



**UNIVERSITY OF  
KWAZULU-NATAL**

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**INYUVESI  
YAKWAZULU-NATALI**

**‘BEAUTY IS IN THE EYE OF THE INSTAGRAMMER’  
A WALK-THROUGH APPROACH EXPLORING NARRATIVES OF FEMALE  
BEAUTY ON INSTAGRAM AMONG DURBAN HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS**

by

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# COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES

## DECLARATION - PLAGIARISM

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, says my soul, therefore I will hope in him.”

-Lamentations 3:22-24-

Hallelujah to Jesus, my Saviour and Redeemer! I am endlessly grateful to the Lord for His abundant grace, compassion, and the countless blessings He has bestowed upon my life. My achievements and well-being are indebted to Him who sacrificed His life for me.

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"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."

-Proverbs 3:5-6-

## ABSTRACT

In the twenty-first century female beauty is increasingly perceived as a social construct that intersects identity and femininity. Social media platforms have evolved into participatory spaces for women to negotiate and perform their identities, share information about their daily lives, engage with user-generated content, and explore modes of self-expression. South Africa's media landscape has witnessed a shift towards social media platforms, with millions of active users in the country. The literature revealed the need for research on African perspectives in the context of media, and revealed gaps in the intricate connection between feminism, femininity, and social media's influence on women's self-presentation and identity. This study aimed to address the gap in research in focusing on the unique narratives of young female higher education students in actively engaging in the construction of feminine beauty on Instagram. It sought to explore how this construction of feminine beauty on Instagram shaped the articulation of a feminine gendered identity through gender performances. This study also explored how young female students negotiated concepts of feminism and femininity through their engagement in the construction and negotiation of female beauty on Instagram. To ensure that the goals of this study would be achieved, a qualitative phenomenological approach was adopted. The main data collection method employed in this study was a form of walk-through known as the media go-along method that were conducted with 13 young female higher education students. The participants were selected by means of purposive sampling and a reflexive thematic data analysis was performed. The themes 'Digital Craftsmanship', 'Instagram Performativity', and 'Dialectics of Empowerment' ultimately generated insightful findings pertaining to young South African women's contributions to constructing female beauty on Instagram, the platform's role in shaping gender performativity, and the intricate interplay of feminism and femininity in this digital space. This study's findings revealed that young female students on Instagram engage in diverse modes of active curation to shape their beauty ideals in alignment with personal preferences and values. Instagram played a role in constructing future career aspirations by interplaying beauty, professionalism, and identity. Instagram's unique features further encouraged participants to become content co-creators, fostering creative expression and digital discourse. An insightful finding was that young women's self-representation balanced beauty norms with playfulness and authenticity. Cultural and social influences were evident in beauty practices, and these young women navigated a complex negotiation between conforming to and challenging beauty norms while engaging in feminist discussions on Instagram.

**Key words:** Instagram, female beauty, femininity, gender performativity, participatory culture, digital feminism, walk-through, media go-along.

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# **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

## **1. Introduction**

This chapter provides a general overview of this study. The background and rationale for conducting this study is provided in this chapter. Moreover, this chapter highlights the problem statement of this study, research objectives as well as the main research questions of this study. Lastly, the methodological approach and an outline of this study' subsequent chapters are provided at the end of this chapter.

## **1.2 Background of the Study**

This dissertation sets out to understand how young South African female higher education students express and perform feminine gender identities on Instagram. In examining the distinct narratives that emerge, this study seeks to uncover the ways in which these young women engage in the construction and negotiation of female beauty within the digital space. Beauty is a social construct that has been contracted on women in societies in different parts of the world for centuries (Najamuddin, 2020). Beauty is linked to a woman's identity and notions of femininity. This social construction persists throughout women's lives and is a cultural product that is promoted in both traditional and online forms of media. Beauty is constantly evolving and what was once regarded as 'beautiful' in a previous era, or by a specific group, may not be regarded in the current era (Patton, 2006 and Wolf, 1990: 16). The advancement in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and the rise of Web 2.0 has led to the creation of social media platforms which has contributed to changes for how beauty content can be established and published by women. The media can be considered a representation of society and therefore play an important role in the perception and construction of the female beauty. Social media platforms evolved from social networking sites (SNS) to collaborate and participatory spaces for women to negotiate and maintain their identity, publish daily activities, comments/likes on posts, uploading images and videos, and viewing and republishing of other user-generated content (boyd, 2015). This advancement in digital technologies has not only accelerated this engagement but has also led to new ways of identity expression, exploration, and experimentation. Social media platforms have provided women with new avenues for communication, collaboration, and circulation of ideas, this has also led to new opportunities women to not only create content but to view content created by others on social media (Verkuyl, 2020).

In the last decade, South Africa's media landscape has shifted from access and engagement with traditional media content to the access and engagement with social media platforms (Bosch, 2020: 7-8). Social media platforms have become a significant part of contemporary visual culture in the twenty-first century because of the expansion and proliferation of visual technologies that construct how we see the world (Rose, 2016). Social media platforms have both extended and intensified forms of visibility and are now fully integrated in social life in such a way that they mediate this social life (Fuchs, 2014: 53). In 2019, there were approximately 30 million active social media users in South Africa, and this is expected to grow to 40.77 million active users by 2026 (Statista, 2022). Social media platforms have become embedded in the everyday lives of South African women for the main purpose of social connectivity and include affordances that create spaces to build online identities, personal relationships, and communities (Bosch, 2020: 8). This has been encouraged due to the participatory and engaging nature of social media platforms and how social media users can both produce and consume content on these social media platforms. (Bruns, 2009). One of the reasons why women may engage in social media is because social media can influence and shape aspects of a woman's identity (Serafinelli, 2018: 55). Due to the ubiquitous nature of social media and its usage for identity management it has become difficult to differentiate between offline and online identities because real-world identities and virtual identities have become interconnected (Lupton, 2017: 200-201). According to Diana Dămean (2010) women may engage in social media platforms to negotiate and maintain a feminine gendered identity. Social media platforms provide unique features and affordances that allow women to become active producers of beauty content, which in theory align with feminist values such as access, co-operation, and inclusion. These platforms have become increasingly popular websites for women as they act as spaces for expression, exploration, and connection in terms in the construction and negotiation of female beauty (Butkowski, Dixon, Weeks, & Smith, 2019).

Instagram is the social media platform observed in the study and is regarded as one of the fastest-growing social media platforms with currently over 1 billion active users because of its worldwide popularity. 95 million images are shared per day on Instagram (Leaver, Highfield & Abidin, 2020: 7). Given that most users in South Africa are young and female (Statista, 2022), Instagram is a key site for the performance of femininity. Despite this, there is a dearth of literature on Instagram in relationship to other, text-based social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, that is further compounded by a lack of methodological reflection on creative, innovative, and ethical ways of studying Instagram. Due to this increase usage of Instagram by females across the globe, it is insightful to understand how young women in South Africa use this social media platform to construct

and negotiate female beauty on Instagram, to explore different representations of female beauty based on their own content creation and content created from others, and to understand how young women negotiate and maintain a feminine gendered identity on Instagram. The participation in terms of construction and negotiation of female beauty extends to how young women understand beauty through engagement with other celebrities' and/or influencers' posts as well as comments/likes on images which can influence and shape their identity as women. Social media platforms have provided a 'virtual space' for users to express themselves and to express concerns of social and political issues that are meaningful to the user. It is noted that 'In everyday cycles of self-presentation and impression formation, individuals perform on multiple stages, and in doing so, they blend social spheres online that may have been separate offline, thus confusing private and public boundaries' (Papacharissi, 2018: 209). Amy Dobson (2015: 33) argues that on Instagram many young women are selecting to present the 'perfect' representations of self and femininity, for example, through selfies. This further highlights the nature of self-representation on social media platforms and the ongoing debates that have unfolded in the last decade.

Within the South African landscape, Instagram boasts a user base exceeding 6 million individuals, highlighting its popularity within our country's social media realm. Particularly noteworthy is the statistic that, as of January 2021, South Africans aged 18-24 comprised 12.7% of the total social media users in the nation, spotlighting the integral role social media assumes in the lives of its youth (Statista, 2021). In this context, the influential power of social media in shaping perspectives, opinions, and beliefs concerning women becomes evident, especially within the framework of a postfeminist society. A postfeminist society pertains to a societal and cultural phase where feminism, as a socio-political movement, has made substantial progress in realising its objectives (Dobson, 2015). This progress encompasses advocating for gender equality, challenging conventional gender roles, and advancing the rights of women. A postfeminist society is often characterised by the belief that the primary goals of the feminist movement have been achieved, and women have attained equal footing in various facets of life, encompassing politics, the workplace, and society. In this context, the impact of social media is particularly important (Dobson, 2015). Social media platforms have evolved into potent tools for shaping viewpoints, sentiments, and convictions regarding women and gender-related matters within the context of a postfeminist society (McRobbie, 2015). This highlights the significance of comprehending the interplay between gender performativity theory and postfeminist sensibilities within the digital landscape of the twenty-first century. It is worth acknowledging that social media platforms have ushered in a transformative era for feminism.

According to the Association for Progressive Communications (2021), a 'Feminist Internet' strives

to empower diverse women and queer individuals to fully exercise their rights, engage in pleasure and agency, and dismantle patriarchal norms, all while respecting the multifaceted dimensions of their identities – encompassing age, abilities, sexualities, gender expressions, socio-economic statuses, political beliefs, ethnic origins, and racial backgrounds. Embedded within postfeminist perspectives is the notion that beauty defies rigidity and cannot be encapsulated within a predetermined set of criteria, which often favour specific ethnic or racial features while marginalising others. Central to this study is an exploration of the nuanced debates encompassing femininity and feminism, particularly as they intersect with the embodiment of feminine identity on Instagram. It is important to note that the expression of feminine beauty in the South African context may diverge from Western ideals because South African women engage as consumers and participants within global media and commodified cultures. These women may either adopt the 'stylish' and 'modern' trends reflective of international femininity or, conversely, challenge these trends by embracing Afrocentric beauty standards (Montle, 2020 & Avery, Stanton, Ward, Cole, Trinh & Jerald, 2021).

The theoretical framework of this study is shaped by the interplay of Judith Butler's gender performativity theory based on her main work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, published in 1990 and Henry Jenkin's 'participatory culture theory', whose work builds upon the foundation laid by earlier media scholars including Stuart Hall, David Morley, and John Fiske, who all contributed to the understanding of active audiences. Through this framework, this study aims to explore the dynamic relationship between young South African female students and Instagram, where they may be observed as co-creators of digital beauty content. This nuanced engagement is pivotal in constructing and navigating the evolving landscape of female beauty within a South African media context. The theory of participatory culture expands upon the conventional notion of passive media consumption. This perspective, articulated by Jenkins (2006: 7), illuminates the shift towards active media audiences who wield the power to shape their interactions independently or collectively with media content. This dynamic empowerment stems from the ability to not only consume but also to craft and communicate one's own perspectives, values, beliefs, and ideas through the medium of social media platforms. In this study, I aim to explore how participatory culture theory can illuminate the intricate process of how active media audiences engage in the construction and negotiation of feminine beauty. Through a synthesis of gender performativity theory and participatory culture theory, this study seeks to describe the unique ways in which these young women navigate the multifaceted interplay between digital media, cultural norms, and individual expression, ultimately forging a path towards a deeper comprehension of the complex dynamics surrounding contemporary gender identities and beauty ideals.

### **1.3 Research Rationale**

The rationale for choosing this research topic is to contribute to the existing, albeit limited, scholarly literature that interconnects the theories of participatory culture and gender performativity. This study specifically focuses on the realm of constructing and negotiating notions of female beauty within digital spaces, in this case, Instagram is chosen as the research site. This study therefore offers a new perspective to social media research which primarily focused on ethnographic content analyses of content posted on social media platforms to the active engagement and participation in the construction and negotiation of female beauty and a feminine gendered identity on social media platforms such as Instagram. There is a 'pressing need for Instagram-native research strategies which exploit the specific methodological potentials of Instagram's hashtags, mentions, likes, captions, and geo-tags to enable in-depth investigations.' (Caliandro and Graham, 2020: 2). This study utilises a relevant novel methodological approach for social media research known as the walk-through approach (Light, Burgess & Duguay, 2018) a useful approach for researching how young South African women perform gender on Instagram. This study is also conducted as a response to the call for the development of new methodologies for studying Instagram, the need for more qualitative interpretive studies on Instagram, the need for researchers to engage with South African media audiences and their everyday practices, and the need for more feminist media studies scholarship in Africa. This study employs a specific walk-through approach, the media go-along method (Jørgensen, 2016) to guide participants in walking them through a mobile application's (app) interface and affordances to generate participant narratives to gain insight into unique female South African student experiences in the negotiation and construction of female beauty and a gendered identity on Instagram.

This study emanates from my personal curiosity to gain a deeper understanding of social media platforms as integral components of daily mobile applications that shape the routines of South Africans. It is worth noting that I am an ordinary female user who actively engages with various social media platforms in my daily life. Consequently, this study serves to illuminate the intricate ways in which Instagram, a widely used social media platform, is integrated into the daily lives of South Africans. It delves into how Instagram offers diverse avenues for identity establishment and management, while also facilitating community formation and relationship cultivation.

This study's anticipated outcomes aim to uncover new insights in female beauty construction and negotiation in digital spaces. These insights will not only contribute to bridging the gap in existing academic literature regarding the participatory dynamics of social media platforms but also illuminate

distinct narratives of young women as they engage in the multifaceted processes of constructing and negotiating concepts related to female beauty. In essence, this research aims to not only uncover insights but also contribute to the broader academic landscape by enhancing our understanding of the profound role that digital platforms play in shaping identities and interactions within contemporary South Africa society.

#### **1.4 Research Problem**

The overall aims of the study is understanding the unique perspectives and experiences of young female higher education students in the negotiation and construction of female beauty and a gendered identity on Instagram. The academic need for this intended study arises because past research has not been conducted sufficiently on how beauty and social media platforms can be studied in an African context. Recent beauty studies in Africa and abroad focused on the diaspora of different cultures and how these cultures are potentially negatively influenced by Western beauty standards (Yerima, 2017, Gordon, 2019, Akinro and Memani, 2019).

Insufficient research has been conducted on how young female higher education students can play a role in negotiating and constructing their understanding of female beauty, which may deviate from the Western beauty standard that researchers have previously explored (Yerima, 2017, Gordon, 2019, Akinro and Memani, 2019). Representation and construction of ‘beauty’ in the past in print and broadcast media has been through the lenses of traditional media producers where the Western beauty standard of being thin, having long hair, being fair/tan-skinned, having big breasts, small nose, and high cheekbones was seen as the ‘ideal’ beauty standard for women (Akinro and Memani, 2019). This is evident in recent literature that investigated how beauty is represented on traditional forms of media – predominately advertising – and insufficient information has been provided on the role young women have in uniquely constructing beauty and whether they feel the need to reach this often impossible and unattainable standard (Glapka and Majali, 2017, de Freitas, Jordan & Hughes, 2018). This point is further corroborated in a recent African study – a content analysis of beauty representation in African beauty magazines – that provided valuable insight into how African beauty is represented but did not provide insight into unique perspectives and experiences young women have of how beauty is negotiated or constructed (Speno and Aubrey, 2017).

Recent beauty studies conducted have also focused on the comparison of Afrocentric versus Eurocentric beauty standards and the influence of these beauty standards on young women (Tate, 2009, Gentles-Peart, 2018, Dunn, Hood & Owens, 2019 & Montle, 2020). Whilst recent beauty

studies have focused on how beauty is represented on traditional media forms and the influence these beauty standards have on young women, recent studies have not sufficiently investigated the unique experiences young women can have in the negotiation and construction of feminine beauty.

According to Jiayu Zhan, *et.al* (2021) beauty is not ‘fixed’ and cannot simply be defined by a predetermined set of criteria that deems a woman as beautiful or not. Different understandings and experiences of beauty exist. Recent African focused studies have indicated beauty and beauty efforts are multifaceted and complex (Speno and Aubrey, 2017). This is seen in South Africa, specifically in black cultures where some black women believe ‘big-boned’ women are attractive and others believe slender ‘yellow-boned’ women are attractive (Ogana and Ojong, 2013) Therefore in order to situate the proposed study in South Africa to understand African beauty, the intended study aims to focus on the unique and detailed experiences of young female higher education students in the negotiation and representation of their understanding of female beauty on new digital forms of media.

Furthermore, there is also a need to articulate the voices of young South African women between the ages of 18-24 in accounting for how audiences engage with social media platforms and their everyday practices. Audiences are ‘not all the same’ (Barber, 1997: 347) as they are always situated in historically and culturally specific contexts. Research into African media audiences is urgent more than ever because of the rapidly changing media landscape on the continent’ (Willems and Mano, 2017: 2) As Karin Barber (1997: 35) has noted, ‘what has not yet been sufficiently explored is the possibility that specific African audiences have distinctive, conventional modes and styles of making meaning’. There is an urgent ‘need to foreground the voices and experiences of Africans with a range of media forms more strongly’ (Willems and Mano, 2017: 2). There is ‘an urgent imperative need to study audiences and users in Africa’ from a critical, qualitative perspective to better understand how African audiences make sense of, and relate to, media forms in their everyday lives (Willems and Mano, 2017: 4; Helle-Valle, 2017). Within this, there is also an urgent need for more feminist research in Africa. The rise of social media requires further study as it is important for feminist media scholarship to include ‘a broader range of voices from the global South, particularly in Africa’ (Bosch, 2013: 28).

This study specifically focus on media audiences situated in a new ‘social media paradigm’. One of the biggest challenges facing researchers is ‘developing methods that can adequately address the scale and scope of the available data without losing the capacity for analysing the more granular aspects of participatory cultures’ (Caliandro and Graham, 2020: 6). Critical reflective methodologies on

studying Instagram ‘remain in their infancy’ (McCrow-Young, 2021: 27) and there is need for ‘additional critical considerations that arise from the vast scope of visual social media, its formats and functions, cultures, and practices’ (Highfield and Leaver, 2016: 50). There is also ‘a clear need for more research that engages with Instagram users directly rather than simply looking at the content they create’ (Laestadius, 2017: 589). Instagram significantly is ‘rich source of data for those seeking to understand youth culture’ (Laestadius, 2017: 588). This paradigm reflects how social media platforms have become a popular phenomenon for global and local media audiences (Burgess, Marwick & Poell, 2018: 13). Social media studies to date in South Africa have largely focused on the influence of a social media platform on the user. This is evident in a recent study conducted on Instagram that focused on the influence Instagram has on body dissatisfaction and how celebrities on social media can influence the perceptions young women have of their bodies (Motseki and Oyedemi, 2017). Influencers and their experiences on social media platforms has also been a recent research focus in South Africa that focused on South African influencers experiences on social media platforms (Roux, 2020). Whilst these perspectives provided valuable insight into the influence social media platforms can have on its users, the role and unique experiences social media users play in actively creating and sharing content on social media is often not focused on in recent studies. Furthermore, past studies have also not investigated sufficiently how South Africans use social media to construct their identities. Social media in the study mainly focuses on the capability to support user-generated content and how social media users engage with each other (Quan-Haase and Sloan, 2017: 11).

### **1.5 Aims and Objectives of the Study**

The aims of this study are based on a forthcoming article co-authored by me and Professor Sarah Gibson, which has led to the desire to explore new methodologies for social media research in South Africa. Specifically, this study seeks to comprehend the distinctive perspectives and insights into how young female higher education students on Instagram both perform and engage in the construction and negotiation of female beauty. As such, the objectives and research questions have been shaped by the theories of participatory culture and gender performativity.

The research objectives for the study are:

1. To understand different ways young female students actively participate in the construction of female beauty on Instagram.
2. To understand how the construction of female beauty on Instagram articulates a feminine gendered identity for young female students.
3. To explore how young female students negotiate feminism and femininity through the construction of beauty on Instagram.

### **1.6 Research Questions of the Study**

The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. In what ways do young female students actively participate in the construction of female beauty on Instagram?
2. How does the construction of female beauty on Instagram articulate a feminine gendered identity for young female students?
3. How do young female students negotiate feminism and femininity through the construction of beauty on Instagram?

In Chapter 4: Methodology, sections 1.7 - 1.10 will be explored in more depth. The subsequent sections provide an overview of the topics that will be delved into in that chapter.

### **1.7 Research Approach**

The research approach serves as the strategic pathway that guides a researcher throughout the various stages of a study, providing a structured trajectory for achieving research objectives (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018: 1523). It delineates the specific steps that are taken to investigate a particular phenomenon (Neuman, 2014: 86) Research approaches generally fall into two categories: quantitative research, which focuses on numerical data to establish relationships between variables, and qualitative research, which delves into uncovering subjective thoughts and unique experiences (Adams *et.al*, 2007: 54). Qualitative research employs data collection and analysis techniques that enable researchers to gain in-depth insights into participants' distinct experiences (Fielding, Lee and Blank, 2008: 3), a depth that is often challenging to attain through quantitative methods, which tend to generalise findings. In this study, I adopted a qualitative research approach which aligned with the objectives of comprehensively understanding participants' experiences regarding the construction and negotiation of female beauty and the performance of gender on Instagram.

This approach enabled me to collect detailed narratives and descriptions, particularly as participants guided me through their Instagram profiles.

In this study, the use of a qualitative research approach was particularly insightful. It facilitated a nuanced exploration of young women's engagement with Instagram, shedding light on how they infuse meaning into their interactions on the platform, thereby constructing their feminine identities. While qualitative research does face criticism, particularly in terms of generalisability and validity (Flick, 2004: 90), it remains a vital tool for understanding complex social realities (Flick, 2004: 90). Considering this, this study aimed to explore the distinct ways in which young female university students construct and negotiate female beauty on Instagram. This belief operates on the premise that the phenomenon under examination comprises multiple interconnected realities (Neuman, 2014: 89), each contributing to unique experiences of how these individuals construct and negotiate their feminine identities within the digital realm. In essence, the inherent limitations of generalisability and validity in qualitative research are mitigated by the opportunity to comprehensively grasp the multifaceted intricacies of social phenomena, as demonstrated by this study's exploration into the significance young women assign to their experiences on Instagram.

### **1.8 Research Design**

A research design provides the methodological structure for a study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018: 1525). The research design encompasses the procedural framework that guides the investigation (Neuman, 2014: 92). Phenomenology was selected as a significant research design that frames this study. This design focuses on the reflective exploration of pre-reflective or lived experiences (Adams and van Manen, 2008: 614). At its core, phenomenology seeks to understand the world through the lens of human experiences, devoid of conceptualisation, categorisation, theorisation, or reflection (Adams and van Manen, 2008: 615). Phenomenology was conscientiously selected as the suitable research design for this study due to its capacity to delve into the 'lived experiences' of human participants within the realm of Instagram usage. This approach seeks to explore the ways in which a range of experiences shapes and constitutes an individual's lifeworld, intricately linked to our reality, encompassing our daily existence (Dreher, 2003: 142). In this study, Instagram is regarded as a lifeworld within the context of the cyber network, pivotal for individuals who navigate online spaces and interact via social media platforms. It is within this framework that Alfred Schütz's phenomenological perspective, rooted in the mundane everyday world, gains relevance. This lifeworld extends to the stage and backdrop for social interactions (Goffman, 1956 in Wallace, 2005). The foundation for an individual's thought and action is rooted in typifications, encompassing the

comprehensive realm of an individual's lifeworld (Inglis and Thorpe 2012: 88-89).

In the context of young female higher education students engaged in the construction and negotiation of female beauty on Instagram, this is reflected in the practical aspects and affordances they adopt. This includes the language used, multimedia content shared, and strategies employed to captivate audiences. The culmination of these typifications equips young females with practical knowledge acquired through their engagement on Instagram, a platform that serves as a rich canvas for learning from the participation of others.

### **1.9 Data Collection**

Data collection involves the systematic collection of data to address research questions and aims of a study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018: 1529). In this study, a unique data collection method, the walk-through approach rooted in digital ethnography, is utilised. This method, known as the media go-along approach, examines mobile application interfaces and cultural influences, revealing technological mechanisms and sociocultural representations. The challenge in the realm of social media research is understanding mobility, especially in the context of platforms like Instagram, where stable contextual information can be elusive (Hand, 2017: 221). This approach has gained prominence in addressing the fluidity of these platforms (Light, Burgess & Duguay, 2018; Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). In addressing the challenges of social media research, the media go-along method has gained prominence. This approach, as adopted in this study, involves a collaborative navigation of mobile application interfaces to explore cultural and technological aspects, revealing sociocultural representations (Light, Burgess & Duguay, 2018). In this research, the media go-along method took the form of semi-structured interviews, allowing for a holistic understanding of how female university students engage with Instagram in the context of gender and femininity performance. This immersive approach uncovered patterns and themes related to the construction and negotiation of gender and femininity on the platform, including the framing and discussion of beauty content on Instagram (Jørgensen, 2016; Møller and Robards, 2019).

### **1.10 Data Analysis**

Data analysis, the process of deriving insights from collected data (Chamberlain and Lynch, 2022: 147) was conducted in this study using manual reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) Thematic analysis (TA) involves systematic data coding to identify and interpret patterns within qualitative datasets (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Following Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's six-step TA approach (2006), this study aimed to comprehensively understand how female beauty is constructed and

negotiated on Instagram. The analysis process was not linear, requiring iterative review. Data was coded manually, with key words, concepts, and statements highlighted and connected to corresponding themes using different coloured markers.

Thematic maps were created to visualise key concepts and themes (Braun and Clarke, 2022). The findings were categorised into three main themes: 'Digital Craftsmanship: Participatory Beauty Construction and Digital Engagement,' 'Instagram Performativity: Embodying Feminine Identity through Performances,' and 'Dialectics of Empowerment: Beauty as Site of Feminist Expression and Negotiation.' These themes were defined deductively based on the theoretical framework and literature review, while sub-themes were derived inductively from the coded dataset. The naming of each theme and sub-theme was achieved through repeated reading for accuracy and relevance (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

### **1.11 Structure of Dissertation**

This study is structured in the following chapters:

**Chapter Two: Literature Review** – A literature review is a way of demonstrating and explaining prior and current published research on a specific topic (Ridley, 2013). This is the second chapter of the dissertation as it serves as a demonstration of present knowledge on the topic, which is designed to highlight key findings and gaps to facilitate research for the study. The literature review chapter covers the review of available literature on this topic. This chapter is divided into two main intersecting sections, namely beauty studies and social media. The section on beauty studies is a comprehensive exploration of diverse concepts, encompassing themes such as *The Beauty Myth* (Wolf, 1990), the intersection of female beauty within the realm of feminist discourse, the contextual significance of beauty in sociocultural and African contexts, and a discerning examination of traditional media's construction of beauty. The subsequent section delves deeply into the realm of social media, homing in on the dynamic evolution of digital platforms. Emphasis is placed on Instagram as a prime example of this phenomenon. This section further navigates through the intriguing dynamics of identity formation on Instagram, the influential role of online personalities and celebrities, and how ordinary users make use of Instagram's unique affordances.

**Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework** – The aim of a theoretical framework is to connect the research study to existing theories to form the foundation that supports the research study (Grant and Osanloo, 2014: 18). It provides meaning and reasons for the research findings to be centered in academic

research. This study's theoretical framework constitutes of two main theories. Participatory culture theory (Jenkins 2006) is discussed as it is used as a theoretical foundation to understand the different ways young women may participate in the construction and negotiation of female beauty on Instagram. The second theory, gender performativity theory (Butler, 1990) is used to explore how young South African women negotiate a feminine gendered identity on Instagram. Both theories key concepts, assumptions, practical application, strengths, and weaknesses are discussed to fully conceptualise the relevancy of these theories as constituting this study's theoretical framework.

**Chapter Four: Research Methodology** - This chapter outlines the methodological approaches observed in this study. It discusses the research paradigm, design, and approach, focusing on the walk-through data collection technique and the reflexive thematic analysis method. The research approach is elucidated, highlighting the selection of qualitative research to explore participants' experiences regarding female beauty construction and gender performance on Instagram. This chapter subsequently describes this study's research design, emphasising phenomenology as the suitable framework for capturing lived experiences within the realm of Instagram. The chosen data collection method, the walk-through approach, is expounded upon, specifically employing the media go-along method through semi-structured interviews. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of a reflexive thematic analysis are also discussed as forming part of a suitable data analysis method in this study. Lastly, a section on the major ethical considerations I had to employ in this study to maintain that academic integrity and rigour is discussed in this chapter.

**Chapter Five: Findings & Analysis** - This chapter presents and analyses the data collected from the media go-along interviews conducted with my participants. This data is structured according to themes and sub-themes generated through the reflexive thematic analysis previously conducted (Braun and Clarke, 2020). These themes are dissected to logically present the participants' perspectives, fostering authentic narratives. By giving voice to these young women, this chapter aims to comprehensively explore their collective experiences. This chapter critically examines the theoretically informed thematic analysis in relation to the earlier reviewed literature. This chapter describes the intersection of data with the reflexive thematic analysis, expounding on each theme and sub-theme's relation to addressing the research questions and objectives, thereby offering a comprehensive exploration of the participants' engagement with Instagram's portrayal of female beauty and gender identity.

**Chapter Six: Conclusions** - This final chapter reviews the major conclusions of this study in themes, summarises important points and discusses inferences discovered during this study. This chapter draws upon the synthesis of the literature review (Chapter Two), the theoretical framework (Chapter Three) and the key findings discussed in the findings and analysis chapter (Chapter Five). It reflects on how young female higher education students navigate their perception of female beauty in utilising the interactive and unique affordances offered by Instagram. This concluding chapter comprehensively addresses and discuss the three main research questions and objectives of this study and discusses the overall significance of this study considering the overall problem statement, suggesting further recommended research avenues.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2. Introduction**

The objectives of this study are to understand how young higher education female students may use Instagram to construct and negotiate female beauty, and how this may constitute part of a feminine gendered identity. Therefore, to further explore these objectives, the following literature review presents an overview of the relevant research around the topics of beauty, social media, and feminist media. It is hoped that through this exposition of the subjects of beauty in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as well as the rise of new forms of digital media, including social media, will help demonstrate the research gaps that this study aims to fill. This chapter will demonstrate past and current research situated within beauty studies and provide context in terms of how social media platforms, specifically Instagram, have become integrated in the daily lives of young women in the twenty-first century.

The concept of female beauty is both intricate and diverse, encompassing different interpretations shaped by social, cultural, and historical influences. Beauty standards and ideals have evolved over time, reflecting the values and societal expectations of different eras (Scruton, 2011: 7). Recently, the portrayal of female beauty has experienced a notable shift in the realm of media. In the past, mainstream media platforms have had a significant influence on moulding and promoting beauty ideals and in portraying limited and unrealistic standards of beauty (Gill, 2007: 18). Nevertheless, the emergence of social media, particularly Instagram, has brought about a noticeable change in how beauty is constructed and portrayed. Instagram, being a widely used platform that is situated in an increasingly visual culture, has become a significant site for individuals to actively engage in the creation and sharing of content (Leaver et.al, 2020: 7). To comprehend how female beauty is constructed and represented on Instagram, it is necessary to examine its divergence from traditional media portrayals. Instagram provides a distinct environment with unique affordances for users to curate their self-representation and engage with diverse visual content (Serafinelli, 2018: 54). This shift in representation has also led to changes in the understanding of femininity and its intersection with feminism in the twenty-first century. To fill these research gaps and make a meaningful contribution to the existing body of knowledge, this chapter has the objective of critically examining the current scholarly works related to the construction and representation of female beauty on Instagram. Through the synthesis and analysis of relevant literature, insights are offered into the evolving landscape of beauty ideals, the influence of social media platforms on beauty standards, and

the strategies employed by young women to negotiate and navigate the construction of female beauty within a decolonised context. In essence, this chapter aims to provide a holistic understanding of female beauty and different developments and perspectives of beauty study as well as how female beauty is shaped and presented on Instagram. Additionally, it emphasises the necessity for further research that embraces diverse perspectives and employs decolonised frameworks. By doing so, this chapter intends to contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding beauty, identity, and the role of social media in the twenty-first century.

## **2.1 Beauty Studies**

The subsequent section will offer diverse viewpoints on the concept of beauty, encompassing historical and contemporary arguments and debates surrounding its construction. The discussion commences with an examination of *The Beauty Myth* (Wolf, 1990) and progresses towards an exploration of beauty within the context of a postfeminist digital era. Notably, critiques of beauty across waves of feminism, postfeminism, and intersectional feminism will be presented. The socially constructed nature of beauty will also be explored, particularly in relation to gender, race, and culture, and its intersectionality with identity in a contemporary South African setting.

