has, historically, been pinned to supporting and prioritising black men and the collective.

In spite of this clear domestic imprint on black women, those who have been perceived as too powerful, ambitious and outspoken have been subsequently labelled in derogatory terms as, for example, 'menacing witches or cigarette-smoking whores' (Motsemme, 2002). Consequently, the question remains as to how black women can speak in South Africa and whether or not their imposed sense of obligation to the black collective dictates the ways in which they represent themselves in digital spheres (Motsemme, 2002).

Reflecting on Motsemme's portrayal of black women historically and in present times has led to my questioning how black women speak and perform online, on YouTube and Instagram. Before being able to explore this, I acknowledged through my own experience that YouTube is global and these women are not just engaging with South African gender cultures but with global gender regimes. In the first few minutes of my film, I explain how I may not be South African and yet, their content has captivated me, so much so that I became a consistent viewer.

### *A Post-Feminist South Africa?*

I firstly interrogated the ways in which notions of post-feminism for black women are available in Southern settings. Dosekun's (2015) exploration of transnational culture within post-feminism derives from her counter critique of McRobbie's characterisation of the 'global girl' – this global girl being the non-western woman who like "her western counterpart is a career woman, independent, motivated, ambitious and hardworking and able to enjoy some rewards of the feminine consumer culture which in turn becomes a defining feature of her citizenship and identity" (McRobbie, 2007, p.733). At a first glance, her definition of the non-western, post-feminist woman seems to maintain/adhere to non-western identities within western tropes, such is suggested when McRobbie (2007) asserts, "like her western counterpart".

In McRobbie's defence, her critical portraiture of the global girl is to support her claim that whilst Southern women may not aspire to migrate to the West they nevertheless tend to mimic and yearn for fashion and beauty products associated with Western femininity (McRobbie, 2009). In essence, they remain stuck in Western tropes of femininity, regardless of their apparent commitment to disassociate with the West. McRobbie (2009) illustrates this argument via the example of Cosmopolitan magazine and its local equivalents operating in the South, as inhabiting and masquerading Western femininity.

Unintentionally, an added incentive that pushed me to conduct this study was Cosmopolitan South Africa's March Influencer Issue of this year, focusing on many women of colour's grip on the digital space as producers. Reflecting on McRobbie's critique, it is fundamental that consideration is given to how these international women's magazines' local equivalents may still reproduce western customs, thereby inevitably imposing Global North cultural productions onto Southern women. Dosekun (2015) finds McRobbie's description of the global girl problematic, even if it does address the cracks in post-feminism literature, as its emphasis on the West and constant relation to the West remains reductionist in its portrayal of the Global South woman.

McRobbie's definition is reductionist in the way that it centralises the global girl within white womanhood, portraying the Southern woman as consistently striving to achieve the same goals as her Western counterparts by way of her own naivety. It never accounts for the differences in non-Western women, assuming that they all aspire for the same things in the same way when, in reality, there are grand socio-economic differences between the Global South women and between their respective countries (Dosekun, 2015).

To this point, her description then erases the notion that, even for some, the global girl portrait may not be attainable – but that there are class privileged women for whom privileged post-feminist culture may be available (Dosekun, 2015). The global girl figure strongly relies on the empirically insufficient binary of the 'affluent west' versus the 'poor rest' and does not answer for the new feminine cultures and subjects in the Global South (Dosekun, 2015, p.968).

While striving not to undermine the reality of the socio-economic disparities in the global South, this study allows for the conceptual view, and the possibility of, post-feminism in a non-Western context, whilst also allowing for transnational approaches in order to better nuance the Western interactions these women face, by the simple fact that their self-representation online is formed on an American-born platform. For this reason, Dosekun puts emphasis on the need to combine post-feminist theory with theories of transnationalism.

Post-feminism may here be viewed as containing the transnational demands that we attend to how “the culture is localized rather than exclusively westernized” (p.969). So far, within this study, examining South African histories, politics, structures and cultural logics has enabled post-feminism to be articulated on the ground instead of relying on Global North contexts (Dosekun, 2015). Dosekun (2015) places class difference as the key structural category differentiating Global South subjects within transnational post-feminist culture. Such will be attested to in my sample, where all three women pertain to middle-higher class families.

