Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

'Brandsluts': Instagram influencers and conspicuous consumption in post-apartheid South Africa

Vidhya Sana

Department of Sociology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Post-Apartheid South Africa shifted to a culture of consumption, originating with a transition to a neoliberal society [Sana, V. (2022). Bits of bytes and bites of bits: Instagram and the gendered performance of food production in the South African Indian community. *Agenda*, *36*(1), 100–108], alongside access to a globalized world. During apartheid, consumption was strictly regulated, and racialized. This culture of consumption has been prevalent since the mid-1990s. As apartheid regulations lifted, the freedom of movement, choice and the ability to consume unreservedly, opened possibilities previously unimagined for much of the population. Consumption in South Africa is largely characterized by the unique contextual and symbolic processes that inform it. Consumption practices have impacted performances of identity and anxieties of belonging in turn [Sana, V. (2022). Bits of bytes and bites of bits: Instagram and the gendered performance of food production in the South African Indian community. *Agenda*, *36*(1), 100–108]. This paper examines the visual representations of consumption practices on Instagram. Using critical consumption studies, an analysis of various Instagram influencers' consumption uncovers how South Africans affirm their place in the neoliberal global stage through acts of consumption. The article considers the consumption of products as a product itself to be consumed, and how this links to debates around conspicuous consumption in South Africa.

In March 2022, a social media scandal involving many famed influencers had South Africans questioning the blind faith with which they trust their favourite content creators. Dubbed by the mainstream media as 'The Holiday Swindler', Tasneem Moosa owned a company run primarily through social media channels (Naidoo, 2022). The company sold discounted holidays through referrals by social media influencers, mostly via Instagram. As is a norm in social media, influencers promoted the company, Hello Darlings, and its services in exchange for free or partially paid holidays. Some influencers allegedly received compensation for promoting their holidays, thus securing more clientele for Hello Darlings. In February 2022, many aspiring travellers were astonished to find that

---

CONTACT Vidhya Sana ✉ vidhyasana@gmail.com

their bookings were not valid, and that Hello Darlings had closed all their social media accounts. The company had shut down and the owner could not be located. Deposits and money paid for trips had all been left unaccounted for. This case highlights a significant trend on social media, where content creators[1] (known popularly as influencers), promote products or services by preparing content in which they are seen 'unboxing' said products, consuming the product or service and portraying the product or service as essential to their lifestyle, thereby influencing their followers to purchase products or services. With over 5.65 million users as of January 2023, Instagram is one of the fastest-growing social media platforms in South Africa (Charles Smith Associates, 2023). Often, these performances are aligned to the influencer's chosen aesthetic and performed emotively and excessively to ensure that followers aligned with and aspiring to a similar lifestyle deem the product as essential to the enhancement of their own lifestyle and, subsequently, act on purchasing the product or service. Using a framework of conspicuous consumption in post-apartheid South Africa, this paper explores the trend of influencers consuming products on social media to create content and examines what this can reveal about the anxieties of belonging and identity in post-apartheid South Africa. More specifically, what do these performances of consumption indicate about the state of freedom and identity in post-Apartheid South Africa?

Instagram, and other influencer content, including blogs, YouTube channels, Facebook pages, and more recently, TikTok, are grounded in consumption. Videos, images and text, all curated and styled with the intention of being consumed. In countries like South Africa, the user experience is no different from the Global North, but consumption is 'much more conspicuous in the global south where there is an imbalance in terms of wealth distribution' (Mpofu et al., 2023, p. 6). The nature of this conspicuous consumption is significant in South Africa, one of the most unequal countries in the world where 42.2% of the country's wealth is held by only 1% of the population (Credit Suisse Global Wealth Report, 2023, p. 61).

Demonstrations of conspicuous consumption on Instagram, which are widespread, offer compelling data that can be analysed for their social impact in post-apartheid South Africa. While consumer behaviour may also be an avenue for research, this article is particularly concerned with how this behaviour is reflective of wider social trends in post-apartheid South Africa and the subsequent impact on identity formation. The article contributes to the growing corpus of research on consumer culture, as crucial to identity-making in South Africa, in an increasingly digital age. It offers a unique perspective on how the manifestation of conspicuous consumption online reflects broader trends in South Africa. Current work in consumption studies in South Africa[2] explores conspicuous consumption through the lens of poverty, femininity and masculinity, status and belonging. This article draws on these ideas and frames consumption as an integral factor in identity-making. The manifestation of this, in an online space is unique. The work considers how identity-making is experienced and manifests uniquely along racial lines, an indication of broader fractures in the South African milieu.

Framing consumption online in post-apartheid South Africa

Consumption pervades virtually all activities in daily life because in every action, something is being consumed. Many of the items we consume have a value (mostly monetary)

but not entirely, and while 'these types of everyday consumption seem unexciting', they are 'experienced by most of the global population in some form' (Paterson, 2017, p. 8). Paterson (2017, p. 8) elaborates further:

> Insofar as it relates to consumption, comparable admixtures of conscious and nonconscious processes take place, such as noticing labels, passing the gaze over advertisements and signs, breathing in smells that involuntarily remind us of home or holidays. If we stand back and take notice, these actions and processes reveal complex personal and interpersonal negotiations to do with identity, status, aspirations, cultural capital, and position within a social group.