### **2.1.1 The Beauty Myth**

A notable key feminist work on beauty is *The Beauty Myth*. Wolf (1990) identifies the ‘myth’ to critique it. Wolf (1990) believes that if there is a fixed definition of beauty, women should strive to attain it. This concept believes that men should seek out beautiful women. The problem with this is that there is no objective definition of beauty; people tend to perceive beauty differently based on their own personal experiences, racial and cultural backgrounds. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the concept of female beauty has been conceptualised as a myth that is unattainable and unrealistic, as women are granted more rights and social power, there is an increased pressure on women to adhere and strive to achieve unrealistic and social standards of physical beauty. This increased pressure and preoccupation with the female body in turn leads to women becoming involved in unhealthy and extreme practices to achieve this unrealistic beauty standard. The *beauty myth* can further be explicated as a belief that women are compared to the symbol of an ‘Iron Maiden’ in that it is believed an unattainable beauty standard that is used to punish women both physically and psychologically for their failure to achieve this standard. Both the fashion and beauty industries are viewed as exploitative to women and that women should have the ‘the choice to do whatever we want with our faces and bodies without being punished by an ideology that is using attitudes, economic pressure, and even legal judgments regarding women's appearance to undermine us psychologically

and politically' (Wolf, 1990: 10). The *beauty myth* has double standards in that it believes women who are sexually active are seen as immoral and women who are not sexually active are viewed as prudes. Beauty standards are constantly changing and involving are unattainable because they are based on "phantom and not reality" (Wolf, 1990: 11).

In the realm of feminism, the *beauty myth* is viewed as a mechanism of control over women, prioritising their physical appearance over their abilities, accomplishments, and intellectual capacities. It functions as a systemic force that reinforces patriarchal norms, upholding gender inequality in society. The *beauty myth* often intersects with other forms of oppression, including racism, ageism, and ableism, thereby exacerbating the challenges faced by marginalised women who do not conform to society's narrow beauty standards (Wolf, 1990: 18). The *beauty myth* also emerged in response to the cultural ideal of the 'happy housewife' in the mid-twentieth century, which emphasised a woman's fulfilment through homemaking and prioritising her husband's needs (Friedan, 2013: 7). Conforming to traditional beauty standards became integral to this ideal, as a woman's appearance was seen as crucial for being a supportive and attractive wife. Wolf (1990: 19) argues that the *beauty myth* was a way of oppressing women who had found freedom/independence after the end of the 'happy housewife' perspective, so women could just be housewives, but also had to be beautiful instead (Wolf, 1990: 10). However, the *beauty myth* introduced new expectations for women, requiring them to invest significant time, effort, and resources into their physical appearance (Wolf, 1990: 14). This reinforced the belief that their value primarily lies in their looks, adding to the burden of conforming to narrow and unattainable beauty ideals.

As women released themselves from the feminine mystique of domesticity, the *beauty myth* took over its lost ground to continue its work as a form of self-control (Wolf, 1990: 10). Additionally, mass media outlets including television, radio, magazines, film and now the advent of digital technology and creation and usage of social media platforms perpetuate unrealistic and unattainable beauty standards (Wolf, 1990: 19). It is estimated that the more exposure women have with idealised beauty images, the more dissatisfied they are with the physical appearance of their bodies (Dămean, 2010). The exposure to these images which are often linked to exercise regimes advertisements, dieting advice, 'bikini ready' posters and gym membership advertisements further reinforces the unattainability aspect of the *beauty myth* as these aspects are not achievable through diet or exercise (Wolf, 1990: 20-21).

This further has a negative effect on a woman's health as due to these unrealistic and unattainable standards, women undertake extreme forms of dieting, exercise and strive to reach a body weight that is unhealthy which could lead to the development of eating disorders (Wolf, 1990: 11). It is also believed that the *beauty myth* may reinforce male dominance in society (Scholz, 2010). As women in society become preoccupied on their physical appearance, equal rights and fair treatment becomes less of a priority. If women never feel good about their physical appearance than even when they do gain victories in professional realms, they are still subjected to scrutiny based on physical appearance that is not meeting the unattainable beauty standard. Similarly, there are practices in society that condition young girls and women to behave in a feminine manner (de Beauvoir, 1949: 14-15). It is believed that as young women there are certain social expectations that are expected that prevent women from behaving inhibited that are unlike the social expectation of men. This includes the use of makeup products, clothing styles and manners that are subject to extensive scrutiny that is not faced by men (de Beauvoir, 1949: 18-19).

The *beauty myth* (Wolf, 1990), a seminal feminist work, holds substantial significance in elucidating societal perspectives on feminine beauty. The ensuing sections delve into diverse facets of beauty examined through the lens of various waves of feminism, as well as from an intersectional and decolonised standpoint, particularly within the context of South Africa.

### **2.1.2 Feminist Critiques of Beauty**

Feminist theories aim to reconstruct the belief of women from 'being viewed as objects to being seen as subjects' (Shayne, 2007: 1685). Feminism is a multifaceted concept that seeks to uncover women's perspectives and experiences in the world (Winkler, 2009: 8). It is not a singular paradigm, but rather encompasses various approaches that address women's issues in society. First-wave feminism, which emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, focused on expanding women's opportunities, particularly suffrage (Kozlowski *et.al*, 2019). Initially, women's physical appearance was tied to their social worth, and the use of cosmetics was viewed cautiously. However, by the early twentieth century, the stigma around cosmetics diminished, and their use became a form of self-expression and perceived desirability (Peiss, 2001: 54). Suffragists even incorporated lip rouge into their rallies as a symbol of women's rights (Schaffer, 2006). While some suffragists experimented with unconventional attire like 'bloomers', which was met with public rejection, educated women supported sensible dress reforms (Brownmiller, 1984: 88-89).

The rejection of traditional femininity and criticism of the fashion industry demonstrated how first-wave feminism viewed fashion as a political decision and identified it as a source of women's oppression.

While the first wave of feminism focused on absolute rights such as suffrage, The second wave of feminism, spanning from the 1960s to the 1990s, focused on cultural equality and ending discrimination. While women gained legal rights and social recognition during this period, the emergence of the *beauty myth* became apparent. The *beauty myth* is a backlash against feminism, that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement. (Wolf, 2013: 10). As women broke through legal and material hindrances, society placed increasingly strict and cruel expectations on female beauty (Wolf, 1990: 11). The beauty industry perpetuated unattainable beauty standards, reinforcing patriarchy's objectification and control over women's bodies (Wolf, 1990: 22). During the second wave, women were compelled to compete for male approval and were subjected to oppressive beauty standards (Brownmiller, 1984: 24-25). Some women attempted to challenge these standards by embracing natural appearances and rejecting consumerism. However, there was diversity within the feminist movement regarding views on femininity and beauty. While some feminists criticised traditional notions of femininity as toxic, others struggled to reconcile feminist identity with traditional beauty ideals (Alcoff, 1988). The stigma associated with being a feminist, characterised as unattractive and bitter, discouraged some women from joining the movement.

Second wave feminism faced criticism for promoting beauty standards that favoured whiteness and the Western beauty ideal, which thus neglected marginalised groups who believed diverse beauty standards (Laughlin *et.al*, 2010). The second wave feminist movement's adherence to Western beauty norms excluded women whose appearances did not align with these beauty ideals. Furthermore, the focus on equality within Western structures ignored the challenges faced by women in non-Western contexts and failed to address the intersectionality of race, gender, and beauty. In contrast, the third wave of feminism emphasised beauty ideals as a central issue, with some feminists rejecting them altogether and others selectively embracing certain aspects while rejecting traditional femininity. This wave also incorporated post-modernist and post-structuralist feminist thinking, recognising the diversity of women's experiences and intersectionality of beauty based on class, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity. This gave rise to the term 'intersectionality'. This term was coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989 and it recognises the interconnectedness of social classifications including race, gender, sexual identity, and class, and how their intersection shapes the experiences of women in society. It challenges the notion of treating all women as equal and striving for the same

goals, acknowledging the unique experiences and vulnerabilities of marginalised groups. It was initially developed to address the experiences of black women, but intersectional feminism has expanded to include all marginalised bodies and their specific vulnerabilities (Carastathis, 2019). It provides a platform for voices outside of the Western mainstream and seeks to address equity issues and promote social justice. However, despite its recognition of differences, women of colour still engage with a beauty industry that upholds Eurocentric ideals, leading to underrepresentation of marginalised groups in traditional media (Awad *et.al*, 2014). The influence of the *beauty myth* and the male gaze persists in society, with a focus on women's bodies, the idealisation of thinness, and the pressure to conform through cosmetic surgery, fake hair, long nails, and skin bleaching (Edmond, 2014). These issues pose challenges for intersectional feminism as it strives for inclusivity and challenges societal beauty norms.

The third wave of feminism coincided with the emergence of post-feminism, which encompasses both feminist and anti-feminist elements, creating a 'double entanglement' characterised by contradictory features (McRobbie, 2004). Post-feminist women's studies combine postmodernist and constructionist perspectives to examine contemporary gender representations in the media (Gill, 2007). Post-feminist media theory, originating in the 1980s, argues that the goals of traditional feminism, including gender equality and women's independence, have been achieved, leading to the belief that the feminist movement is no longer relevant (McRobbie, 2008). Media portrayals during this period depicted women in highly empowered roles, deviating from traditional feminine roles. However, Susan Faludi challenged this perspective, emphasising that traditional feminine roles could also embody empowerment and beauty (Faludi, 1991). These media depictions of women in emancipated roles were recognised as integral to feminine identity but were seen as opposing the 'masculine' feminist agenda (McRobbie, 2008). Post-feminist women were often viewed as non-conformers, rejecting conventional ideals of beauty, maternity, and complacency. The media promoted consumerism to enhance feminine sexuality, linking it to power and identity (McRobbie, 2009). McRobbie coined the term 'commodity feminism' which places emphasis on individual agency and empowerment through consumerism. Women are encouraged to express their identity and assert their power through the purchase of products branded as feminist or aligned with feminist values (McRobbie, 2015). This can include items such as clothing, accessories, beauty products, and media content that promote messages of female empowerment or celebrate women's accomplishments (McRobbie, 2015).

While commodity feminism presents the illusion of empowerment and choice, it often operates within the confines of capitalist consumer culture. By reducing feminism to a marketable commodity, it has the potential to dilute and depoliticise its transformative objectives. The emphasis on individual empowerment through consumption may overshadow collective feminist activism that aims to challenge systemic inequalities and structural barriers (McRobbie, 2015).

Rosalind Gill (2007: 148) coined the term ‘postfeminist sensibility’ to describe a framework of ideas concerning female subjectivity, embodiment, and empowerment. The concepts within postfeminist sensibility are not fixed but provide a flexible structure for understanding how different elements intersect in various contexts and have subjective effects. The core themes of postfeminist sensibility include a shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification, viewing women's participation in practices that may seem sexually objectifying as expressions of knowing sexuality; the understanding of femininity as a bodily property shaped through self-surveillance and appearance-related bodywork; the emphasis on the body as central to a woman's success and identity; and a reaffirmation of gender difference and biological essentialism, which positions traditional feminine concerns and pleasures related to appearance and consumption as natural choices for contemporary women. These themes encourage women to perceive themselves as empowered, while simultaneously constraining their choices to focus on body-related work, often through consumption (Gill, 2007). The coexistence of contradictions is a significant aspect of postfeminist sensibility. Understanding the contrasting media representations allows for a deeper understanding of the complexities of media culture. Gill (2007) argues that postfeminist bodies are disciplined and shaped to embody individual freedom, agency, and empowerment. The body is viewed as possessing power but also requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, and remodelling (Gill, 2007). Postfeminist women perceive themselves as projects, constantly working on themselves (Tasker and Negra, 2005). The disciplined body is also associated with consumerism, as women who can afford expensive clothing and beauty products are seen as desirable. This perspective aligns with the idea that post-feminism is a form of ‘class performance’ by women who can engage in conspicuous consumption. It is also believed that the postfeminist lifestyle is a result of women's economic independence and sexual freedom, thus highlighting the role of consumerism in analysing postfeminist trends (Miroiu, 2007).

While this section discussed key feminist critiques of beauty, the preceding section expands on this by exploring the intersectionality of beauty and the impact of colonialism on beauty standards, particularly in the South African context.

### **2.1.3 Intersectional and Decolonised Perspectives of Beauty**

Throughout history, beauty standards and trends have been shaped by shared socio-cultural perceptions of what is considered beautiful and desirable. These standards have been influenced by colonialism, resulting in the establishment of a particular beauty ideal as the norm, while women who did not conform to this ideal were judged and evaluated by society (Tate, 2009). During periods of slavery, colonialists sought to erase the visibility of black beauty. Lighter-skinned black women with European features and straight hair were often chosen as house slaves, while those with darker skin, curlier hair, and other distinctive features were relegated to field slaves (Tate, 2009). This gave rise to the concept of colourism, which involves prejudice or discrimination within a racial or ethnic group, favouring individuals with lighter complexions over those with darker complexions. The preference for 'white beauty' marginalised women whose features deviated from the norm, perpetuating their inferior treatment in comparison to their white counterparts. The 'ideal' Eurocentric beauty standard, characterised by thinness, tallness, fair or tan skin, large breasts, a small nose, small waist, and high cheekbones, became the hegemonic global standard of beauty that women were encouraged to attain (Akinro, 2019). These physical attributes are commonly associated with Western (North American and European) women and have been promoted as the epitome of beauty in society. Black women who possessed features that diverged from this norm were often deemed unattractive and subjected to inferior treatment.

In the twenty-first century, there has been a growing recognition and movement towards the decolonisation of beauty standards. Decolonisation is 'the intelligent, calculated and active resistance to the forces of colonialism that perpetuate the subjugation and/or exploitation of our minds, bodies, and lands, and it is engaged for the ultimate purpose of overturning the colonisation structure and realising Indigenous liberation' (Wilson and Bird, 2005: 1-2). The decolonisation of beauty involves embracing the visual representation of Indigenous women in society and politics and creating spaces for the intellectual development of Indigenous feminine beauty (Bourassa, McKay-McNabb & Hampton, 2009). Decolonisation is a complex process that requires individuals to unlearn Eurocentric beauty standards. It involves a rejection of the oppressive colonial ideas of beauty and a recentring of beauty within people of colour. This entails dismantling the notion that white features are superior and embracing one's natural aesthetic. By doing so, women of colour reclaim their autonomy and challenge the dominant white beauty ideals that perpetuate anti-Black aesthetics (Norwood, 2015). The decolonisation of beauty standards represents a resistance to Western norms and a celebration of diverse cultural expressions of beauty. It is a rejection of a life characterised by inferiority and subservience to Western standards, offering women of colour the freedom to embrace their unique

beauty and challenge the hegemonic ideals that have marginalised and oppressed them.

In the context of our own culture, South African beauty standards are largely influenced by international trends and Eurocentric ideals of beauty. The promotion of light skin, slim bodies, and sleek hair in mass media has led many black South African women to strive for this idealised standard through restrictive dieting, intensive exercise, and the use of skin lightening products (Nahomie, 2014). This perpetuates the *beauty myth*, which continues to permeate and impact South African communities. However, there has been a recent movement towards debunking Eurocentric beauty standards and embracing a more inclusive and diverse understanding of beauty. The focus is shifting towards accepting a "universal" beauty standard that appreciates beauty in its various forms across different cultures (Lai and Perminiene, 2020). In the context of post-feminism, the decolonisation of beauty standards is a crucial aspect. It involves challenging and unlearning the Eurocentric ideals that have been internalised and perpetuated by mass media and societal norms. By embracing diverse representations of beauty and rejecting the notion that one standard is superior, women can reclaim their agency and redefine beauty on their own terms. The process of decolonising beauty standards in South Africa involves acknowledging the historical influence of Eurocentric ideals, challenging their dominance, and promoting an inclusive and culturally diverse understanding of beauty. This shift allows for a celebration of beauty in all its manifestations and empowers women to embrace their unique features and individuality.

When examining beauty standards in South Africa, it is important to consider the historical influence of colonialism. Western dress and beauty products were initially embraced by Africans as a means of self-expression and the construction of new social identities distinct from those imposed by colonialists. Postfeminism in South Africa challenges patriarchal norms and the oppression of women by emphasising personal choice, freedom, and engagement through social media platforms and the consumption of global beauty products. Some African women have adopted a hyper-feminine style characterised by elements like weaves, acrylic nails, heavy makeup, false eyelashes, and jewellery, aligning with the notion of the 'post-feminist masquerade' described by McRobbie (2009). However, it is important to acknowledge that the concept of free choice may be influenced by external pressures stemming from mainstream media and the beauty industry, which naturalise certain beauty standards (McRobbie, 2009). In the context of African women's engagement with beauty practices, the notion of 'aesthetic vigilance' emerges as a neoliberal form of aesthetic labour. Women strategically allocate attention and resources to different parts of their bodies and minds, allowing them to 'breathe' or 'rest' in a cyclical manner (Riley *et.al*, 2022: 16). This highlights the complex interplay between

agency and external pressures in African women's pursuit of hyper-feminine practices.

Moreover, Afrocentric beauty represents an approach to beauty that highlights and uplifts the innate qualities, aesthetics, and cultural aspects linked to individuals of African heritage. It values the diversity present within the African diaspora and acknowledges that there is not a universal standard of beauty that fits everyone. Afrocentric beauty asserts that beauty is fundamentally rooted in African heritage and actively questions the historical dominance of Eurocentric beauty norms in media, fashion, and society. The natural hair movement, which encourages individuals to embrace their natural, textured hair, has attracted significant attention in current research. Studies about this movement have explored the history, significance, and impact of this movement on beauty standards (Nimocks, 2015 and Matjila, 2020). Studies have also explored the role of Africanised beauty norms in fostering a feeling of cultural identity and self-esteem within people of African heritage. This examination encompasses the importance of cultural traditions, including body adornments and conventional hairstyles (Bencosme, 2017 & Kaziga, *et.al*, 2021).

Overall, it is crucial to consider the intersectionality of feminist perspectives, the impact of colonialism on beauty standards, and the complexities of post-feminism in the South African context. By acknowledging the diverse experiences and contesting the dominant narratives, it is possible to foster a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of beauty, gender, and agency in South Africa.

#### **2.1.4 Beauty Practices – Embodiment and Commodification**

It is crucial to understand the tensions between the embodiment of female beauty and its commodification by the beauty and media industries to better understand how female beauty is constructed and portrayed in the twenty-first century. Femininity is influenced by the gendered social structures within which women are situated, making it a social construct that is shaped by cultural and biological factors (Williams, 2011). In the past, femininity was associated with women fulfilling traditional gender roles as housewives and mothers, characterised by qualities including meekness, gentleness, and supportiveness. Additionally, female beauty was defined by specific physical attributes, including a slim body with large breasts, small shoulders, and a small waist, which were considered attractive to men and indicative of a woman's dedication to her appearance and family (Windsor, 2015). The notion of female beauty is seen as performative, involving acts of mimicry, hybridity, and performance (Tate, 2009).

Embodiment refers to the representation or expression of something in a tangible or visible form, and beauty is considered an embodied practice that requires daily performance and maintenance, including styling hair, applying makeup, and choosing attire (Bourdieu, 1977). These practices intersect with a woman's gender and embodiment of femininity, as female beauty can be embodied through various measures including improving body shape, facial features, skin tone, clothing style, body weight, and hairstyle (Spade and Valentine, 2010). Historically, women used 'adornments' such as makeup and jewellery to enhance their perceived physical attractiveness, particularly if they felt unattractive, as a compensatory tool (Bloch and Richins, 1992). This consumption of beauty products serves to authenticate oneself by connecting external expressions of beauty to internal orientations (Fillitz and Saris, 2013). The use of fashion encompasses clothing, accessories, and style choices and enables self-expression for women. The ways in which women engage with fashion goes beyond merely wearing of clothing and jewellery; it involves a conscious curation of their appearance, a reflection of their individuality, and a response to societal influences. Fashion as a beauty practice is also influenced by societal ideals of attractiveness. The choice of clothing often aligns with cultural and societal beauty standards, reflecting a desire to conform or challenge those norms. The *beauty myth* argues how fashion trends can perpetuate or challenge narrow beauty ideals, detailing the ways women negotiate their appearance within this normative framework (Wolf, 1990: 10). Fashion in the twenty-first century has increasingly started to focus on inclusivity and diversity. Women are increasingly challenging traditional notions of beauty by embracing styles that promote body positivity and celebrate individuality. Ashley Mears (2011) discusses how models and influencers who break conventional beauty norms are reshaping the fashion industry's narratives. While the focus on this study is on how young women construct and negotiate female beauty, it is also important to note that recent studies have increasingly focused on the relationship between aging, femininity, and beauty, revealing that while youth has traditionally been idealised as the epitome of female beauty, older women often face social exclusion due to their deviation from the youthful beauty standards propagated by the mass media (Wallach *et.al*, 2017).

Moreover, women exhibit a heightened interest and attention in skincare routines and the application of makeup as they prepare for their daily social interactions. Maschio (2015) asserts that consumer rituals, such as these beauty practices, allow individuals to engage in performances that uncover deeper meanings in their everyday activities and the objects they interact with. These rituals often bring emotional satisfaction and aim to evoke specific emotional states. In the case of women, engaging in skincare routines and applying makeup can lead to feelings of confidence, happiness, and preparedness. Conversely, neglecting these rituals can negatively impact women's emotional states,

resulting in self-consciousness, lack of confidence, and embarrassment about their physical appearance (Maschio, 2015). The tension between inner beauty and outer beauty gives rise to an ambiguity in feminine identity. While women participate in daily makeup application and skincare routines, they are simultaneously exposed to advertising discourse that reinforces the significance of physical appearance. However, through the embodied experience of integrating their internal and external selves, women modify and negotiate this discourse. This ambiguity arises from the differing discourses and power dynamics between consumers and the beauty industry. Ritualisation, as theorised by Catherine Bell (2009: 34), serves as a means for acting and exerting power in shifting and ambiguous contexts, where elements of consent, resistance, misunderstanding, and appropriation coexist. It is not a relationship where one social group has absolute control over another, but rather a complex interplay between consent and resistance. Women who engage in makeup use and skincare routines navigate the power disparities inherent in the various discourses of beauty, reconciling the messages propagated by the beauty industry with their own embodied experiences of combining inner and outer beauty. Therefore, beauty regimes are transformative and paradoxical in nature.

In contemporary society, women continue to face the influence of the *beauty myth* wherein an unattainable standard of beauty is propagated by society and mass media. Women invest significant amounts of money in various practices aimed at conforming to this unrealistic beauty standard. These practices encompass a wide range of severity, including plastic surgery, skin bleaching, hair removal, makeup, tanning, and skincare routines. Beauty is considered an empty signifier, as its meaning is constructed through discourse and varies depending on the context (Madan *et.al*, 2018). The beauty industry plays a significant role in perpetuating the unattainable standards by bombarding women with advertisements featuring digitally altered images that present an idealised version of women's bodies. These images, achieved through digital techniques including photoshopping and computer enhancement, further reinforce the impossible beauty standards that women encounter daily. By marketing an idealised version of beauty and promoting various methods and products to achieve this standard, the beauty industry garners substantial profits (Madan *et.al*, 2018). Media and advertising channels also contribute to the reinforcement of beauty industry standards by establishing and disseminating cultural values and norms related to the beauty ideal. These norms encompass the culturally prescribed and endorsed "looks" that define the standards of physical attractiveness within a given society (Calogero *et.al*, 2007). The beauty industry exposes women to repetitive and relentless images that encourage social comparisons based on physical appearance. Consequently, women internalise the belief that physical attractiveness is essential, leading to the notion that they must go to any lengths to attain and maintain this standard of beauty (Greenfield, 2018).

Fitness and exercise routines as well as dieting are also regarded as popular beauty practices for women in the twenty-first century. These practices are often linked to the desire to 'feel good' and to achieve a healthy standard of living (Mayoh and Jones, 2021). However, these beauty practices may also be linked to the desire to achieve an idealised body, leading to a complex interplay between the desire for beauty and the promotion of well-being. The desire to exercise and diet is exemplified by the popularity of media imagery and cultural messages that depict slim, toned bodies as the epitome of female attractiveness. This imagery not only reinforces the Western beauty ideal but also suggests that achieving this ideal body is attainable through disciplined exercise routines and mindful dietary choices. The pressure to attain a particular body shape can therefore lead to harmful practices such as extreme dieting, over-exercising, and even the development of disordered eating behaviours (Duncan and Klos, 2012). The fitness industry has capitalised on these ideals, promoting products and services that promise to transform bodies to meet these standards, further reinforcing the perception that adhering to a specific body type equates to beauty (Schrank, 2015).

Therefore, it is contended that the beauty industry perceives beauty as a 'commodity', a tangible product that can be purchased and worn by women to enhance their physical attractiveness. However, despite the availability of beauty products in the market, women often feel disempowered and oppressed by an industry that perpetuates the notion that they are not "good enough" and need to strive for perfection in their physical appearance. Consequently, the beauty industry regards women's bodies as sites of containment, control, and oppression. When the female body is seen as something that necessitates effort to achieve beauty, the industry capitalises on women's experiences to serve this purpose (Black and Sharma, 2001). Women who regularly use cosmetic products, particularly makeup, experience differential evaluation by their peers when they wear makeup, as it boosts their self-esteem and confidence. Advertisements prominently feature beauty ideals, portraying women as "passive, vulnerable, and markedly different from the body language of boys and men." This perpetuates the perception of women as weak, while men are presented with dignity and strength (Killbourne, 1993). Despite the beauty and media industry primarily focusing on women, the representation of their value and worth is significantly diminished compared to that of men. This further emphasises the gender divide in media, which impacts how women embody their physical appearance and are subjected to harsher judgments than men (Gill, 2007: 150).

### **2.1.5 Beauty and Traditional Media**

The embodiment and commodification of beauty presents a complex interplay within the beauty industry, where women's physical appearance becomes both a personal experience and a marketable

commodity. This tension is further exacerbated by the mediatisation of beauty in traditional media, where the portrayal of beauty ideals and the gender divide create additional challenges and pressures for women. The significance of physical attractiveness in women's lives stems from its association with heightened social status, improved relationships, and enhanced career opportunities (Gordon *et.al*, 2017). Conventional modes of media, such as television, radio, billboards, and magazines, have played a pivotal role in influencing women's perception and comprehension of beauty. These traditional media platforms have historically presented an idealised beauty standard and promoted the notion that women should aspire to attain such standards. The concept of the 'ideal' standard of beauty has undergone fluctuations throughout different time periods, with varying ideals emerging in each era. In the 1950s, traditional forms of media portrayed the 'ideal' body shape for women as curvier and fuller figures, which contrasted with the belief in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s that the 'ideal' body shape was 'thin and slender' (Ngo, 2019). These beauty standards were predominantly focused on white women, while women of colour were considered different and excluded from the Eurocentric beauty standard promoted in mass media.

The beauty industry utilises traditional media to advertise and market beauty and cosmetic products, as well as to promote specific body shapes and hair textures. With the support of traditional media and advertising channels, the beauty industry establishes values and norms concerning the desired beauty standards. Women are consistently exposed to these culturally endorsed and prescribed ideals that encompass various facial and bodily features, thereby shaping the criteria for physical attractiveness within a given culture (Calogero *et.al*, 2007: 261). Marika Tiggemann and Rosalind McGill (2004) contend that women may frequently engage in comparisons with other women portrayed in the media, leading to increased levels of body dissatisfaction.

However, not all women are equally susceptible to the negative effects of advertising messages, and it is important to note that social comparison, rather than the advertisements themselves, is the primary cause of these adverse effects. Additionally, women recognise that the thin models showcased in advertising media represent unattainable ideals, thereby mitigating explicit social comparison. It is crucial to comprehend the interplay between implicit and explicit measures of self-image in relation to the conflicting messages of beauty prevalent in mainstream media. Women often seek reassurance about their appearance from others who emphasise that their worth and value should not be based solely on their looks. Nevertheless, societal norms dictate that higher levels of physical attractiveness are associated with greater success, acceptance, and self-worth. Consequently, women may attempt to discount the superficial and idealised standards of beauty, yet subconsciously internalise them.

Although traditional forms of media have frequently portrayed women as commodities to be consumed and admired, placing significant emphasis on their physical attributes, and reinforcing prevailing beauty ideals, it is also crucial to acknowledge that women have actively engaged with traditional media as active participants, assuming agency and utilising these platforms to challenge stereotypes, amplify their voices, and drive social progress (Gill, 2007). Women have demonstrated their active agency as subjects in traditional media by producing and endorsing feminist media content. Feminist magazines, websites, and television shows serve as platforms for women to engage in discussions and address important topics such as gender inequality, body positivity, and female empowerment. Through these mediums, women can share their personal experiences, viewpoints, and stories, effectively challenging the prevalent objectification of women within traditional media (Banet-Weiser *et.al*, 2019).

However, in contemporary society women continue to be depicted in a sexualised manner in mass media. Television and media outlets specifically encourage women to embrace independence, youthfulness, ambition, and a sexually liberated fashion sense. There is a fetishisation of youthfulness, as teenage stars are portrayed as hot sex symbols, and even children are elevated to the status of famous “it girls”. The contemporary notion of the ‘ideal body’ shape has evolved to encompass a combination of being "slim yet thick" (McComb and Mills, 2022). This illustrates how past body shape ideals have amalgamated into the current portrayal of a ‘slim, yet thick’ body, which is presented even in South African media, particularly in advertisements, as the benchmark for women's physical attractiveness (Ngo, 2019).

Furthermore, women are exposed to television programmes that promote ‘makeovers’ as desirable methods for altering one's physical appearance to ‘look and feel better.’ These makeover shows can be seen as an extension of previous cosmetic surgery television programs focused on enhancing beauty (Kubic and Chory, 2007). Typically, these makeover shows revolve around transforming the physical appearance of women who are initially perceived as ‘unattractive.’ The transformation of their physical appearance is often tied to their inner worth and value, suggesting that they will only ‘look and feel better’ once the transformation is complete. This reinforces the notion that women are not considered beautiful until certain aspects of their physical appearance conform to the standards of being ‘stylish’ and ‘trendy.’ These programmes convey problematic messages regarding identity and selfhood. Contestants on these makeover shows are carefully selected to undergo transformations that align with a hyper-gendered and idealised notion of femininity. Thin and curvy women alike are styled to resemble one another, seeking an hourglass figure, and striving for a beauty ideal that is

unattainable. Women on these shows often face criticism and punishment from their friends and family for either dressing too childishly or too provocatively, indicating that they are deemed to have failed or resisted this version of normative femininity (Weber, 2010: 54).

Viewers of these makeover shows, referred to as reflexive audiences, are not simply passive consumers but rather are aware of the marketing tactics and manipulative editing employed in these programs. These audiences possess a reflexive understanding, recognising the ability to construct a self that can be seen from an outsider's perspective and must be explored and expressed to others (Sender, 2012: 76). Makeover television shows have faced criticism for their tendency to categorise women into binary categories of 'ugly' and 'beautiful', and for perpetuating inherent sexism. In a comparative study, Brenda Weber (Weber, 2010: 57) argues that women featured in makeover television shows are subjected to beauty practices aimed at enhancing physical attractiveness and conforming to the male gaze, while men in these shows are presented as simply improving aspects of their masculine appearance.

## **2.2 Social Media**

There has been extensive debates and arguments regarding the development of social media platforms in the twenty-first century (Bakardjieva, 2010: 6 and Serafinelli, 2018: 3). To contextualise the choice of Instagram as the preferred social media platform for this study, literature pertaining to applications is explored. The focus of this study is on understanding how young female higher education students negotiate and construct a feminine identity through their participation on Instagram. Therefore, this section discusses Instagram to comprehend its distinctive features and affordances, as well as its significant role in the daily lives of users with respect to identity construction and negotiation. Several key aspects will be examined, including identity and representation, the influence of digital influencers, as well as the impact of digital photography and video communication.