Furthermore, cultural knowledge and production inequalities between the North and South has been surveyed. The division of cultural production in academics, as has been noted, is embedded in Northern dominance practices and strategies. To expand on this point, feminist theory grew out of social movements and, yet, the knowledge production surrounding it is central within universities and publishers of the United States and Western Europe (Roberts & Connell, 2016). Moreover, “the leading journals in the international league tables, the biggest doctoral programmes, the main funders, the most prestigious associations, the biggest libraries and databanks are all located in the global metropole” (Roberts & Connell, 2016, p.135). Southern regions are faced with tenacious dominance tactics from the North, making it difficult for Southerners and Africans to become agents in their own cultural and knowledge production. Comprehensively, before anything can be investigated, it is critical to disclose how all these digital developments and phenomenons are situated within particular neoliberal frames. South African women engage in economic activities and economic industrial systems that require certain modes of representation. In doing so, they become responsible in

performing within certain ideologies and class levels: consumerism and femininity which are all celebrated as freedom, as Dosekun (2015) frames it.

Combining post-feminism with neoliberalism, the idea is that “women in the global South are no longer invariably seen as passive victims; there is an increased focus on women’s ability to make decisions and choices under given circumstances, allowing them to exercise ‘free will’ within the material constraints imposed by patriarchal power” (Wilson, 2011, p.316).

During my interrogation of South African women’s self-representation online, I began considering what lured me, personally, to their content, increasing my understanding of our historical position in media. Again, there were various lifestyle themes in their content that I enjoyed, but the most prominent youtube segments which caught my attention were beauty and fashion content. Maybe because they performed beauty in ways that were distant to Eurocentric standards, speaking on natural hair and makeup designed for our melanated skins. These were discourses that I had never before seen online on-screen, nor in traditional media.

Beauty and fashion industries may be considered shallow industries or non-adjacent to racial and political discourses but, in reality, for black women and myself, it has profound significance. Dosekun (2016) states how, “fashion and beauty are complex structural considerations for women in Africa, and at the same time immensely personal” (p.1). Black women’s content online, about natural hair and more, were deeply personal to me and were significant in the self-exploration of my black beauty.

On the continent, it is the case that we, “fashion and beautify ourselves in the interstices of multiple cultural and socioeconomic grammars – colonial, local, global and neocolonial” (Dosekun, 2016, p.1). African and feminist scholarships have voiced the policing of women’s fashion and beauty practices by the patriarchal and racial logics persisting within the dominance and structures of Eurocentric standards of beauty. As a result of the violent structures of beauty for black women in South Africa, attention has been paid to archiving historical photographic narratives of the beauty industry in black communities, with this project being framed as political and emancipatory (Ribane, 2006). Here, Ribane’s historical

photographic narratives – considered as political – may refer to traditional mediums of visual content but it is not to say that these new mediums, such as digital audio-visual content, cannot participate in these emancipatory acts.

Through this reflection, alongside the accompanying video documentary, I will inspect the ways in which black South African women's performances on YouTube and Instagram have manifested new aesthetics of representation and success, asking whether these new emblems support new forms of liberation. Therefore, when speaking generally of women in this reflection, I will be referring to the black South African women I have been categorically viewing in my YouTube and Instagram journey, as well as the many others that have found themselves in this digital space.

Again, through my research on black women on YouTube, the academic articles within my search which have explored this theme have observed black women in diasporic settings which, in turn, requires many to rely on academic works arising in the West rather than the South. Sobande (2017), in her own diasporic work, has expressed that, “unsurprisingly, YouTube activity has been a source of academic interest, yet few studies focus on the resistant sentiments it can involve, or the YouTube experiences of Black women” (p.656). According to Sobande, YouTube studies related to black women may be minimal, but it is critical to point out a significant gap in considerations of black women on the African continent – making the number of studies even smaller. Consequently, Iqani's (2019) declaration of further African case studies is important, if we are “speaking of de-westerning studies of cultural labour, African case studies need to be included” (p.230). My focus, as suggested in my research question, is on South African women and, as much as they cannot be taken as representatives of the whole continent, many conditions for women in this country are shared by many other countries on the continent, including “high rates of poverty and unemployment and growing levels of income inequality” (Iqani, 2019, p.230). Essentially, “when wealth and poverty exist shoulder to shoulder as they do in many African (and global south) contexts, questions about access to economic opportunity, employment and consumer aspirations become central to any research to do with labour” and, specifically in this case, digital labour (Iqani, 2019, p.230).