Every act of consumption can reveal a set of complex social interactions and decisions that lead to the choice to consume.

More importantly, acts of consumption tell a story about the consumer's social status by giving an indication of their level of wealth, culture, preference, etc. The practice of consumption essentially tells us a story about the identity of the individual and where he/she/they belong.[3] Furthermore, 'consumer behaviours and decision making can be interpreted only in terms of a certain level of irrationality, of daydreaming, or wanting and wishing' to belong to a specific group (Paterson, 2017, p. 7). Paterson suggests that at the same moment of consumption, we are also producers and that 'we buy to express our individuality, but we get our cues from social groups and social media' (Paterson, 2017, p. 11). Thus, through consumption, we produce, or reproduce, markers of identity which others consume. For Instagram influencers, this cycle functions as a core of their online identity. It is through consumption of products, items and experiences that influencers carefully curate and capture through their lenses, that their product, their social capital, is produced for followers to consume. Thus, consumption itself becomes social capital, which in turn becomes a product to be consumed. I refer to this as consumption-production which gives rise two interrelated questions, namely (1) what does this reflect for a new democracy that is struggling to come to terms with glaring inequalities? (2) What do instances of consumption-production reveal about consumption as a performance of identity? Through an analysis and recognition of these key elements of consumption-production, inferences can be made about identity and belonging in the South African community.

Consumption as identity and freedom in post-apartheid South Africa

Acts of consumption are pervasive in our daily activities and constructs our lives in several ways. Consumption is an important feature of global society. 'Consumption is unique to its social contexts, but a social process that occurs worldwide' (Iqani, 2012, p. 12). Viewing consumption as a social (indeed a cultural) process, unique to contemporary South Africa, enables the framing of social capital as a driving force behind consumption practices. The consumption context in post-apartheid South Africa is a notable lens through which we can explore 'global patterns of income, inequality, race-based economic oppression, and hopes for the material betterment of life' (Iqani & Kenny, 2015, p. 97 in Sana, 2022, p. 70).

The examination of practices of consumption-production are illuminating in that they reveal the contextual and symbolic processes that inform them. In this context, by consumption, I refer not only to the consumption of physical goods, but also the implications

of choices informed by a neoliberal system, an economy of consumption and the so-called freedom associated with such consumption. During apartheid, the regulation of consumption practices served to control race groups.[4] It was consumption itself that mobilized former apartheid supporters to abandon the Apartheid project, as '[W]hites moved to abandon passive support for apartheid only when their participation in the bright world of the shopping malls came under threat' (Hyslop, 2000, p. 43).

Post-apartheid South Africa allowed the freedom of movement, choice and the ability to consume as one wishes (Sana, 2022, p. 7). The post-apartheid South African milieu is defined by the ability to consume (Sana, 2022, p. 70) Incorporating a framework of consumption in examinations of subject matter in contemporary South Africa 'highlights the various forces at play in a post-apartheid context' (Odhiambo, 2008, p. 72), if only because consumption is so pervasive in South Africa, as it is in many postcolonial societies.[5] In post-apartheid South Africa, 'consumption has become one of the modes for social analysts to anticipate and read change, citing the entry of the black consumer into new spaces and new socialites as markers of transformation' (Mupotsa, 2015, p. 185). Thus, the study of consumption in post-apartheid South Africa is vital as it reveals a multitude of readings of how, if at all, notions of identity have evolved in the post-apartheid, and how this evolution is performed through consumption. A study of consumption is also inextricably linked to power[6] and belonging. Analysing aspects of consumption-production through this lens unfolds a great deal about how South Africans demonstrate their own understandings of freedom, and how they fit into post-apartheid South Africa through acts of consumption. In considering the theorizing of consumption in post-apartheid South Africa, I consider two perspectives on consumption. First, consumption as a route (or the root) of manipulation, control and maintaining existing power structures.[7] According to Sana (2022, p. 70) contrarily, individual agency also plays a role in consumptive practices, more so 'in the context of societies in which consumption was actively used as a form of racist regulation and exclusion' (Iqani, 2012, p. 8). Second, consumption from an anthropological perspective, as an assertion of freedom, where agency is central in the construction of identities of class.[8] Both approaches offer useful frameworks through which consumption can be explored online. I adopt the anthropological approach that considers consumption as a means of expression, agency and choice (Sana, 2022, p. 71). This approach is helpful in exploring of how the trajectories of consumption-production are essentially an expression of identity and social capital (Sana, 2022).