The advent of Internet Communication Technologies (ICT) has led to the transformation of social media platforms. Initially, they were online social networking sites (SNSs) accessible solely through web-based technology on computers. However, they have now expanded to include mobile devices, tablets, and even watches (Quinn and Papacharissi, 2014: 4). Social media can broadly be defined as a platform that allows for 'the capacity to support user-generated content' that 'provides a means for users to connect with one another' and to 'support various means for members to engage with one another in collaboration, community building, sharing and linking and other means' (Laestadius, 2017: 5). Social media has become an integral part of contemporary visual culture due to the

expansion and proliferation of visual technologies that shape our perception of the world (Rose, 2016). These platforms have not only extended but also intensified forms of visibility, becoming fully integrated into social life and mediating various aspects of it (Fuchs, 2014). They are dynamic entities influenced by temporal, spatial, and technological factors, resulting in diverse interpretations and functionalities (Quinn and Papacharissi, 2014: 4). While earlier studies focused on the virtual nature of the Internet and its separation from everyday life, recent research suggests that social media has become deeply embedded in users' daily routines (Serafinelli, 2018). Initially, social media was viewed as largely deterministic, assuming a direct correlation between user engagement and various aspects of their social lives and identities (Ganda, 2014; Gündüz, 2017). However, recent attention has shifted towards understanding the impact of social media on people's behaviour, particularly focusing on the emergence of social media influencers (Lopez and Islam, 2021). Moreover, social media platforms now offer a range of affordances beyond connectivity, including features such as business marketing, user-generated content sharing, product and service promotion, and integration with other platforms and websites (Leaver, *et.al*, 2020: 67).

In the context of the continuously growing and evolving nature of social media platforms, it becomes imperative to comprehend these platforms from the users' perspective. While previous research has primarily focused on the pervasive influence of social media platforms on users' lives (Longstreet and Brooks, 2017), there is a scarcity of studies conducted within a South African context that specifically examine the user's experience in engaging with a social media platform for the purpose of identity construction and negotiation (Bosch, 2020: 8). South African studies exploring identity construction and negotiation on social media platforms have centered around various themes. These themes include the influence of social media influencers on identity, socio-economic disparities, and the role these disparities play in shaping identity (Matenda *et.al*, 2020). Additionally, South African researchers have examined the interplay between visual self-presentation, social interaction, and the process of identity exploration on these platforms (Nzombe *et.al*, 2023). The lack of contemporary scholarship in the field of social media and identity construction in South Africa reinforces Wendy Willems and Winston Mano's (2017: 3) call for more social media research to be conducted to understand unique voices in an African context. It is believed that more cultural studies' scholarship on social media embraces different understandings of the audience, for instance, the participatory and/or interactivity of media audiences (Hanteer, *et.al*, 2018).

Moreover, due to the affordances offered by social media platforms and the development of mobile applications, users began to engage in social media applications on their technological devices. Mobile applications have played a crucial role in the engagement with social media platforms on technological devices. Mobile applications, defined as software designed for mobile devices, have become increasingly popular and offer a wide range of functionalities. Gerard Goggin views apps as a crucial transition point connecting two phases of media evolution—serving as a bridge between the mobile communities of the late 20th century and the all-encompassing and deeply engaging digital culture of the 2010s. (Goggin, 2011). Users can download apps from dedicated ‘App Stores’ on their mobile devices (Ramos *et.al*, 2019). Early studies on apps focused on the reasons behind user engagement, highlighting the convenience and ease they bring to personal and professional lives (Barkhuus and Polichar, 2010). Users value the ubiquity and portability of apps, as they can be accessed at any time on mobile devices (Goggin, 2011). Genre-specific app studies have explored their influence on user behaviour and experiences, such as dating apps and gaming apps (Norcie, *et.al*, 2013). While mobile apps have been successful and embedded in people's daily lives, concerns have been raised about their negative impact. Studies have investigated issues including dependency, reduced face-to-face communication, and online manipulation and bullying (Chan *et al*, 2021). Power relations and freedoms on apps should be critically examined, as they shape user cultures and can have implications for software development and computing industries (Goggin, 2011). Understanding the significance of apps requires acknowledging the limitations of notions of openness derived from internet cultural debates. Attention should also be paid to infrastructure, connectivity, delivery mechanisms, regulations, and the ways they are imagined and operated (Dourish and Bell, 2011: 5).

### **2.2.1 Instagram**

Once such social media app that has revolutionised the social media landscape of the twenty-first century is Instagram. Instagram was first launched as an iPhone App in 2010 designed by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger and was inspired by the need for a simple way to share photos with others through social networking (Leaver *et.al*, 2020: 5). At the time, mobile applications were making a breakthrough in the market with the launch of more sophisticated smartphone devices that provided affordances not previously offered in previous mobile phones. The smartphone combines cellular mobile telecommunications, mobile Internet, and mobile computing (Goggin, 2021: 29; Hjorth *et.al*, 2012). Without the hardware of the smartphone, mobile applications such as Instagram cannot work. Instagram was imagined by its creators to be ‘a world connected through photos’ (Leaver *et.al*, 2020: 4). Originally titled Burbn, the founders changed the name to Instagram, stemming from the words ‘instant’ and ‘telegram’ to highlight the significance of creating a visually oriented social media

platform that combined retrospective photography aesthetics and new digital photography aesthetics (Leaver *et.al*, 2020: 6). Instagram is viewed as a ‘visual social media platform’ (Leaver *et.al*, 2020: 2). Instagram is said to offer its users several benefits: 1) allows users to improve the appearance of their images through filters, 2) allows for the sharing of images and videos across other social media platforms and 3) it accelerates the process of uploading and sharing multimedia content (Serafinelli, 2018: 12).

Social media platforms can be viewed as communicative genres that combine interactive functionalities configured in software with distinct social purposes that users engage in their communicative practices. These platforms focus on interpersonal communication and togetherness, providing interactive features that facilitate connection and content creation (Treem and Leonardi, 2012). Analysing social media as communicative genres requires studying how genres are enacted and negotiated in social practice, emphasising the dynamics of interaction (Lomborg, 2016). In contrast to platforms like Facebook and LinkedIn, Instagram serves as a platform for various entities, including celebrities, organisations, public institutions, and individuals using online identities (Leaver *et.al*, 2020: 11). The platforms of social media are defined as ‘sites and services that host, organise, and circulate users’ shared content or social exchanges for them; without having produced or commissioned [the majority of] that content; beneath that circulation, an infrastructure for processing that data (content, traces, patterns of social relations) for customer service and for profit (Gillepsie, 2017: 254).

However, defining Instagram as simply a social media platform can mask its complexity:

Instagram is more than one thing: it is an app; it is a series of programs and algorithms; it is a gigantic database of images, videos, captions, comments, geolocate tags, location tags, likes, emoji and more and more items over time; it is a collection of personal data; it is an application program interface [API] ; it is a series of decisions and developments over time that create different versions of these things; and it also encapsulates various popular understandings of what Instagram “is” to the more than a billion people who use it (Leaver, *et.al*, 2020: 8).

Each social media platform offers unique features and affordances that distinguish them from one another. The concept of affordances suggests that humans perceive and interact with objects based on the opportunities for action they provide, influenced by their background, experiences, and environment. Affordances are not inherent features of technologies but emerge through the interplay between humans and technology (Hutchby, 2001). While extensive literature exists on the

affordances of Facebook and Twitter (Murthy, 2012; Bucher and Helmond, 2017; Siegert, *et.al*, 2020 & Hase *et.al*, 2022), limited research has been conducted on Instagram and its affordances. Twitter's unique affordance is its text box, which encourages users to share insights and commentary within the platform's 280-character limit, a practice known as 'microblogging'. Twitter distinguishes itself from other social media platforms by fostering public interactions and multicasting, enabling real-time communication to a wide audience limited only by the number of followers (Siegert *et.al*, 2020). On the other hand, Facebook differs from Twitter by emphasising connections within one's personal network and facilitating the sharing of more detailed content. Facebook also places a greater emphasis on identity, as users are expected to use their real names or variations thereof (Hase *et.al*, 2022).

Instagram offers unique affordances and these form significant important research sites. Instagram attracts and demands study due to its affordances of visibility, persistence, searchability and replicability (boyd, 2010) and interpretability (Laestadius, 2017: 578). Instagram affords users persistence which means that not only can users upload and share ephemeral content on stories but also this content can be uploaded on Instagram servers thus this persistency of both moments and images allows for a stable research site for researchers to access this data. Instagram also affords visibility of content (boyd, 2015). As Instagram defaults accounts to public a lot of data is publicly available to researchers.

Instagram also allows for replicability as posts uploaded on this platform can be screenshot, saved and shared on other interfaces even once posts have been deleted (boyd, 2015). Instagram allows for searchability meaning researchers can identify content specifically related to their research topic. Lastly, Instagram offers a high degree of interpretability.

Leaver *et.al* (2020) also believe that in understanding Instagram's unique affordances, several concepts that constitute this digital environment are important. Within the realm of Instagram, 'platform' denotes the digital framework that enables users to share and engage with visual content. Instagram serves as a venue for users to post images and videos, follow others, express appreciation through likes and comments, and employ an array of features for content creation (Leaver *et.al*, 2020: 15). 'Aesthetics' on Instagram involve the visual characteristics and design decisions users employ when crafting and sharing content. This encompasses factors including filter selection, composition, colour schemes, and visual storytelling. Researchers may examine how these aesthetic choices influence engagement, user experience, and brand image on the platform (Leaver *et.al*, 2020: 26). The term 'ecologies' in the context of Instagram pertains to the larger digital environments and

networks that the platform either impacts or is affected by. This involves investigating how Instagram content and users are linked with other social media platforms, online communities, and real-life interactions (Leaver *et.al*, 2020: 117). Lastly, ‘lifespan’ on Instagram refers to how long posts stay relevant and visible. Instagram's short-lived content, including Stories that disappear in twenty-four hours, influences discussions on post impact and durability (Leaver *et.al*, 2020: 187). These concepts play a significant role in understanding user experiences with Instagram as a visual social media platform.

Moreover, Instagram's unique functionalities contribute to its platform ecology, allowing users to create, upload, and share various types of visual content such as images, videos, short reels, and longer videos through features like Instagram Live (Serafinelli, 2018: 16). The platform's emphasis on visual content enables users to effectively convey information and engage audiences in a visually appealing manner. Van Dijck (2008) elucidates that digital photography transforms individuals into producers and distributors of visual content, fostering a participatory culture where users actively contribute to the digital realm. Through the lens of a smartphone camera, users can capture and present their own images and engage with diverse aesthetic perspectives. In this way, Instagram has become an integral part of global digital culture, offering users a space to express authenticity and creativity through the sharing of real-life images and videos (Serafinelli, 2018: 17; Leaver *et.al*, 2020: 79).

Hashtags also play a crucial role on Instagram. They serve as coordination tools for organising public discussions, debates, and various forms of activism, like their use on other platforms like Twitter (Bruns and Burgess, 2015). They enhance discoverability and foster community participation, enabling users to engage in relevant conversations and connect with like-minded individuals. Instagram also provides features for personalisation, such as profile pictures and ‘bios’, allowing users to express their identities and control access to their content, acting as gatekeepers (Leaver *et.al*, 2020: 57). Instagram encompasses diverse forms of user-generated content, including selfies, stories, videos, direct messaging, and meme-captioned posts, catering to various interests and preferences. Popular topics on Instagram revolve around fitness, food, fashion, beauty, and celebrities, often explored through the explore tab (Leaver *et.al*, 2020: 64). Moreover, Instagram facilitates communication with followers through direct instant messaging and offers the option to share temporary ‘stories’ that last for twenty-four hours or curate them as permanent ‘highlights’ on users' profiles (Leaver *et.al*, 2020: 69). Instagram has also witnessed a shift in its usage patterns, with organisations and high-profile celebrities leveraging content creation and sharing to promote their businesses (Serafinelli, 2018: 23). Users are increasingly opting for business accounts, highlighting

the platform's potential for marketing and brand promotion (Serafinelli, 2018: 27). Therefore, Instagram's visual-centric approach, coupled with its diverse functionalities and features, has positioned it as a prominent visual social media platform. The platform's ability to convey information effectively, facilitate community engagement through hashtags, and offer personalised experiences has made it a significant part of global digital culture.

### **2.2.2. Instagram and Identity**

The unique affordances and functionalities that Instagram offers its users provides users with a platform for identity construction and negotiation. This enables Instagram to be a significant research site for social media and mobility research (Laestadius, 2017). A digital identity refers to any data that describes a person using digital technologies, including information about their life and relationships (Cover, 2016: 4). Digital identities have been in use even before social media platforms, on early web-based communication platforms such as blogs and chat forums. They allow users to control what they reveal about their offline selves (Cover, 2016: 5).

On social media platforms such as Instagram, users can create their own online identities or social identities. Research has explored how young people use social media to construct and maintain their identities and how these platforms influence their self-perception and views of others (Requies *et.al*, 2016). There has been a debate about 'disembodiment' versus 'embodiment' on social media platforms. Some researchers argue that users cannot fully be disembodied online, and decreased disembodiment is associated with increased loneliness, depression, and reduced social support (Kang, 2007). Social media platforms blur the line between organic and technical expression, limiting unmediated human experience and making it challenging to distinguish personal experiences from virtual interactions. On Instagram the boundaries between authentic human expression and the technological interface become blurred. This blurring of lines hampers the ability to fully engage in unmediated human experiences. It becomes challenging to differentiate between genuine personal experiences and the interactions that take place in the virtual realm (Holloway-Attaway, 2012). Instagram's interface and features create a digital environment where users can curate and present their lives through images, videos, and captions. This curated representation of personal experiences on Instagram can sometimes overshadow the actual lived experiences of individuals. The platform encourages users to showcase a highlight reel of their lives, emphasising certain aspects and filtering out others (Serafinelli, 2018: 164). As a result, it becomes difficult to discern between the authentic reality and the constructed narratives that are presented on Instagram. Users may be influenced by the perceived perfection and idealised lifestyles they encounter on the platform, leading to

comparisons, self-doubt, and a distorted sense of reality.

Considering the debate of embodiment versus disembodiment on social media platforms, Instagram users can create and manipulate their personas, selectively revealing and concealing information about themselves (Serafinelli, 2018: 165). However, some social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have introduced profile verification mechanisms where users are required to provide a valid email address or phone number during account setup, and some platforms may even request identification documents for suspicious accounts. This process of verification highlights the significance of materiality, as social media platforms assert the importance of verified accounts and imply that unverified accounts are less trustworthy (Jain, et.al, 2021). Twitter, for instance, introduced verification in response to the rise of celebrity impersonators, and users are now required to submit personal details, identification documents, and photos to apply for verification (Marwick and boyd, 2014).

However, the concept of verification on social media platforms can also be seen as part of the larger framework of big data and affective capitalism. The process aims to associate a physical body with a user account rather than being solely based on legal or bureaucratic control (van der Nagel, 2017). On Instagram, the verification process serves to establish credibility and trustworthiness, distinguishing genuine accounts from potential impersonators or fraudulent profiles. It reinforces the idea that material evidence is crucial for online identity and highlights the ongoing tension between the virtual and material realms (Marwick and boyd, 2014).

One of the core reasons why people may engage in social media platforms is because these social media platforms can influence and shape aspects of a person's identity (Serafinelli, 2018: 159). Social media platforms provide a virtual space for users to express themselves, blend social spheres, and blur the boundaries between private and public. These platforms offer valuable sites for expressing identity, including political and social values (Leaver, *et.al*, 2020: 86). On Instagram, users construct online identities through profiles that showcase their location, hobbies, interests, likes, studies, and career pursuits. Self-disclosure, revealing and concealing information about oneself, is a common practice on the platform (Serafinelli, 2018: 166). Users may engage in self-monitoring and can change aspects of their identity based on self-presentation on Instagram. This is done through sharing images, particularly through selfies. Selfies play a significant role in visually constructing personal identity. Identity is shaped by social interaction, and individuals actively participate in their own self-construction (Cover, 2016: 11). A selfie is a self-generated photo taken with smartphones or

webcams, meant for immediate distribution on social media networks (Schreiber, 2017). Selfies enable self-expression and serve to capture and remember specific moments, contributing to identity formation. Instagram's archive section allows users to observe how their identities may evolve over time, highlighting the malleability of identity (Serafinelli, 2018: 107; Lupton, 2017: 8).

Moreover, on Instagram, users may use emojis, memes, and storytelling to enhance their self-presentation and identity formation. Memes, defined as cultural ideas spread through imitation, play an active role in digital participation and civic engagement (Milner, 2016: 3). Emojis, originally from Japan, serve as pictograms conveying emotional cues in digital conversations and have become a rapidly growing form of communication globally (Danesi, 2017: 5). Storytelling is a significant aspect of Instagram, with its "stories" feature allowing users to post images, captions, memes, and gifs related to their daily activities that disappear after 24 hours. Digital storytelling enables accessible and authentic narratives through multimodal means, facilitated by the appeal of technology (Amancio, 2017). This ephemeral nature of stories, adopted by Instagram from Snapchat, allows for less edited and more spontaneous content, fostering a sense of involvement and rarity for users (Leaver, *et.al*, 2020: 46). Sharing stories on social media platforms like Instagram serves as socially rewarding self-promotion, attracting attention, likes, and interest to users' profiles (Amancio, 2017). Through emojis, memes, and storytelling, users engage in creative forms of expression that contribute to their online identities and foster social interactions within the platform.

### **2.2.3 Social Media Influencers and Everyday Instagram Users**

Graeme Turner (2013: 11) defines a celebrity as someone who is highly visible through the media and whose professional and private life attracts public interest. Traditionally, celebrities have wielded the power to influence cultural change, particularly in areas such as fashion, beauty, and lifestyle. In the past, beauty blogs, YouTube's beauty community, and magazines served as platforms for conveying beauty ideals and information about products. Women were influenced by celebrities whose style and fashion they related to, leading them to buy into fashion trends (Tomovska, 2020). However, the landscape has shifted with the emergence of social media platforms. Now, everyday users have access to a new type of influencers known as "micro-celebrities". These micro-celebrities are ordinary individuals who have amassed a dedicated fan base through their presence on social media. Their success is measured by metrics such as likes, shares, tweets, followers, and comments (Khamis *et.al*, 2017). This proliferation of micro-celebrities on social media has expanded the sphere of influence beyond traditional celebrities. Everyday Instagram users now can shape opinions and choices through their online presence. These micro-celebrities, with their relatability and

accessibility, have become influential figures in the realms of fashion, beauty, and lifestyle. They have the power to create discourse with the public and the media, thereby impacting the preferences and habits of those exposed to their lives.

As social media continues to evolve, the influence of micro-celebrities grows stronger. These influencers or micro-celebrities have harnessed the power of social media platforms to expand their personal brands and engage with their followers. With thousands, and sometimes millions, of followers, they are identified based on admiration, aspiration, recognition, and association (Tomovska, 2020). In the realm of beauty and fashion, influencers often have more impact than traditional celebrities. This is because they create communities where users feel a stronger connection through higher levels of engagement, relatability, and authenticity. The process of ‘celebrification’, involves an ordinary person becoming a popular celebrity on social media. Online celebrity acts reveal a narrowing of the gap between celebrities and their fans or followers, with influencers treating others as they would treat a celebrity (Turner, 2011 & Senft: 2013). Karen Freberg *et.al* (2011) also state that influencers act as autonomous outsider endorsers who shape individuals' attitudes through their influential energy on Instagram.

Instagram, as a social media platform, has levelled the playing field by shifting power away from organisations and allowing anyone with the ability to share to engage in conversations and exert authority when talking about brands (Leaver *et.al*, 2020: 102). Influencers rely on metrics such as the number of followers, likes, and shares to demonstrate their relevance to brands and associations. While Instagram has provided an opportunity for ‘ordinary’ people to attract audiences previously limited to mainstream media, the ‘Instafamous’ often conform to traditional celebrity culture. They showcase glamorous selfies, designer goods, luxury cars, and skincare products (Marwick, 2015). This focus on showcasing luxury and glamour attracts more attention and followers, but it raises questions about the authenticity of these influencers. Their content often prioritises displaying the luxurious aspects of life rather than revealing their authentic selves or sharing life challenges and hardships (Duffy and Hund, 2015). Despite this, influencers still manage to build relationships with their followers by directly interacting through comments, making themselves accessible. In the realm of beauty, influencers are a popular source for tips, tricks, and product recommendations, as they create content aimed at educating and informing consumers about beauty trends. Everyday Instagram users are drawn to the allure and authority of these influencers, seeking inspiration and guidance for their own beauty choices and preferences.

This allure of fame and wealth for ‘ordinary’ users, fosters a culture of micro-celebrity (Khamis *et.al*, 2017). In this context, users engage in performative practices to showcase an aspirational version of beauty. Beauty influencers, who are often seen receiving free products, cars, and vacations, reinforce the notion that beauty is a pathway to fame and fortune. This emphasis on performing and constructing beauty has contributed to the booming beauty industry on social media. However, it is important to note that while these influencers may portray luxurious lifestyles, they differ from traditional celebrities in their ability to establish more authentic relationships with their followers. They achieve this by sharing candid images and showcasing their everyday lives. Additionally, beauty influencers attempt to build connections with their audience through authenticity. In revealing their own imperfections, insecurities, and struggles, they aim to establish trust and common ground with their followers. This transparency challenges the perception of beauty as unattainable and threatening for some women, conveying the message that beauty does not require perfection (Kapitan *et.al*, 2021).

Lastly, there is little scholarship that explores Instagram usage of ‘ordinary’ users in South Africa. Ordinary users refer to individuals who use social media platforms without seeking attention or fame, a contrast to the microcelebrity or influencer culture (Caldeira, 2021). It would be interesting to examine the everyday interactions of these users and how these users utilise social media platforms as part of their daily lives. Research into this area has investigated how these users use social media platforms to express themselves, connect with like-minded individuals, and create meaningful interactions (Araujo *et.al*, 2014 and Caldeira, 2021). In understanding the unique behaviours and motivations of ordinary Instagram users, it could shed light into broader social implications found on social media platforms. As these users constitute majority of platform participants, their experiences can highlight the ways in which social media intertwines with everyday life, shaping interpersonal connections, self-expression, and digital identity formation.

### **2.3 Chapter Summary**

To conclude this chapter, this literature review provided an exposition into beauty studies starting from *The Beauty Myth* (Wolf, 1990) in the twentieth century to the current digital representation of beauty in the twenty-first century. The way beauty forms part of a gendered identity remains a contentious debate in the twenty-first century, while previous studies investigated how beauty as part of a gendered identity is influenced by socio-cultural factors (Sartwell, 2012), the beauty industry (Maschio, 2015) and socio-capitalist politics, a gap exists in understanding how young women negotiate a gendered identity using Instagram as a social media platform. Similarly, the relationship and debates that have formed between the concepts of feminism and femininity remains a contentious

issue in a postfeminist era where women are encouraged to be ‘sexy but not too sexy’, ‘smart but not too smart’ (Dobson, 2015). It would be insightful to understand how women negotiate feminism and femininity as these forms a significant part of a young woman’s identity (Tate, 2009). Moreover, the focus in previous beauty and media-related studies was on how feminine beauty is represented by traditional media platforms where women were provided little agency in detailing these representations (Ngo, 2019). With the advent of social media, more specifically, social media platforms, these platforms have provided women with the affordance to construct and negotiate a feminine identity. These affordances include uploading and sharing of multimedia content, likes, comments, memes, GIFs, and statuses. Young women may also be influenced by the advent of ‘influencer culture’ and microcelebrities that post beauty content that young women may engage in. However, although these affordances allow women the opportunity to represent their feminine self through user-generated content, women are still harshly judged, and policies are enforced on social media platforms to restrict the type of content women post. Thus, this highlighted that although women have freedom in a postfeminist era to choose what type of content to post on social media, these women are still subjected to strict policies and regulations enforced by the creators of these social media platforms who remove content that deviate from the normative belief of a feminine gendered identity (Mills, 2017). This is a gap that this study aims to explore.

Lastly, the literature revealed that there are gaps in terms of the understanding of unique ‘African’ voices. This echoes Wendy Willems and Winston Mano’s (2017) belief that there is an urgent and imperative need to understand how Africans engage with media. Previous studies investigated how African media users may be influenced by Western values, ideas and beliefs of feminine beauty promoted in the media. Insufficient research has been conducted on how young South African women feel regarding the construction and negotiation of South African female beauty as studies conducted previously primarily focused on comparison-based studies and how young South African women are negatively influenced by Western beauty ideals in that they may lose aspects of their own original cultures and uniqueness of their beauty features (Lai and Perminiene, 2020). However, South African female higher education students may feel inclined to represent ‘Afrocentric’ beauty that differs from the dominant Eurocentric beauty ideals promoted in mainstream media. This was a notable gap that this study aims to investigate.

## **CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **3. Introduction**

The previous chapter presented a critical review of literature centred around femininity and beauty as well as social media, specifically, current literature on Instagram relevant for this study was discussed. This chapter unpacks the theoretical framework employed in this study. The theories of ‘participatory culture’ (Jenkins, 2006) and ‘gender performativity’ (Butler, 1990) will be outlined in this chapter as they structure the theoretical framework of this study. Theoretical frameworks are imperative in that they provide different perspectives to analyse social issues and complex problems. Theories that would support in achieving the objectives of this study were chosen because of their appropriateness, application, and explanatory power with regards to the research findings. The significance of utilising a theoretical framework for the purpose of a dissertation is highlighted by Cynthia Grant and Azadeh Osanloo (2014: 18-19):

The theoretical framework serves as a guide to your research and assists in determining what things you will measure and examine. The theoretical framework is something solid and reliable on which to build your research and to inform the rest of your design.

Although the theoretical framework and literature review of a study are intrinsically linked, a theoretical framework differs in that it provides a guide for developing and understanding interconnected parts of the literature review. Both the theoretical framework and literature review for a study should centre the researcher’s ‘lens’ on how he/she views the world and the information presented should then be used to support the data, interpret the findings, and suggest recommendations (Grant and Osanloo, 2014: 21).

The study aims to gain an understanding of the unique viewpoints and experiences of young female South African higher education students concerning the negotiation and construction of female beauty on Instagram through gender performances. Instagram, as a social media platform, is a significant space for the performance of gender. What sets Instagram apart from other platforms is its visual nature, being best described as a ‘conduit for communication in the increasingly vast landscape of visual social media cultures’ (Leaver *et.al.*, 2020: 1 & Serafinelli, 2018: 6).

This negotiation and construction of female beauty utilises Instagram's unique features and functionalities, providing everyday women with a platform for participating in and representing female beauty.

Hence, given this study's focus on social media participation and the use of Instagram to examine gender performance among young women through participatory practices, two key theoretical frameworks underpin this research: participatory culture theory and gender performativity theory. In the twenty-first century, it is essential to amplify the voices of young South African women aged 18-24 in understanding how audiences interact with social media platforms and their day-to-day activities as audiences are not homogeneous, as they are invariably rooted in specific historical and cultural contexts (Barber, 1997: 347). This chapter comprises two main sections: participatory culture theory and gender performativity theory. These sections provide comprehensive explanations of the chosen theories, their strengths, limitations, previous applications in research, and their significance in forming the theoretical foundation of this study.

### **3.1. Participatory Culture Theory**

The current media landscape is transforming the ways in which individuals, both as users and as part of the mediated public, engage in a society that is becoming more reliant on new forms of media. The theory of participatory culture emerged from earlier audience research, specifically a focus on exploring the active choices, uses and interpretations made of media materials by consumers. The concept of an 'active audience' emerged from Stuart Hall's Reception Theory, which included a model of encoding and decoding (Hall, 1980). Hall's Reception Theory focused on how media content producers encode values and messages in content that are decoded by audiences who were active in that they could negotiate meanings and respond to messages differently based on their own values and beliefs that form part of the decoding process. Stuart Hall (1980) suggested three ways of viewing media texts, namely, dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings. The concept of reception was also viewed as a semiotic process through which 'audiences differentially read and make sense of messages which have been transmitted, and act on those meanings, within the context of the rest of their situation and experience' (Morley, 1980: 11). This highlights how early reception research claimed that mediated communication was not about 'transmitting' messages from sender to receivers, but rather, the process of 'sense-making' required literacy skills for 'reading television' texts as observed in David Morley's concern to provide a theoretical perspective adequate to capture the cultural practices of the television audience (Morley, 1980: 12). John Fiske contributed further developments to the audience reception paradigm by emphasising the active participation and agency

of audiences in constructing meanings from media texts. John Fiske introduced the concept of the 'active audience', suggesting that audiences are not passive recipients but actively appropriate and reinterpret media content according to their own needs and desires. He focused on the ways in which audiences engage in activities such as fan culture and subcultures, illuminating the creative and transformative potential of audience participation. The concept of 'play' describes that audiences do not just consume media passively; instead, they actively reinterpret and manipulate cultural content to construct their own meanings. This active engagement with media brings pleasure and satisfaction to audiences, challenging the notion that they are solely passive receivers of messages dictated by the media industry (Fiske, 2010).

Due to the relevance of this study on social media, participatory culture theory was selected as one of the theoretical lenses for this study. Jenkins (2013: 3) defines participatory culture as:

A culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices. One in which members believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another at the least they care what other people think about what they have created.

Participatory culture also supports the idea of diversity by fostering interactions among individuals (Jenkins, Ito, and boyd, 2017: 9). It operates on the belief that people possess the ability to make decisions both collectively and individually. Jenkins (2013: 4) elaborates that in a participatory culture, people express themselves through a wide range of different forms and practices, including the media. Jenkins (2006: 7) identifies four main forms of participatory culture. These four forms are: affiliations, expressions, collaborative problem solving, and circulations. Affiliations refers to associations made, both in formal and informal settings, through online communities (Jenkins, 2006: 7). Expressions refers to the production of new content (Jenkins, 2006: 7). This content includes fan fiction writing, uploading of images and videos, Facebook lives and audio-mixing. In terms of collaborative problem solving this refers to the ability of media users to work together to find solutions, tools, techniques, and knowledge to solve problems. Lastly, circulations refer to the act of media users viewing and sharing of media content (Jenkins, 2006: 7).

The growth of Web 2.0 and digital media has led to the shift in how media is consumed and produced by audiences. It is believed that the shift from distribution of media content to the circulation of media content has afforded a move to a more participatory culture where audiences are not only viewed as consumers of media content but also as users who are shaping, reframing, and sharing diverse media content (Jenkins, 2013: 32).

The concept of participatory culture has developed to include different mediators responsible for media production and distribution to assist joint interests. Convergence culture is the merging of media platforms, technologies, and content. In a convergence culture, various media forms come together and interact, creating new opportunities for cross-platform engagement and content consumption (Jenkins, 2013: 4). The convergence of media platforms and technologies provides the infrastructure and opportunities for people to actively participate and engage within media culture. The audience reception paradigm was expanded upon in focusing on participatory culture and the role of fans in media consumption. Jenkins (2013: 7) explored how audiences actively engage with media through activities including fiction, cosplay, and online communities. He emphasised the blurring of boundaries between producers and consumers, highlighting the active and creative contributions of audiences in shaping media content. Jenkins (2013: 11) described fans or ‘poachers’ as active participants as opposed to being mere spectators who creatively transform and ‘poach’ elements from their favourite media texts to produce fan fiction, art, and other fan works. Jenkins (2006: 19) described participatory culture as playing a significant role in understanding how audiences receive and consume media content and the influence in the roles groups of audiences play in how media content is produced and circulated. Therefore, it is believed that participatory culture presented a development of Stuart Hall’s encoding and decoding model (Hall, 1980) in terms of how media content was traditionally produced and circulated, and it challenged prior mass media theories that believed mainstream mass media was concerned with one-way communication and producers of media content communicated set messages to passive audiences.

Participatory culture has evolved and expanded with the rise of social media platforms, enabling new usages of audience engagement, collaboration, and creativity. Social media platforms have become key digital spaces for users to actively participate in the production, distribution, and consumption of media content (Burgess and Green, 2018). Axel Bruns argues that the ‘produsage’, the blurring of the production and use or consumption, associated with social media enables a ‘produsage-based, participatory culture’ (Bruns 2008: 256).

The four types of participatory culture identified, except for circulations, all involve the act of creation of creative content. Circulation as a form of participatory culture is focuses on the aspect of ‘spreadability’ of the creative content produced (Jenkins, 2006: 7). There has been a shift; instead of focusing on the distribution of media content, social media users are now involved in the production of content and circulation of this content on social media platforms. The focus has specifically been on how social media platforms can form part of participatory culture. Aspects including identity, representation, production, and consumption were considered important aspects to consider when understanding participatory culture in the age of social media (Burgess and Green, 2018).