## Black African Women's Cultural Success

In addition, Iqani (2006) – in her case study of selfie images on Instagram produced by black African women who are located within specific Global South locations and heritages – was informative of the cultural power and success of black African women. Still, many of the women she observed, who had a digital presence, were also affiliated to traditional careers, such as acting, singing and modelling. In fact, there is an emerging debate around the notion of celebrity and whether content creators who surface from the digital space with no affiliation to traditional media can be meaningfully deemed celebrities and/or influencers.

Iqani has defined the celebrity status, “by a tension between the ordinary and the extraordinary” (p.163). And yet, by way of contrast, what many viewers have grasped from digital content creators is their “realness and relatability factor into YouTube activity which includes the real, raw and unfiltered” (Sobande, 2017, p.657). Of course, a counter-argument can be constructed as to digital creators and the level of realness they produce and, indeed, Sobande (2017) highlights this as follows:

“...micro-celebrity vloggers may project authentic images in comparison to more conventional types of celebrities, partly due to the ‘do it yourself’ online platform that vloggers appear on and the everyday feel of their images, but this is not to deny that these are also conscious acts of self-staging that may be involved in the pursuit of a profitable self-brand” (p.661).

This is an extremely important point. Sobande examines the intersections between celebrity status and the “ordinary” black woman in the digital arena and, in doing so, it deepens the research question posed above, reflecting on whether women’s online performances on YouTube and Instagram grant them the celebrity status that for so long was attached to traditional media and mediums. If so, should the notion of celebrity be modified or should the women on these platforms solely maintain the ‘influencer’ and/or brand ambassador title?

According to Iqani (2019), South Africa has approximately 50 million citizens, in respect of which it is recorded that between 40% and 60% of adults have internet access (including smartphones). Therefore, the total followings of the influencers, between 15,000 and 215,000, in the case of these three women, reveals that, although they have certainly achieved some degree of recognition in the public realm, they are not quite full-blown celebrities. Nevertheless, these black African women are now part of a growing phenomenon of digital cultural production within which the term 'influencer' has become a title linked to their online performances. In my personal experience, as much as these terms may come off as technical, influencers have embodied celebrity traits because they do have influence which in part, pushed me to cut off my hair. However, this influence and 'celebrity' aura was rooted in their relatability.

Iqani (2019) observes the work of brand ambassadors and influencers specifically in South Africa and states how, "the majority of brand ambassadorial work takes place on social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and YouTube", as the digital arena is leading this occupancy (p.231). Brand ambassador or its synonym, influencer, is considered when, "citizens themselves are seen as able to fulfill an ambassadorial role such that they can infect those with whom they come in contact with and have the ability to influence the opinions and ideas" (p.232). These brand ambassadors have influenced my purchasing decisions and self-reflexive notions of beauty. The film reflects on my journey of being influenced, but also, the many other viewers who have come in contact with these women.

Black African women on YouTube who have a following and produce content are able to influence their circle of followers whilst working alongside brands which align with their values. Such has been my experience, as I have witnessed women speaking on various subjects in their lives, including the brands and products they have enjoyed and which, in turn, have allowed them to become brand ambassadors.

Through my consumption, I have found myself buying the products they mention, researching the brands they speak of and, overall, enjoying the content they produce. Therefore, my consumption becomes more than just viewership; my consumption transforms into a purchasing power that digital creators may profit from. As seen in the various YouTube

studies on black women, black women viewers, including myself, are now part of the circles content creators form in these spaces. YouTube and Instagram are no longer just mediums of representation; they have become mediums within which new careers and brands may arise – new careers and brands in respect of which the traditional media would have precluded.

I would like to note that as much as I have spoken of online performances from black women on both YouTube and Instagram, YouTube remains the leading platform which I investigated. As stated previously, my enthusiasm for black women’s online productions began on YouTube, whereas Instagram only came later on in my digital consumption viewing history.

YouTube is more than a video sharing website: it has permitted communities of colour to find a platform where video production skills may be refined; where careers can be made; and where new representations can be distributed amongst local and global audiences. The platform itself, and the way it has been constructed, facilitates these various profitable gains. Farchy (2009) explains how YouTube, “promises a more direct relationship between creators of content and the public and the essential function is to capture Internet users’ attention by guiding them into this economy of abundance” (p.361).

