

Celebrating authentic bodies: Instagram (self)representations of models with disabilities in South Africa

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South African society is characterized by a historical legacy of institutionalized segregation and oppression along racial and, to a lesser extent, gender and (dis)ability lines. While social media can be considered a relatively elite phenomenon, it has the potential to challenge stereotypes and reshape public discourse. Beauty contests, fashion shows and modelling parades represent offline as well as online sites of struggle over aesthetic canons, aspirational looks, and ideal bodies. At the same time, they offer opportunities for alternative, marginalized and stigmatized bodies to “step into the light”, as it were. Due to the primacy of the visual element, a platform like Instagram offers a rather unique opportunity to affirm that racialized, gendered and disabled bodies are not only normal, but authentically beautiful. In this paper we adopt an intersectional lens to investigate Instagram profiles by South African models with disabilities. Five women who differ in terms of ethnic affiliation as well as impairment were selected for an in-depth qualitative critical visual analysis and an ethnographic content analysis. In a South African context still largely shaped by patriarchy, sexism and ableism, we found (self)representations on social media are intimately intertwined with resistance, advocacy and social change. Self-representations by models with disabilities include sharing authentic aspects of self, affirmation, and role modelling.

Keywords: South Africa, Instagram, models, (dis)ability, intersectionality.

Introduction

South Africa is characterized by a history of segregation and violence, whose legacy persists today. During colonialism and apartheid race was the main vector of discrimination but inequalities ran along other lines, such as gender or disability (Howell et al. 2006). A vibrant civil society, forged during the struggle against oppression, is active in both offline and online spaces. Thanks to one of the highest Internet penetrations on the African continent, social media offers increased opportunities for promoting awareness around social issues and for the (self)empowerment of members of previously marginalized groups across domains as diverse as organizing protest marches, political mobilization, and renegotiating (digital) media representations (Bosch 2000). In this article we focus on the Instagram profiles of female fashion models with disabilities to explore

aesthetic forms as a site of socio-cultural contestation in a technologically advanced yet profoundly unequal society.

Aesthetics and digital authenticity

For members of marginalized groups, authentic self-representation can be understood as a liberating, disruptive and potentially revolutionary endeavor. Authenticity can be defined as “a bridge between the inner and outer worlds. It is a deconstructive act: a momentary glimpse of an inner world expressed outwardly and increasingly shared on social media” (Taylor 2022, p.12). Furthermore, it is an act of co-creation which is localized and temporally situated (Marwick and boyd 2011). It is performative, and it implies a meaningful process to the extent that it involves a social, cultural or political effect.

Through self-representation, the Black, disabled, and female body reappropriates and reinterprets the distorted image it has internalized. The possibility of matching one’s interior and exterior worlds is central to the notion of aesthetics of everyday life, whereby each human being is attributed value in its full range (Gordon 2018). This is particularly important for the black female body, historically constructed as “grotesque”, “strange”, “unfeminine”, “lascivious” and “obscene” (Hobson 2003, p.87). Similarly, the disabled female body has been represented as disturbing, pitiable or sexually ambiguous (Botha and Harvey 2022). Disability scholarship problematizes such representations and shifts the focus either on mediatized social constructions (Barnes 2019) or on alternative but equally valid and even positive interpretations (Flynn 2022). The biological body and social ‘be-ing’ mediate cultural territory as an act of refusal and deconstruction (Hutchison 2018).