The main characteristic of social media platforms is that they are forms of ‘spreadable’ media. Jenkins (2013: 21) further elaborated on this concept of ‘spreadability’. The concept of ‘spreadable media’ is viewed as an alternative to the traditional notion of ‘viral media.’ It is argued that rather than focusing on the audience's passive role in the viral dissemination of media content, it is more accurate to recognise the active involvement of individuals in sharing, remixing, and repurposing media within a networked culture. Spreadable media pertains to content intentionally created to be easily shared, enabling audience engagement and participation in its distribution. It is therefore important to understand the significance of comprehending the social, cultural, and technological contexts that influence the spread of media and how the agency of audiences shapes this process (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013: 12). Jenkins (2013: 43) states that in the age of social media engagement, there are four issues concerned with the ‘spreadability’ of media, namely, (1) the technical resources that enable circulation of some kind of content than others, (2) the prevailing economic structures supporting or restricting circulation, (3) the attributes of the media content that may be appealing to a community and hence motivate for sharing material and (4) the social networks that link people through the exchange of creative content.

### **3.1.1 Benefits and Limitations of Participatory Culture Theory in the study**

In understanding the relevance of participatory culture, it is imperative to understand the benefits and limitations of it. Jenkins (2013: 3) believed that due to the affordances offered by new media platforms, media users can share and learn new skills from each other. On Instagram, users are provided affordances of uploading and sharing of photos, videos, and stories that showcase their unique creativity and personal style (Leaver *et.al*, 2020: 6). This enables opportunities for other users to explore and learn different aspects of beauty, experiment with makeup, fashion, and hairstyles, and express their unique female identities.

Burgess and Green (2018) corroborated this idea in that they believed media users benefit from peer learning as it fosters interaction and engagement. Instagram's collaborative design allows users to engage in conversations surrounding beauty construction and negotiation. Users can interact with content creators and influencers who promote beauty ideals as well as challenge traditional gender norms. In actively participating in these discussions, users can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of beauty and gender, expand their own perspectives, and contribute to shaping these discourses themselves.

Another strength of this theory is that peer-to-peer learning leads to creation of unique creative content that can be shared with other media users (Jenkins, 2013: 3). Through the creation of this content, users can become co-constructors and develop a sense of ownership and responsibility when engaging with media products. These users can also gain inspiration, learn new techniques, and gain insights from fellow users. This learning process fuels the creation of original content. In the context of this study, users can learn from other users who post beauty content and they can experiment with different makeup looks, hairstyles, fashion choice as part of their self-presentation, contributing to a diverse and dynamic beauty landscape on the platform. Kessler (2013) believed that content creators may develop a sense of responsibility and ownership regarding intellectual property thus leading to a change attitude in terms of protecting works produced. Users take pride in their creations and become co-constructors of the social media platform's visual culture. In sharing their unique perspectives and experiences, users contribute to the collective representation of beauty and challenge conventional norms. This sense of ownership and responsibility can empower users to embrace their individuality, express themselves authentically, and advocate for a more inclusive understanding of beauty and gender identity.

While participatory culture theory can provide valuable insights and benefit this study, there are several limitations to consider when using this theory in a study. The participatory gap is linked to the notion of the digital divide which is known as the gap between those who can access new media technologies and those who cannot access new media technologies in a society (Jenkins, 2013: 4). This theory focuses on the experiences and practices of active participants within specific online communities. Participatory culture theory assumes all participants have equal access to digital technology, thus neglecting the unequal access to resources, skills, and opportunities among individuals (Jenkins, 2013: 4). Therefore, it may not capture the perspectives of those individuals who do not actively engage or participate in the platform, potentially limiting the generalisability of the findings to a broader population of young South African women.

This can lead to a limited understanding of how diverse young women with varying socio-economic backgrounds and identities engage in the construction and negotiation of beauty and gender identity on Instagram.

Moreover, as participatory culture theory focuses on online participation and collaborative activities within digital communities (Jenkins, 2013: 4), this emphasis may not focus on offline factors and social contexts that influence young women's construction and negotiation of feminine beauty and gendered identity. Another possible limitation that may be considered is this theory emphasises the democratising potential of online participation, but it may not sufficiently address power imbalances within digital spaces (Jenkins, 2013: 4). Young women's unique experiences of beauty construction and gendered identity negotiation on Instagram can be influenced by societal norms, media influence, and existing power structures that are not adequately addressed by this theory. Participatory culture theory does not fully address power dynamics within participatory spaces. This theory also emphasises the production and sharing of content, but it may not adequately capture the complex and multifaceted processes of identity construction and negotiation. Young women's engagement on Instagram involves not only content creation but also consumption, interaction, and interpretation, which may require additional theoretical perspectives to comprehensively analyse this study's topic. This theory tends to focus positive aspects of participatory practices, such as creativity, collaboration, and learning. However, it may not critically address the potential negative consequences or reinforce existing beauty standards and gender norms. Christian Fuchs (2014: 55) contends that participatory culture can result in unpaid digital labour. Users contribute content, data, and engagement on social media platforms without receiving proper compensation, while social media companies profit from the user-generated content and data. This, according to Fuchs, constitutes a form of exploitation where users add value to the platform without fair remuneration. He also argued that participatory culture frequently entails users disclosing personal information and engaging in self-revelation. Fuchs has stressed the privacy and surveillance issues tied to these actions, highlighting that users may not be fully aware of the methods through which their data is gathered and utilised (Fuchs, 2014: 56). Lastly, Fuchs explored the algorithmic mechanisms involved in the functioning of social media platforms and believed that this algorithmic control has the potential to bias content preferences and may prevent the variety of voices and ideas within participatory culture (Fuchs, 2014: 56).

### **3.1.2 Application of Participatory Culture Theory in the study**

To further understand the saliency of participatory culture theory as part of the theoretical framework for this study, it is imperative to understand how this theory was used and applied in prior scholarly works. The combination of digital technology and the Internet has provided an online platform where users can participate in various social contexts. The theory suggests that the correlation between the accessibility of digital technology and the creation of user-generated content encourages users to actively contribute to content production and distribution (Burgess and Green, 2018). Social media have become a significant part of contemporary visual culture in the twenty-first century because of the expansion and proliferation of visual technologies that construct how we see the world (Rose, 2016). Social media platforms have both extended and intensified forms of visibility and are now fully integrated in social life in such a way that they mediate this social life (Fuchs, 2014: 53). In engaging with individuals who have similar interests, users may feel motivated to participate because they are discussing topics that are perceived as important to them. This allows users to engage with the world as members of a community. Consequently, the act of sharing and disseminating information has become a means of active participation, as users are actively involved in creating, sharing, and circulating information (Jenkins, 2009).

The research site for this study is Instagram. Instagram is a social media platform that affords the ability for users to engage and circulate content in a participatory manner. Burgess and Green (2018) investigated the concepts of authenticity and community openness and believed that because YouTube enables users to create and share content it allowed users to increase their engagement and consumption of creative content. This finding corroborated with another study conducted by Cristian Buzeta, Patrick De Pelsmacker and Nathalie Dens (2020) that found that users who engage in participatory culture are usually motivated and have a vested interest in using a particular social media platform. In the present study, the chosen group of participants is young female university students who are regular and active users of Instagram, therefore these participants may use Instagram for a vested interest and are motivated to engage in this platform. Instagram offers unique affordances and these form significant important research sites. Affordances are understood as the type of actions that are made possible for users through a social media platform (Bucher and Helmond, 2017). Instagram attracts and demands study due to its affordances of visibility, persistence, searchability and replicability (boyd, 2010) and interpretability (Laestadius, 2017: 578). Unlike traditional media like television and print media, which typically lack opportunities for user interaction and ongoing discussions about content (Jenkins, 2013: 15). Instagram provides users with the ability to actively engage with and contribute to the content. On Instagram, individuals can participate by liking,

commenting on, and sharing posts. Other Instagram users can then respond to the published content or engage in conversations by commenting on existing comments (Leaver *et.al*, 2020: 17). This fosters an active conversational space that promotes participation. To fully explore the ‘performativity’ of gender on visual social media platforms later in this chapter, it is important to explore the participation of the social media users, and their understanding and experiences of the participatory nature of social media platforms.

In analysing the participatory nature of Instagram, the four forms of participatory culture are explored in this study in the themes identified in the thematic analysis. In terms of affiliations on Instagram, in this study the focus is on active Instagram users who have a curated an online identity through a bio/description and profile picture, and who use Instagram profile frequently, thus forming part of a unique online association afforded by this social media platform. Expressions as a form of participatory culture refer to how participants are expressing themselves on Instagram through the unique affordances offered by Instagram. This could involve uploading of selfies and stories (Butkowski *et.al*, 2020), engagement with other celebrities’ and/or influencers’ posts and beauty trends (Jairath and Daima, 2021) as well as comments/likes on received and given on multimedia content which can influence and shape their gender identity as women (Caldeira, 2021). In terms of collaborative problem-solving, young female Instagram users may work together on Instagram to understand and construct their female beauty by referring to and engaging in beauty trends and beauty communities on Instagram and addressing the issues often associated with these beauty trends and communities. Collaborative problem-solving promotes a feeling of ownership and empowerment among female Instagram users, acknowledging that solutions can arise from the collective contributions of a community rather than relying solely on a user’s own understanding. These young women may also use hashtags as a form of engagement and a form of communal belonging with other women on the platform (Erz *et.al*, 2018). Collaborative problem-solving is therefore perceived as a flexible and ongoing process that encourages feedback, reflection, and improvement of ideas. These ideas and solutions may also lead to women challenging the status quo, in this case, dominant beauty standards represented on Instagram.

Lastly, circulations refer the movement and sharing of content, ideas, and information. This is linked to the unique affordances that Instagram offers its users in terms of content sharing, remixing, and repurposing of content, collaborative engagement, hashtag culture and influence/virality (boyd, 2015). Instagram users can curate and personalise the content they consume and engage with, which contributes to increased agency. These users can be not only viewed as passive consumers but also

active contributors and co-creators of beauty ideals and trends. Users may actively engage in practices including sharing and remixing of makeup tutorials, posting selfies, and endorsing specific beauty products or techniques. In connecting with like-minded individuals who share similar interests and concerns, users are motivated to discuss and learn about topics that are personally relevant to them. This dynamic creates opportunities for users to challenge social boundaries as they actively engage in everyday identity practices and participate in discussions related to identity politics. In the context of beauty construction on Instagram, users can explore and express their unique beauty preferences, engage with others who share similar beauty interests, and actively contribute to conversations surrounding beauty standards and identity representation.

Participatory culture on Instagram is closely intertwined with gender performativity, influencing how gender identities are formed and expressed within the platform. The interactive and collaborative features of this social media platform encourage users to actively engage in performative behaviours that conform to societal notions of gender. This active involvement encompasses the creation, sharing, and consumption of content that revolves around gendered identities, including the construction of feminine beauty. Participatory culture allows for resistance and the exploration of diverse beauty expressions through affordances provided by Instagram, it also carries the risk of reinforcing traditional beauty norms and promoting performative behaviours and surveillance. The next section will therefore explore gender performativity theory in further detail as forming an essential part of the study's theoretical framework.

### **3.2 Gender Performativity Theory**

J.L. Austin argues in his work *How to Do Things with Words* that speech acts are not just a means of conveying information but can also be used to perform actions (1962). Further, in an article *Doing Gender* by Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987), they propose that gender is not an inherent quality but rather a social construct that is enacted through series of actions and behaviours. According to them, gender is not simply a fixed identity but an ongoing result of interactions within society. Judith Butler drew on these ideas in her formulation of performativity. Butler (1990: 33) theorises that gender is a continuous process of negotiation and performance. Judith Butler's work in the field of identity from a performativity perspective is considered highly influential and constitutes part of the theoretical framework for this study.

Gender plays a crucial role in shaping our identity, it is a socially constructed concept influenced by cultural norms and individual experiences. It is commonly believed that there is an existing inherent biological identity representing all women. In her book *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir argued that gender is not an inherent or biological attribute but rather a product of societal influence and imposition on people. de Beauvoir further emphasised the role of cultural and societal expectations in shaping gender roles. The dependence on binary categories of male and female commonly obstructs the ability to acknowledge and appreciate the complete spectrum of diversity and variation that exists. Butler (1990: 185) challenges this conservative belief in stating ‘the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.’ She further asserts that gender is not an inherent or fixed characteristic but rather a social and cultural construct that is continually produced and reproduced through performative acts (Butler, 1993: 85). Butler (1990: 33) argues that gender is a process of continuously performing and stylising the body through repetitive acts within a structured framework. Butler (1988: 582) further suggests that it is a ‘cultural interpretation, purporting that being a woman involves compelling the body to measure up to historical ideas of a woman and prompting the body to turn into a cultural sign, and this is sustained and repeated like a corporal project.’ This process of embodying masculinity and femininity highlights how gender roles are inscribed on the body and highlights the performative aspect of gender. Gender is not something one ‘is’ but something one ‘does.’ By understanding gender as performative, Butler aims to highlight its fluidity and challenge the idea of a fixed and binary understanding of gender.

Butler (1993: 121) further asserts that the performance of gender is a ‘re-enactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established.’ In society, for people to maintain their sense of gender identity, people are required to continuously uphold and control their observance of societal expectations regarding gender roles. The concept of ‘performativity’ builds upon Erving Goffman's theory of speech acts. This theory views a performance as a type of discourse that not only labels something but also conveys the power or will of the speaker (McCawley, 1999). However, Butler argues that attributing the power of the subject to produce speech acts to an original will obscure the fact that these acts are always dependent on pre-existing codes or models. Performative ‘utterances’ can only work within an established framework. Butler argues that the embodiment of the sexed and gendered body can be seen because of the accumulation of discursive norms, which are then perpetuated through the citation of authoritative discourses. The formation of identity is thus complicit with power (Butler, 1993: 13).

Further, Foucault's examination of power dynamics and the role of knowledge in relation to sexuality and gender has played a significant role in understanding the socially constructed nature of gender. Foucault (1976) explored the ways in which discourses and social institutions influence and control gender and sexuality, thereby supporting hierarchies and power structures in society. Butler (1990: 124) asserts this in stating that gender performativity is not simply an individual choice or expression, but rather a complex process that is significantly linked to power relations and social structures. She suggests that people perform gender in specific ways to fit within socially constructed gender norms. These norms are not natural or predetermined but are enforced through disciplinary measures that regulate and restrict gender expression. Butler suggests (1990: 25), 'the deed is everything' and thus 'identity is performativity constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results.' Gender identity is not an inherent possession, but rather a result of the behaviours, gestures, and cultural norms that people engage in and perform in society. These actions and/or behaviours in gender performance are influenced by power dynamics. Societal norms of gender performances are enforced through power dynamics that determine societal standards for acceptable gender behaviour. Certain 'normalised' gender performances are commonly emphasised and accepted within social institutions, discourses, and cultural practices. This process marginalises and excludes alternative gender expressions. The normalisation of these specific performances reinforces existing power structures, promoting dominant gender norms and marginalising individuals who do not conform to these norms (Butler, 1990: 35). Butler (1988: 522) elaborates on this in stating 'those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished' Therefore, those who go against what is the norm in terms of gendered behaviours are punished through both stigmatisation and marginalisation.

However, Butler (1988) does acknowledge the potential for agency in this framework. She argues that through the repeated enactment of performative acts, there exists the possibility to challenge and shift the very gender norms that enable their repetition. This implies that subversion of identity is most likely to occur when people engage in the repetition of actions, behaviours, or desires that defy dominant gender expectations. In this way, people can actively reinforce alternative perspectives to gender by persistently embodying behaviours that challenge dominant gender norms (Jenkins and Finneman, 2018). The theory of performativity identifies a form of agency that can exploit internal limitations of power. This agency somehow eludes or comes before the process of subject-formation, allowing individuals to exert influence and challenge power structures.

### **3.2.1 Benefits and Limitations of Gender Performativity theory in the study**

In understanding the relevance of gender performativity as a theory utilised in this study, it is imperative to understand the benefits and limitations of this chosen theory. One of the major benefits of this theory is that it allows for the deconstruction of beauty norms. This theory challenges the essentialist views of gender/beauty by placing emphasis on social construction. This enables me as a researcher to understand how young women on Instagram perform and negotiate beauty standards, thus revealing the ways in which these standards are influenced and perpetuated by societal expectations. By deconstructing beauty norms, underlying power dynamics and ideologies that shape female gender performances on Instagram can be uncovered too (Butler, 1990: 124). The aspects of fluidity and agency are also beneficial in this study. This theory allows users to have agency in constructing their identities. On Instagram, young women can present and experiment with various aspects of their gender and beauty performances. Thus, this theory allows me to analyse how women actively negotiate and shape their beauty performances on Instagram. These young women may make choices that personally align with their own motivations, identities, desires, and expressions. Another benefit of this theory is its focus on intersectionality as a major factor in understanding gender performances. This theory recognises that gender intersects with other social aspects including race, class, and sexuality in shaping individual experiences of beauty. This intersectional framework enables me to explore how different intersecting identities influence beauty performances and how women from diverse backgrounds and challenge societal expectations of beauty. As this study is conducted in a South African context, I have considered the intersectionality of class, race, and sexuality in my research design as well as in the methodological approach in this study to investigate diverse narratives and experiences young women have in the negotiation and construction of a feminine gendered identity on Instagram.

Moreover, another benefit of this theory as a key part of this study's theoretical framework, is the ability of this theory to uncover underlying power dynamics and acts of resistance. As stated previously, Butler (1990: 124) believes that gender performances are linked to power relations and social structures. Thus, this theory can help me analyse how beauty performances on Instagram can either reinforce or challenge existing power structures and norms. In highlighting acts of resistance including body positivity and fat acceptance movements as well as the promotion of diverse beauty standards, I aim to shed light on the ways young South African women use Instagram as a platform for both empowerment and activism in their gender performances. The aspect of digital expression and identity is also an important factor to consider when analysing the benefit of this theory as part of this study's theoretical framework. Instagram provides young South African woman with a digital

space for self-expression and identity construction (Leaver *et.al*, 2020: 11). Thus, this theory can assist me to understand how young female higher education students on Instagram use this platform to shape and perform gender through exploring the ways in which these young women engage with digital tools, including filters, captions, and hashtags in this construction.

While gender performativity theory can provide valuable insights and benefit this study, there are several limitations. One of the first potential limitations of gender performativity is that this theory places importance on ‘performative acts’, therefore, this may overshadow other factors influencing gender and beauty performances. It may also overlook the individual participant experiences, emotions, and personal motivations that shape these performances (Boucher, 2006). This is why it was imperative to consider participatory culture theory too in the construction of this theoretical framework, as this theory allowed me to delve into participant experiences, emotions, and personal motivations behind participation on Instagram. Secondly, another limiting factor worth considering is the potential lack of individual agency. Gender performativity theory may overlook individual agency and personal choices of women who use Instagram. While it is true that there are external factors and social structures that influence gender performances, young women also can shape and negotiate their own gendered identities and expressions. Therefore, we cannot assume all gender performances are determined by external factors. In this study, the research design and structure of the media go-along interview schedule has been created in a manner that it allowed me to gauge internal factors such as personal choice and motivations of users in constructing and negotiating a gendered identity on Instagram.

Another limiting factor could be the context of the digital environment. Initially, gender performativity theory was developed in the context of offline interactions, and therefore its application to digital environment, such as social media platforms like Instagram, may have limitations (Van Doorn, 2011). Social media platforms such as Instagram offer unique “spaces” for self-expression and identity construction, therefore, this could complicate the application of this theory. It is imperative to therefore consider the distinct affordances and dynamic of the social media platforms. In this study, Instagram’s unique affordances are considered in the research design and construction of the media go-along interview schedule to include questions that investigate users’ experiences of Instagram’s unique affordances in the negotiation and construction of a feminine gendered identity. Moreover, Instagram is only one social media platform that constitutes the digital environment, and it has specific functionalities, algorithms and user demographics that shape the nature of gender performances on this platform (Serafinelli, 2018: 57). It was important to consider

that this study was not going to provide comprehensive understandings of gender performances of beauty in both the greater digital realm as well as in offline contexts. This was not a concern as this study was based solely on understanding unique narratives and experiences of gender performances among young women on this platform, so generalisation of findings to other platforms was not applicable in this study.

### **3.2.2 Application of Gender Performativity theory in the study**

To further understand the saliency of gender performativity theory as the theoretical framework for the present study, it is imperative to understand how this theory was used and applied in prior scholarly works. The aspects of identity and expression have been observed in research studies investigating how individuals perform and negotiate gender identity and expression in different social contexts. These studies have explored how individuals either conform to or challenge traditional gender norms and expectations, highlighting the performative aspects of gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Schippers 2007; Paechter, 2007; Schilt and Westbrook, 2009; Risman and Davis, 2013). Intersectionality has also been researched in studies that have explored how gender performances interact with other aspects of a social identity including race, sexuality and class thus allowing researchers to understand how different aspects of a social identity influences the construction and negotiation of expressions and experiences of gender (Collins 1990; Crenshaw, 1991). Specifically, Hancock (2007) stressed the significance of acknowledging how gender performances interact with social identities including race, class, and sexuality to develop a holistic comprehension of individuals' gender experiences. The study emphasised the interrelationships between different identities, revealing their influence on the way gender performances are shaped. There has also been research using gender performativity theory in understanding language and discourse, specifically focusing on how gender is constructed and negotiated through language and discourse (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003; Holmes, 2008).

In addition to the use of gender performativity as a theoretical lens in past studies, the rise of digital technology and the internet has provided a platform where users can construct and negotiate their gender in online contexts, which has led to more online studies using this theory as part of a theoretical framework. Specific studies have been conducted where researchers have utilised gender performativity theory to examine how individuals express and portray their gender identities using affordances offered on online platforms, such as social media platforms and online forums. These studies investigate the influence of digital technologies on the enactment and mediation of gender performances and expressions, as well as how individuals navigate and negotiate gender norms within virtual environments (boyd, 2010; Hanckel *et.al*, 2019). These studies explored the application of

gender performativity theory in analysing how individuals express their gender identities in online environments. In exploring the impact of digital technologies and virtual spaces, these studies offer insights into how users navigate and address societal expectations regarding gender norms on social media platforms, online forums, and other digital platforms. In addition to understanding gender performances on social media platforms, studies have also explored how gender performativity functions in online activism, for example feminist movements and LGBTQ+ advocacy. A topic that has also been explored is how individuals may challenge or subvert power structures and traditional gender norms using affordances offered on online platforms. This highlights the potential transformation that digital spaces afford users (Cirucci, 2017; Andreevskikh and Muravyeva, 2020). Lastly, researchers have utilised gender performativity theory to analyse the role of gendered behaviours and expectations in online harassment and cyberbullying. These researchers investigated how harmful gender performances are enacted in virtual spaces, providing insights into the gender dynamics underlying online aggression (Vandebosch and Van Cleemput 2008; Barlett, Gentile & Chew, 2016).

In this study, gender performativity theory is utilised as a theoretical lens to examine how young female higher education students construct and negotiate a gendered identity on Instagram through gender performances of female beauty (Butler, 1990). On Instagram, young women engage in performative actions to shape and convey their concept of feminine beauty. This study analyses the ways in which these performances manifest through digital photography, including selfies, poses, filters, cosmetics, and fashion choices. These young women may construct and perform their gendered identity through the uploading and sharing of selfies (Schreiber, 2017). Selfies are gestures that can be adjusted to elicit specific reactions, ranging from social disapproval to desire (Senft and Baym, 2015: 1589). Selfies on social media are not only limited to presenting 'best' selves but also includes funny expressions, controversial or political content, and regular everyday images (Kuntsman, 2017: 14). The act of taking selfies allows women to have control over their appearance and select how they want to present themselves online. Selfie-taking acts by women have been both criticised as narcissistic and defended as empowering by feminists. Selfie culture highlights gendered dynamics, with women being more active in taking and sharing selfies compared to men (Iqani and Schroeder, 2015: 405). The phenomenon of selfie-taking on Instagram and its relation to gender performances is explored in this study in examining the complexities and contradictions inherent in women's selfie culture. The male gaze and societal expectations of women's appearance play a significant role in shaping women's selfie practices (Agger, 2016: 21). Women are both valued for their bodies and looks while being criticised for conforming to beauty standards. Instagram's beauty

filters contribute to the reinforcement of unrealistic Eurocentric beauty standards, leading to the editing and modification of selfies to fit these beauty ideals (Frosh, 2015).

However, selfie-taking can also be viewed as an empowering act for women, allowing them to have control over their own representation and challenge societal expectations (Butkowski *et.al*, 2020). Selfies can serve as a platform for feminist activism, with hashtag campaigns highlighting issues such as sexual violence, racial discrimination, and body positivity. Selfies can provide a means for ordinary women to navigate gender politics and for women of colour to reclaim agency in media representation (Caldeira, 2021). Context is important in understanding the implications of selfie-taking. When women have agency in creating and uploading selfies, these images become more personal and genuine, representing versions of themselves they choose to share. While a sexy selfie might be individually empowering, it does not necessarily challenge the gendered sexual double standard that shapes its interpretation and valuation. This study therefore investigates the interplay between women's selfie practices, societal expectations, empowerment, and the perpetuation of gendered norms on Instagram provides insights into the complex dynamics of gender performances in digital spaces (Calderia, 2021).

Moreover, gender performativity theory recognises the relation of gender with other social identities, including race, class, and sexuality. Race and age, like gender, are also socially constructed identities that individuals perform within the broader context of society. Individuals from diverse racial backgrounds may express their gender differently due to cultural, historical, and social factors associated with their racial identity (Charmaraman and Grossman, 2010). Gender expression can vary across different life stages, from childhood to adolescence and adulthood, due to age-related norms and expectations. This means that expectations regarding what is considered masculine or feminine can shift as people grow, impacting how they perform their gender (Chaplin, 2015). This study explores how young female higher education students negotiate and navigate their performances of beauty on Instagram, considering the influence of their intersecting identities. The underrepresentation of women and people of colour in mainstream media production contributes to narrow, stereotypical, and demeaning portrayals of women and girls (Brooks and Hébert, 2016 297). Instagram provides an opportunity for women to challenge these limitations and shape their own representations of femininity through self-presentation and self-expression. By exploring the interactions between different identity categories, insights can be gained into how these factors shape and influence young women's choices and depictions of feminine beauty within the context of Instagram. Lastly, gender performativity theory enables the examination of how young women can

defy established beauty norms and expectations on Instagram. In this study, situations where young women actively challenge conventional beauty ideals and partake in non-traditional or unconventional expressions of beauty is explored. This may involve investigating how young women utilise their presence on Instagram to defy beauty standards, advocate for body positivity, or promote diverse and inclusive representations of beauty. This study further investigates how young women's performances of beauty and femininity may be influenced by the validation they receive from their followers and the wider Instagram community. This involved questioning participants about their comments, likes, and engagement on their posts and exploring how these interactions influence their ongoing gender performances.

### **3.3 Chapter Summary**

As this study primarily focused on how young female higher education students participate in the construction of female beauty on Instagram, how this construction can articulate a gendered feminine identity on Instagram and how these young female tertiary students negotiate feminism and femininity in the construction of beauty, theories that provide contextualisation and framework to achieve these objectives were used to structure this study's theoretical framework. More particularly, participatory culture theory provided insightful contextualisation for the understanding of how young women could possibly 'participate' in the construction and negotiation of beauty as part of a gendered feminine identity through the affordances and unique functionalities on Instagram. Additionally, to comprehensively understand how young women perform gender and feminine beauty on Instagram, gender performativity theory as a theoretical lens was discussed as a useful theory together with participatory culture theory as the structure of the theoretical framework for this study. The following research methodology and data presentation and analysis chapters are based on this theoretical framework.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY**

### **4. Introduction**

While the previous chapters provided frame a literature review of beauty and Instagram as well as the theoretical framework of gender performativity and participatory culture, this chapter focuses on the research methodology that was employed in this study. The research issue identified was the fact that recent beauty studies conducted have been conducted from a Western perspective and focused on traditional media's influence of beauty standards on young women (Tate, 2009, Gentles-Peart, 2018, Dunn, Hood & Owens, 2019 & Montle, 2020). These studies have not sufficiently investigated unique South African perspectives and experiences of young female university students in understanding how female beauty is constructed and represented on Instagram. Research methodological procedures were utilised that would lead to extensive data for analysis and discussion with the aim of contributing scholarly knowledge to the existing body of literature. It is believed that social science researchers should adopt a qualitative approach to uncover unique experiences, thoughts and feelings participants may have about a phenomenon (Flick, 2018: 1-2). In this study, in undertaking qualitative and phenomenological research, young female higher education university students shared their unique and personal experiences about how their female beauty is constructed and represented on Instagram. Together with understanding participants' unique lived experiences, the media go-along method enabled participants to share how they perform their gender and negotiate a feminine gendered identity on Instagram. The responses from the data collected through media go-along interviews were analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis.

### **4.1 Research Paradigm**

A research paradigm is a group of beliefs and perspectives about how research problems are investigated (du Plooy-Cilliers *et.al*, 2014: 9). According to Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (2011: 12), philosophy refers to use of abstract ideas and beliefs that advises research. The philosophical assumptions are, therefore, a group of abstract ideas in developing a study or research design. Ontology refers to 'the nature of our beliefs about reality' (Richards, 2003: 3). Ontology seeks to uncover what is out there in reality that needs to be known (Patton, 2002: 134). Epistemology refers to 'the branch of philosophy that studies the nature of knowledge and the process by which knowledge is acquired and validated' (Gall *et.al*, 2003: 13). It is believed that 'ontology and epistemology are to research what 'footings' are to a house: they form the foundations of the whole edifice.' (Grix, 2004: 59). Methodology is the methods that the researcher uses to conduct a study and it constituted of

qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method approaches (Grix, 2004: 32).

#### **4.1.1 Constructivist-Interpretive Paradigm**

The constructivist-interpretive paradigm believes that reality is created through interactions between the researcher and the participant. According to Michael Smith (2008: 19), ‘scientific knowledge can be created by virtual experience and conversation.’ In this study, I interacted with research participants to understand the unique experiences young women have in constructing their female beauty, negotiating femininity and feminism, and performing a feminine gendered identity. The constructivist-interpretive approach also believes that to understand the world, one needs to interpret it (Schwandt, 1998: 222). The researcher is responsible for explaining the process of meaning construction and needs to clarify how meanings are embodied in the language and actions of participants (Schwandt, 1998: 223). The constructivist-interpretive paradigm is therefore concerned in how people think and connect with others regarding their subjective views on their world and the way they construct and understand their world (Thomas 2009: 75). This study adopted this paradigm as it wanted to assess how participants’ personal experiences fitted within the overall process of meaning creation. It was imperative to research this from both an interpretive and constructivist perspective as an individual’s construction and performance of herself is based on her own lived experiences of the social world. Interpretive academics believe it is important for an individual to express these unique experiences with others in the social world (Torbert, 2021).

John Creswell (2013) believes that when conducting interpretivist research, the views and unique perspectives of participants should be gathered and focused on from the participants and not the researcher as the emphasis is to understand participant perspectives and their unique interpretation of the world. The ontological position of the constructivist-interpretive paradigm assumes that reality is formed and based on subjective experiences of participants. The epistemological position within the constructivist-interpretive paradigm believes that knowledge is gathered through participant thought processes and reflection of unique personal life experiences (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

The constructivist-interpretive approach enabled me to engage with the selected young female higher education students to understand unique experiences of the construction and negotiation of female beauty on Instagram. To understand these unique experiences, I interacted with the young female higher education students as participants of this study therefore encapsulated an essence of social reality based on participant views of the interaction between the physical environment and female beauty construction and negotiation on Instagram. The constructivist-interpretive paradigm believes

that reality is a socially constructed phenomenon that is based on social, historical, cultural, and personal contexts (Creswell, 2013). Neuman (2012: 93) asserts that qualitative research participants are not passive, rather they have the capabilities that allow them to form their own judgements and perceptions about research phenomena. This means that in conducting this study, participants were involved in an interactive dialogue, and this allowed the elicitation and meaning making of data. The data collected from each participant in this study was based on authentic and unique experiences, and each participant differed in terms of their rationalities that demonstrated the significant value of conducting research within the constructivist-interpretive paradigm.

## **4.2 Research Approach**

A research approach is the specific route a researcher aims to follow through all stages of the research study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018: 1523). A research approach allows a research study to be delineated in following a particular series of steps to achieve the objectives of a research study (Neuman, 2014). There are two major approaches to research. Quantitative research which focuses on numerical values and determining relationships between variables, and qualitative research which focuses on uncovering unique, subjective thoughts and experiences about phenomenon (Adams, et al., 2007: 54). Qualitative research uses data collection and analysis methods that allow the researcher to gain in-depth insight into the unique experiences of participants (Fielding *et.al*, 2008: 3). This cannot be achieved using a quantitative method which largely focuses on generalisations on a topic. This study employed a qualitative research approach which aims to describe a participant's unique experiences of a social reality that the participant decides to participate in. The main aim of conducting qualitative research is to understand social realities in examining patterns between people and society (Flick *et.al*, 2004: 3). The data collection and analysis methods employed in qualitative research differs from those employed in quantitative research. Whilst quantitative research is grounded within positivist frameworks in social research, qualitative research involves the use of constructivist-interpretive frameworks by attempting to understand unique experiences and meaning construction of social phenomena (Neuman, 2014).