The medium has been fabricated in an intentional manner to facilitate a closer relationship or, even, a closer bond, between creators and viewers. Indeed, the attention economy of viewers can speak for how black women’s self-representation online is being received. In order for this to be effective, certain frames and functions on the platform enable content creators to communicate and share their content with their audiences, and all the while building a relationship with them. The immediacy and facilitated potential to create these affinities reveal the extent to which many of the platforms’ features are created just for this objective. Women produce their content independently, edit the content and publish it on these platforms; content which is then received by the audiences which consume it.

## **Methodology and Process**

### *Research Strategy*

In my pursuit of this project, I had a strong desire to convey my ideas through the audio visual medium. Recognising that I wanted to focus specifically on content creation on Youtube and Instagram, I wanted this project to stylistically reflect the content often created for these platforms, combining video, audio and photographic content. As a consumer of digital content production, much of the relatability that influencers have has often been rooted in the familiar setup of their content- a young woman in her bedroom, speaking directly to the camera and giving her own personal perspective on brands, products and life experiences. Seeing traditional media aligning to these digital creatives, I was interested in understanding more from their experiences, the current status of their careers and the behind-the-scenes of their production enterprises. Conversing orally with them seemed the most appropriate method for this research piece, on consideration, in order to “understand the meaning of respondents’ experiences and life worlds”, whilst framing it within critical race theory, critical feminist and neoliberalist consumer culture perspectives (Warren, 2002, p.83). Additionally, having various women speak on their experiences allowed for the disruption of a homogenous understanding of the black South African woman. Indeed, these women work on the same platform and create similar content but they are inherently different from one another. In my research I learned that South African content producers do not share the same background or the same relationships to social class.

### *Design of Research Tools*

Unlike traditional media, when entering the YouTube realm, the audiences’ expectations of the content they seek or engage with is not necessarily rooted in big budget productions. Well curated content can gain just as much traction as a video taken on one’s phone without thought or consideration for aesthetics. These design strategies form the basic foundations in creating a YouTube video, but ultimately the beauty of this platform is that it is not prescriptive in the ways that content is produced and distributed. The essence of my film was grounded in being engaging and relatable, particularly given that the success of content creation on Youtube and Instagram is its personable quality. Therefore, it was important that this documentary felt

as though the audience was directly immersed in the conversation, almost as if they were speaking to a friend or family member despite having never met the influencer. Through the black women I witnessed on the platform, I was able to see myself in them and for this reason, I replicated what I had been captivated by.

For some time I considered travelling to Johannesburg to meet with all three, as all of them reside there presently, but given the logistical and budget constraints of this project I interviewed two via FaceTime and only one in person. Lungile, who I interviewed in person, visited Cape Town on a business trip with Google as an influencer, and as such, I agreed to meet with her in her free time. Minky and Cassandra's interviews were conducted online. During the editorial process what I thought was a defeat was in fact a success and, further, a powerful extension of my argument centering on the increase in digital performances. My in-person interview gradually felt out of a place, but through various jump cuts and alternations between Lungile's digital content and her interview footage, I managed to integrate her in-person footage, giving it the opportunity to fairly interact with the others'.

### *Sampling and Challenges*

The three participants featured in this documentary are: Minky Mothabela, Cassandra Twala and Lungile Thabethe- all of whom are leading content creators in South Africa. These three individuals have a presence both on Instagram and Youtube, utilising these social media platforms to promote their brands. All three are born and raised in South Africa and fall between the ages of 24 and 26. Their content largely explores fashion, beauty and lifestyle, leading to them working with reputable local and international brands.

With 8.27K subscribers on Youtube and 21K followers on Instagram, Minky has worked with the likes of L'oreal and Dior. Revlon, Forever New and Maybelline are brands that are frequently featured on Lungile's profiles, reaching her audiences of 6.2K subscribers on YouTube and 164K followers on Instagram. Cassandra's 790 Youtube subscribers and 28.7K Instagram followers are

frequently updated with carefully curated content in partnership with brands such as Clinique, Country Road and Coach. Whilst brand partnerships such as these often call the authenticity of influencers into question, in the digital sphere subscribers and followers function as social currency. Therefore, in relation to the participants of this documentary, these numbers reflect a significant influence on consumer behaviour.