More recently, work in consumption in South Africa has explored the gendered and racial nature of consumption (Mpofu et al., 2023) and consider that the rise of the new black middle class in South Africa has shifted their focus from economic justice to their personal wealth accumulation and their own consumptive practices (Posel & van Wyk, 2019). Mpofu et al. (2023, p. 17) elaborate that notions of conspicuous consumption, whether aspirational or status, are microcosmic expressions of the wider structural issues of poverty, gender, race, and class. In this vein, online expressions of consumption, in their social capital capacity, alongside the consumption of influencer content by users, mase consumptive practices so 'much more insecure and difficult to negotiate' (Mpofu et al., 2023, p. 17).

By acknowledging consumption as an expression of identity, we acknowledge 'consumption is a form of public action and participation, and a process of making visible –

both of which are inherently political' (Iqani, 2012, p. 12). Through practices of consuming, be it food, clothing or entertainment, we are making visible statements about our identities and social inclinations (Sana, 2022). In addition, Iqani and Kenny (2015, p. 96) argue that 'consumption, in its visibility, in its excess and extravagance, in its (contrary) basic economic necessity, in its expressive freedom and in its ability to call up anxieties and moral orders, returns us to the limits of society and value/s'. Consumption, in all its visibility and excess is notably important in this argument because the actual moments of consumption-production, which, true to the nature of social media, are excessively visible. This includes the way the influencers style themselves, how they perform or showcase their brands, what language they use, and comments they make about the brands. These are all indicators of what consumption-production suggests about identity (and identity formation) in South Africa in relation to the chosen examples in this paper.

Instagram influencers and social capital

Social media campaigns and collaborations with Instagram influencers have increasingly harnessed lucrative for corporations, and many are beginning to recognize the value created by influencers, whose word-of-mouth style of interactions are appealing to followers of social media.[9] The interactive nature of social media facilitates the illusion of a more intimate relationship between influencers and their followers.[10] The constant interaction with content and the ability of the influencer to respond to followers, enables a relationship where followers gain confidence in their admired influencers. Influencers are 'seen by consumers as more trustworthy and attractive because of their more engaged relationships' (Silva et al., 2020, p. 134). While some academic work has been undertaken on social media, specifically Instagram, much of the work has focused on the manner in which Instagram can be utilized for marketing (Hollebeek & Chen, 2014; Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014), education (Bennett & Morton, 2021), public policy and psychology (Fardouly et al., 2018; Mackson et al., 2019). This article acknowledges that Instagram, as a platform, has valuable impact on identity creation and belonging.

Instagram influencers accumulate social capital[11] and build networks of relationships with the marketers of brands they interact with, other influencers and, most importantly, their followers. Social capital is defined by Bourdieu (1984) as 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition'. Furthermore, Bourdieu (2001, p. 103) suggests:

> The volume of social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected.

Influencers work tirelessly at building their trust and relatability with their audiences. The stronger their ties to their followers, the higher their social capital value. In the case of Instagram influencers, social capital then becomes an asset that can be monetized by influencers in the form of brand collaborations and the like. The larger the networks of influence, the higher the social capital of the influencer. These relationships have to be 'maintained for a long time' (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 106).

Social capital is also linked to class. Thus, not only are the ties that bind influencers to their followers of significance, but so is the assumed social capital of their followers. Thus, brands will collaborate with influencers based not only on their number of followers, but also the perceived social class with which a specific influencer resonates. As influencers get renumerated for their collaborations with brands, the social capital, or social relations, they have built begin to 'produce profits' (Lin, 2001) and social capital becomes monetized. Thus, once influencers collaborate with brands, '[T]he communities which were built on social capital and authenticity now became venues for influencers to engage in branding activities, often in direct opposition to how the communities were formed' (Gnegy, 2017, pp. 4–5).

It is helpful to consider Instagram influencers through the lens of social capital theory as it offers a framework through which we can begin to see *how* influencers influence, *who* they influence, and *what* the possible implications of performing consumption online could be. I turn now to the influencers themselves and the methodology of the paper.

Which influencers? – methodology

For the purposes of this discussion, I have undertaken a qualitative visual and textual analysis of four South African Instagram influencers' posts, with a specific focus on the various ways in which they promote products and services on their pages and engage what these performances can reveal about consumerism in post-apartheid South Africa. Instagram, as a platform, was chosen for its audio-visual capabilities, along with textual captions to posts and the ability to scrutinize responses to content. The four influencers were selected based on pre-determined parameters and the nature of the research questions being addressed, more specifically for their engagement with brands. The frequency of interaction with branded items, and the influencers' consumption thereof, offers moments of insight to explore performances of consumption, and these moments are analysed to reveal the state of freedom and identity in post-apartheid South Africa. In the first step of data collection, a list was compiled of Instagram accounts with influencers who participate in brand endorsements. The parameters for selecting case studies were positioned on the popularity of the influencers, which was determined by number of followers, along with appearances in mainstream media as notable influencers, self-identifying as a South African content creator. Due to the algorithmic nature of the Instagram platform, I have accessed influencers based on my own user experience.

