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Sexy, Smart & Altogether Spectacular analysing the self-display of young black South African women on instagram

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Abstract

Many young black aspirational South African women are involved in the construction of their identities, and their ideal selves, through their self-display on Instagram. Within the framework of certain hegemonic structures, these women are seen exercising their 'freedom' within a post-feminist setting, as neoliberal citizens, and thus striving for a sense of empowerment from this engagement. This project explores the self-display of 10 of these young women that have each accumulated more than 10,000 followers on Instagram. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of them, and their Instagram images were analysed, in order to find out how their online performances relate to consumption and global celebrity culture, and how these ideologies are depicted in their images. They draw inspiration from certain black female celebrities such as Beyoncé and Rihanna, and their emulation of these celebrities is used in their identity construction. They do this by displaying a lifestyle of glamorous consumption by incorporating certain exclusive brands and fashionable items into their online presentation. Additionally, they modify and model themselves to fit a specific beauty ideal, which is characterized by long straight hair, fair skin and a curvaceous body. By doing all of this, these young women are, by their own definition attaining a level of 'success', and achieve the status of 'Insta-Celeb' by the Instagram community. The ideological frameworks on which this construction is built, involves a collective imperative to be liked and accepted by their online followers, the desire for status, and the contradictory creation of a faux idea of female empowerment that is, in reality, not actually as free as it seems.

Key Words: Instagram; Post-feminism; Identity Construction; Empowerment; Status; Success; Consumption; Celebrity Culture.