Minky, Lungile and Cassandra were three of the thirty individuals I had contacted in consideration for this project. One of the most significant challenges I faced was sourcing interviewees who actually wanted to participate and who would, in addition, commit to speaking with me. As Boucher (2017) mentions, “the interviewer should be concerned with both commitment and engagement with the interviewee (p.99).” For many of those I contacted their emails were captioned as being “business emails for business enquiries”, which was an issue that posed a greater challenge in my research. Without a commercial advantage, I came to realise that this unfortunately meant that I fell in the cracks of an unanswered emails. These women may not be exclusively influencers but they also fail to resemble entirely a conventional celebrity. There is indeed a sense of hybridity in their online performance which raises the question as to whether these binary categories are useful tools for explanation.

For this reason, in terms of methodology I very quickly realised that this should not be conducted via a regular interviewing method but rather by an elite interviewing method, where a “group of individuals, who have held a position in society and occupy institutional and social power” are sought for (Boucher, 2017, p.99). Indeed, as can be observed by their number of followers and subscribers, these women hold a level of importance in the digital realm.

Whilst working on this project, the release of the Cosmopolitan Influencer Issue in March 2019, was not only timely but pertinent in informing me about how the creative industries perceived influencers. This Influencer issue focused on interviews with various content creators in the country, discussing digital platforms, online growth and their emerging global reach. This illustrated the ways in which traditional mediums and digital platforms converged to reimagine new ways of cultural production and distribution. An exciting statement in the magazine was

made by Dayo Olopade, the Content Managing Partner for Africa at YouTube: “South African culture has global reach and as more and more producers have started to create content by South Africans, for South Africans, local audiences are responding” (“YouTube Power List 2019”). This is significant because it demonstrates that South African content not only has local reach but international relevance positioning its creatives as being at the forefront of this global digital movement. This in turn led me to contacting Holly Meadows, an industry figure and current Editor-in-Chief of Cosmopolitan SA to understand the decision and process behind the design of this issue. Struggling with responses from content creators I had contacted, I followed up mentioning that I had spoken to Holly as part of this project. Instantly, I went from having no one to interview, to three influencers who were suddenly interested in participating. Through this I came to realise that whilst audiences connect with influencers for the realness and authenticity factor, these women were – I realized – aligning with brands signaling commercial potential, which in many ways causes inaccessibility for audiences.

### *Class in Post-Apartheid South Africa*

It must be noted that for my sample, all participants ranged from middle to upper class backgrounds, reflecting the notion that one needs to be part of the social elite in order to gain access to these social media applications in the first place. Iqani (2019) explains how the disparities in cultural and aspirational access become political, because of the historical exclusion and marginalisation of black South Africans from national and global economies. Therefore, aspiring black South Africans who pertain to middle-class families are stretching their credit limits in order to have access to middle-class lifestyles as a luxury which is simply unavailable to the lower class (James, 2014). Because of the absence of a different social class level in my sample, I did attempt to contact a higher number of influencers for diversity purposes. However, this attempt was unsuccessful given the limited responses I got. This indicates that in post-apartheid South Africa whilst the digital sphere has resulted in greater avenues to create and share content, class distinctions mean that these opportunities are unfortunately concentrated amongst the middle and upper classes. Iqani (2019) addresses this

as follows: “the influencers are making a commentary about their individual rights, but also the rights of all those who look up to them, to have access to these global brands” (p.242). In other words, their influence becomes bigger than their individuality, as they develop into an aspirational example and accrue responsibility for those watching who may desire to resemble them.

### *Ethics and Reflexivity*

Lastly, even if these women’s online performance is rooted in filming and recording themselves, in order to publish this for the world, I was forced to remain cognizant that, as I was recording this for our interviews, the interviewees might still feel uncomfortable and/or unwilling to speak. Although consent forms were signed and/or written consent via emails was obtained, the act of recording, outside of your control, is not always an easy process for respondents. Nevertheless, for the creatives who did indeed decide to speak to me, it seemed to be a therapeutic experience for them to reflect on their own online journey.