The digital environment allows people to express and share their stories. On predominantly visual platforms such as Instagram, representations of Black, female and disabled bodies can be understood as the aesthetic instrument of a shift in gaze on the part of those who have always remained on the margins of advertising, media, and fashion show programming. The exuberance that marginalized experiences display highlights the ability and willingness to be authentic protagonists in public discourse (Abruzzese 1988), particularly on

Instagram (Lin and Yang 2021, Södergren and Vallström 2022). Social media practices are often associated with leisure and playfulness, but they are also increasingly recognized as meaningful (Albrechtslund and Albrechtslund 2014). Growing possibilities of self-representation enable a transition from shame to pride, highlighted in scholarly literature on the collective political identities of feminist, LGBTQIA+ and disability movements (Britt and Heise 2000, Whittier 2017). The reappropriation of one's body involves the elaboration of new narratives based on individual experiences. The body reflects a "complex meaning, which is not simply limited to its physical aspects but extends to include the social space it occupies, its functions, the gestures, passions and desires it expresses, the whole of social and symbolic functions" (Abruzzese 1988, p.190).

Social media (self)representation is a site of struggle. Embodied subjects are part of social and cultural processes (Lewis 2012) in which fashion is a powerful political language able to unify, differentiate, challenge, contest and dominate (Allman 2004). The fashion world's preferences often follow creative dynamics responding to a rather narrow "aesthetic economy" (Foster and Pettinicchio 2022). Business logic tends to prefer and impose exclusionary homogeneity which invisibilises much of the population, leading to a denial of aesthetic citizenship (Foster and Pettinicchio 2022). The risk of authenticity becoming a commodity (Jerslev and Mortensen 2016) linked to "narrow" visibility economies that exploit and deplete the transformative potential of identity has been highlighted (Raun and Christensen-Strynø 2021).

Research design and Methodology

The aim of the present study is to investigate how Instagram self-representations of models with visible disabilities challenge stereotypes and public discourse in South Africa. Many Instagram users are likely to be part of a relative socio-economic elite compared to the rest of the South African population (Data Reportal 2023). This platform was chosen because of its predominantly visual character (Manovich 2017). Images create reality by suggesting the

perspectives which allow us to develop attitudes towards the world (Merleau-Ponty 1984). The primacy of the visual element on Instagram offers a rather unique opportunity to show and affirm that racialized, gendered, and disabled bodies are not only normal, but authentically beautiful. The use of hashtags or keywords to personalize the profile biography on this platform makes it possible to search for users who openly choose to self-identify as advocates and as disabled.

The study included an initial ethnographic phase of research of active and public South African Instagram profiles of models with (mainly physical and therefore visible) disabilities. This choice is consistent with an emphasis on the visual element and addresses the well-documented challenge of users hiding their disability in online spaces (Bitman 2023). Five accounts were identified. The present study followed the perspective proposed by Zhao and Abidin (2023), who explicitly report usernames and screenshots of the accounts analyzed, acknowledging the users as public figures. We adopted an intersectional approach to understand a person’s (dis)ability as a socio-cultural construct within their race, gender etc (Dalvit 2023). A breakdown of the five Instagram profiles considered in the present study is provided in Table 1.

Name	Zizopho Soldat	Eshile Mhluzi	Laura Wagnermeyer	Lebohang Monyatsi	Thando Hopa
Username	@zizopho_soldat	@eshile_mhluzi	@laura_wagnermeyer	@therolling_goddesS	@thandohopa
Follower	14.400	10.000	5.074	2.535	39.600
Self-definition	Model and Digital Creator	International Disability Advocate and Lawyer	Top Model for disability inclusion	Model and Actress	International Model, Diversity & Inclusion Advocate

Tab.1 - Overview of models with (dis)abilities’ profiles.

For each profile, 20 posts dating between 2018 and 2023 were purposively selected (see Ritchie et al. 2003) and critically analyzed in-depth. The analysis adopted a critical visual (Rose 2016) and an ethnographic (Altheide 1987) approach. We focused on the description and understanding of the emerging

cultural meanings and narratives with respect to: type of content, represented subjects, themes, functions of the message transmitted etc. Visual methodologies reveal the ways in which the visual operates not as a mirror of reality but as an ideological and cultural object that produces and contests imagined notions of identity, place and society (Ives 2009, p.247). In the following sections, each profile is discussed in turn.