The use of the qualitative research approach is appropriate for this research study. I aimed to gather in-depth descriptions and narratives of how young female higher education students construct and negotiate female beauty on Instagram as well as how they perform their gender as part of a feminine gendered identity. It was insightful to adopt a qualitative research approach as this approach allowed me to uncover detail lived experiences and narratives of participants as they walked me through their Instagram profiles. Qualitative research also aims to gather a detailed understanding of perceptions

and it attempts to create a clear interpretation of phenomena through individual viewpoints of unique lived experiences. Thus, the phenomenon is investigated in the context where it takes place (Silverman, 2011: 2). In essence, young women who engage on Instagram are studied in the context of how they portray themselves on this social media platform. In this research study, interpretation is used to understand how young female higher education students who engage on Instagram attach meanings to their unique experiences in using Instagram. It is significant to note that there are multiple realities that constitute this phenomenon (Neuman, 2012: 89). Qualitative research does have limitations, especially because of the aspects of generalisation and validity that often form part of the critique of qualitative research designs (Flick, 2009: 90). However, despite these critiques, the use of qualitative research allows the researcher to have a better understanding of social realities (Flick, 2009: 90).

### **4.3 Research Design**

There are several definitions of ‘research design’ proposed by scholars (Neuman, 2014; du Plooy-Cilliers et.al., 2014: 2 & Denzin and Lincoln, 2018: 1525). Lawrence Neuman (2014) asserts that a qualitative research design allows researchers to be immersed in gathering detailed and dynamic data. Franzel du Plooy-Cilliers *et.al* (2014: 3) elaborate that a research design is a procedural plan that is adopted by the researcher to validly, objectively, accurately, and economically answer the research questions posed in the study. The research design provides the methodological structure for a study (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018: 1525).

#### **4.3.1 Phenomenology as a Research Design**

Phenomenology is believed to be the ‘reflective study of pre-reflective or lived experience’ (Adams and van Manen, 2008: 614). The main aim of phenomenological research is to study the world as people experience it, prereflectively, rather than as we conceptualise, categorise, theorise, or reflect on it (Adams and van Manen, 2008: 615). Studies that observe a phenomenological research design believe that the ultimate source of all meaning and value in the world is observed through the lived experience of human beings (Neuman, 2014). Phenomenology originates from philosophy and believes in unearthing of phenomena from the perspective of how human participants interpret and attribute meaning to the world and existence (Adams and van Manen, 2008: 616). In this study, focus is drawn to interpretive phenomenology as the research design. This branch of phenomenology differs from the descriptive school originating from Husserl’s work in that it believes that everyday phenomena is hidden in society due to complex levels of forgetfulness (Tassone, 2017). Martin Heidegger believed that a phenomenon can only be unearthed through ontologically through what he

believed was 'being Dasein' which denotes an interpreting human being (Adams and van Manen, 2008: 615).

Phenomenology was selected as the appropriate research design for this study. I believed that to in order achieve this study's objectives, the 'lived experiences' of human participants in terms of using Instagram were considered important. Phenomenology attempts to uncover how an individual's wide collection of experiences influence and constitute his/her lifeworld, and these experiences are connected to our reality, namely, our everyday life (Dreher, 2003: 142). The concept of the 'lifeworld' forms an important part of phenomenological research, and it refers to how human being perceives everyday reality and influences how an individual makes sense of this reality. According to Schütz (1970: 14), lifeworld includes the cultural and social life and its effects on the thoughts and behaviour of an individual. The 'lifeworld' results from 'an individual's everyday actions, communication, interaction, and interpretation from which social reality occurs' (Srubar, 2005: 560).

Individuals that are Internet users and interact with social media platforms such as Instagram. Instagram serves as a significant part of their everyday life where social interactions and relations are established and maintained. Schütz's phenomenological standpoint is in 'the mundane, everyday world in which people operate'. The lifeworld also refers to both the frame and the stage for social interactions (Goffman, 1956 in Wallace, 2005). The actions concerned in an individual's every day is made possible by so called typifications. Typifications refer to the foundation of all human thought and action. They create the complete sphere of an individual's lifeworld (Inglis and Thorpe 2012: 88-89). The practical features and affordances young females may participate in when consumed by the acting of constructing and negotiating female beauty on Instagram entails a unique set of embedded typifications that they have learned through engagement with Instagram such as the type of language used on Instagram and the multimedia content such as images and videos to attract audiences to the profile.

The result of these typifications is an increase in practical knowledge for young females as they have learned the ways to conduct themselves on Instagram through observing others who have participated on this social media platform.

#### **4.4 Data Collection Method - The Walk-through Approach**

Social media research involves the process of using techniques to gather data and insights about social media users, their behaviours, and their interactions on different social media platforms (Lee *et.al*, 2014: 14). This type of research methodology depends on a researcher's design. Common research designs have focused on how to gain insights into how and why people engage with social media as well as the meaning that is attached to experiences with social media (Snelson, 2016; Fox, Warber and Makstaller, 2013). Studies conducted that involved social media platforms have been situated in the methodological method known as connective ethnography. The concept of 'connective ethnography' is 'the extent to which new methods could allow for objects of inquiry that are not assumed to have a static existence in a single location' (Hine, 2012: 63). Connective ethnography has become significant in conducting social media research. Kristian Møller and Brady Robards (2019: 96) further asserts that 'in a digital media saturated world, the meaning of what constitutes presence and action is changing with the fast pace of development and adoption of socially mediating technologies. This also explains the continuous and ongoing efforts to describe an ethnography for mediatized society.'

A key component of social media is that of 'mobility' (Hand, 2017: 221). This mobility of social media can mean, variously and simultaneously, the circulation of images through platforms, devices, and databases; the algorithmic mobility processes of the flow or stream of images; and how the sites of production and interpretation are often done 'on the move' with the mobilities of people and their devices (smartphones) (Hand, 2017: 221). One of the key problems of analysing visual social media such as Instagram is this mobility: 'there is a distinct challenge in being able to identify 'sites' of a social media image in relatively stable terms' and 'a key problem with visual objects in social media is determining their context' (Hand, 2017: 222). A method that attempts to overcome this challenge is known as the walk-through approach, which is utilised in this study. I collaborated as a co-author on an upcoming research chapter, wherein I explored the utilisation of the walk-through approach as an innovative method to investigate the intersection of mobility and social media research, with a particular focus on addressing and surmounting ethical challenges.

The walk-through approach generally involves the collection of data through observing and documenting the steps individuals take to perform specific tasks using a computer-generated programme (Troeger and Bock, 2022). This approach developed from an empirical approach whereby in mobility studies the researcher would physically observe and document the movement patterns of individuals or vehicles within the study area (Møller and Robards, 2019). The walk-through approach

has developed due to technological advancements and is now method that can be used to analyse social media data and experiences of participants in using social media platforms (Duguay, 2018; Rettberg, 2020, Swart, 2021). This approach provides a way for researchers to engage ‘directly with an app’s interface to examine its technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references to understand how it guides users and shapes their experiences’ (Light *et.al*, 2018: 8). This method ‘involves the step-by-step observation and documentation of an app’s screens, features, and flows of activity—slowing down the mundane actions and interactions that form part of normal app use to make them salient and therefore available for critical analysis’ (Light, *et.al*, 2018: 8). This approach focuses on how the researcher navigates through the interface as it affords high mobility to access all areas of the media interface which allows time for reflection on each of these areas. As a result of this, ‘a sense of habitation arises from pre-established knowledge and impressions as well as in direct engagement with the material space at hand’, this then allows for ‘narratives of the sequences of interface affordances with the social coding that the researcher reads into each button, layout, profile picture and so on’ (Møller and Robards, 2019: 102).

The walk-through approach presents new methods appropriate to the contemporary ‘computational turn’ (Berry, 2011: 3) or in other words, moving beyond using computational methods to tackle traditional social science phenomena, and instead creating new concepts and methods to study computational technologies as sociocultural artefacts. Richard Roger (2013) asserts that the use of digital methods for social science research necessitates the need for ‘methods of the medium’ in terms of studying society and culture through the ‘functions and everyday practices of digital media technologies that remediate and shape sociocultural phenomena’ (Roger, 2013: 12). In conducting a walk-through approach, attention is drawn to the underlying sociocultural representations as much as the technological features or data outputs, which also consists of social and cultural influences. Digital ethnographic research in a mediatised society should constitute a record of ‘ephemeral and fixed digital traces as well as creating its own traces, all of which should be integrated into the analysis of how everyday life with media looks and feels’ (Møller and Robards, 2019: 98). Further, it is believed that by ‘working actively with agencies or directions of both people and media materials and how they come together in the research encounter’, researchers can “retain the human interest in critically approaching the ways in which everyday lives are touched by media’ (Møller and Robards, 2019: 99).

#### **4.4.1 The Media Go-Along Method**

This study adopted a method of the walk-through approach known as the media go-along method and which is utilised in mobile ethnography. Mobile ethnography ‘brings to the foreground some of the transcendent and reflexive aspects of lived experience as grounded in place’ (Kusenbach, 2003: 456). Margarethe Kusenbach (2003: 463) asserts that it’s important for ‘fieldworkers to accompany individual informants on their ‘natural’ outings” and that in ethnographic interviews, participants are taken out of their natural setting which she viewed as a ‘prerequisite for accessing subjects’ stream of experiences and practices as they move through, and interact with, their physical and social environment” (Kusenbach, 2003: 464). The media go-along is not the same as Margarethe Kusenbach’s method, rather it involves ‘the critical re-examination of the premises of fieldwork that the method offers.’ (Jørgensen, 2016: 38). This method explores a participants experience and practice in relation to a context. It brings forth insightful ethnographic research data as it allows the researcher and participant to ‘navigate and talk about media in that they have sensorial access together and simultaneously’ (Jørgensen, 2016: 39). This approach offers collection and analysis for both the media material texture and the ways the research invites ‘routing’ practices. The proposed media material categories are ‘affordances’, ‘representations’ and ‘communications and the questions that invite this ‘routing’ fall into either open or thematic categories (Jørgensen, 2016: 39).

The media go-along environment is different from traditional spatial instances, in the context of spatial orientations, the gap between presence and movement is bridged. In this study, orientations of the participant, myself, and the mobile phone are the primary elements in which the media go-along method required to take place. In my media go-along interviews, I sat in close physical proximity with participants, this was required because of the attributes of the device screen and sometimes these meetings accommodated only a face-to-face setting across a table making screen sharing difficult and more physical act whereas at other times, the participant and I would sit shoulder-to-shoulder therefore allowing a less awkward observation and only required slight leaning on my part. Sometimes the participant would flick through the app, and I would follow and other times the participant would slightly move the screen to accommodate my viewing.

Moreover, the media go-along method has been utilised in previous studies that involved social media research. Kristian Jørgensen (2016) conducted a study to investigate user experiences on a social media app known as ‘Grindr’, it has also been observed in studies that analysed perceptions and reactions of posts on social media platforms (Duguay, 2018). A research area that has not been explored is the use of the media go-along method to analyse and navigate users’ lived experiences on

Instagram. This study utilised this method in a manner that other studies have not as it has explored an area of research that has been insufficiently researched in a South African context, which is, how young women construct and negotiate their own idea and experiences of beauty on Instagram.

I first did my own tour/walk-through of Instagram and made note of all the features and then decided on what questions to ask participants based on my own engagement with the platform. Two categories of questions were created and asked. Open-toured questions usually ‘serve as starting points for a more or less open orientation in the media environment’ and invite participants to narrate a pathway through Instagram which included details about account creation and usage’ (Jørgensen, 2016: 40). The second, thematic touring questions “invite participants to move to certain places (the feed, explore page, story highlights user profile and messages area) and/or include certain themes” (Jørgensen, 2016: 40). In this case, these questions were centred around beauty representation, female empowerment and online identity creation and management. The questions were open-ended and discussion-based so that participants were provided with an opportunity to present unique viewpoints and perspectives in terms of how beauty is represented on Instagram, and how they uniquely negotiate and construct beauty using the app’s features such as uploading of images, videos, commenting and liking on posts and viewing stories, viewing and/or participating in trends and engaging in posts created by other users.

Social media research entails complexity and legality around ethical issues. Some of the areas of concern in terms of ethical considerations for this kind of research involves privacy, informed consent, anonymity, and the risk of harm (Townsend and Wallace, 2017; Tiidenberg, 2018). It is believed that some mobile apps pose greater ethical and legal complications than others, for example, hook-up apps for sex work. However, the walk-through approach calls for attention to be ethical concerns regardless of the app in investigation (Light *et.al*, 2018). The first ethical consideration that was considered in this study is the issue of privacy. There has been an emerging date regarding the ethical issue of public versus private data available on social media platforms (Markham and Baym, 2009: 14).

Instagram, like other social media platforms, has settings that allow users to control their audience and actively decide what they want to make publicly available, this has been updated over time to include more privacy options (Highfield and Leaver, 2016: 12). Researchers can access data posted on Instagram that is available in the public domain, any other data that is private requires informed consent from participants. However, the domains of public versus private on social media is complex

and dynamic because people may be involved in the act of screenshotting and disclosing of personal images as well as the fact that sharing posts across different platforms means different privacy settings become applicable (Ravn, Barnwell & Neves, 2019).

Responding to these issues, researchers conducting social media research that combine text and image have utilised two strategies, firstly, to exclude visual material, for example, pictures and videos completely and either ‘describe it alongside the textual material such as caption, hashtags, and comments’ (Tiidenberg, 2018: 6) or ‘aggregate the textual material into critical themes’ (Ferrigno and Sade, 2019: 9). The latter involves the concealing of identifying features such as eyes with a black box/censor bar to protect users’ identities (Caruso and Roberts, 2018). There are no prescriptive guidelines when it comes to Instagram researcher however Tim Highfield and Tama Leaver (2016: 82) argue that instead of focusing on public versus private domains, researchers should consider potential to do harm in representing research findings.

The issue of informed consent (Appendix D) to use a social media user’s personal data uploaded on the platform becomes a contentious issue in the realm of social media research. In some cases of social media research, data can be accessed and analysed without informed consent having been sought from participants in the study (Hutton and Henderson, 2015). In the walk-through approach, the researcher is exposed to personal user information, such as usernames, photos, videos, and in-app activity, this can be observed and recorded during the walk-through. Therefore, it is important for the researcher to obtain clear informed consent from all participants before conducting the study. In following the strategies posted by Katrin Tiidenberg (2018), I did not collect personal images and videos from participants, rather the questions posed during the interviews elicited responses from participants in the form of narratives and descriptions rather than the collection and storage of tangible copies of multimedia content uploaded on participants’ Instagram accounts.

In addition to the issue of informed consent, the issues of anonymity and confidentiality and avoiding harm of participants and their social media content is an area of contention when conducting social media research (Hutton and Henderson, 2015). While no actual tangible social media data was collected and stored from participants involved in this study, participants were still required to provide pseudonyms so that their identities would not be revealed at any point in this dissertation. In some of the participant responses, mentions of usernames and names in tags and comments were replaced with pseudonyms too, thus assuring confidentiality and protection against harm of all participants included in this study. Responses elicited from participants were kept confidential and efforts were

made to secure the privacy of the informants. I reported on participants' online lives and user patterns in the form of narratives which allowed for a thematic analysis to be conducted, but I did not republish their online expressions for any other purpose besides for this dissertation.

The walk-through method's ethical considerations can be addressed by combining methods or data sources. While walking through an app can provide a sense of user engagement, 'the walk-through does not directly collect and analyse user content, activity, or attitudes' (Light, *et.al*, 2018: 3). Application reviews, news articles, and online user discussions can provide supplemental data. In the case of this study, go along interviews were conducted to help orient both the researcher and participant in terms of understanding unique experiences young women have in constructing and negotiating female beauty on Instagram. This could have not been achieved with simply viewing of the app's features and user profiles, the narratives elicited through the go along interviews supplemented and enhanced the discussion of female beauty on Instagram. This is why I have opted to do a more traditional, empirical, real-life form of data collection.

#### **4.5 Sampling and Recruitment**

##### *Population and Sampling:*

Population refers to the total number of individuals that are included in a research study (du Plooy-Cilliers, *et.al*, 2014: 132). This study's primary population is university female students in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal who are frequent users of Instagram. This population is too broad, and I cannot physically access all these individuals therefore the researcher decided to choose a representative sample for this study. Sampling is a strategy that researchers use to represent the entire population for a research study (du Plooy-Cilliers, *et.al*, 2014: 133). For this study, I have narrowed this population to include young women between the ages of 18-24 in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal who attend the private higher education institution that I received gatekeeper's approval from to conduct this study.

Young women were selected instead of men as this study focuses on female beauty and therefore, I wanted to provide these women with a platform to share their unique perspectives in terms of the representation and participation of beauty on Instagram.

### *Sampling Techniques*

There are two main types of sampling that exists. Probability and non-probability sampling. Probability sampling refers to how each member of a population has an equal chance to be selected as part of the sample whereas non-probability sampling involves the subjective selection of participants because generalisation is not considered as essential (Creswell, 2012:142). In this study, non-probability sampling type was selected because I actively sampled participants to be part of this study based on predetermined criteria. Non-probability sampling involves the subjective selection of participants because generalisation is not considered as essential (du Plooy-Cilliers, *et.al*, 2014: 137). In keeping with the objective of sampling in qualitative research studies, this study implemented two sampling methods. The first method is purposive sampling which is when participants are included in a study because they meet predetermined criteria (Neuman (2000: 517). Heather Ames *et.al* (2019) have critiqued this method as not being representative of the entire population. However, Claire Bless *et.al* (2006: 106) argues that purposive sampling is still a useful method in qualitative studies as it allows the researcher to gather insights and unique experiences of participants which could pose a challenge in conducting a study that uses probability sampling. I purposively selected participants based on predetermined inclusion criteria. Secondly, convenience sampling was utilised in this study. This method involves the selection of research participants based on their availability and accessibility (Creswell, 2012: 145). In this case, because I am an employee at the private higher education institution, I selected participants due to their ease of access because they were in proximity. Convenience sampling has been critiqued because it may result in a biased sample that does not accurately represent the population being studied. In this case, an exclusion criterion that was applicable in this study was to not include any participants in the researcher's classes therefore justifying the selection of this sampling method in this research study.

The inclusion criteria for this study are as follows:

- Female - the focus of this study was female beauty and how young women articulate a feminine gendered identity.
- South African - the focus of this study was on how beauty was constructed and negotiated on Instagram from a South African perspective.
- Higher Education Institution student - the young female students had be enrolled students at this research site.
- They had to be aged 18-24 years old.
- Active Instagram users - the participants had to be engaged in the regular posting and viewing of content on Instagram.

### *Sample Size*

A sample refers to the subset of a study's target population (du Plooy-Cilliers *et.al.*, 2014: 134). According to Statista (2021) an active user of Instagram is a person who actively engages in the uploading and viewing of content on a regular basis. The inclusion criteria were 13 young women between the ages of 18-24 who are active users of Instagram. Active users in general instead of daily active users were selected as Serafinelli (2018: 73) states that Instagram users' engagement and content may change over time due to external factors such as holidays, trends, and social events. Therefore, by focusing on a wider period, I can gain more insight into how these young women participate and represent their beauty over a wider period. The selection on a sample is because of the need to conduct research from critical, qualitative perspective to better understand the salience of media forms in everyday lives of South Africans (Willems and Mano, 2017: 3). This study only includes 13 participants because I want to understand unique and specific lived experiences of young woman in constructing and negotiating their female beauty on Instagram, this could have not been achieved by focusing on a larger sample.

### *Recruitment*

Before I could conduct go-along interviews with participants, I had to acquire a gatekeeper letter from the private higher education institution as this was the research site where the media go-along interviews took place. Once I received gatekeeper approval, I then scheduled venues on campus prior to the date of interviews with the participants over a two-month period. I recruited the participants using research recruitment posters on campus noticeboards. On the recruitment poster I created a QR code that potential participants could scan if they were interested in participating in the study. This QR code embedded a link to an online Google Form where participants answered a series of screening questions if they were interested in participating in the study. I found it advantageous to include a set of screening questions based on the predetermined criteria so I could sift through responses and screen participants that met the predetermined criteria. Google Form responses are also presented in an analytic fashion which enabled me to retrieve information in an efficient manner. Once I screened potential participants, I then contacted each of them and discussed an appropriate time and place to meet to sign the informed consent form and to schedule the interview once consented. The media go-along interviews were then conducted with each participant over a two-month period.

## 4.6 Data Analysis Method

Denzin and Lincoln (2005: 22) ascertain that qualitative research is ‘interpretive and guided by the researcher’s set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied. Some beliefs may be taken for granted, invisible, only assumed.’ Qualitative research studies must undergo detailed investigation and analysis as assured by Sarah Holloway and Gill Valentine (2001: 129) who believe that to derive insightful and logical findings, analysing of collected data requires ‘rigorous analysis before embarking upon structuring your argument.’ However, qualitative data analysis has often been critiqued for being ‘unsystematic’ and lacking academic value and rigour in comparison to quantitative data analysis. This section therefore describes a detailed sequential examination of the data analysis process adhered to in this study to mitigate these sentiments and ensure the reader that academic rigour is maintained.

The study utilised a manual reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). In essence, a thematic analysis (TA) is ‘a method for developing, analysing, and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset, which involves systematic processes of data coding to develop themes’ (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 4). Braun and Clarke (2020) in their exploration of thematic analysis have re-termed it reflexive thematic analysis. The thematic analysis in this study includes some core concepts and principles from Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis as well as perspectives from other scholars (Terry *et.al*, 2017). However, although the original inception of the thematic analysis posed by Braun and Clarke (2006) provided a good foundation for thematic analysis research and allows for flexibility and application to different types of studies within social sciences (Braun and Clarke, 2020). Their recent exploration of a reflexive thematic analysis believes that themes do not pre-exist but are rather formed based on a critical and comprehensive analytical process conducted by the researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2020). Braun and Clarke (2022: 4) further ascertain that there can be confusion between the different approaches to thematic analysis. Therefore, stated three differentiating factors, namely, (1) coding reliability which focuses on measurement of accuracy or reliability within a coding data set, (2) codebook approaches thematic analysis which focuses utilising a structured codebook and (3) the reflexive approach which will be expanded upon later in this section (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 4).

The reflexive approach to thematic analysis accentuated the researcher’s active role in knowledge production (Braun and Clarke, 2019) In searching for meaning across a qualitative dataset, the reflexive thematic analysis allows the researcher to form meanings from the data through shared experience. (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 5). The concept of ‘reflexivity’ involves ‘the practice of critical reflection on your role as a researcher and your research practice and processes’ (Braun and Clarke,

2022: 6). For a successful reflexive thematic analysis to be conducted, the researcher must routinely reflect on his/her ‘assumptions, expectations, choices and actions throughout the research process’ (Finlay and Gough, 2003: 5). A researcher’s subjectivity is regarded as the fundamental principle for reflexive thematic analysis as the generation of knowledge is a subjective process in which the researcher’s subjectivity should be understood and viewed as resource for conducting analysis. A reflexive thematic analysis is advantageous in analysing qualitative data as the ‘analytic and interpretative tools reflexive TA provides can be used to produce analyses from relatively straightforward descriptive accounts to more complex, theoretically embedded ones’ (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 10).

Braun and Clarke (2006) identify six phases that constitute a thematic analysis, these steps were in the original inception of this method and are still applicable in the exploration of reflexive thematic analyses utilised in qualitative research studies. Braun and Clarke (2020) urge researchers to understand that the six phases are not a straightforward process and that they should be cognisant that the process is ‘recursive and iterative’ therefore requiring the researcher to move back and forth through the phases when necessary.

The six phases are as follows (1) data familiarisation, (2) data coding, (3) initial theme generation, (4) theme development and review, (5) theme refining, defining and naming, and (6) writing up. Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 6) emphasise that these six phases apply ‘the method to work with and make sense of data, but is embedded in, and surrounded by, a bigger set of values, assumptions and practices, which, collectively, make up the method.’

In my study, I followed the six phases of conducting a reflexive thematic analysis as summarised in the table below.

<b>NO.</b>	<b>STEP</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>
1.	Familiarising yourself with your data	The information provided by young female university students was transcribed after listening to the audio recordings, reading the transcription several times, and noting down non-verbal clues and cues in the transcription document.

NO.	STEP	DESCRIPTION
2.	Generating initial codes	<p>The data that was transcribed was then translated into codes in the form of key words, ideas and statements. These codes formed the foundation of data analysis and identify and describe an indicator for the features of the dataset that are relevant based on the key questions posed in the study (Creswall, 2013). Data relevant to each code was outlined and included in the data presentation and analysis section of this dissertation</p>
3.	Searching for themes	<p>The themes were both deductive and inductive. The deductive themes were identified based on past literature and theoretical framework whilst the inductive themes were generated based on the transcribed data. A core component of a reflexive thematic analysis is the identification of inductive themes that derive once data has been collated and during the data analysis process (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 13).</p>
4.	Reviewing themes	<p>This phase involves the checking of themes and the relevancy of these themes. Themes that were deemed as not relevant were discarded. In addition, some attention was paid to comparing audio recordings and transcripts with the themes that have been developed. Any inconsistencies were noted, and the analysis was revised until final themes that were relevant for this study were identified. Once these themes were identified, thematic maps were created.</p>
5.	Defining and naming themes	<p>The themes included in the analysis were defined using clear statements that were relevant and unique to each theme. The naming of each theme was created through repeated reading of each theme so that accuracy could be maintained.</p>

NO.	STEP	DESCRIPTION
6.	Producing the report	I presented the information in a logical and factual manner that is reader-friendly and allowed readers to see how the collected data can be analysed and categorised into different themes. This also enabled me to draw logical findings and conclusion from the data.

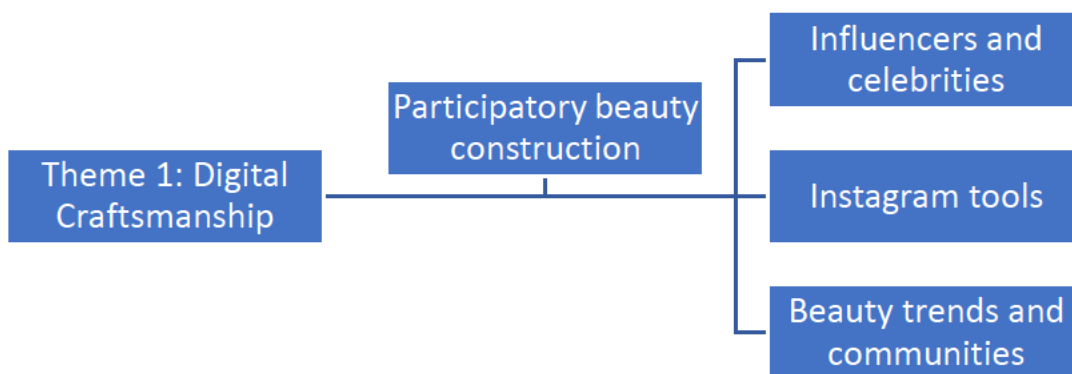
**Table 4.1. Thematic Analysis: Six Phases**

Source: Author, adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006: 87).

All the audio recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim to allow for direct access to the excerpts as they occurred from the data and related to each theme (Braun and Clarke: 2022: 8) believes the transcription process is important as it ensures that the researcher becomes familiar with the data during early phases of data collection. I therefore began transcribing the data on the day of each interview to ensure I was familiar and well-versed with the data and issues emerged. Braun and Clarke (2006) ascertain that this ‘corrective’ process is important in the data collection process as it allows for meaningful and comprehensive data to be elicited. In a reflexive thematic analysis, ‘codes are understood to represent the researcher’s interpretations of patterns of meaning across the dataset’ (Braun and Clarke: 2006: 10). The reflexive thematic analysis is a representation of the researcher’s analysis of the data based on the intersection of: (1) the dataset; (2) the theoretical assumptions of the analysis, and (3) the analytical skills/resources of the researcher (Braun and Clarke 2019). The coding of data in a reflexive thematic analysis is said to be both flexible and organic and should evolve during the analysis. Researchers conducting this type of thematic analysis are urged to use codebooks. In a reflexive thematic analysis, themes are not predefined to ‘find’ codes. Instead, ‘themes are produced by organising codes around a relative core commonality, or ‘central organising concept’, that the researcher interprets from the data’ (Braun and Clarke, 2019: 6). In my study, I therefore then coded the data by means of highlighting key words, concepts and statements followed by relating each code to a corresponding theme. This process was performed manually using different coloured highlighters and pens. For the formulation of themes to be effective and incorporate all initial codes, thematic

maps were created based on the objectives of this study. Braun and Clarke (2022: 6) describe a thematic map as a visualisation of key concepts and themes utilised in the analysis section of a research study. I created a thematic map for each of the main themes identified in this study.

The first thematic map that I created was for the theme ‘digital craftsmanship’. This theme stems from Jenkins (2006) theory of ‘participatory culture.’ This first theme focuses on participatory beauty constructions that involves individuals, influencers, and celebrities who actively shape beauty trends on social media platforms like Instagram. It's linked to the four forms of participatory culture: influencers drive trends, Instagram tools aid creativity, communities form shared beauty ideals, and collective intelligence shapes beauty standards on social media platforms. Collaboration between influencers and brands fosters creativity, and beauty construction benefits from distributed cognition across digital platforms. Instagram users, in this case, young female higher education students engage in participatory learning, experimenting with trends and sharing knowledge in a dynamic online educational environment. This digital craftsmanship shapes beauty culture in a collaborative, evolving manner.



**Figure 4.1: Theme 1: Digital Craftsmanship Thematic Map**

Source: Author (2023)

The second thematic map that I created is based on a main theme in this study known as ‘Instagram performativity.’ This theme derives from gender performativity theory (Butler, 1990) that forms part of the theoretical framework of this study. This theme focuses on how young female higher education students embody feminine identities through gender performances on Instagram. One of the sub-themes that constitutes this theme is selfies, as selfies form an important part of gender performances (Döring *et.al*, 2015). Beauty practices such as makeup, fashion and hair also constitute a sub-theme in this section as beauty practices are regarded as performative expressions (Tate, 2009).



**Figure 4.2: Theme 2: Instagram Performativity Thematic Map**

Source: Author (2023)

The final thematic map I created is based on the final theme in this study known as ‘dialectics of empowerment.’ This theme also derives from gender performativity theory (Butler, 1990) as well as participatory culture theory (Jenkins, 2006) that form part of the theoretical framework of this study. However, this theme in particular focuses on the intersecting and negotiation of feminism and feminism through the construction of beauty on Instagram. A sub-theme that constitutes this section is “beauty standards – conform or challenge” that highlighted how young female higher education students may conform or challenge the dominant Western beauty standards portrayed on Instagram through the construction and/or negotiation of female beauty. This sub-theme was derived based on past literature that focused on the representation of dominant Western beauty standards in media (Kaziga *et.al*, 2021); Lai and Perminiene, 2020). Another sub-theme ‘empowered expressions – body positivity and self-acceptance movements’ focused on how young female higher education students may engage in body positivity and self-acceptance movements that aim at challenging established beauty norms and was based on literature that investigated the rise of these movements on social media platforms (Afful and Ricciardelli, 2015; Cohen *et.al*, 2019). The final sub-theme in this section “feminist discourse: selfies as acts of empowerment versus objectification” focused specifically on how young women perform gender on Instagram in the context of postfeminist sensibilities (Gill, 2007).



**Figure 4.3: Theme 3: Dialectics of Empowerment Thematic Map**

Source: Author (2023)

#### 4.7 Ethical Considerations

Social science researchers are obligated to conduct research in a way that is morally and ethically defensible and responsible (Creswell, 2003). Communication scholars are required to follow a code of professional ethics that values the integrity, fairness, equality, honesty, and confidentiality of all participants included in a study (Emmerich, 2019). For this study, ethical considerations highlighted in UKZN’s research ethics policy specifically for research conducted that is approved by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics (HSSREC) committee, were adhered to when conducting research in an ethical manner. The HSSREC is responsible for granting researchers ethical approval within the School of Applied Human Sciences. An application was made on UKZN’s Research Information Gateway (RIG) and I was granted full ethical clearance (protocol reference number: HSSREC/00004426/2022) (Appendix B). Ethical principles that were advised included avoiding any harm inflicted on participants, receiving voluntary consent, and maintaining participants confidentiality. Each of the ethical considerations were adhered to throughout this study.