During the editing process determining a way to present the influencers, whilst simultaneously retaining the authenticity of these women, was a challenge. What facilitated the overcoming of this challenge was, my own personal journey: that of struggling with the representation of black African women and relating to their desire to become self-representative producers. Taking into account the personal sensitivities around the historical lack of representation and the joy around emerging digital platforms, I endeavoured to navigate the footage respectfully, whilst at the same time remaining critical. One of the difficulties surrounding editing is the inability to say and portray everything in a restricted amount of time. In addition, one must always consider the audience whilst also implementing strategies that will attempt to minimize the loss of viewers’ attention without losing the quality of the information presented. The process of collecting information through interviews and editing is never neutral: “none of these activities – watching, listening, asking or collecting is a neutral, value free act nor does it exist

beyond the assumptions and prescriptions of the discourse of the participant's own culture" (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1998, p.85).

Ethnographic work is always intertwined with affirming the voices of subjects, but also having the ability to distort them, given the ethnographer's governing position. I may be a middle-class African woman myself, from Uganda and the Ivory Coast, but I am not South African. Therefore, I have not experienced black womanhood within this particular context. On that account, many theorists' such as Dosekun, Iqani and Posel, challenge the homogenous portrayals of black women, informing my self-reflexive and ethical process. As Warren (2002) puts it, "if there is a subtle distinction between ethnographic methods and qualitative interviews where interviews focus further on common patterns and themes between particular types of respondents, it has long been linked to ethnographic fieldwork regardless" (p.85). Both methods require observations of patterns and disparities whilst remaining critical of this activity in itself.

Whilst these women's online performances are rooted in filming and recording themselves, I was forced to remain cognizant that as I was recording them for our interviews, the interviewees might still feel uncomfortable and/or unwilling to speak. Although consent forms were signed and/or written consent via emails was obtained, the act of recording, outside of your control, is not always an easy process for respondents. Nevertheless, for the respondents who did indeed decide to speak to me, it seemed to be a therapeutic experience for them to reflect on their own online journey.

### **Reflections on Interviews & The Video Documentary**

The many arguments addressed in the literature and the methodological sections in this study, informed my editing process of the interviews for my video documentary. I will briefly outline my findings and illustrations from my interviews and from what one will witness in the film.

My editing process was informed by my articulated perspectives of critical race theory, critical post-feminist and neoliberalist theories in the literature review. Black women representation in media has had its challenges historically, at an international and national scale. However, traditional media post-apartheid allowed for some women to demand space and agency to form new representations of themselves and the black women around them. As such, the emerging digital platforms have facilitated this movement for the ones who have access to it. Allowing black women to diffuse such representations at a local and global scale. Thus, my playback of the interviews motivated me to split them into five 'thematics' that I will devote a paragraph to each section successively: Consumer to Producer; Access and Challenges; Beauty and Fashion; Redefining Aspiration (Black Women Edition); and Act Local/Think Global. The reason I chose to divide them into five parts was enlightened by the theory in part, but also my conversation of an hour and more with the women. Repeated keywords, patterns suggested by the creators themselves brought me to these conclusive themes.

As it will be observed in the film, one particular chosen aesthetic of my editing process was that of choosing to implement my own voice over, narrating the various content around these three subjects. Like I mentioned in my methodology, the film was rooted in replicating the YouTube format: combining video, audio and photographic content in quick jump cuts. The content shown is not necessarily rooted in big budget productions one would witness in Hollywood. Rather, the content shows women speaking directly to the camera in their rooms, bathrooms sharing personal opinions and life experiences. Essentially, showcasing relatable and personable aesthetics – which I wanted to implement with my own voice. This project began with my personal experience and I felt it was necessary to narrate my research process and opinions through this self-reflexive study.

The video documentary is dissected into two parts: the first being the history and context behind the emergence of black women's online performance; and the second part revealing the interviews of the three respondents. My voice over leads the first section but is, thereafter, placed in the background, because the women's voices are in the foreground. The five thematics, alongside my voice over, are implemented in-sync. I felt that this detail was

fundamental in order to not lose my voice, the rhythm and flow of the film never ruling out the women's voices.

### *Consumer to Producer*

The video documentary illustrates the extent to which all three women were consumers of content before they became producers of it. Understanding how scarce black African women's representation has been globally, and specifically in South Africa, all three respondents were demonstrably eager to view content made by black women. However, it is important to note that, as much as they have and continue to enjoy content from their South African peers, they did, in fact, consume black women-created content from the diaspora along with local South African content. For example, they were influenced by *Jackie Aina*, a Nigerian-American pioneer in black women representation in beauty.