Sexy and rural

Zizipho is a young woman born with a rare genetic condition that significantly affects the symmetry of her body. She is very petite; her left arm ends at her elbow, and she employs a conspicuous brace to stand and walk. Her choice to be a fashion model appears consistent with an understanding of African aesthetics as strangeness, the ability to create a kind of feeling in the observer or to communicate a message, and of beauty as a conglomerate of harmony (Njiofor 2018). The centrality of her body figure conveys a message of deep self-awareness as well as full and free expression of her beauty and attractiveness. Zizipho fully displays her nude figure, in underwear or in poses that challenge her interlocutor in almost every content posted on her profile (photos, reels, etc.). As is the case in other parts of the World, in South Africa disability may constitute an obstacle to expressing female sexuality or, conversely, reduce a woman to a mere sexual object (Van der Heijden et al. 2019). The desirability that Zizipho wants to convey often takes on provocative tones. This is shown, for example, in the following caption: “All that matters is what I see & I see a masterpiece...I wonder if u see the same in u or u rely on validation?”; “When they speak about black swan I must be mentioned too”. In this context, the phrase “black swan” seems to refer to the association between blackness and beauty rather than designating a rare or unlikely event (see Aven 2013). The image the young Zizipho wants to give of herself is always edited in every detail. She is made up, perfect, seductive (Fig.1). Thus, the external gaze of the user is controlled and directed towards a process of “unmasking” black and (dis)abled female subjectivity (Hobson 2003).

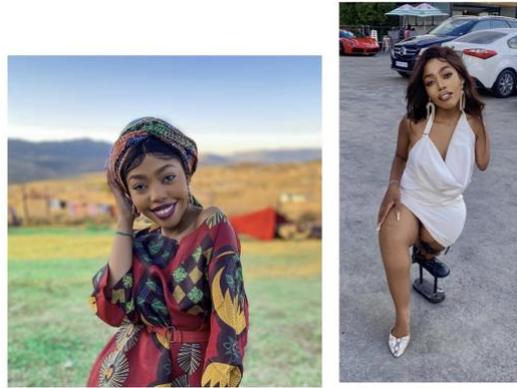


Fig.1 – Zizipho in a traditional (first photo) and sexy dress (second one)

Zizipho happens to share her Xhosa ethnicity and rural background with former *Miss Universe Zozibini Tunzi*. Sheik (2020) comments on the latter's claim of growing up in a world where a woman with her type of hair and skin colour could not be considered beautiful as an indicator of Eurocentric bias in aesthetic perceptions. By contrast, the aesthetic Zizipho proposes fuses her intersectional identity as a woman, black and disabled, of Xhosa descent. Beauty then becomes for her a fluid language that challenges the pleasantness of conventional symmetry (Hutchison 2018, Njiofor 2018). Inner and outer harmony is evoked by resorting to the fictional myth of freedom (Lewis 2012) of South African rurality, where direct contact with nature allows for complete self-acceptance. By blending modern and traditional Xhosa aesthetic elements, Zizipho sweetens, reformulates, and reclaims her identity by constructing a new decolonized aesthetic of her own authentic, yet nonconforming body. This aesthetic feeds on pride by delineating the autonomous, strong, happy, bold, and carefree Xhosa woman she has become and wants to be in any context. By contrast, this stress on self-pleasure and inspirational celebration (Jerslev and Mortensen 2016) leaves out of the spotlight the burden of the daily struggle against systemic and symbolic violence.

Faith and action

Esihle is an award-winning model and international disability advocate. She deals with the accessibility policies for health care services for people with

(dis)abilities in the Eastern Cape Province, where she is from. Her condition requires her to use crutches to walk and parade on stage. In the caption “My God is seating me at tables I could only dream of”, she refers to her faith as well as her public engagement as an activist and advocate. Esihle participates as a professional in public events related to fashion and politics, thus flaunting a certain social status (Fig.2). Unlike studies conducted on influencers (Södergren and Vallström 2022) seem to suggest, she is not driven by the quest for visibility for her personal and economic affirmation, but by her spirituality and her relationship with God. Therefore, she claims that her work and visibility are for the good of the community of (dis)abled people.