The profiles of all four influencers were analysed based on a set of established parameters (aesthetic aspects, brands they engage with, and language dimensions) that these influencers deploy to create social capital. The first influencer selected is Kay Ngonyama, popularly known as Kay Yarms (@kay.yarms). With 362 000 followers, she is one of the most famed influencers in South Africa, and primarily engages in hair and beauty content. Second, I consider the persona of Mr Smeg (@michaelbucwa), with 15,500 followers, who became popular for his humorous posts on Twitter, where he depicts pictures of his red Smeg brand kettle in various environments (hiking, ad hoc events, and the gym) as a comment on aspiration, newly acquired wealth and lifestyle. Third, I consider Misha Levin (@mishalevin), formally known as *Brandslut*, who has 34 000 followers on Instagram. She started her brand as *Brandslut* in 2010, and subsequently changed the brand image

and name to *Misha Levin* as her content evolved with her changing lifestyle from single woman to wife, to mother. Finally, I turn to Naqiyah Mayet (@naqiyah_mayet), with close to 56 000 followers. Mayet is a food, fashion and lifestyle influencer and has published her own cookbook, *The Beginning: Indian Recipes from My Home* (2020). Influencers from different racial, ethnic and class backgrounds are chosen to offer a broad view of how consumerist practices play out differently across these various demographics, and if these are reflective of wider South African trends.

An abundance of literature exists on methods of researching Instagram for its visual and textual features. Many adopt a quantitative approach, using statistical methods and the like to make inferences about the data. The qualitative approach, which this paper adopts, relies heavily on the 'analyst's intuition and experience' (Brannen, 2017). Visual analysis is the primary research method, as Instagram is primarily a visual platform. Visual analysis offers a framework to understand 'what consumers look at, what they see and how they make sense of the visual world' (Schroeder, 2006, p. 229). Visual analysis, thus, offers a robust methodology to analyse the primary feature of Instagram – the image. In combination with an analysis of the accompanying text in captions, inferences can be made about these images and texts and their wider consumptive practices and influence.

'Brandsluts' – Instagram influencers, brand consumption and social capital

As previously mentioned, the various products that these influencers interact with, in combination with the way they interact with the brands they have chosen to promote, offers insight into identity formation online and the deductions that can be made about wider trends in post-apartheid South Africa. I begin with an interpretation and analysis of the overall aesthetic of each influencer, and the brands with which they interact. I then turn to specific case studies that depict moments of consumption by the influencers, and what these moments reveal about the nature of consumption in post-apartheid South Africa.

Aesthetic and brands

Instagram profiles of influencers, digital pages upon which they post images, videos, and captions, are carefully strategized and curated to draw their followers in on first sight. The way that products are consumed and presented by Instagram influencers differs vastly from the highly stylized advertisements of traditional mainstream media. In building their social and cultural capital, Instragram influencers offer an element of relatability, where consumers experience an affective connection to content producers, who are not nameless, airbrushed and photoshopped models, but rather real people who offer glimpses into their personal lives and create connections with their followers through various forms of interaction. These interactions include replying to comments on their posts, offering live streaming sessions where they discuss a particular topic or answer follower questions, interacting with followers via direct message streams, amongst others. Once a repertoire is created between an influencer and followers, consumption-production begins to be a more interactive

(indeed relational) experience for the follower. In these scenarios, followers are offered visual glimpses of their favourite influencers consuming items that enhance their lifestyle and that are appropriate to their personal style and identity.

Aesthetically, at first glance, some profiles seem inadvertent, while others offer a more organized, aesthetically uniform experience. The profiles of for example Mr Smeg (@michaelbucwa) and Kay Ngonyama (@kay_yarms) seem more organic and 'unplanned'. These profiles allude to relatability, with realistically stylized pictures and videos that seem more organic. In these cases, relatability is built on the influencers being 'one of us' and their social capital is built on neo-liberal aspiration and hard work. On the other hand, Naiqiyah Mayet (@naqiyah_mayet) and Misha Levin (@_mishalevin) have more strategized and aesthetically organized profiles, with all pictures and videos aligned to the overall planned aesthetic of the page. The aesthetic of Mayet's and Levin's pages indicate clinically strategized posts, with obvious more financial capital invested in the overall pages, than that of the other two pages. Here relatability is built through identity markers of middle class motivations, and the engagement with followers is more aspirational to achieve the kind of luxury lifestyle these women have.