However, instead of remaining audience members and continuously viewing such content abroad and in South Africa, they were inspired to become producers themselves. Iqani (2019) has expressed how consumers become brand influencers and key actors in the creation of brand reputation – not only for others but also for themselves. Consumers, such as the three women, understood the ways in which their viewership is a key construction of brand value (Iqani, 2019). For that reason, attaching themselves to brands entails valuable work and allows them, in turn, to become producers (Iqani, 2019).

I had, previously, considered how my viewership converted into celebrity and socio-economic affluence for many of these creators. Consumption value and power are now within the hands of influencers who generate their circles. Additionally, citizen-consumers who become producers are of value because they remain detached from the consumption experience and can speak directly the language of other consumers.

All three women, especially Lungile, went into detail as to how their production role is designed on digital platforms. Brand advocacy programmes, and instructing bloggers to participate in events whilst covering them on social media, or simply being paid to associate with brands, are some of the characteristics of their position (Iqani, 2019). Be that as it may, Minky and Cassandra are not full-time digital producers: one has her own business and the

other is a bank manager. Lungile, on the other hand, is a full-time content producer, undertaking brand ambassadorial work seriously whilst also looking into business ventures outside of this profession. That is important to extract from them being part-time and full-time producers is the reality that this is in fact a possible venture for South Africans and that this has been by way of representation of other fellow black women; a career in apartheid and current post-apartheid times seems inconceivable for black women.

### *Redefining Aspiration – Black Women Edition*

All three respondents insisted that seeing other women of colour on-screen allowed them to aspire to make their own representations onscreen. Representation is pivotal in allowing women to recognise that they can pursue this new-age career, if access and technological knowledge are sufficient. Reverting back to Posel's (2010) reflection regarding the erasure of black consumption and aspiration during apartheid, the three respondents have been amazed but also burdened by the responsibility of being digital performers of aspiration culture in South Africa, whilst nevertheless recognising the local politics around race, gender and class.

What was most pertinent in this theme was Minky's expression around redefining aspiration because of her failure to relate to luxurious and elite influencers. She is an influencer herself, and, furthermore, she benefits from a certain class-privilege and, even with such privilege, she believes that some influencers disseminate unrelatable aspirational content. Complementing this, Minky mentioned influencers such as *Kefilwe Mabote* on Instagram being unreachable for her standards of aspiration and that, therefore, she wonders how other consumers may relate to her own aspirational content. Iqani (2019) suggests that "South African influencers who promote global brands are not trying to be western and are claiming their right to occupy the most elite and luxurious identities available" (p.243).

However, it may be possible that some consumers and other influencers do not enjoy or relate to such content. Again, Dosekun (2015) stressed that, via a transnational viewpoint, women are able to be different and perform differently. Reducing women to a homogenous portrayal of them, or attempting to fit them all in one box, necessarily rejects difference and multiplicity in black Southern women.

### *Access and Challenges*

Class-privilege and class difference towards other black women in South Africa has in fact become a priority for the influencers interviewed in my film, in respect of how they produce content and when they publish it. Minky and Lungile are hyper aware and are consciously implementing conversational strategies to attain their desired reach. It is an entangled online performance for them, because, on the one hand, they are fulfilling their aspirational desires and building brands for themselves but, on the other hand, they are grounded with respect to the class and socio-economic discrepancies between black women and individuals of colour.

Data access in South Africa, being among the most expensive in the world, has resulted in extensive gaps between different classes and socio-economic communities: “while the wealthy can control their access to the internet, which is easily available to them, the poor, which make up the majority of the population have to resort to disproportionately high rates for data to access the internet” (“Internet access has become a human right”). For this reason, Lungile went into extensive details as to how she organises her strategies to publish content. Here, she relies heavily on viewers’ places of work, where WiFi is free and accessible to them. Thus, her publishing schedule revolves around their timetables and when she assumes they will have a break to view her content which takes place primarily between 9am and 5pm. On the other hand, Cassandra was aware of the access issues for the many in South Africa but was not producing and publicising content in order to answer to their possibly particular needs.