Fig.2 – Esihle at the Health Conference of the Province of the Eastern Cape

Claassens and colleagues (2019) note the centrality of religion in the lives of many people with disabilities in the Global South and call for a new theology to account for it. In Esihle’s case the evocation of God is pervasive. It is this deep and abiding spirituality that inspires selfies and slide shows, in a feed that features soft and evanescent lighting and colors in neutral or light tones. Her account can be considered as an aesthetic tool for connecting with a God capable of healing inner malaise, consistent with some widespread South African religious perceptions (Bosire et al. 2021). Her activism can be seen as an aesthetic cure for anyone who follows her or discovers her content. Esihle is always dressed and photographed from the bust up. This can be understood as a strategy to foreground

her most attractive features or, as noted in a different domain, as a way to hide her disability (see Buysse and Borchering 2010). Her body is material and spiritual at the same time, which is why it seems to disappear into poses that convey the responsibility of the model's public role. In contrast with her aesthetic, such role is often carried out in rather militant tones in her captions and posts, as shown in the claim that "We have to invade industries and spaces where they have said that the core of who we are is not adequate. We're here to serve notice on that falsehood".

Fashion and feistiness

Laura is a coloured model born with a rare genetic condition. Her experience exemplifies the contentious issue of whether termination of pregnancy may represent a form of discrimination (Hall 2013). She shares that doctors predicted she would have a short and poor-quality life (if at all) and advised her mother to terminate the pregnancy. She reflects on this in the quote below:

My body has exceeded the mere 48 hours that were predicted. Its made it to 21 years of living a beautifully 'normal' life. I wish that I could find every single doctor who told my mom to terminate. I would absolutely have loved to have shown them the envisaged 'poor quality of life' 😞 My body isnt 'normal' but it's me. I think that's more than enough.

Sharing such intimate details and feelings is consistent with the blurring of private/public boundaries on Instagram (Suh 2020) and contributes to an authentic and effective profile. She is the only woman in our study who identifies as coloured, a racial classification associated with historical miscegenation. In the case of coloured female bodies, stereotypical representations of sexual exploitation and hypersexualisation led to feelings of shame and a need for belonging (Jeftha 2020). Laura pursues a more inclusive fashion world through the development of accessible clothing design. Nonconforming bodies are not only largely invisible but are often neglected by fashion designers.



Fig.3 – Laura at the seaside during a photo shooting of underwear

Laura was the first model with disabilities to compete in the *Miss South Africa* beauty pageant. Her commitment to “Experiencing life one crutch step at a time” (Fig.3), clashed with followers deriding her for participating in beauty contests. Comments such as “at this inclusivity nonsense is going too far, now...can...i enter my dog he identifies as a female human” and “but we don’t want to subject our dogs to such low standards” show how participation by a woman with disabilities challenges entrenched stereotypes about beauty but also calls into question the very nature of beauty and the purpose of such events. Laura’s public denunciation through the re-sharing of mocking comments and her response that “This is just one comment section (luckily!) But this is what people with disabilities are faced with in 2023, folks!” is meant to expose the harshness of South African social media discourses (Dalvit 2023). Despite a sophisticated legislative framework which explicitly prohibits discrimination along *inter alia* gender or disability lines (Bhabha 2009), this incident exemplifies the challenges in policing online spaces and reaffirms the need for users like Laura to be present and remain vocal in these spaces. Laura’s contribution lies in overcoming the proposal of gendered control over the body (de Beer 2012, Goffman 1976). She plays on the contrast between her small stature and the face of an adult woman, alternating photos in which she looks like a little girl or a perfect, colorful doll with photos in which she expresses a mature and elegant femininity. Laura

expresses how it is not the physical dimension but the ability to develop one's personal expectations that builds one's aesthetic sense.