##### 4.7.1 Research Site and Location of Study

The location site of this study is Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa paying specific attention to young women that reside in this city. According to Stats SA (2019), KwaZulu-Natal has the second largest overall population in South Africa of 11.5 million inhabitants and Durban with 3 million inhabitants. The last official South African census conducted in 2011 stated that females account for 52% of the total population of KwaZulu-Natal, reflecting most of the population. I selected to focus specifically on Durban, KwaZulu-Natal as the research location for this study is the physical location where I reside. I included young students from a private higher education institution as participants in this study. Participants from this institution were selected as this is the campus where I work, and I am in proximity with participants included in this study. The higher education institution was

consulted for me to utilise their premises for research purposes and to use students from the private higher education institution in my study. I then had to enquire with the private higher education institution's Dean of Research and Postgraduate Studies to receive gatekeeper's approval. Once I received approval, the gatekeeper's approval letter (Appendix C) stated that I could not include the name of the private higher education institution in my study and that I should present a copy of the final copy of the report to this private higher education institution to be uploaded on their repository.

#### **4.7.2 Informed Consent**

Informed consent refers to the acquisition of a written statement that explains the nature and purpose of the study which is then signed by all participants to signify voluntary participation (Neuman, 2014). The human rights of research participants must always be protected, and it is 'incumbent upon the qualitative researcher to provide a dynamic informed consent when study outcomes change (Byrne, 2001). The violation of human rights in this instance has serious consequences for the researcher as it is the responsibility for qualitative researchers to 'protect human rights throughout data collection, analysis and dissemination' (Byrne, 2001). During the process of inviting participants for my go-along interviews, I undertook a verbal briefing to assist my participants in understanding the purpose of my study and their role as a participant in my study. I reminded my participants that could opt-out at any point of during the go-along interview if they felt uncomfortable to answer any questions. Participants were also assured that if they required clarity about the research study they could contact my research supervisor, Professor Sarah Gibson. Participants were also requested to provide permission to be audio recorded and that their responses would be transcribed. Once consent was given, I placed the recording device in a place between the participant and myself to ensure clarity of the recording. The audio recordings and transcriptions were uploaded and saved into a safe storage on an external hard drive and on my One Drive cloud storage. The external hard drive will be kept in a locked cabinet. To maintain security, passwords to access both the One Drive cloud storage and my laptop were kept confidential and only shared with my supervisor. The data will be stored for a period of 5 years, after which all data will be deleted.

#### **4.7.3 Confidentiality**

Another important ethical principle that was considered in this study was the issue of confidentiality and anonymity of participants included in the study. Confidentiality refers to the 'obligation on the part of the researcher to ensure that any use of information obtained from or shared by human subjects respects the dignity and autonomy of the participant and does not violate the interests of individuals or communities' (Bos, 2020: 16). In qualitative research, confidentiality is valued as although the

researcher may know the names of participants included in the study (they are not anonymous), participants and their rights can still be protected by maintaining ethical standards (Bos, 2020: 17). The research participants were given the option to provide pseudonyms so that their real names would not appear in any manner in this study. Participants were contacted with recommended pseudonyms and only once approval was granted, I used these pseudonyms in my study. While working through the transcriptions of the audio-recordings, I kept within ethical boundaries of confidentiality, trustworthiness, and personal bias by not revealing any collected data, narratives, and experiences with any other individual besides my own supervisor. Since most of my participants decided to use pseudonyms, they were unable to be identified in this study. I was aware of my own personal bias when analysing the collected data and narratives therefore this information was analysed through conscious reflexivity when working with the research findings. The participants of this study were also reminded to not disclose, publish, or discuss information obtained during this research study to unauthorised individuals that were not part of this research study.

#### **4.8 Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented a clear outline of the research steps that were followed to conduct this study in a way that contributed valuable scholarly research outputs. The chapter discussed the qualitative research approach and phenomenological research design selected for this research study. This chapter unpacked the constructivist-interpretive research design as the framework of this study. This chapter also detailed the qualitative data collection method of go-along interviews guided by the walk-through approach as the data collection method for this study. It has also illuminated the choice of non-probability sampling and it how was conducted in this study. A reflexive thematic analysis, which was discussed in detail will, guide the subsequent chapter. Additionally, this chapter highlighted the important ethical considerations, and the way ethics was upheld in this research study to confirm the moral integrity of the research study and confidentiality of participants was assured.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS & ANALYSIS**

### **5. Introduction**

The chapter presents the data analysis from the media go-along interviews I conducted. As outlined in the Introduction (Chapter One). There is ‘an urgent imperative need to study audiences and users in Africa’ from a critical, qualitative perspective to better understand how African audiences make sense of, and relate to, media forms in their everyday lives’ (Willems and Mano, 2017: 3; Helle-Valle, 2017). Therefore, the findings presented in this chapter shed light onto the cultural significance that Instagram has as a social media platform for young female higher education students. Specifically, the findings expound on the unique perspectives and experiences that these young female higher education students have in the negotiation and construction of female beauty on Instagram. This negotiation and construction of female beauty are facilitated by Instagram’s unique affordances and functionalities that provide everyday women with a site for representation of beauty and gender performances.

This chapter is structured based on the themes and sub-themes derived from the reflexive thematic analysis conducted in the previous chapter (Braun and Clarke, 2020). The three broad themes were identified and labelled, these included: ‘Digital Craftsmanship: Participatory Beauty Construction and Digital Engagement’, ‘Instagram Performativity: Embodying Feminine Identity through Performances’ and ‘Dialectics of Empowerment: Beauty as a Site of Feminist Expression and Negotiation’. These themes included sub-themes that were analysed logically, and the comments and perspectives of participants are presented verbatim to maintain the authenticity of their unique narratives. The main purpose of this chapter is to comprehensively expound on the collective experiences and unique perceptions of young female higher education students by giving them a voice to reflect on their experiences. In exploring the significance of the findings, the discussion will critically explore this theoretically informed thematic analysis in relationship to the literature critically reviewed earlier. Based on an extensive enquiry of literature applicable to this study, the three questions that framed this study were as follows:

- In what ways do young female students actively participate in the construction of female beauty on Instagram?
- How does the performance of female beauty on Instagram articulate a feminine gendered identity for young female students?

- How do young female students negotiate feminism and femininity through their construction of beauty on Instagram?

### **5.1 Digital Craftsmanship: Participatory Beauty Construction and Digital Engagement**

The first aim of this study was to investigate the ways in which young female university students participate in the construction of female beauty on Instagram. The participants of this study communicated their understanding of how they use Instagram to construct their female beauty during the media go-along interviews. Therefore, the following theme will explore these different perceptions and viewpoints in the participation and the construction of female beauty on Instagram. This participation is based on Jenkins (2006: 4) definition of participatory culture that focuses on affiliations, expressions, collaboration, and circulations. These forms of participatory culture are discussed in relation to the findings analysed in the subsequent sub-sections.

#### *Beauty, fashion, and influencer accounts*

In the evolving and dynamic landscape of digital culture, the intersection of beauty, fashion, and influencers has become common, redefining the way women may perceive and construct their notions of femininity and female beauty (Marwick, 2015). The media go-along interviews conducted with participants explored their participation with beauty content on Instagram which highlighted diverse experiences and perspectives. Participant narratives resonated with wider societal trends, reflecting the attraction of online communities as discursive spaces for inspiration and validation, resonating with the principles of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006: 14). Influencers collaborate with brands, other influencers, and their followers to create content and promote products. Instagram users may also participate in collaborations through challenges and trends, creating a collaborative environment in which everyone contributes to shaping beauty trends. However, in this attraction of influencers and celebrity culture, not all participants embraced this trend. Some expressed scepticism toward beauty ideals propagated by the beauty industry, considering them 'toxic' and disconnected from authenticity.

During my media go-along interview with Jane, she showed me several haircare, skincare, and styling accounts that she frequently interacted with on Instagram: 'I interact with a lot of haircare and skincare pages, styling as well as you can say fashion. This has influenced how I look and the content I engage in too.' Similarly, Kerisha showed me an account that she engaged with as a reference point for beauty, and she elaborated on how she believed female beauty should be more natural: 'Okay so I follow this girl, she's like body goals. I want to be natural like her, she barely wears any makeup and she's uh she's very fit. I feel like women should be more carefree.' Both Jane and Kerisha's

statements emphasise the complex interplay between agency and the influence of beauty content posted on social media platforms. Their experiences reflect the broader societal trend of people seeking inspiration and validation through online communities. This phenomenon relates to the concept of participatory culture, where users actively engage with and contribute to digital content (Jenkins, 2006: 4).

As Jane and Kerisha actively shape their beauty perceptions and views based on the content they engage with, it demonstrates how social media platforms may function as powerful agents in shaping contemporary ideas of beauty and femininity. Through this active engagement with beauty, fashion, celebrity, and influencer accounts, these young women utilise digital spaces as engaging spaces for constructing and negotiating their ideals of female beauty. Participants may curate their online experiences in selecting accounts to follow, engaging with content that resonates with them, and even contributing their own perspectives through comments, likes, and shares. In doing so, they become co-creators of the discourse around beauty and femininity, shaping the narratives that align with their personal preferences and values.

Additionally, some participants believed that female beauty intersects with professionalism and professional fashion. During my media go-along interview with Simphiwe, she showed me several professional style accounts that she interacts with and how these accounts helped shape the decisions she makes regarding her fashion choices:

I have engaged in a couple of accounts mainly ones that do professional clothing hauls and showcasing professional formal wear (...) I just see that when I'm in the work environment like I want to dress that way, like it inspires me to be beautiful and carry myself well.

Similarly, Lusanda showed me several accounts that she follows that played a role in her future career as a professional woman and that professionalism in her opinion is a sign of internal female beauty:

I follow my friends and family as physical reference points for beauty. I also engage in few law firms for future job opportunities, I don't really follow any celebrities and influencers. I rather focus on inner beauty and my determination to be successful as a lawyer.

Mastrangelo (2021) investigated how women may curate their online personas to align with their personal and professional aspirations. Simphiwe's experience highlights the role of social media in

shaping not only individual perceptions and views but also broader cultural norms and values. Her engagement with accounts showcasing professional fashion reflects the increasing visibility of discussions around workplace attire and presentation standards in the digital age. As more people rely on social media for inspiration and guidance, these platforms including Instagram become places where discussions about beauty, professionalism, and identity perspectives become significant.

However, not all participants believed that interaction with beauty and influencer are reference points for beauty and fashion choices. Some participants were critical of these accounts and believed that the beauty industry was 'toxic' and promoted unrealistic and unhealthy beauty standards. Participants preferred engaging with accounts that demonstrated a level of authenticity and that did not portray unrealistic beauty expectations. Thando elaborated on this belief:

I don't follow celebrities and influencers as I feel like they don't portray the right things about themselves. Sometimes they have the wrong message of beauty that they pass on to people, so I don't associate with that.

Similarly, Mikaela shared her belief on the 'toxic' nature of the beauty industry in shaping feminine beauty:

The thing about beauty accounts is if it's an authentic account and you're showcasing your craft, but I'm not a fan of Durban beauty accounts. I don't actually follow a lot of beauty accounts because I feel the beauty industry is fake and can be quite toxic.

Thando and Mikaela's perspectives provide valuable insights into the complex relationship between social media, beauty culture, and perceptions of authenticity. Thando's decision to avoid interacting with celebrities and influencers due to their perceived promotion of harmful beauty messages and expectations corroborates with arguments that emphasise the detrimental impact of media on body image and self-worth (Perloff, 2014). The concept of 'toxic femininity' refers to societal expectations and representations that pressure women to conform to limiting and often unattainable standards of beauty, behaviour, and success (McRobbie, 2009). Thando's critique of these messages reinforces that belief that such portrayals can contribute to feelings of inadequacy and promote harmful beauty ideals. Mikaela's perspective of the beauty industry as 'fake' and 'toxic' relates to the topic of authenticity and authenticity culture on social media platforms. This pursuit of an idealised and curated image can contribute to feelings of inauthenticity and disconnection from one's true self

(Marwick, 2015). This aligns with the beauty myth as Wolf (1990: 13) believes that media promotes an unattainable beauty standard that women strive to achieve and feel inadequate when they do not conform to this standard. Her scepticism towards beauty accounts that do not portray an authentic self-emphasises also reveals the tension between genuine self-expression and the commodification of beauty within influencer culture and social media.

Moreover, some participants also favoured interacting with accounts that shared a personal and intimate connection and drew upon beauty represented in these accounts for inspiration for their own construction of female beauty. These participants believed that beauty can be practiced in the form of skill-sharing, whereby Instagram users contribute to and benefit from a culture of shared beauty knowledge, creating a collective space for learning and experimentation.

During my media go-along interview with Jane, she showed me an Instagram account that she interacts with personally as a reference point for her own female beauty construction:

I know this girl personally, she's a beauty and fashion influencer. So the thing is when I look at her page, she influences me in a way that I can also go, for example, this dress. (...) She's like a go, like a reference point. The other day I was thinking about switching up my skincare products and I was like I can interact with her as an advisor.

It can be seen that some participants only engaged with accounts they share a personal connection with, thus enabling them to relate to beauty tips and techniques in a more personal and accessible setting. This corroborates with Duffy and Hund's (2015) belief that beauty influencers are a popular source for beauty tips and techniques and product recommendations as they create social media content around educating and informing Instagram users on beauty trends. This also corroborates with Khamis et.al (2017) belief that the rise of micro-influencers on Instagram allow ordinary users to build connections and relationships and they are not distanced from this micro-influencer. Micro-influencers were seen as more empowering, are they seen as more authentic as opposed to the commercialism and aesthetic of other bigger influencers (Arriagada and Bishop, 2021). Jenkins (2013: 4) believed that a participatory culture can contribute to skill-sharing. In this case, Jane revealed how she learns new skincare and beauty tips from other Instagram users, thus emphasising the collaborative and participative nature of Instagram as a social media platform that enables skill-sharing and knowledge creation.

### *Trend Participation and Beauty Communities*

Additionally, participants engage in the construction of female beauty on Instagram through the engagement in beauty communities and trends on Instagram. Beauty communities on Instagram refer to communities of users who share a common interest in beauty-related content. These communities revolve around sharing and discussing various aspects of beauty, including makeup, skincare, haircare, fashion and fitness (Hassan et.al., 2021). Instagram users actively express themselves by engaging with influencer content through likes, comments, and sharing. Additionally, profile curation allows users to express their personal style and beauty preferences, reflecting their identity within the platform. Within these beauty communities, trends emerge that appeal to users including makeup challenges, fitness challenges and skincare routines. The participatory culture on Instagram drives the rapid circulation and adoption of beauty trends. Users, influencers, and brands collaborate to introduce and popularise new beauty trends, which quickly circulate and gain traction on the platform. The emergence of beauty communities and trends on Instagram reflects the dynamic interplay between participatory culture and the construction of gendered identity. Specifically, participants expressed the connection between beauty and fitness communities as online spaces where they actively participated and performative exploration of beauty and self-presentation. While some participants engaged in these fitness beauty communities, for others engagement in beauty trends and communities is not active but rather driven by content that appears on their feeds due to Instagram's algorithm, in a more passive manner. Some participants also raised concerns about the potential drawbacks and misleading information that certain beauty trends and beauty communities may contain and promote to Instagram users.

Kasey showcased several fitness accounts on Instagram and discussed how she actively engages in a fitness community on Instagram:

I'm part of a fitness community on Instagram where we share similar beliefs about diet and exercise. I also pay attention to gyming accounts because it's like something I can incorporate in my daily routine, it makes me feel good about myself.

Kasey's engagement in an Instagram fitness community highlights a significant connection between beauty and fitness, reflecting the connection between physical well-being and aesthetic ideals. This relationship between beauty and fitness resonates with research by Aanesen et.al. (2020) who discovered how the pursuit of physical fitness is linked to modern beauty standards. Kasey's engagement in a fitness community aligns with this belief, as she actively introduces fitness routines

into her daily life to enhance her well-being and, by extension, her sense of female beauty. Kasey's attention to 'gyming accounts' on Instagram resonates with the concept of 'fitspiration' – a popular trend where social media platforms serve as sources of motivation for people striving to improve their physical fitness and appearance. Fioravanti et.al. (2021) suggests that exposure to positive and empowering fitness-related content can lead to feelings of body appreciation and boost self-esteem. Kasey's belief reflects a similar sentiment, highlighting how her engagement with fitness content contributes to a positive self-perception and a sense of beauty.

However, Simphiwe discussed how she only participates in beauty trends and communities if they appear on her feed and most of her participation is passive in nature:

I don't actively search for beauty accounts. Like if they come upon on my explore page then I engage in them. I end up trying to do like makeup tutorials, but it doesn't always end up working too well with me.

Simphiwe's engagement with beauty trends and communities that appear on her feed demonstrates how some Instagram users can become part of a participatory culture in less active ways, their involvement can be more passive than active. In this manner, Simphiwe's behaviour aligns with the notion of 'grazing' or 'lurking' within participatory cultures (Blau, 2011). This refers to individuals who observe and consume content within online communities without necessarily actively contributing to creating their own content (Blau, 2011). Despite her passive engagement, Simphiwe still attempts to participate by trying out makeup tutorials, indicating that even passive engagement can inspire some level of creative response in negotiating her female beauty.

However, Kerisha and Thando expressed scepticism about certain beauty trends and communities, particularly in the fitness and dieting space. Beauty construction on social media often intersects with ideas of physical appearance, including body shape and weight. Fitness and health practices are frequently presented as beauty practices that can be undertaken to achieving these beauty ideals, often through the promotion of specific diets, exercise routines, and wellness trends (Holland and Tiggemann, 2016). While these fitness and diet accounts may promote healthy living, Kerisha and Thando both highlighted the potential for misleading information and emphasised the importance of individualisation in adopting health and fitness practices. This suggests a critical perspective on the impact of beauty trends and a cautious approach to incorporating them into one's lifestyle:

Kerisha: 'I think some beauty trends and communities can be very misleading. Like if they tell you to diet like there's many different types of dieting. Like they'll tell you their version is the best one, but it's specific to each person and can be misleading.'

Thando: 'I have come across these trends I feel like fitness trends can motivate people like I don't take too much interest in it but it can also tell people their lifestyle is wrong.'

Some participants also expressed a lack of active involvement in beauty communities and trends on Instagram. Specifically, Kasey and Mikaela expressed a lack of active involvement in beauty trends and communities. They cited reasons including lack of time, disinterest, or a preference for maintaining their own established routines. This suggests that active participation in beauty communities may not be a significant aspect of their female beauty construction and negotiation on Instagram:

Kasey: 'I don't really engage in beauty trends and communities because I don't like to go out of my comfort zone makeup and looks wise.'

Mikaela: 'I don't really have time and these communities take up too much time. I don't like to jump on the bandwagon when it comes to beauty trends.'

It was also interesting to note that many participants felt they did not engage in these beauty communities and trends because these beauty trends or practices were viewed as time-consuming, requiring significant effort and dedication. This perception of the time required can discourage participation, particularly if these young women felt that they have limited time available. This perception of beauty practices as time-consuming and labour-intensive can act as a deterrent, particularly for women who have limited time available in their daily routines. This perception aligns with the notion of 'beauty work', a concept that refers to the physical, emotional, and temporal labour individuals invest in achieving societal beauty standards. The decision to engage in such beauty practices becomes a complex negotiation between personal desire and personal time (Robertson and Kingsley, 2021).

### *Instagram Tools*

Moreover, there is a gap in existing literature to understand how ordinary everyday South African Instagram users construct and negotiate female beauty through the unique features offered by Instagram. Instagram with its unique affordances, provides everyday women with a site for representation of beauty (Schreiber, 2017). Instagram allows its users to become co-creators of digital content due to the tools readily available for users on the platform. Instagram's empowering features grant young women agency as active co-creators in shaping the discourse of female beauty. Instagram's built-in tools, allow users to craft and enhance their beauty expressions. Filters have played a significant role in setting beauty trends by giving users the tools to experiment with different looks. Through this array of dynamic features, including a curated feed and profile, shop, IGTV and Live, reels, stories, highlights, filters, likes and comments, hashtags, explore and DM (direct messaging) (Serafinelli, 2018: 17). Instagram offers a multifaceted toolkit that goes beyond just engagement to enable women to negotiate and construct their female beauty. Participants in this study particularly cited profile curation, stories, highlights, filters and likes and comments as features commonly used.

Instagram's feature of profile curation allows users to create a unique username and description and provides important information about how users merge their personal identity and aesthetic appeal on Instagram. While Instagram offers opportunities for self-expression and connection, it also considers authenticity, societal norms, and the dynamic nature of online identities. During her media-go along interview, Jane showed me her profile description and stated she desired to maintain authenticity and professionalism while embracing her femininity. In using her own initials and surname as her username, she crafts a 'girlboss' image that aligned with her professional aspirations. This reflects a conscious effort to blend personal and professional personas on Instagram. She elaborates: 'I exposed myself to the public and I was like let me make my page more 'girlboss' and professional. That's why I use my own initials and surname.'

Similarly, Simphiwe discussed the importance of identity and recognition. Her decision to use her real name as the username and her own photo as her profile picture reflects a desire for easy identification. For her, the consistency in her online presence from the start of her Instagram journey showcases her genuine self and assists in personal branding. She stated: 'The username is the one I had since I started Instagram, I didn't change it. People should be able to find me and my account.'

In contrast, Yuvari showcased a creative and ‘cute’ username that relates to her physical appearance. By including elements of her identity, such as her skin tone, into her username, she embraces a playful and visually oriented approach to profile construction. She stated: ‘I have always been dark skinned, so I really like the idea of this username including the word sunkissed and yeah it’s pretty cute like me.’

Jane's practice of updating her bio to reflect current activities and values reveals a desire for relevance and connection with her audience. This serves both personal expression and engagement with followers. Additionally, her inclusion of religious information demonstrates the incorporation of values into her profile construction. She elaborates: ‘My description changes all the time. As soon as I find something that I’m going to be doing for a while, I want to disclose it and that I know people that I follow will like.’

This engagement in profile curation reflects agency and active participation in shaping online identities on Instagram. Jane's choice to use her own initials and surname to convey a ‘girlboss’ image, Simphiwe's consistent use of her real name and photo, and Yuvari's creative username all highlight how Instagram users actively participate in constructing their profiles in alignment with their values, aspirations, and identities. Participatory culture emphasises identity expression and affiliation within online communities (Jenkins, 2006: 13). Simphiwe's decision to maintain her username since the start of her Instagram journey emphasises her desire for recognition and consistency, reflecting affiliation with her online identity. Yuvari's creative username, related to her physical appearance, highlights her engagement with her own identity while resonating with a specific community that values diverse beauty ideals.

Participants' advances to profile construction also highlight the concept of cultural production and remixing within participatory culture. Jane's dynamic description updates reflect her engagement with ongoing cultural trends and activities, indicating her active role in producing content that resonates with her followers. This process of adapting and remixing her profile aligns with participatory culture's emphasis on constant engagement and dialogue (Jenkins, 2013: 140). Yuvari's choice of a ‘cute’ username that incorporates her identity demonstrates the diverse modes of expression available within participatory culture. This therefore demonstrates how Instagram users are not limited to established forms of communication; instead, they creatively shape their online personas to reflect unique aspects of themselves and engage with their audience in innovative ways.

Moreover, the Instagram Stories feature was also commonly used among participants. Instagram Stories provide a dynamic and ephemeral way to circulate real-time updates, tutorials, and daily beauty routines, further enhancing engagement and trend circulation. The use of stories has raised concern among participants who felt that stories can omit genuine experiences and foster superficiality. Engagement features enhance connections, yet they might also contribute to pressure and isolation. Stories also serve to differentiate from main profiles, providing a space for casual content. Participants particularly favoured the use of Instagram's Story feature and the 'highlights' feature to reflect unique aspects of themselves, focusing beyond beauty construction and representation. While Jane believed that Instagram stories can reflect aspects of one's beauty in posting selfies with embedded beauty filters, she also acknowledges that many Instagram Stories are curated and may not accurately represent someone's personality. Jane displayed several stories which she feels align with her real-life persona:

People present a character of themselves on stories. Look I don't ever say or post things on my stories that I wouldn't be able to account for in real life, so I think in a way it does reflect me. Sometimes I like to post a picture of myself using a Story filter, but most times I liked people to see me for who I am.

Similarly, some participants believed Instagram Stories can be used for personal interest and activism beyond the realm of beauty, make up and fashion. Kerisha showcased several Instagram Stories that related to topics of feminism, sport, and religion: 'My stories are mainly about feminism, my religion. It's things I'm very interested in and take an active role in my life.' Kasey also shares this sentiment in that she believes Instagram should reflect real life experiences and events. She showcased several stories that reflect her current real-life experiences, such as going out with friends, visiting nice places, and documenting trips. She also enjoys posting nature-related content and collages of events from her travels. She noted: 'I usually post like when I go out with my friends like if we going to a nice place and we look cute we will take pictures of us, the food and drinks and upload on Instagram.'

These insights highlight the evolving nature of Instagram's Story feature showcasing their capacity to serve as spaces for multifaceted self-expression that extends beyond using Instagram tools for beauty construction and representation. Jane's perspective on Instagram stories highlights the platform's potential to reflect elements of personal beauty, as she often posts selfies using beauty filters. However, her acknowledgement of the curated nature of Instagram Stories emphasises the complexity of digital self-presentation. Her commitment to authenticity, wherein she ensures her

story content aligns with her real-life persona, emphasises Instagram's role in facilitating genuine self-expression (Leaver *et.al*, 2020: 56). Kerisha also stresses the importance of authenticity in that her stories serve as a space for engaging in meaningful conversations and advocating for causes she's passionate about, therefore corroborating with broader research on social media's role in promoting discussions on societal issues. Kasey's approach to using Instagram Stories reflects a growing trend of prioritising authenticity, personal experiences, and participation in online self-presentation. Her emphasis on sharing real-life moments and events, rather than solely focusing on beauty construction, aligns with psychological needs for self-expression and identity. This corroborates with Serafinelli (2018: 75), who discuss the ways in which individuals may use social media to construct digital narrative that incorporates diverse aspects of their lives, interests, and values in the form of 'storytelling.'

In addition to the use of Instagram Stories, participants also provided insight into filter usage on Instagram for female beauty construction and negotiation. While some participants actively made use of filters to enhance their images to appeal more physically attractive, other participants preferred using filters for entertainment and fun. Therefore, participants demonstrated varying degrees of choices in selecting filters that maintain authenticity and enhance existing features. The use of filters in digital self-presentation and construction of beauty reveals a nuanced and evolving relationship between beauty ideals and authenticity. Some participants used filters to effectively conceal blemishes and enhance their skin's appearance, highlighting a practical purpose for filters in improving their self-perceived imperfections. This reflects the empowering potential of digital tools to manage and enhance self-image. Yuvari showed me an image of herself where she used filters that was posted on her story: 'I like to use filters especially for my stories because of my skin, it's not perfect like dark marks so I like to cover my blemishes and use retouch filters.'

Participatory culture emphasises user engagement, collaboration, and creative expression. (Jenkins, 2006: 15). Yuvari's choice to use filters, particularly for her Instagram Stories, aligns with this concept, showcasing her active involvement in shaping her digital self-presentation. In using filters to conceal blemishes and retouch her skin, she participates in the co-creation of her online persona, Yuvari's narrative also resonates with the evolving beauty ideals that highlight authenticity and self-expression (Madan, 2018). Her choice to use filters for her Instagram Stories reflects a conscious effort to balance enhancing her appearance and maintaining a natural look. This aligns with the contemporary shift away from overly edited images toward a more genuine representation of oneself.

Similarly, other participants shared similar experiences. Both Gia and Janice noted that their prior use of filters had contributed to insecurities about their appearance, emphasising the potential negative effects of digital manipulation. Janice stated:

I used filters back in the day in the photos archived because I just felt like back then I felt I didn't look good but then I look back at them and realise I did look nice. I felt so insecure back then and now that I'm older I feel more confident and don't use filters these days.

The development of a higher level of self-confidence over time that Janice expressed, indicates a nuanced course in the relationship between filters and self-perception. This evolution signifies the role of social media platforms in promoting self-acceptance and empowerment through digital self-expression. Participant experiences embody the concept of participatory culture, as their use of filters reflects active agency in shaping online identity. The initial insecurity, as indicated using filters to conceal imperfections illustrates the potential challenges Instagram users may face in navigating the digital landscape's beauty standards.

Moreover, Thandi and Jane expressed a preference for using built-in filters and editing tools on their smartphones over third-party apps due to convenience and lack of technical ability. The use of in-phone tools was favoured for simplicity:

Thandi: 'So I did use a filter, but I only used the black and white filter, you know the built-in one that comes with the iPhone where you can edit pictures. The other apps are too much work for me.'

Jane: 'I'm not tech savvy like that. I don't know how to do all that. The closest I went to was Snapchat filters. But the whole like, I know a lot of content creators use lightroom and Photoshop...but I don't have the time to see potential in a picture and decide that's it's going to look better if I use lightroom.'

Thandi's mention of using a simple black and white filter and Jane's reference to Snapchat filters highlight the playful and creative aspect of participatory culture. They both engage with filters that are easily available and uncomplicated, showcasing their desire to have fun while participating in digital self-presentation. This aligns with participatory culture's emphasis on the active role of individuals in shaping their online identities and the content they share (Jenkins, 2013: 67). Their

choices reflect a retreat from traditional use of filters for enhancing of appearance and features to highlighting the role of technology in enabling individuals to actively engage in different ways in the creation of their digital identities (Lupinetti, 2015).

Additionally, likes and comments were also Instagram features that was commonly used by participants in this study. The interplay between likes and comments on Instagram becomes an affordance of expression, validation, and connection (Serafinelli, 2018: 23). As Instagram users navigate through the multifaceted environment of this social platform, the dual functionalities of liking and commenting exist as Instagram tools that not only indicate appreciation but also play a significant role in shaping individuals' self-perceptions, contributing to the ongoing dialogue about beauty ideals and self-assurance (Serafinelli, 2018: 26). This sub-theme delves into the nuanced dynamics of likes and comments on Instagram, highlighting their significance as key features that actively engage Instagram users in the cultivation of aesthetic identities and their construction and negotiation of female beauty.

Some participants revealed the emotional impact of comments and likes. During my media go-along interview with Thandi, she shared how receiving comments on Instagram made her feel 'good and confident.' Mikaela also shared a similar perspective stating that likes and comments make her 'feel good' She elaborated on this 'like oh you're so pretty or like your outfit is really nice.' It was interesting to found that more participants preferred receiving likes and comments than giving likes and comments to their followers. Gia affirmed this in stating: 'I give comments and likes only once in a blue moon, I receive likes and comments more.'

In receiving likes and comments, participants favoured likes and comments from known individuals, such as friends and family, over those from strangers. This preference derives from the perception of authenticity and reduced likelihood of negative interactions from those close to participants, contributing to a sense of emotional safety. Jane stated, 'I have mutuals so they're very unlikely to bully me so I don't feel like they will be mean because likes hold a lot of weighting you know.' Kasey affirmed this sentiment as she stated: 'my account is set to private, so I receive likes and comments from people who know me.'

Moreover, some participants revealed the impact of likes as indicators of audience preferences. A lower number of likes on a particular post may influence content decisions, as they interpret it as an audience disapproval or lack of interest in the posted content. Jane elaborated on this and stated, 'If I

don't receive a lot of likes like other pictures on my feed, that means the audience is not happy with that content so let me not give them what they don't want.' Similarly, Kasey revealed a strategic approach to posting, aligning content publication with peak user activity times. This tactic aims to maximise likes by posting content when a larger audience is online, she stated:

I receive likes and comments, but it depends on the time you post. Apparently between 7 and 9 o'clock in the afternoon, that's the time people are mainly on their phones on Instagram. I don't really make sure to post pictures during this time, but I just learned a trick and it will depend on how many likes you'll receive.

Additionally, Thandi and Jamie emphasised the role of maintaining a consistent aesthetic on one's profile. Balancing the number of comments and likes across Instagram posts is perceived as contributing to the overall visual 'aesthetic' of the profile. Thandi described specifically how she removes images on Instagram 'I delete pics when I don't receive enough attention. Like you can't have one post with 100 comments and another post with 30 comments, you must be consistent.' Jamie also 'archived posts that didn't receive enough likes and comments.' She stated how 'a few years ago Instagram was like a sport, like which girls can get enough comments and attention and I took it very seriously.' Thando also shared a strategic tactic of how she intentionally disables comments and like counts to exert control over the engagement dynamics on her posts. This decision is driven by the desire to curate a positive environment while alleviating potential negative consequences of visible metrics.