As much as YouTube may claim to be a democratising platform, South African creatives have found themselves facilitating a form of democratic access in their localised contexts (Wasko & Erickson, 2009). Through the experience of these three women, the assertion of ‘democratisation’ on the platform is unpacked and, ultimately, questioned. Is it really a democratic entity for all or is it again asserting this claim with reference to the West? Even if one wants to observe these women’s self-representation online as transnational, it is inevitable that the ways in which the global North comes into play are interrogated, because of the Western nature of these platforms.

### *Beauty and Fashion*

The video documentary illustrates how all three subjects classify their content to be beauty and fashion-related. Iqani (2016) and Dosekun (2016) have implied how beauty and fashion may seem like superficial industries to perform and aspire to be a part of, but, in reality, both industries have been pivotal in the negation of black women. So much so, that it is deeply embedded in violent systems of oppression, from apartheid up till our present times.

Eurocentric ideals of beauty and desirability have controlled and even, at times, erased black female portrayals in media, entailing the notion that the beauty industry is more than a production and more akin to a political monopoly. Cassandra has alluded to her dislike for her physique, especially her behind; and Lungile struggled with acne and never witnessed women who looked like her on-screen. This emancipatory act of becoming producers to make audio-visual content around beauty narratives focusing on black women is political and it is growing on both Instagram and YouTube (Iqani, 2016).

### *Local/Global*

The notion of being local and global is at the heart of my interviews with the three respondents. The women having to perform online to appeal to a local audience whilst aiming to broadcast themselves globally is an important observation I made during my personal consumption of YouTube and throughout this study. Exclusive of my personal analysis, a compelling fact is that the women brought these topics up continuously in conversation, and they did this independently of my part as an interviewer. They kept mentioning how they have to act local and global in order to pursue this production venture: local, because they want to produce for South Africans and be proud to be of the country, and; global, because they do not believe that their careers should be limited to the country or the continent.

Lungile stressed the fact that we never impose such boundaries or limits on anyone else but black women. Especially on the continent, black women seem to need to hold the burden for all. This echoes a point that was made by Motsemme (2002) about how black women hold

the burden and prioritise everyone else at the expense of their own self. None of these women were apologetic about their desire to grow and increase global reach.

Reflecting on these interviews, the overall film and the theoretical research, it is evident to me that YouTube had a substantial impact in my journey. From attempting the “Big Chop”, viewing the videos on a daily basis to speaking of these content creators offline. Distancing myself from the YouTube stylistic aesthetics in the film would have felt estranged from the topic at hand. Plus, it gave me an opportunity to delve into my own production capabilities which I have explored in my own media career. Mimicking this YouTube and digital content style by adding my personal voice and experiences supported the idea that a consumer can in fact become a producer. My target audience of this film, which I believe are women of color who identify with this digital phenomenon, can become conscious of their own production capacities but also recognize how valuable their viewership is to this digital realm. Realistically, without the digital creators’ audiences, the digital sphere would not allow for communal conversations locally and globally.

To conclude, this reflection has been written in support of a video documentary exploring South African women’s performances online. I entered this project with the following research question : what does it mean for black women to be content creators on these digital platforms in South Africa?

My study has considered how youtube content producers are engaged in shaping new discourses on post-femininity, critical race theory and neoliberalist perspectives. Digital platforms, YouTube and Instagram especially, are foundations in the construction of digital influencers. As Iqani (2019) puts it, “Instagram is established as a key social media platform in which influencers are active” (p.234). The same goes for YouTube, given that it contains “an institutional function operating as a coordinating mechanism between individual and collective creativity and meaning production” (Burgess & Green, 2009, p.37). However, both function as outlets for potential creatives and cultural producers.

Although it may be easy to perceive influencer performance as trendy and simply ‘with the times’ , the intention behind this reflection and documentary is that of enunciating the extent to which black women’s representation has been political and how pivotal their independent productions online have been for the grander political and historical oppression of women of colour. Not only are they forming new representations of women and beauty, but they are forging economic affluence and recognition for themselves.

This study is too small in scope to discuss every trope tied to black women’s history and it is unable to fully consider their present position in South African society. What it has attempted to do is deepen conversations around what it is to perform femininity within an aspirational culture in southern settings and away from western influence. The media production in the West may not have been my focus but contesting it and critiquing its position in African cultural production was necessary. Most importantly, this project has allowed me to expand my understanding of black female representation online. The process has made me aware of how important it is not to homogenise black women as one entity and has helped me to recognise the complexities and diversities of black African women in terms of geography, identity and performance.

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