The brands with which each influencer aligns themselves can be indicators of their material wealth, their interests, their life stage, race, age, class and various other identity markers. The brands that influencers feature in their consumption-production posts offer their followers aspirational targets upon which they may build their own lifestyle, like that of their admired influencers. Each influencer affiliates themselves with brands that resonate with their own chosen aesthetic and lifestyle. Kay Ngonyama, for example, most often partners with skincare and make-up brands, or related products. Her Instagram highlights tab reveals partnerships with popular brands such as *Elizabeth Arden*, a famous department store make-up brand, *Dark and Lovely*, a haircare brand, and *Christian Dior*, a luxury make-up and perfume brand, amongst others. Ngonyama, whose fame is built on make-up and skincare tutorials, consumes these products in her make-up tutorials, or seemingly casual posts where she mentions a specific brand and its usefulness in her daily routine. Posts like these are usually buffered by other posts of a personal nature, reminding followers of their influencers' humanity and relatability. Followers are constantly reminded that influencers are human just like their followers, going about mundane day-to-day activities. Naqiyah Mayet's Instagram fame stemmed from her food blogs and that she primarily focuses on Indian food is an indication of her Indian heritage. Interestingly, Indian women's consumption practices have almost always been seen as inextricably linked to food, the household and the maintenance of Indian culture.[12] Food posts make up the bulk of Mayet's profile, as 'food is able to evoke ideas of identity and a sense of familiarity' (Jagganath, 2017, p. 122) for her identity as an Indian woman, but also for the bulk of her followers, who are Indian women themselves. As an extension of her food posts, she began posting her luxurious tablescapes, her favourite restaurants, luxury items that she uses in her daily life (*Le Creuset*, a French crockery brand, for example) and, more recently, updates on her kitchen renovations. Thus, it is notable that the products that these influencers consume are indicative of various elements of taste and facets of their identity.

I know that brands make me – Mr Smeg and Brandslut

Mr Smeg, for example, became famous for flaunting his purchase of a Smeg brand kettle by posting pictures of the kettle in various everyday locations. He explains (Dayile, 2022):

> The Smeg idea came from me noticing how brands play such a big role in people's lives and how being seen with a certain name brand tells the story of the type of person you are. Sometimes people who have achieved success and acquired material wealth tend to want to show it off and I found that to be funny because I come from nothing and I had to work hard. So I decided to play on that humor and I became Twitter famous for it.

Smeg is a luxury Italian appliance brand. That Mr Smeg's persona became popular through a satirical commentary on luxury items is notable, and he has continued to benefit from this with Smeg and other brands offering him products and services. For her part, Misha Levin began her career with a blog written under the pseudonym '*Brandslut*', where she reviewed various brands of skincare, make-up and fashion. As the Brandslut identity following grew in time, so too did Misha's repertoire of items that she consumed daily, which evolved progressively as she transitioned from being single, to married and, more recently, to motherhood. Both Bucwa and Levin acknowledge the consumption of brands as the primary reason for their accounts. This consumption is indicative of the general environment of consumption in South Africa, the acknowledgement that consumption becomes synonymous with choice, freedom, and in Bucwa's case, upward mobility and material success. At the same time, both accounts offer a degree of self-reflexive acknowledgment of the fact that consumption of brands is primarily something that we are dependent on to construct identity. Bucwa's amusing posts are his acknowledgement of the sometimes-absurd ways in which consumption identity plays out in reality. In Levin's case, the term *Brandslut* itself, a play on the term 'slut', a derogatory word referring to women who keep many sexual partners, indicating that the core aim of the page was to review various brands. At the same time, the connotations of the word slut, as excessive, a slave to one's carnal cravings is also a self-reflexive acknowledgement that Levin's interaction with brands is the core of her online identity.

The perfect date

In one post, Mr Smeg is seen standing aloft, almost floating, between two Mercedes Benz vehicles, hovering above another famous South African personality, Durban-born actress Pearl Thusi who is most popularly known for her role as Patricia Koponong in the BBC/ HBO comedy-series, *The No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency*. This picture was taken at their first date, which was arranged online when Mr Smeg asked Pearl publicly on Twitter to go on a date with him. Her reaction to that invitation (which is in the affirmative) sparked an extraordinary online reaction, with followers calling on them to publicly share the details of their date. In this case, the 'everyday man' had managed to achieve what most regular men would not, getting a date with a celebrity. In preparation for the date, he was sent various gifts by famous South African brands, thus increasing his eligibility as worthy of a celebrity like Pearl. While followers cheered on, brands were flaunted on both Instagram accounts. Romantic attachment became monetized.[13] In this image 'perfection and a freedom via romance, but that this is bound to a construction of an aspired-for future' (Mupotsa, 2015, p. 196) is portrayed. Thus, that the followers

would admire and aspire to Mr. Smeg's style, an intimation that these brands would ultimately allow them romantic success, was the desired effect of the brands. Here, the freedom to overcome perceived differences of social class, is seemingly achieved through the consumption of certain brands deemed worthy of a date with Pearl Thusi. Consumption in this instance ultimately leads to the success of the date, in the same way that it led to Mr Smeg getting a date with Thusi.

Brandslut becomes a mum

The consumption-production cycle is also indicative of other identity markers. The various ways that influencers consume brands indicate to their followers what influencers deem suitable for their own identities. Misha Levin, formally *Brandslut*, underwent a rebranding in 2020, citing the predominant reason for the rebrand was because she had evolved, as had her content. As Brandslut, Levin would appeal to her largely young, single female following, but as Misha Levin her content had evolved to include her experiences as a wife and mother. *Brandslut*, then, became an inappropriate moniker for a mother of two. This contradiction is highlighted further when one considers how her page evolved from her single woman lifestyle, to marriage, to mother. As the page evolved alongside Misha's real life, so too did content on clothes, fashion and make-up evolve to include homemaking, pram reviews, and family friendly items and services. The rebranding then was an apt choice to highlight the fundamental shift in her lifestyle, values and ultimately, her identity.