Although participants favoured receiving likes more so than giving likes, participants' engagement with likes and comments on Instagram reflects a participatory culture, where these users actively seek and derive emotional validation from these interactions. The act of liking and commenting on posts represents an active form of engagement within the participatory culture framework. Participants actively contribute by expressing their appreciation, admiration, or support for others' content. This interaction goes beyond mere consumption and involves a participatory act of communication. The positive comments and likes to serve as a form of affirmation that bolsters self-esteem and confidence, contributing to the cultivation of a positive self-image. Thandi's experience is an example of how participants derive emotional validation from these interactions, reinforcing their sense of self-worth within the digital realm.

Moreover, the concept of the 'imagined audience' refers to the mental construct people create of the potential audiences of their self-presentation and communications, shaping their behaviour, content choices, and interactions (Yau and Reich, 2018). The participants' experiences and behaviours as described in these responses reflect the influence of the imagined audience in the context of Instagram. Participants' positive emotional responses to receiving comments and likes to highlight the role of the imagined audience in seeking validation and recognition. Thandi and Mikaela's statements demonstrate how the imagined audience, consisting of followers and potential viewers, influences their self-perception. Positive feedback through comments and likes contributes to feelings of attractiveness and self-assurance, reinforcing the imagined audience's positive perception. The consideration of audience preferences in content creation, such as posting times and content decisions based on like counts, aligns with the imagined audience concept. Jane and Kasey's interpretation of likes as indicators of the audience's approval or disapproval highlights how participants tailor their content to meet the expectations and preferences of their imagined audience.

## **5.2 Instagram Performativity: Embodying Feminine Identity through Performances**

In addition to the ways young women participate in the construction of female beauty on Instagram, another aim of this study was to understand how these young women articulate a feminine identity through gender performances on Instagram. The following theme will therefore explore the different ways young women negotiate and construct a feminine gendered identity on Instagram. Digital photography is regarded as a way of performing gender on Instagram, this includes the act of uploading and sharing of selfies and images that reflect women's interests. (Schreiber, 2017). Self-representation on Instagram is the way individuals, in this case young women, present themselves online through various forms of media such as text, images, and videos. It involves creating and curating a digital identity that is reflective of one's personality, interests, and beliefs (Haimson, *et.al*, 2021). Therefore, the uploading and sharing of selfies through aesthetic and style choices, and beauty practices in using fashion, makeup and hairstyles by participants to embody a feminine gendered identity is discussed. The use of captions to articulate and narrate experiences of femininity in constructing a textual layer of visual performance is discussed as this emerged as an insightful finding.

### *Selfies: A form of gender performance*

Although the focus of this study is not primarily on selfies, during my media go-along interviews with participants selfies was one of the major practices' participants engaged in on Instagram in the articulation of a feminine gendered identity. Participants' engagement with selfies revealed the

multifaceted nature of gender expression and its intersections with personal interests, self-confidence, and external perceptions (Döring et al., 2015: 955). Selfies afford users with self-expression and the ability to remember a specific moment in time which links to identity formation (Marwick & boyd, 2014). Selfies can be seen as a form of gender performativity because they involve the deliberate presentation of the female through visual and textual cues and are shaped by social and cultural norms around beauty, gender, and identity (Marwick & boyd, 2014). Tarleton Gillespie and Kelly Bergstrom (2016) argue that selfies on Instagram are a form of 'digital femininity', in which women perform and construct their gendered identities through carefully curated images and text. Performance of femininity on Instagram is based on several factors, including beauty standards, peer pressure, and the desire for social validation. Therefore, this sub-theme investigates multifaceted ideas and perspectives behind the taking, uploading, and sharing of selfies that form an important part in the articulation of a feminine gendered identity.

Some participants revealed how they take and upload selfies that portray their 'best' (acting sexy, smiling, or posing) versions of themselves. Simphiwe stated: 'I feel like I look good in this pic, I mean look at how great my hair and eyes look, super pretty... and I had a big smile too!' However, it is interesting to note that she also felt the need to post selfies that reveal a more playful side, in this instance, pulling funny facial gestures. She stated, 'I mean I also post selfies that have funny filters like this dog ears one where I can stick my tongue out and be fun.' Simphiwe's intentional selection and sharing of selfies that emphasise her 'best' features, such as her hair, eyes, and smile, aligns with the act of performing gender through visual expression. Her choice to highlight specific physical attributes corroborates with Butler's concept of repetitive and stylised acts that signify and constitute gender identity (Butler, 1990: 127). This performative act not only reflects her agency in shaping her self-presentation but also highlights the societal pressure to conform to beauty ideals and norms associated with femininity (Gillespie and Bergstrom, 2016). Simphiwe's decision to also post selfies featuring playful expressions and funny filters also reveals a complex understanding of gender performativity. In engaging in playful and light-hearted expressions, she challenges the notion of fixed and binary gender identities. Her willingness to adopt facial gestures like sticking out her tongue and utilising filters that transform her appearance into a more unusual form reflects a conscious subversion of traditional gender norms.

Moreover, some participants expressed how they embody femininity and beauty in line with societal expectations. Thandi's selection of selfies that accentuate certain physical aspects, such as concealing blemishes and emphasising legs, reflects the performative nature of gender identity. Similarly,

Thando expressed:

I am using makeup and it does elevate my look and I feel pretty, it also helps my skin as I have blemishes and pimple marks that I want to conceal. I don't use heavy makeup only foundation and powder, it's always natural.

Thandi and Thando's selective selfie choices illustrate how they actively perform their gender identities on Instagram. Thandi's emphasis on concealing blemishes and highlighting certain physical features aligns with cultural ideals beauty. Similarly, Thando's strategic use of makeup to enhance her appearance while maintaining a natural look demonstrates a conscious effort to conform to societal standards of attractiveness. These actions emphasise that gender identity is not only expressed through personal identity but also shaped through deliberate aesthetic decisions (Butler, 1990: 124).

Additionally, Jane's decision to post selfies that reflect the style of models, despite not fitting the conventional body type, illustrates the performativity of gender and the negotiation of societal norms. She stated:

I like everything about this picture. Okay, I'm tall so growing up everyone was like you should model but I'm not small so I can't really be a supermodel. But when my friend took these pictures, I was like you know what I could risk and post a model-like photo even though I don't have the body.

This performance subverts traditional gender expectations and challenges the binary norms associated with modelling and beauty standards. By taking this action, Jane exemplifies the transformative potential of gender performativity to reshape and go beyond traditional gender roles. Offline, Thandi's decision to emphasise certain aspects of her appearance, such as concealing blemishes and showcasing her legs, aligns with the societal expectations of beauty. Similarly, Thando's strategic use of makeup, despite deciding on a natural look, reflects a conscious effort to conform to established beauty norms.

Both these participants participate in the digital realm by uploading selfies that showcase their chosen aspects of identity. Thandi and Thando's selective selfie choices exemplify how their gender identities are actively performed through the aesthetics of their photos. Thandi's emphasis on concealing imperfections and accentuating certain features reflects a performative alignment with the notion of

the beauty myth, in which these women strive to achieve an ideal yet unattainable beauty standard (Wolf, 1990: 16).

Jane provides a unique perspective. She challenges conventional norms by uploading selfies that mirror reflect the style of American models, even though she does not conform to the typical body type associated with Western modelling. This act subverts traditional gender and beauty expectations, demonstrating the performativity of gender. By showcasing her willingness to embrace a model-like photo despite not fitting the mould, Jane underscores the transformative potential of gender performativity. Her choice to go beyond traditional gender roles in this way highlights the power of performative actions to reshape societal norms and challenge binary categorisations.

However, participants expressed that it is not just external motivation that led to the creation and sharing of selfies on Instagram. Participants revealed how feeling good internally and having a positive mindset contributed to their decision to post selfies on Instagram. Kasey emphasised the importance of her internal state of mind and attitude in deciding to take and upload a selfie on Instagram:

I feel like maybe my attitude that morning like before I took the selfie, like sometimes you can wake up on the wrong side of the bed, but maybe I woke up on the right side of the bed. So inside I feel good and decided to take a selfie and upload it.

Similarly, Gia and Yuvari associated their decision to upload selfies based on specific events or memories. Gia stated: 'Well, this one. I felt good because I was participating in an Olympiad. So, I thought I'll upload this selfie where I look cute and to remember this memory.' Yuvari also felt the same and stated 'this selfie was taken on a good day because I was getting my results so when I look at it, I look fly, and it brings back positive memories.' These participant responses highlighted an important aspect of looking good versus feeling good. Some participants felt that they had to look good to feel obliged them to take and upload selfies on Instagram, whereas other participants felt they must feel good to take and upload selfies on Instagram. In line with Butler's theory of performativity, this perspective challenges the notion that appearances are the sole basis of identity construction. Instead, it highlights the performative nature of emotions and internal experiences. By capturing moments of positive emotions and feelings, they are performing their emotional states as an integral part of their identity (Butler, 1990: 16).

### *Beauty Practices – makeup, fashion, and hair*

In Butler's theory of performativity, gender performances are regarded as a dynamic process of mimicry, hybridity, and the continuous enactment of gender norms (Butler, 1993: 84). Young women engage in this performative expression through beauty practices, as highlighted by Tate (2009). These beauty practices, ranging from makeup application to the selection of fashionable clothing and hairstyling, serve as intentional acts of constructing and embodying feminine gender identities. In following culturally distinct standards of physical attractiveness, women engage in a form of performativity that aligns with Butler's belief that gender is not a fixed essence but a fluid and ongoing performance (Butler, 1990). This belief is further corroborated by the comprehensive range of these beauty practices, as outlined by Joan Spade and Catherine Valentine (2010), which encompass a several aspects contributing to the negotiation of gender identity within the framework of societal expectations. The following sub-theme will describe the various beauty practices young women engage in as part of their performance of gender on Instagram.

Some participants expressed a need to present themselves in a positive manner on Instagram. These participants emphasised looking good, wearing makeup, having styled hair, and wearing attractive clothing before posting pictures. This reflects a preference for demonstrating their best selves on social media. Particularly, Thandi describes: 'I feel that before I upload my selfies on Instagram I must have my hair, makeup, eyelashes done. I also feel once my posts are on the Internet, it is there forever.' This is an insightful finding as it demonstrates how some women believed in making a conscious effort in their physical appearance before uploading an image on Instagram as they did not want to be perceived in a 'bad' manner by their audience. This also relates to the concept of the imagined audience, her belief that her posts will be on the internet 'forever' suggests that she is considering not only their current followers but also her potential future audience. The idea permanence contributes to how these posts might be interpreted by others over time, including those who might come across their content later.

Additionally, Mikaela shared a similar sentiment:

I don't think there's a picture of me on Instagram where I'm not wearing makeup. I always want to reflect the best version of myself, and I feel like that is the purpose of Instagram. Like if you are sitting in the library crying your eyes out you're not gonna take a picture and put that on Instagram. Instagram is the best version of me like makeup, hair, nails must look good, it's there to stay.

This desire to have an attractive physical appearance and the concern about the permanency of online posts indicate that Mikaela carefully curates her online identity. She seeks to control the impression she makes on her 'imagined audience' and strives to present herself in a way that aligns with the image she wishes to project. Not only did both these participants express their desire to present the best versions of themselves, they also even likened this to their level of self-confidence and self-esteem. They both indicate how beauty practices make them feel more grown up, attractive, and confident. They view these practices as enhancing their self-perception.

However, not all participants engaged in intentional beauty practices before uploading images on Instagram, some participants took a more spontaneous approach. For instance, Janice describes: 'So no, my images are more like a matter of fact and spontaneous. Like if I'm dressed up and I feel I look nice then I will take a picture and upload it. I won't specifically get ready to take a picture for Instagram.'

Kasey also shared a very similar view:

Mmmh, I don't actually dress up to take the pictures for Instagram. Like if I'm going out for a family dinner and I look good then I'll be like let me take a picture and upload it to Instagram before we leave. But like there are a lot of times where I'll dress up and go out and just forget to take pictures so it's not that I do it for Instagram it's just like a by the way.

Both Janice and Kasey expressed how they 'dress up' for events and social gatherings, with Instagram being a resulting consideration. Their images are taken when they feel they look good without specific preparation for Instagram. Their approach reflects how some young women may not always engage in intentional or premeditated beauty practices for Instagram. Instead, their behaviour aligns with Butler's notion that identity is an ongoing, situational performance that responds to various contextual cues. When they 'dress up' for events, they are enacting a performative act of identity, influenced by the specific social contexts and occasions. Their actions indicated that their primary motivation is not necessarily the construction of an idealised online identity. Instead, their image-sharing on Instagram emerges as an extension of their lived experiences, reflecting Butler's idea that identity performances are embedded in everyday life and actions (Butler, 1990: 120). Thus, this demonstrates the nuances of gender performances on Instagram, emphasising the interplay between identity, context, and the spontaneity of everyday actions.

Moreover, interesting to note was the aspect of realism versus idealism: there's a tension between

presenting an idealised version of oneself (with makeup, styling, etc.) and a desire for more realistic and natural representations. Some participants expressed a desire to post images with minimal makeup or in everyday situations without extensive preparation. The nuanced nature of performing gender through beauty practices was noted in Yuvari's response:

I usually like to wear makeup and a nice outfit before I upload a picture on Instagram because like I said when I'm uploading picture I want to make sure I look good and I just like the whole aesthetic of having good pictures on Instagram. But at the same time I would like to get into more realistic day to day without me having to do so much to look as good as I want to. I want to be able to just wake up, do something light and then post a picture like light makeup, no makeup at all. Instagram reels provide us with hacks like putting your foundation in water, putting Vaseline before putting mascara, so you get lots of hacks to do your makeup so like in my own personal life I like to do that to achieve the look they are going for.

Yuvari mentions her desire to wear makeup and dress attractively before uploading pictures on Instagram. This corroborates with the belief of presenting an idealised version of oneself – conforming to societal beauty standards and adhering to the aesthetic norms and conventions on Instagram. This suggests the performative aspect of gender identity, where beauty practices are utilised to construct and express a particular image of femininity. At the same time, Yuvari also expresses a wish for more realistic day-to-day representations. She articulates a desire to post pictures without undertaking extensive beauty practices, embracing a more authentic and natural appearance. This desire for authenticity corroborates with the belief that individuals seek to break away from prescribed norms and express their identity in a manner that feels genuine and unfiltered. The tension between idealism and authenticity in her response to beauty practices on Instagram underscores the complexities of gender performativity. Yuvari negotiates between conforming to societal ideals and expressing her authentic self. This negotiation reflects the dynamic interplay between external pressures to conform and the internal desire to be true to one's identity.

Moreover, some participants highlighted the influence of cultural and social factors on their choices regarding beauty practices and self-presentation on Instagram. These influences shape participants' perceptions of beauty, fashion, and personal self-expression. Kerisha expresses comfort in wearing traditional cultural clothing and sharing such images on Instagram. This suggests that her cultural background significantly impacts their fashion choices and image-sharing practices. She mentions being comfortable in Indian wear, highlighting the interplay between cultural identity and self-

presentation.

I think I'm comfortable wearing my traditional culture clothing and taking and uploading pictures on Instagram like that, like I feel like I look nice in it and like most of my posts are more in Indian wear.

She also mentions following both traditional Indian wear and Western makeup trends. This hybridisation reflects the complex nature of cultural and social influences, where individuals gain inspiration from diverse sources to create their own unique style: 'I like I don't know about makeup and stuff like what is really Indian per say but I do also follow a lot of Western like makeup too.' Kerisha's comfort in wearing traditional cultural clothing and sharing those images on Instagram demonstrates the influence of cultural identity on fashion choices and self-presentation. This aligns with gender performativity theory, where individuals enact and express their gender identity through their appearance, reflecting the interplay between personal identity and societal norms. Kerisha's engagement with both traditional Indian wear and Western makeup trends showcases the hybridisation of influences, revealing the complexity of performing gender in a diverse and interconnected digital environment. This resonates with the idea of performativity as individuals navigate various cultural and social ideals to construct their gendered selves, often drawing inspiration from diverse sources.

Some participants cited that external influences and brand association play a significant role in shaping beauty practices. Lusanda's predisposition to follow a makeup account and follow renowned brands such as Chanel showcases the impact of social media and fashion brands on her choice. This reflects a desire to mirror prevailing beauty trends and associate with reputable brands:

Before I upload pictures I'll make sure I'm wearing makeup and my hair must be looking good even my clothes must look good. But like if my friend just takes a random picture and uploads it, it's fine I'll let it be. But personally I make sure my pictures look good before I upload them." "I follow a makeup account that I really like and I like the big brands like Chanel. I always want to do my makeup like them and I have tried before but it doesn't turn out like those accounts.

Similarly, Thandi's consideration of cosmetic surgery to attain celebrity-inspired beauty standards highlights the influential role of media and celebrity culture. This reveals how external factors can bolster personal aspirations for physical enhancement, emphasising the significant potential of ideal

media representations on individual perceptions of beauty:

I do get my nails and eyelashes done because I feel beautiful and grown up, I don't look like a child, I feel confident. I would consider cosmetic surgery in terms of getting lip fillers because I see celebrities and facials and that type of thing also seem beautiful to me.

Lusanda, who follows makeup accounts and aspires to imitate high-end fashion brands such as Chanel, reveals the impact of external influences and brand association. This highlights the role of digital spaces in amplifying the performative aspect of gender identity, as individuals seek to align themselves with popular trends and reputable brands. Her consideration of cosmetic surgery to meet celebrity-inspired beauty standards highlights the influence of media and celebrity culture. This emphasises how external influences, often propagated through digital media, can influence personal aspirations for physical enhancement and beauty ideals. This reflects the focus on media's role in constructing beauty ideals and influencing individuals' perceptions of attractiveness.

Another finding that emerged was that participants' engagement with beauty practices on Instagram went beyond just physical appearance. It extended to the use of captions to articulate and narrate experiences of femininity, creating a textual layer that complements the visual performance. This multifaceted approach highlights the nuanced nature of gender performance within the digital space. Jane elaborated:

I upload images because they reflect what's going in my life, my main reason for this one is my friend took this picture and he was leaving to go to Joburg and he was with me on my birthday and he was like you know what I know you like the beach, let's go the beach and he took some really nice pictures that I posted as he said I haven't posted in a while. And the pictures came out nice so I was like let me post it. It does have a caption and I chose the caption because I thought it was cool and the aesthetic of it.

Jane's explanation of uploading images that reflect her life experiences and her choice of captions to enhance the aesthetic of her posts represents the performative aspect of constructing her feminine gender. By selecting specific captions, she is not only adding context to her images but also participating in the ongoing creation and reinforcement of her gender identity. This aligns with Butler's idea that gender is produced through repeated actions and expressions (Butler, 1990: 125).

Similarly, Simphiwe showed me an image during her media go-along interview and stated:

I uploaded this picture because I thought I looked nice. It includes a caption a dose of pink on Wednesday because I like pink and wearing it.

Similar to Jane, Simphiwe's decision to upload an image based on her perception of looking physically attractive with the caption she chose to add ('a dose of pink on Wednesday') emphasises how her self-presentation is a conscious act of performing femininity. The caption serves as a linguistic means to communicate her identity and feelings, contributing to the construction of her gender identity as she performs it on Instagram.

Gia also described her experience in using captions during her navigation of posts on Instagram:

I uploaded this selfie of me because I liked the filter. It has a description which is an angel and Christian cross. It was a time where I was like slowly growing into my faith. I was born Christian but I was still in a bumpy patch.

The use of captions to describe her experiences and emotions while sharing a selfie highlights the interplay between personal experiences and gender performance. Her caption choice of an "angel and Christian cross" relates to her journey of faith, indicating that her self-presentation is not solely about physical appearance but also about connecting her identity with her personal religious beliefs and values. This corroborates with Butler's assertion that performativity involves not only appearance but also the expression of one's inner experiences and beliefs. Butler's theory of performativity suggests that individuals repeat and embody certain behaviours to create a coherent sense of identity (Butler, 1990: 87). In the realm of Instagram, users make use of captions to convey specific emotions, thoughts, or narratives that enhance the image they're sharing with audiences. This act of attaching textual meaning to visual content is a performative act that contributes to the construction of their online identity.

### **5.3 Dialectics of Empowerment: Beauty as Site of Feminist Expression and Negotiation**

The preceding section explored how young women use Instagram as a platform to construct and present their feminine gender identities. This process involved navigating a range of factors, including beauty practices aesthetics, selfies, and personal narratives. The final aim of this study was to explore how young female students negotiate feminism and femininity through the construction of beauty on

Instagram. In the dynamic context of Instagram's development, empowerment is established through activism, the re-evaluation of established beauty norms, and nuanced feminist discussions. This exploration interlinks the process of negotiating feminine identities with empowered self-expressions, intersectional beauty narratives, and the evolving dynamics of feminist discourse. Together these elements highlight the interplay between individual agency and broader societal transformation, highlighting the role of social media platforms in shaping contemporary feminist narratives.

### *Beauty Standards – Conform or Challenge?*

The portrayal of Western beauty standards on Instagram includes both social and cultural factors which can influence the process through which young female university students negotiate and construct female beauty. The widespread ubiquity of Instagram has enabled this with the capacity to transmit a range of aesthetic beauty ideals, encompassing both those that represent established Western norms of beauty and those that introduce discord that challenge this conventional paradigm. In the examination of the symbiotic relationship between Instagram and the shaping of female beauty, diverse viewpoints from participants emerge, collectively contributing to the combination of influences and reactions to this discourse. Some participants felt the need to conform to these Western beauty standards, while others disagreed and seek to challenge these beauty standards and represent their own cultural and ethnic beauty on Instagram.

Thandi and Janice both acknowledged that Western beauty standards are still prevalent on Instagram and this engagement plays a role in the construction of feminine beauty. During my discussion with Thandi about selfies and the posts she regularly engages with on Instagram, she showed me several accounts and commented: “I think the European/American standard of being fair and slim is being represented a lot on Instagram.” She also expressed how there is gradual trend to slowly introduce women of colour on Instagram but underscores the industry's lack of accommodation for diverse beauty ideals:

I mean very slowly bringing in people of colour. And, the one day I was scrolling through Instagram and this one influencer who bought foundation and foundation didn't match her skin and she was like ‘this is so light, how is this going to blend with me.’ So, she was revealing the beauty industry and how it is not accommodating women of colour.

Janice also concurred and elaborated on her opinion about the prevalence of Western beauty standards on Instagram:

I can tell you from personal experience the representation of American/Western beauty standards on Instagram, is true, as much as we don't want to accept it." She further expounds on how American beauty standards have influenced her own feminine beauty "Back in the day, when I was more slim more people came into my DMs and were like interested in me and more people liked my content (...). People still preferred clear skin and slimmer bodies which I tried hard to maintain.

Janice's statement corroborates with the belief that the promotion of light skin, slim bodies, and sleek hair in mass media has led many black South African women striving for this idealised standard through restrictive dieting, intensive exercise, and the use of skin lightening products (Nahomie, 2014). Butler's theory of gender performativity (Butler, 1990) believes that identities are not inherent but are constructed through repeated performances of norms and expectations. Thandi and Janice's experiences of conforming to Western beauty standards reflect the performativity of these norms. Their Instagram profiles highlighted how engagement with Instagram's portrayal of such standards led to attempts to adhere to the idealised feminine appearance.

Other participants felt that there is a changing trend on Instagram to represent diverse types of beauty standards to be represented. Jane supports the belief and beauty standards represented on Instagram depend on personal choices and the accounts one follows, with a focus on African hairstyles and convenience over Western beauty ideals:

You have the choice to follow people who follow American beauty standards and those who don't. I see a lot of African girls who resist American ideals, I look at afros and how they are maintained. I do see sleek and straight hair, but I'm not influenced by it.

Jane's belief resonates with the recent movement towards debunking Eurocentric beauty standards and embracing a more inclusive and diverse understanding of beauty. The focus is shifting towards accepting a 'universal' beauty standard that appreciates beauty in its various forms across different cultures (Lai and Perminiene, 2020). Her preference to represent more ethnically African beauty in the form of hairstyle and dress signifies that some South African women do not wholly agree and partake in normalised Western beauty standards.

Additionally, Kerisha perceives Instagram as more open to diverse beauty standards, particularly for shorter individuals. She felt that Instagram tailored content and algorithms influence perceptions of beauty, allowing for the representation of diverse beauty standards. She elaborated: 'I think that times have changed. Especially people who are short now are able to become models and uh Instagram is open to that.' Mikaela also had this sentiment and feels Instagram contributes to body positivity by providing space for diverse body representations, influenced by the accounts one follows:

I think Instagram helps with body positivity in the sense that people get to be who they are and I feel like Instagram is a space where other representations of bodies can be displayed.

Both Kerisha and Mikaela challenge commonly accepted Western beauty norms by embracing diverse beauty standards and representing their unique identities. Their actions on Instagram reflect a conscious performance of alternative beauty ideals, aligning with Butler's theory by revealing the flexibility of identity through performative acts. Participatory culture as outlined by Jenkins (2013) emphasises the active role of audiences in media consumption, suggesting that media platforms allow users to engage in creative expression, collaboration, and subversion of dominant narratives. Jane's viewpoint resonates with this theory, highlighting the power of user choice in curating their Instagram experience. In following accounts that challenge Western beauty norms and celebrating African hairstyles, Jane illustrates the participatory nature of online engagement. This suggests that individuals have the agency to resist and reshape prevailing Western beauty ideals by contributing to a diverse online discourse.

While some participants felt that diversity of beauty standards was becoming more commonplace on Instagram, other participants believed that there are still instances of societal pressures and limited representation and exposure of other beauty standards. Taslyn noted the limited representation of Asian or African beauty standards on her Instagram feed, primarily encountering the American beauty standard:

A lot of people that follow me especially young girls tend to demonstrate this American beauty standard. I hardly see other beauty standards like an Asian or African beauty standard on my feed.

Similarly, Yuvari acknowledged a slow shift toward more diverse beauty standards on Instagram, particularly through darker-toned influencers, but still observes a higher presence of Western-

influenced content:

People with darker complexions have become beauty influencers and this has opened up the doors to many opportunities for others. But at the same time I still do see more Western influenced people and I can tell by my recommendations.

Some participants also noted the pressure to conform to American beauty standards and societal expectations through social comparisons made on Instagram. Gia expressed her personal insecurities about pimples and the pressure to have clear skin due to comparison with classmates:

I feel beautiful in this picture, it was taken on a day where my hair was sleek and my pimples were less visible. I told myself that because girls in my class had clear skin, I needed to look that way too.

Similarly, Lusanda reflected on her experiences of negative comments regarding dark skin and noted advertisements promote the American beauty standard of thinness, pale skin and light-coloured hair and eyes, which leads to feelings of pressure and criticism:

On Instagram, the American beauty standard is being portrayed a lot because like this one guy I mean I don't know who he is or where he is from but he was blowing up my phone on Instagram and when I wasn't replying he was saying I'm a b\*&tch and I don't have a reason to be one because my skin is so dark and then he blocked me." (...) "I see a lot of advertisements on Instagram that portray the American beauty standard and I think this can be negative too.

The participants' perspectives reveal nuanced perspectives of Instagram's role in shaping beauty standards. These experiences highlight the ongoing influence of Western beauty standards on Instagram, even in the context of a South African Instagram users. While Western ideals continue to exercise significant influence, individual choices and evolving inclusivity contribute to a more diverse representation. The intersection of societal pressures, self-perception, and media portrayal introduces complexities that impact body image and identity. Jane, Kerisha, and Mikaela showcase an active resistance to Western beauty norms. In curating their Instagram identity to focus on African hairstyles, shorter individuals, and diverse body representations, they challenge the traditional Eurocentric beauty narrative. The influence of the Western beauty standard is negative as participants felt pressurised to reach these beauty standards, and inadequate when they do not reach this standard.

This corroborates with Wolf (1990: 19) who believes that beauty standards are constantly changing and involving are unattainable because they are based on ‘phantom and not reality.’

Even in the twenty-first century with the popularity of social media platforms, some participants revealed while there is some progress in changing beauty standards to reflect specific cultural beauty standards, this is slow. This corroborates with Ruth Kaziga *et.al* (2021) study that focused on how although black women are engaging in content creation on Instagram that reflects African beauty standards, this is still at a slower pace than the proliferation of Western/American beauty standards portrayed on Instagram. The intersection of Western and African beauty standards on Instagram is not a one-dimensional phenomenon; rather, it encompasses a range of responses and negotiations. The participants' experiences highlight the ongoing tension between conformity and resistance, while also revealing the transformative potential of online engagement in reshaping beauty ideals. Thus, this revealed contextually nuanced understanding of how beauty standards are negotiated and constructed on Instagram.

#### *Empowered expressions – body positivity and self-acceptance movements*

On social media platforms, the domain of body positivity and self-acceptance movements has experienced an increase in efforts aimed at challenging established beauty norms, facilitated notably by the emergence of social media-driven endeavours such as the 'body positivity' and 'fat acceptance' movements (Afful and Ricciardelli, 2015; Cohen *et.al.*, 2019). The pervasive influence wielded by social media platforms has played a significant role in creating a digital environment beneficial for proactive engagement of its users. These social media platforms have effectively enabled women across the world to collaboratively engage in recreations that include cooperation, advocacy, and support, all revolving around pertinent matters (Shade, 2002). This theme aims to discuss different perspectives articulated by participants in relation to their participation within the framework of body positivity and self-acceptance movements. Some participants expressed their endorsement of these movements while others remained apathetic and not particularly active in these movements stating that these movements can have potential health ramifications and can make users susceptible to cyberbullying.

Thandi and Simphiwe expressed a positive opinion toward body positivity movements on Instagram. Both of them acknowledged the significance of these movements in promoting self-confidence, overcoming low self-esteem, and promoting a diverse understanding of beauty. They view these movements as platforms that embrace different body types and enable individuals to cultivate self-

acceptance.

Thandi expressed her support for these movements, and is happy to see others with similar struggles, but feels the need for more confidence to actively participate:

I'm happy about it because I mean I'm not skinny. I have cellulite and rolls and all so seeing other people go through the same struggle, I'm like 'yay' this is a great idea. I wouldn't partake in it yet, I feel I need a bit more confidence.

Similarly, Simphiwe expressed that the existence of these movements is significant as she believes in the acceptance of different types of beauty but she personally doesn't actively participate in this the movement:

I feel like it's a good thing. I feel like many different people out there on Instagram. Everybody should be seen as beautiful like there isn't just one way of beauty and that's the right way. I just view those posts though, I don't really have much interest to partake.

Moreover, Lusanda and Yuvari expressed the potential benefits of body positivity movements for those struggling with insecurities. Lusanda recognises the positive impact of these movements on people with insecurities, offering them a means of self-affirmation: 'Uhm so one of my friends is a little overweight and she's very like insecure about it so I think body positive posts are very good for people like that who are insecure.' Yuvari acknowledges the influence of these movements in promoting confidence, especially among young women:

I love these movements because I mean as women, we are constantly going through something, like body-related weight and stretch marks and all of that so like these movements are influential and young girls can see these movements and feel confident in themselves.

However, not all participants shared the same favourable sentiments. Some participants believed that dynamics exist surrounding the recognition and visibility of individuals with bodies that do not conform to conventional norms. They emphasise the unequal attention received by diverse body types within these movements. This highlights the imperative for inclusivity that extends to all body shapes, sizes, and backgrounds. Thando also acknowledges the potential for empowerment but also highlights the negative consequences such as cyberbullying and demoralisation:

I feel like it can be good for empowerment, but I feel like it can be bad because other people that look another way can be picky on it and be like you look this way, you shouldn't be posting, people can comment and put women down and this can be demoralising and demotivating.

Similarly, Gia supports the movements, she appreciates the shift from the thin ideal but warns against both weight-related criticisms and skinny shaming:

I think it's good because people back in the day were like thin is beautiful and you have to look like a Victoria's Secret model, you have to be in shape. But I like the fact now it's more people being like yourself. Like in my family everyone comes in different shapes and sizes.

Moreover, both Mikaela and Naetara emphasised the intersection of body positivity with health considerations. Mikaela makes the distinction between accepting one's body and promoting unhealthy habits, highlighting the importance of a nuanced perspective. Mikaela believes that it's important to differentiate between accepting one's body and promoting unhealthy habits, appreciates some aspects but criticises using it as an excuse for unhealthy behaviour:

I feel like there's a difference between accepting your body and being unhealthy. So like growing up, I always struggled with my weight like I've always been chubby, but I am healthy. So I feel like it's nice to accept who you are but don't use it as an excuse to be unhealthy.