Stand up and stand out

Lebohang is an actress, dancer and model. She founded the *Miss Wheelchair South Africa* beauty contest (Fig.4). The ongoing debate noted in other domains on dedicated events as segregation or inclusion (Beekman et al. 2023) notwithstanding, this initiative can be interpreted as a self-positioning within dominant social and political discourses. Creating dedicated spaces constitutes a deliberate attempt to achieve relative autonomy “as part of an inclusive and diverse society” (de Beer 2012, p.347). As a digital content creator, Lebohang stands against subtle forms of discrimination. As an example, she points out that “You're good looking for being in a wheelchair is NOT a compliment” but rather a re-affirmation of the relatively low beauty standards expected of women with disabilities. In South Africa overtly ableist language is positively discouraged and, in some cases, illegal (Bhabha 2009). However, offenses crafted as apparent compliments, such as the one above, represent a pernicious way of entrenching the *status quo* by appealing to what may appear as common sense.



Fig.4 – Lebohang during a fashion show

In almost every post Lebohang uses #borntostandout. This inspirational hashtag hints at the paradox of a wheelchair user standing. Despite a documented

tendency by people with disabilities to hide their difference in online spaces (Bitman 2023), this wordplay reinterprets the notion of standing out as a positive destiny. This is a powerful message in contrast with the traditional belief that disability is the result of witchcraft or a punishment by one's ancestors, common to many indigenous South African cultures (Ngubane-Mokiwa 2018). Standing out is also the shared challenge of an aesthetics of everyday life, according to which daily existence is an extraordinary achievement (Gordon 2018).

Black and White

Thando is an international model with albinism. She grew up and operates in a context where one's skin colour is extremely important in shaping identity, perception, and representation (Magaisa 2016). Her condition as a woman with Black features and White skin situates her as a liminal body defined and characterized by "otherness" (Fig.5). True to her claim that "The ability to tell your own story, in words or images, is already a victory, already a revolt", she has become a public reference for social inclusion in international programs and conferences. In her profile Thando offers professional images in which she mainly wears ethnic clothes. The practice of mixing modern and traditional features can be considered decolonial as it aims to produce new possibilities for identification (de Sousa Santos 2012, Gordon 2018).



Fig.5 – Thando in a photo shooting

Thando's Instagram posts take the form of insights and mottos which contextualize and personalize the unconventional black beauty she represents. This is consistent with an understanding of "aesthetics as an expression of taste and a form or style which is mobilised by an artist to evoke a particular affect" (Hutchison 2018, p.357). By blurring cultural boundaries and reinterpreting tradition, Thando evokes a sense of pride "beyond capitalist, patriarchal, ableist and authoritarian constraints" (Lewis 2012, p.89).

Conclusions

In this article we analyzed online texts purposively selected from the Instagram profiles of South African female fashion models with disabilities. The discussion touches on established issues in Disability Studies, such as sexuality, religion, termination of pregnancy, segregation, labelling etc., often from a gendered and/or local perspective. The findings confirm a predominantly visual social media platform like Instagram as a site of discursive struggle around aesthetic forms. Authenticity is instrumented to raise awareness, promote acceptance and counter stereotypes. The participants appear conscious of their function as role models and activists and the online texts betray an awareness of both beauty and disability as social constructs. In particular, the analysis highlights resistance and contestations of racist, sexist and ableist representations. While race and gender feature prominently as vectors of injustice in public debate, the distinctive feature and main contribution of these profiles is their focus on disability. The emphasis on the visual element places the Black, female, and disabled body as a contested terrain of socio-cultural struggle, which goes far beyond the definition of aesthetic forms to challenge the boundaries of what is visible, acceptable and worthy of celebration.

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