Sandton icons

In a series of posts, Mayet, amongst other Instagram influencers, collaborated with a South African shopping mall, Sandton City, in a campaign labelled #icon22. Sandton City is a luxury shopping mall, located in Sandton, one of the wealthiest areas of Johannesburg, and where apart from local and international franchises is known for his rich array of exclusive boutiques and brands. In this collaboration, influencers were invited to experience unique offerings of the mall's most iconic brands, including Christian Dior, ARC Store (a high-end make-up store), Chanel and Le Creuset, amongst others. Here, followers were given insight into the various offerings at these luxury brand stores, and how the consumption of these brands made their favourite influencers iconic. Pictures of icons consuming the product of the week, or visiting various stores in the swanky Sandton City mall, were abundant, as influencers sought to bring their followers in to participate in luxe consumption.

Here, some paradoxes outlined by Paterson (2017) become clear. Consuming products brings to completion the desire to be iconic. The act of consumption (destruction) of a product, leads to the creation of an icon. Second, the choice to consume these brands is linked to the control by brands to consistently and constantly provide products that shape what we use to express our freedom, and to continuously create needs for products to maintain control. Third, the post-apartheid utopia, induced by the promisein 1994 when South Africa transitioned to a democratic state, has influencers and their followers prescribing to the notion that consumption is a necessary component that is the key to personal progress. This is clearly problematic, as South Africa is the most unequal country

in the world, with 80% of the country's wealth, being distributed amongst 10% of the country's population, and is heavily racialised and gender based (World Bank, 2022). The #icon22 campaign is aimed at giving followers insight into what it takes to be an icon, or rather a person who stands out. Thus, to stand out, one needs to consume these mass-produced brands. This paradox of homogenization underlies many branded campaigns on Instagram. Finally, the #icon22 campaign, while aiming to make lifestyle easier and more efficient by highlighting interesting product offers and services, has the consequence that consumers buy into inaccessible ideals, and ultimately contributing to increasing debt in a country that is already in an economic crisis as a developing economy in a global pandemic.

Conclusion

From the preceding discussion, it is apparent that a study of cultural engagements, in a global, neo-liberal world would be lacking if it did not consider consumption as a stimulus in shaping identity creation; whereby the practices of consumption (and production), in all their excesses, reveal a great deal about the anxieties of belonging through the projection of consumptive practises as identity in post-apartheid communities. Instagram posts which depict consumption, enables us to see how these anxieties play out in the digital domain on Instagram. This occurs in various ways in a South African context.

First, it is important to note that wealth is distributed unequally in South Africa. While much of the wealth is distributed to 10% of the population as noted above, it is worth noting that the racial groups of White and Indian citizens still hold more wealth, on average, than Black citizens. From the aesthetic of both Mayet and Levin's posts, and the brands that they engage, these women have existing wealth and can afford luxury products. Thus, social inequality also plays out on digital post-apartheid as it does in reality. Here I would like to note the role of Black women's bodies as site of consumption. Ngonyama, the only Black woman featured in this paper, is the most popular of the influencers – she appeals to the largest audience of all these influencers. Interestingly as (Odhiambo, 2008, p. 72) maintains:

> The black female body is important in the South African context for a number of reasons but mainly, in this case, because of their perceived role as both new consumer for a range of commodities such as household items, clothing and cosmetics, while also being a 'consumable' subject.

The identity of Black women in South Africa is associated most often with the body as site of consumption, be it as a canvas upon which consumption can be painted or as an object of consumption itself. Ngonyama (Kay Yarms), as an influencer, does both. On the other hand, Levin and Mayet engage with brands that are unaffordable to 85% of the population. Their pictures, taken in various urban landscapes from their homes, to luxury stores and malls, are performances of privilege, wealth and social distinction. Their social capital is disseminated to their aspirational fans as hinging on the consumption of specific luxury goods and less on their bodies as sites of consumption. The spaces and places in which Instagram posts are photographed also reveal a great deal about the post-apartheid landscape. As Mupotsa (2015, p. 193) notes:

> The urban landscapes, homes and neighbourhoods where we take (wedding) photographs become sites where identities are performed and contested through consumption, social distinction and the environment itself.

It is notable that the difference in urban landscapes in which all these influencers capture their identities is reflective of their race, social class, wealth and aspiration.

Finally, utopian notions of freedom in post-apartheid South Africa is linked to excessive consumption. Hard work and pursuit of material wealth is a presiding theme of Mr. Smeg's profile, and he celebrates material success through (as mentioned earlier) the flaunting of his Smeg kettle. His identity as a successful man is linked to his dress and the items he collects, amongst other things – most of which are linked to consumption.

Consumption-production, a process by which consumption is used to produce content, ideas, and ultimately markers of identity, is one of the many ways that influencers connect with their audiences. As such, consumption can be seen as a means through which identity is created. In a post-apartheid South Africa, a country struggling to recover from crippling inequality, consumption has contributed to aspiration, freedom and celebration alongside ongoing structural challenges such as inequality and debt. Online, consumption plays out in much the same way as offline, serving as a microcosm of the deep inequalities that the country still grapples with. As followers hedonistically consume their favourite Instagram influencers content, they simultaneous consume and produce the markers of identity that they too aspire to, triggered in part by consuming products and services to create their own iconic lifestyles.

Notes

1. A content creator or influencer can be defined as 'the person behind a social media account who creates monetized media content with the goal of exercising commercial or non-commercial persuasion, and that has an impact on a given follower base' (Goanta & de Gregorio, 2021, p. 71).
2. See Lewis and Hames (2011), Dunn and Falkof (2021), Madyibi (2017), Mpofu et al. (2023).
3. See Friedman (2005).
4. Iqani and Kenny (2015). Posel (2010).
5. See also Iqani (2012. 2012a), Iqani and Kenny (2015), Mupotsa (2015), Nuttall (2004), Posel (2010).
6. Iqani (2012, p. 9).
7. See Adorno and Horkheimer (1972), Iqani (2012), Lee (2003), Perrotta (2001).
8. Bourdieu (1984), Iqani (2012), Miller (2005).
9. Much research has been dedicated to the potential of marketing on Instagram using influencers. See for example (Abidin, 2016; Carah & Shaul, 2016; Lee & Kim, 2020; Silva et al., 2020).
10. While the relationship seems intimate, social networking sites such as Instagram are valuable mass media forms that can disseminate information to large audiences, albeit on a more intimate level. See for example (boyd & Ellison, 2007).
11. The term social capital was first coined by Bourdieu (1984). This definition has been extended and theorized further by Putnam (2001), Lin (2001) and others.
12. See Sana (2022).
13. Mupotsa (2015).

Disclosure statement

Funding

References

Abidin, C. (2016). Visibility labour: Engaging with Influencers' fashion brands and #OOTD advertorial campaigns on Instagram. *Media International Australia*, *161*(1), 86–100. https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X16665177

Adorno, T. W., & Horkheimer, M. (1972). *The culture industry*. na.

Bennett, P., & Morton, K. (2021). Nuclear medicine education via Instagram: A viable method for informal lifelong learning. *Journal of Nuclear Medicine Technology*, *49*(2), 175–177. https://doi.org/10.2967/jnmt.120.261438

Bourdieu, P. (1984). A social critique of the judgement of taste. In *Traducido del francés por R*. Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. (2001). The forms of capital. In M. Granovetter & R. Swedberg (Eds.), *The sociology of economic life* (2nd ed., pp. 96–111). Westview Press.

boyd, d., & Ellison, N. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, *13*(1), 210–230. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00393.x

Brannen, J. (2017). *Mixing methods: Qualitative and quantitative research*. Routledge.

Carah, N., & Shaul, M. (2016). Brands and Instagram: Point, tap, swipe, glance. *Mobile Media & Communication*, *4*(1), 69–84. https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157915598180

Charles Smith Associates. (2023). Social media users South Africa. *Charles Smith Associates*. Retrieved July 8, 2024, from https://www.csa.co.za/social-media-users-south-africa-2022/

Credit Suisse. (2023). *Credit suisse global wealth report 2023*. Retrieved October 15, 2023, from https://www.ubs.com/global/en/family-office-uhnw/reports/global-wealth-report-2023.html

Dayile, Q. (2022). Mr Smeg on how his hobby turned into a business. *Zimoja Lezinto*. Retrieved July 8, 2024, from https://www.zimoja.co.za/articles/mr-smeg-on-how-his-hobby-turned-into-a-business

Dunn, C., & Falkof, N. (2021). You've got to be real: Authenticity, performativity and micro-celebrity in South Africa. *Frontiers in Sociology*, *6*, 652485. https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2021.652485

Fardouly, J., Willburger, B. K., & Vartanian, L. R. (2018). Instagram use and young women's body image concerns and self-objectification: Testing mediational pathways. *New Media & Society*, *20*(4), 1380–1395. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817694499

Friedman, J. (2005). *Consumption and identity*. Routledge.

Gnegy, H. R. (2017). *Beauty and the brand: A digital ethnography of social capital and authenticity of digital beauty influencers through monetization activities on YouTube*. West Virginia University.

Goanta, C., & de Gregorio, G. (2021). Content creator/influencer. In L. Belli, N. Zingales, & Y. Curzi (Eds.), *Glossary of platform law and policy terms* (pp. 69–72). FGV Direito Rio Edition.

Hollebeek, L., & Chen, T. (2014). Exploring positively versus negatively-valenced brand engagement: A conceptual model. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, *23*(1), 62–74. https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBM-06-2013-0332

Hyslop, J. (2000). Why did Apartheid's supporters capitulate? 'Whiteness', class and consumption in urban South Africa, 1985–1995. *Society in Transition*, *31*(1), 36–44. https://doi.org/10.1080/21528586.2000.10419009

Iqani, M. (2012a). *A genealogy of the Black consumer in post-apartheid South African media: counterpoints to discourses of citizenship*. Publ. presentation to the sixth Brazilian meeting on Consumption Studies, Rio de Janeiro (pp. 12–14).

Iqani, M. (2012). Spazas, hawkers and the status quo: Black consumption at the margins of media discourse in post-apartheid South Africa. *Animus. Revista Interamericana de Comunicação Midiática*, *11*(22), 4–30. https://doi.org/10.5902/217549777298

Iqani, M., & Kenny, B. (2015). Critical consumption studies in South Africa: Roots and routes. *Critical Arts*, *29*(2), 95–106. https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2015.1039198

Jagganath, G. (2017). Foodways and culinary capital in the diaspora: Indian women expatriates in South Africa. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, *26*(2), 19–19.

Lee, M. J. (2003). *Consumer culture reborn: The cultural politics of consumption*. Routledge.

Lee, S., & Kim, E. (2020). Influencer marketing on Instagram: How sponsorship disclosure, influencer credibility, and brand credibility impact the effectiveness of Instagram promotional post. *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing*, *11*(3), 232–249. https://doi.org/10.1080/20932685.2020.1752766

Lewis, D., & Hames, M. (2011). Gender, sexuality and commodity culture. *Agenda (Durban, South Africa)*, *25*(4), 2–7. https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2011.633393

Lin, N. (2001). Building a network theory of social capital. In N. Lin, K. Cook, & R. Burt (Eds.), *Social capital theory and research* (pp. 3–30). Transaction Publishers.

Mackson, S. B., Brochu, P. M., & Schneider, B. A. (2019). Instagram: Friend or foe? The application's association with psychological well-being. *New Media & Society*, *21*(10), 2160–2182. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819840021

Madyibi, S. (2017). The relationship between conspicuous consumption and poverty in developing countries: Evidence from South Africa.

Mayat, N. (2020). *The beginning: Indian recipes from my home*. That Food Guy.

Miller, D. (ed.). (2005). *Acknowledging consumption*. Routledge.

Mpofu, S., Mnisi, S. J. G., & Makgoba, M. (2023). "Money does not stay, it is a visitor": Conspicuous consumption and the fleeting riches in pursuit of elusive happiness. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 002190962311733. https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096231173385

Mupotsa, D. (2015). The promise of happiness: Desire, attachment and freedom in post/apartheid South Africa. *Critical Arts*, *29*(2), 183–198. https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2015.1039204

Naidoo, J. (2022). Hello darlings CEO dubbed 'holiday swindler' allegedly fleeces more than R100 m from unwitting South Africans. *Times Live*. Retrieved March 20, 2022, from https://www.iol.co.za/news/hello-darlings-ceo-dubbed-holiday-swindler-allegedly-fleeces-more-than-r100m-from-unwitting-south-africans-1cf63b5d-8a65-4788-bf7e-dc8f7332e33b

Nuttall, S. (2004). Stylizing the self: The Y generation in Rosebank, Johannesburg. *Public Culture*, *16*(3), 430–452. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-16-3-430

Odhiambo, T. (2008). The black female body as a 'consumer and a consumable' in current drum and true love magazines in South Africa. *African Studies*, *67*(1), 71–80. https://doi.org/10.1080/00020180801943131

Paterson, M. (2017). *Consumption and everyday life*. Routledge.

Perrotta, C. (2001). Increased consumption raises productivity. *Consumption: Disciplinary Approaches to Consumption*, *3*(2), 353.

Posel, D. (2010). Races to consume: Revisiting South Africa's history of race, consumption and the struggle for freedom. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *33*(2), 157–175. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870903428505

Posel, D., & van Wyk, I. (2019). *Conspicuous consumption in Africa*. NYU Press.

Putnam, R. (2001). Social capital: Measurement and consequences. *Canadian Journal of Policy Research*, *2*(1), 41–51.

Sana, V. (2022). Bits of bytes and bites of bits: Instagram and the gendered performance of food production in the South African Indian community. *Agenda (Durban, South Africa)*, *36*(1), 100–108. https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2021.2013119

Schroeder, J. E. (2006). Critical visual analysis. In *Handbook of qualitative research methods in marketing*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Silva, M. J. d. B., de Farias, S. A., Grigg, M. K., & Barbosa, M. d. L. d. A. (2020). Online engagement and the role of digital influencers in product endorsement on Instagram. *Journal of Relationship Marketing*, *19*(2), 133–163. https://doi.org/10.1080/15332667.2019.1664872

Uzunoglu, E., & Kip, S. M. (2014). Brand communication through digital influencers: Leveraging blogger engagement. *International Journal of Information Management*, *34*, 592–602.

World Bank. (2022). New World Bank report assesses sources of inequality in five countries in Southern Africa. *Press Release*. Retrieved June 5, 2022, from https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/03/09/new-world-bank-report-assesses-sources-of-inequality-in-five-countries-in-southern-africa