Similarly, Naetara expressed her concern about the health implications of being excessively overweight while still acknowledging the value of body positivity:

I feel like just focus on yourself why do you want everyone to accept you like just focus on what you believe in. I don't think it's bad I just feel like it's not healthy to be fat.

Butler's theory of gender performativity (Butler, 1990) can be applied to the participants' viewpoints as they navigate the complexities of body positivity movements. The participants highlighted the performance aspect of body positivity, indicating that individuals are engaging in a process of actively embracing and embodying diverse beauty norms. Thandi's acknowledgment of needing more confidence to actively participate reflects the notion that engaging in body positivity can be seen as a performative act that challenges established norms. Jane's viewpoint is relevant to gender performativity theory by emphasising the psychological aspect of body positivity. The participants

also discussed how body positivity is not just about the physical body, but about reshaping the internal perceptions and attitudes towards oneself. This tension between recognising the importance of body positivity and navigating health considerations also reflects the complex interplay of performativity and societal norms.

Based on the findings, participants also highlighted the role of these movements in promoting collective support and empowerment, enabling individuals to share their stories and engage in advocacy, thus reflecting aspects of participatory culture. However, the theory also emphasises the challenges participants raise. Concerns about cyberbullying, negative comments, and detrimental social comparisons highlight the negative side of participatory culture. Thando's perspective resonates with the potential negatives of online engagement, where the power of participation can be harnessed for both positive and negative purposes. It is also important to note that not all women were active participants in the body positivity and self-acceptance movements, some participants support these movements as onlookers, not as active participants. Participants viewed these movements as influential in boosting confidence for insecure individuals, particularly women with body-related insecurities. They appreciated that the recognition and visibility of these movements provide for women who are overweight or have diverse body types. They also emphasised the importance of empowering young girls and promoting self-acceptance movements across social media platforms. This corroborates with (Jenkins, 2006) who believed that new convergence media allows users to create, share and interact with others allowing new forms of participation in uploading, sharing, and reposting of content.

Participants engagement in these body positive and self-acceptance movements can be seen as a form of participatory culture, where they engage with and contribute to the movement by being onlookers and supporters. The participants in this study also placed emphasis on empowering young girls and promoting self-acceptance movements across social media platforms, this aligns with the principles of digital feminism. These movements create spaces for women to share their experiences, challenge societal beauty standards, and foster solidarity among women (Locke, Lawthom & Lyons, 2018). In recognising the importance of these movements and their impact on women's well-being, the participants demonstrate an understanding of the potential of digital platforms for feminist activism and empowerment.

### *Feminist discourse: selfies as acts of empowerment versus objectification*

While the previous theme discussed selfies as a way young women perform gender on Instagram, this sub-theme specifically discusses selfies in the context of postfeminist sensibilities as outlined by Rosalind Gill (2007). Traditional understandings of femininity such as attractiveness, sexiness and idealised femininity can re-emerge on social media platforms and are integrated with the postfeminist discourse of “sexiness as empowerment” (Bruns, 2015). The participatory nature of Instagram has enabled women to be involved in the creation and distribution of selfies this differs from broadcast or print media where women are objectified and then are exposed to these images. While some participants derive empowerment from self-expression, validation, and the freedom to represent their own beauty standards, others still engaged in the uploading of selfies as self-objectification for validation and attention from men, appealing to the “male gaze” (Berger, 1972 and Mulvey, 1975). Participants Kerisha, Mikaela and Yuvari expressed a sense of empowerment and agency derived from posting selfies. They view Instagram as a platform to challenge norms and represent feminist values. Mikaela and Yuvari emphasised the freedom to share images without seeking external validation, demonstrating a sense of autonomy in self-expression:

Mikaela: ‘It’s all about empowerment, yes. So, like if a woman wants to post those bikini pictures and lingerie, I’m all for it. The fact is we have the freedom and opportunity to do it, for ourselves!’

Yuvari: ‘I definitely feel empowered, like oh what would men think... like no I get to pick up my phone, I get to take a selfie and post it. I can do that on my own without anyone else’s opinions.’

Moreover, Kerisha's assertion that she makes a difference in women's lives through her posts represents the empowerment derived from using selfies as a means of advocacy. She elaborates:

Well, I’m a feminist. This is a selfie I posted in the place I worked at in Cape Town. So it is very empowering because I was able to actually make a difference in women’s lives.

These participants' statements align with Gill's (2007) idea that postfeminism emphasises personal empowerment and the reclaiming of one's body and image. Mikaela's assertion that women have the ‘freedom and opportunity’ to share bikini and lingerie pictures for themselves illustrates the agency to challenge traditional norms and exercise control over self-presentation. This aligns with Gill's

(2007) emphasis on individual choices as expressions of agency and resistance to normative expectations. However, tensions exist as McRobbie (2015) critiqued the notion of empowerment within post feminism, highlighting the potential for objectification and self-commodification. She argued that empowerment rhetoric can sometimes disguise the perpetuation of neoliberal market influences and the objectification of women. While Kerisha's assertion of making a difference aligns with empowerment, McRobbie (2015) scrutinises the commodification of feminism and women's experiences for public consumption on platforms like social media. The nuanced perspectives of Mikaela, Yuvari, and Kerisha also reflect the negotiation and tensions between empowerment and objectification that McRobbie (2015) discusses. Mikaela's emphasis on personal empowerment coincides with Yuvari's recognition of the potential judgments from others, demonstrating the balance between asserting autonomy and considering external opinions. Kerisha's advocacy-driven empowerment embodies McRobbie's critique of feminist discourses being repackaged within neoliberal frameworks.

Moreover, Jane shared her experience that being exposed to different people in college helped her redefine beauty and receive compliments, leading her to feel beautiful and empowered despite her perceived flaws:

I think after high school going into college you are more exposed to 'real' people rather than high school where you all just in a cocoon and you think the same way, like the same things and exposed to the same people.

Jane's reflection on her university experiences highlights the transformative potential of exposure to diverse individuals. Her journey towards redefining beauty and feeling empowered, despite perceived flaws, aligns with the empowerment facet of postfeminism. By expanding her perspective and embracing her unique attributes, Jane exhibits a form of self-empowerment that challenges societal norms and nurtures personal agency. Gia also highlighted the importance of self-representation, particularly for young girls who may have felt excluded due to societal beauty standards. This belief aligns with postfeminist sensibilities, where self-representation is a means of challenging traditional media's narrow portrayals of beauty:

I just feel like I can help someone, like if someone who stumbles upon my page and sees this black girl and is like there's someone who feels comfortable in her skin, I want to be like that too. It's just a really good feeling to have.

Similarly, Lusanda recognises that her self-expression can bolster the confidence of friends who feel insecure. This aligns with postfeminist notions of self-representation challenging dominant narratives and fostering a diverse understanding of beauty. She stated: 'I don't post for men; I don't care what they think. I post for myself and my friends.' Her focus on improving the confidence of her friends aligns with the supportive and collective aspects of postfeminism. By prioritising self-expression for personal and communal empowerment, Lusanda challenges the idea that self-representation solely exists for external validation.

However, not all participants engage in selfie culture purely for empowerment. Simphiwe and Mikaela's desire for male attention and validation can be interpreted as instances where empowerment may be linked to societal expectations. Their comments reflect the balance between asserting one's attractiveness and potentially conforming to gendered standards. Simphiwe's emphasis on looking attractive reveal the enduring influence of traditional gender norms and the validation that comes from adhering to them:

I think we all do; I mean I make sure I look pretty with makeup, smiling, great body...we all want a bit of male attention. I mean you want the likes and compliments too; they feel good.'

Similarly, Mikaela admits to valuing male attention more than female attention on Instagram, perceiving compliments from women as common, while compliments from men hold greater significance. She elaborated:

I do like male attention. I don't give attention and credit to girls who like and comment on my selfies. I prefer male compliments of my looks, like hair and my sexy body.

However, not all participants shared the same sentiments. Kasey demonstrated a nuanced negotiation between empowerment and objectification. She selectively posts content to attract male attention while consciously refraining from provocative images. This showcases how individuals may strategically navigate their self-presentation to balance empowerment with potential objectification, taking control of their public image:

I post a lot of car stories that attract male attention. In terms of my selfies, I don't upload provocative/sexual photos of myself as I just feel like that should be reserved for your special person, selfies are always feminine.

Yuvari enjoys both male and female validation but considers compliments from women as more meaningful due to their understanding and knowledge. The acknowledgment by Yuvari that compliments from women hold more meaning resonates with the idea of shared understanding and solidarity. Her statement aligns with postfeminist notions of women finding strength in community and mutual support, indicating empowerment derived from connections with other women. She stated:

A compliment on a selfie from a woman is top tier like I'm not going to lie because like a woman just knows a lot more than a man does.

The participant responses highlight the interplay between gender performativity theory, participatory culture theory, and the postfeminist debate surrounding empowerment and objectification in female self-representations on social media platforms. The participatory culture theory, as outlined by Jenkins (2006), discusses how individuals are not merely passive consumers of media but active participants who shape and contribute to cultural production. This theory intersects with the findings, as participants engaged in intentional self-representations that went beyond conventional gender norms. They actively chose how to portray themselves through various elements of their selfies, such as poses, facial expressions, and clothing choices. This aligns with gender performativity theory, wherein participants perform and construct their gender identities through these intentional actions. It is evident that self-representations are not just reflections of existing gender expressions but also contribute to the process of creating and redefining these expressions, reflecting a sense of agency and empowerment (Döring et al., 2015).

Furthermore, postfeminist sensibilities were evident as participants navigated the juxtaposition of empowerment and objectification. The postfeminist belief that femininity can incorporate both traditional and repositioned elements is evident in participants' preference for portraying themselves as feminine, beautiful, and sexy on Instagram. This repositioning of femininity as an active and choice-making identity counters the traditional ideas of passivity and weakness associated with feminine women. This reflects the negotiation of femininity within a postfeminist framework, where women practice agency in constructing their own identity, while also acknowledging societal expectations (Zaslow, 2009: 17). These acts of self-presentation on social media platforms can be understood as performances that reflect an agency to construct one's gender identity.

However, the complexities of empowerment versus objectification were discussed when considering some participants' motivations for posting selfies. Some participants desired validation and attention from men and that these self-representations may perpetuate objectification. The desire for male compliments and attention can be seen as an extension of the 'male gaze', where women internalise the male viewer's desires and present themselves accordingly to suit this 'gaze' (Long, 2023). This highlights the tension within postfeminism, where empowerment and agency to self-represent can interconnect with traditional gender dynamics and objectification.

Additionally, the preference for female validation and compliments highlights the significance of female support within a digital participatory culture. This emphasises how online communities and relationships with other users can nurture empowerment through mutual understanding and support. Female compliments were valued as more meaningful due to a shared understanding of beauty standards and experiences. This highlights the significance of positive relationships among women in counteracting objectification and creating an environment of empowerment and support (Moradi and Huang, 2008).

#### **5.4 Chapter summary**

The findings in this chapter outlined ways young female university students as ordinary users participate in the construction of their female beauty on Instagram. This included engagement with beauty/celebrity influencer accounts, curation of beauty content through uploading selfies and using filters/editing apps in this curation, acknowledging as well as limited challenging of Western/American beauty standards, and engagement in beauty communities and trends that Instagram affords its users. The use of Instagram stories for personal interest and activism is also discussed as an act of participation on Instagram. It was found that not all women are active participants in body positivity and self-acceptance movements but realise their recognition, visibility and influence on women's self-esteem and confidence. This chapter also explored the construction of femininity through affordances including fashion choices, cosmetics, and features such as filters on Instagram. Further, the undertaking of beauty practices and the uploading of selfies as a form of gender performance was discussed, with some participants focusing on physical aspects of appearance while others express emotional moods and attitudes in this performance. The importance of inner beauty and self-acceptance was also insightful, as well as the desire to represent uniqueness while keeping appealing to audience interests and expectations. This chapter finally concludes by discussing the role of selfies constructing female beauty on Instagram, as well as the how women still negotiate complexities in uploading "selfies" as acts of empowerment versus objectification. Overall,

this chapter provided insight into how young female higher education students participate in the construction of female beauty, how they navigated the intersection of femininity and feminism on Instagram and the potential of social media platforms for feminist activism and empowerment.

## **CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS**

### **6. Introduction**

This study aimed to understand the unique ways young female higher education students use Instagram affordances and functionalities to perform their gender and to participate in the construction and negotiation of beauty in the digital realm. This exploration was driven by the problem statement outlined in Chapter One, which had been generated based on the changing South African media landscape in the past decade from traditional to digital media (Bosch, 2020: 7), the active growth of Instagram users, especially female users in South Africa (Statista, 2022), and the ‘urgent need to understand African voices through qualitative research’ (Willems and Mano, 2017: 3), a topic that has been previously unexplored in the South African media context. Limited literature was available on beauty construction and negotiation of young South African women in digital spaces and there is also a limited body of knowledge that links the theory of participatory culture with the construction and negotiation of female beauty through gender performances on Instagram. This study is significant as it was conducted with the purpose to contribute to the body of knowledge regarding the gaps in digital media research in South Africa. Moreover, young female higher education students were provided with the opportunity to voice their unique experiences in constructing their female beauty and performing gender on Instagram. This study used a novel research approach, the media go-along method, which allowed young female higher education students to share their unique narratives and perspectives to demonstrate Instagram's affordances and functionalities. This approach enriched the study, addressing its three main objectives; (i) to understand different ways young female higher education students actively participate in the construction of female beauty on Instagram; (ii) to understand how the construction of female beauty on Instagram articulates a feminine gendered identity for young female students; and (iii) to explore how young female students negotiate feminism and femininity through the construction of beauty on Instagram.

This chapter will conclude this dissertation with a summary of major research findings in relation to the research questions and objectives and problem, its contribution to the field of cultural and media studies, specifically mobility studies, and suggestions for further research will be discussed.

### **6.1 Conclusions Derived from Research Findings**

The following conclusions discussed are related to the three main respective themes of this research study, namely, ‘Digital Craftsmanship: Participatory Beauty Construction and Digital Engagement’,

‘Instagram Performativity: Embodying Feminine Identity through Performances’ and ‘Dialectics of Empowerment: Beauty as a Site of Feminist Expression and Negotiation.’

### **6.1.1 Modes of Engagement: Young Female Students’ Construction of Female Beauty on Instagram**

One of the aims of this research study was to understand the different ways young female higher education students used Instagram to negotiate and construct female beauty. The following research findings are closely aligned with the research question, ‘In what ways do young women participate in the negotiation and construction of female beauty on Instagram?’ It was gathered from the findings that there were different modes of engagement for young female higher education students in using Instagram to participate in the construction and negotiation of female beauty. The participants believed that Instagram served as a platform for them to engage with various types of content related to beauty, fashion, and influencers. They actively curated their Instagram experiences by following accounts that resonated with their preferences and values. This aligns with the nature of participatory culture on Instagram, where users have the agency to choose the content they engage with and shape their own beauty ideals. Beauty, fashion, and influencer accounts played a significant role in shaping participants' understanding of femininity and beauty ideals. This finding was unique as it demonstrated Instagram's affordance as a space where users can engage with and be influenced by a wide range of content creators. It was also found that some participants gained inspiration and validation from engaging with beauty content, others expressed scepticism and view the beauty industry beauty ideals as 'toxic' and disconnected from authenticity.

It was interesting to note that participants had diverse opinions about authenticity in beauty content. Some participants preferred accounts that demonstrated authenticity and rejected beauty standards they perceive as unrealistic. Other participants engaged with accounts that they have a personal connection with, as they find such accounts more trustworthy and closer to them. The diverse opinions on authenticity and beauty standards among participants reflect the nature of participatory culture on Instagram, where a multitude of voices and perspectives are present. Participants found and engaged with beauty content that aligned with their personal views and values. The interplay of beauty, professionalism and identity also was an important finding in this study as some participants viewed beauty as intersecting with professionalism and future career aspirations, this has been underexplored in previous research studies. Participants also engaged with accounts related to professional attire and presentation, viewing these accounts as sources of inspiration for constructing their own identities as successful professionals. This finding therefore highlights a nuanced relationship between beauty and

professionalism that goes beyond traditional beauty ideals. While past literature has often explored beauty standards and their impact on self-esteem, body image, and societal expectations (Tate, 2009, Gentles-Peart, 2018, Dunn, Hood & Owens 2019 & Montle, 2020), this study uncovered a new dimension. It revealed that some individuals use Instagram as a space to integrate beauty ideals into their professional lives. This integration demonstrates how female beauty can be seen as a tool for enhancing one's feminine identity in the context of career aspirations. These findings also shed light on how young female higher education students in this study actively engaged with and negotiated the concept of female beauty on Instagram, contributing to a deeper understanding of beauty standards and their impact in specific cultural and demographic contexts. Therefore, this study also addresses the underrepresentation of African and diverse cultural beauty standards. Historically, media, especially in the global context, has often represented Western ideals of beauty. This study revealed the intersection of beauty and professionalism on Instagram, deepening understanding of identity and future career prospects in the South African context. Additionally, it highlighted the active involvement of South African women in Instagram beauty communities, fostering diverse South African narratives. Overall, these findings contributed to addressing the research problem by highlighting the unique and diverse ways in which South African women actively engage with beauty and social media on Instagram.

Additionally, participants engaged in beauty communities and trends on Instagram to actively participate in the construction of female beauty. These communities and trends involved makeup, skincare, fitness, and fashion, and they provided a space for sharing and discussing beauty-related content. While some participants actively immerse themselves in these communities, others participate more passively by engaging with content that appears on their feeds. Participants also highlighted the potential for misleading information and stress the importance of individualisation in adopting health and fitness practices. The recognition of passive engagement on Instagram is unique and significant. It acknowledges that users can participate in beauty communities without being active contributors, merely by consuming content that appears on their feeds. This aspect adds depth to the understanding of the user experience on social media platforms. These findings therefore highlighted the active role that Instagram played in facilitating the formation and participation in beauty communities. While prior research has acknowledged the existence of online beauty communities (Hassan *et.al*, 2021), this study shed light on the diverse ways in which young female higher education students actively immersed themselves in these beauty communities, demonstrating the platform's capacity to foster niche interests and discussions.

Moreover, Instagram's distinctive affordances and functionalities played an important role in transforming users from passive consumers into active co-creators of digital content. Past literature has often focused on users as consumers of online content (Burgess and Green, 2018), but the findings in this study highlighted the unique role of Instagram in turning users into content co-creators. Engagement goes beyond conventional understandings of social media participation. These digital tools on Instagram empowered participants in this study to actively shape their online identities and engage dynamically within the digital realm. It was insightful to discover how Instagram provided a multifaceted toolkit that enabled participants to express themselves, experiment artistically, and participate in ongoing digital beauty discourse. While past literature has discussed user engagement on social media platforms (Burgess and Green, 2018) this finding highlighted the role of Instagram's specific features in enhancing creative expression. Instagram's toolkit for expression is unique in its emphasis on visual and multimedia content. The process of profile curation empowered participants to strategically construct their digital identities. Through creating unique usernames and descriptions, participants merged personal and professional aspects of their identity, reflecting their unique aspirations and values. This active role in self-presentation diverges from traditional passive consumption by allowing users to curate their profiles in alignment with their desired presentation. Past literature has explored identity performance on social media but did not focus as explicitly on the active role Instagram plays in enabling participants to strategically curate their profiles (Requies *et.al*, 2016). This emphasised Instagram's distinct impact on self-presentation.

Similarly, Instagram Stories allowed participants to share and circulate content. This sharing contributes to the circulation of ideas, trends, and discussions within the digital realm as well as facilitated a form of self-expression for participants. This feature transcended the boundaries of passive beauty representation in enabling users to share aspects of their lives. Whether discussing feminism, sports, or religion, Stories became a useful tool for users to actively engage with diverse subjects, thereby nurturing genuine dialogue with other users and for their own identity expression. While past literature has acknowledged the role of Stories in sharing personal moments (Amancio, 2017), this finding emphasised its role in fostering genuine dialogues on diverse subjects, transcending the traditional boundaries of beauty representation. This expanded use of Instagram Stories is unique in showcasing Instagram's capacity for broader, community-oriented discussions. Filters also afforded users to actively manipulate their images. While enhancing appearances is a common motive, participants also experimented with filters for entertainment and creative expression. This active utilisation of filters goes beyond traditional beauty ideals, highlighting users' agency in crafting their visual narratives. Past literature has often focused on filters primarily as tools

for beautification and image enhancement (Madan, 2018). This finding highlights the unique aspect of Instagram users' agency in experimenting with filters for creative expression and entertainment, showcasing the platform's versatility. The engagement through likes and comments represented a shift from passively consuming content to actively participating in digital conversations. Participants gained emotional validation from receiving likes and comments, boosting self-esteem, and fostering a sense of connection. The consideration of the imagined audience further shaped online interactions, reflecting users' active involvement in tailoring their content to resonate with others on Instagram. While past literature has explored the role of likes and comments (Serafinelli, 2018: 23), this finding emphasised their significance in transforming Instagram from a passive consumption platform to an active engagement platform. This shift in emphasis adds a unique perspective to understanding user interactions on the platform.

### **6.1.2 Instagram's Role in Gender Performativity: Beauty Practices and Self-Representation**

Another aim of this study was to understand how the construction of female beauty on Instagram articulates a feminine gendered identity for young female students. The following research findings are closely aligned with the research question, 'How does the construction of female beauty on Instagram articulate a feminine identity for young female students?' The findings revealed the multifaceted dimension of Instagram performativity, where participants in this study engaged in the construction and negotiation of their feminine gendered identities through various forms of performative practices on Instagram. This study contributed insight into how participants in this study were engaged in the construction of female beauty ideals on Instagram through a diverse array of gender expressions, characterised by beauty practices and significant emphasis on self-representation. This finding aligned with Butler's theory of gender performativity (Butler, 1990: 124) as this theory acknowledges that individuals can explore diverse gender expressions beyond traditional conventions and that gender is not fixed but can be explored and enacted in various ways. The significance of these findings in terms of past literature is its emphasis on users' exploration of diverse gender expressions, going beyond traditional beauty ideals. This aligns with Butler's theory of gender performativity, which highlighted the fluidity of gender expression (Butler, 1990: 124). The study's unique contribution is its focus on how Instagram serves as a platform for this exploration, enriching the understanding of social media's role in challenging and reshaping traditional gender norms in the digital age.

Moreover, findings in this study also highlighted how young female higher education students engaged in the construction of feminine gender identities through selfies on Instagram. Selfies are

portrayed as deliberate acts of visual and textual cues, influenced by societal norms of beauty, gender, and identity (Schreiber, 2017). Participants curated their images, showcasing their 'best' features and sometimes adopting playful expressions or filters that challenge traditional gender norms. Tension was apparent in that participants' negotiation between presenting their 'best' selves to conform to beauty ideals while also subverting these norms by incorporating playfulness and non-traditional expressions. This negotiation reflected Butler's idea of performativity, where gender is both constrained by societal norms and simultaneously subverted through performative acts (Butler, 1990: 126). This negotiation of participants revealing their "best" selves in conformity with beauty ideals while also challenging these norms by incorporating playfulness and non-traditional expressions mirrors Butler's concept of performativity, demonstrating how gender is both constrained by societal norms and subverted through performative actions (Butler, 1986: 92).

Another insightful contribution of this study is the illumination of the empowerment aspect of beauty practices. Participant engagement in beauty routines was not solely focused on conformity but also a means of self-expression and empowerment. This insight contributes to redefining discussions around beauty practices from being solely passive viewers to being agents of empowerment, allowing individuals to navigate societal expectations while asserting their identities. It was also found that beauty practices, including cosmetics and fashion choices, also formed a significant part of the performative process for participants in constructing their gender identities. Participants intentionally curated their appearances before posting images, aligning with societal beauty standards, and adhering to aesthetic norms on Instagram. Tension was noted in participants' struggle between presenting an idealised version of themselves that adheres to beauty norms and their desire for authenticity and realistic representations. This tension relates to Butler's theory of performativity, where the performative nature of identity involves a continuous negotiation between external pressures and internal desires for self-expression (Butler, 1990: 126). The significance of these findings can be related with literature on the performative nature of gender identity, as proposed by Butler (1990). This study's revelation that participants engage in beauty practices and meticulously curate their appearances to conform to societal beauty standards mirrors the idea that identity is a continual negotiation between external influences and internal desires. This connection with Butler's gender performativity theory (Butler, 1990) reinforces the notion that the construction of gender identity is a complex interplay between conforming to established norms and striving for individual authenticity. By shedding light on how this process unfolds within the specific context of Instagram, the findings in this study enrich the understanding of how individuals navigate these dynamics in the digital age.

Moreover, the findings also highlighted how cultural and social factors shaped participants' beauty practices and self-presentation on Instagram. This study's focus on South African participants provided unique perspective on gender performances within our social and cultural context. The participants' engagement with cultural traditions, beauty standards, and global trends highlighted the intersectionality of their gender identities. This intersectional lens aligns with Butler's (1990: 124) concept of gender performativity as a process influenced by various intersecting factors, including culture, society, and individual agency. Participants' choices were influenced by their cultural backgrounds, with some engaging in hybrid practices that blend traditional wear with modern makeup trends. This corroborates with Butler's concept of performativity (Butler, 1990: 124), where individuals navigate a variety of cultural and social performances to construct their gendered selves. The tension exists in terms of the interplay between conforming to cultural norms and embracing individual self-expression, reflecting the complex negotiation of identity in a diverse society. These findings therefore highlight the impact of cultural and social factors on participants' Instagram beauty practices and self-presentation. This study's South African focus provides a unique perspective on gender performances within a specific cultural context, in line with Butler's notion of gender performativity influenced by intersecting factors like culture and society. Participants' choices were culturally influenced, with some combining traditional elements with modern beauty trends, reflecting the complexity of identity negotiation in a diverse society. These findings enhance the understanding of how cultural and social elements shape gender identity performances.

Besides cultural and social factors, external influences, such as social media and celebrity culture also played a significant role in shaping beauty practices and aspirations. Participants' aspirations to imitate big fashion brands or partake in cosmetic procedures highlighted the impact of media representations on individual perceptions of beauty. This tension highlights the power dynamics at play in shaping beauty ideals and reflects Butler's idea of performativity as individuals respond to and engage with external influences to construct their gendered identities (Butler, 1990: 125). These findings revealed the influence of external factors, particularly social media, and celebrity culture, in shaping participants' beauty practices and aspirations. Their desire to emulate prominent fashion brands and engage with cosmetic procedures highlights the influence of media representations on individual beauty perceptions. This tension exemplifies the dynamic power structures involved in shaping beauty ideals and aligns with Butler's concept of performativity (Butler, 1990: 124), where individuals respond to and interact with external influences in the construction of their gendered identities. These findings highlight the broader influence of digital media and celebrity culture on individual beauty practices, further deepening the understanding of the multifaceted nature of identity

negotiation in a digital age.

Additionally, the emphasis on the use of captions by participants in this study to articulate and narrate experiences of femininity added a textual layer to the visual performances on Instagram. This multifaceted approach demonstrated how gender performance extends beyond physical appearance, encompassing linguistic expression as well. This aligns with Butler's concept of performativity (Butler, 1990: 126) as a repetitive and stylised enactment of identity, where the use of captions becomes another layer of identity construction. These findings revealed a multifaceted approach that demonstrates how gender performance extends beyond physical appearance to encompass linguistic expression. This alignment with Butler's concept of performativity (Butler, 1990: 124) as a repetitive and stylised enactment of identity illuminates how the use of captions becomes another layer in the construction of one's identity. These findings revealed the comprehensive nature of identity performance, providing a more holistic understanding of how individuals navigate gender on social media platforms. Moreover, the study also focused on the concept of participatory culture within the framework of beauty and gender. While existing literature explored participatory culture in different digital contexts (Burgess and Green, 2018), linking it explicitly to beauty and gender performances on Instagram is an innovative approach. This perspective demonstrated how young women are active contributors and co-creators of content, challenging the notion of passive media consumption.

These findings therefore effectively address the research problem of the lack of unique, diverse narratives in South Africa, particularly focusing on African audiences in the context of beauty and social media platforms. Past studies have primarily focused on Western influences and diaspora cultures, but this study sheds light on how young female higher education students actively construct their feminine gendered identities on Instagram. This research uniquely contributes to the understanding of how Instagram serves as a platform for challenging and reshaping traditional gender norms, emphasising the role of social media in fostering diverse narratives and identities in the digital age.

### **6.1.3 Navigating Feminism and Femininity on Instagram**

Lastly, the final aim of this study was to explore how young female students negotiated feminism and femininity through the construction of beauty on Instagram. The following research findings are closely aligned with the research question, 'How do young female students negotiate feminism and femininity through the construction of beauty on Instagram?' In addition to the discussion on gender performances, the interplay between feminism and femininity was revealed as young female higher

education students navigated the construction of beauty on Instagram. Findings gathered in this study contributed to the understanding of how participants leveraged Instagram as a social media platform to engage with feminist ideals while constructing their gender identities. This negotiation became apparent as participants challenged established beauty norms by deliberately embracing natural aesthetics or opting for minimal makeup. This reimagining of conventional beauty standards not only challenges societal expectations but also resonates with feminist principles that advocate for the inclusion of diverse definitions of beauty. Yet, the tension in this negotiation arises from participants' roles as they navigate the realms of conforming to normative beauty standards while simultaneously expressing their commitment to feminist values. This intricate negotiation parallels Gill's (2007) and McRobbie's (2015) critiques of postfeminist sensibilities, where seemingly empowering choices can inadvertently reinforce societal expectations. This study therefore acknowledged the complexity of identity negotiation within an intersectional framework. In emphasising participants' different backgrounds and their influence on beauty practices, this study recognises that beauty and gender are not isolated concepts but intertwined with various aspects of identity.

Moreover, participants' empowerment through their engagement with beauty practices emerged as a significant finding. This illuminated how many participants perceived their beauty routines as empowering choices, driven by personal preferences and intrinsic self-esteem, rather than external validation. This empowerment aligns with the core principles of feminist discourse, which emphasises individual agency and autonomy over one's physical appearance. However, the tension lies in the dichotomy between personal empowerment and societal pressures to conform to standardised beauty norms. This tension relates to Butler's theory of performativity (Butler, 1990: 124), where individuals navigate the balance of asserting their autonomy amidst societal expectations, a theme closely connected to critiques of postfeminism that highlight how the veneer of empowerment can obscure ongoing structural inequalities (McRobbie, 2015). These findings shed light on how young female students use Instagram to negotiate feminism and femininity, challenging established beauty norms and embracing diverse definitions of beauty, thus contributing to more inclusive narratives. This aligns with prior research that primarily focused on diaspora cultures and their potential negative influence from Western beauty standards (Yerima, 2017, Gordon, 2019, Akinro and Memani, 2019).

Furthermore, the textual element of Instagram, embodied in captions and descriptions, played an important role in narrating participants' experiences of both feminism and femininity. These captions not only provided context to the images but also served a purpose for sharing personal narratives of

self-acceptance, body positivity, and the embracing of imperfections. In sharing these narratives, participants contributed to a broader discourse on feminism and body image, effectively challenging traditional notions of flawlessness while promoting self-love. However, the tension emerges as these textual narratives connect with the visual performances on Instagram. This juxtaposition illuminated the complex duality of identity enactment—participants simultaneously challenged and conformed to beauty ideals. This dialectical relationship between text and image reflects Butler's (1990: 126) conception of identity as an ongoing performance that incorporates elements of resistance and compliance, a dynamic like the tensions highlighted within postfeminist critiques. The textual affordance of Instagram, particularly through captions, adds depth to the narrative by challenging traditional notions of flawlessness and promoting self-love, thereby contributing to broader feminist discussions.

Lastly, this study recognised that feminism is diverse and multifaceted, resonating with the sentiments posed by Gill (2076). The participants' engagement with beauty practices was largely influenced by their intersecting identities, encompassing factors including cultural backgrounds and socio-economic statuses. This intersectional approach challenges the idea of a singular feminist ideal and strengthens the importance of inclusivity in feminist discussions. Yet, the tension arises from the complex negotiation of embracing various aspects of identity while navigating conforming to or challenging beauty norms. This study therefore recognised the intersectional nature of feminism, emphasising the importance of inclusivity in feminist discourse. This recognition contributes to a more holistic understanding of beauty practices.

The exploration of cultural and social factors in relation to beauty practices and self-representation provided a unique lens into the South African context. It highlighted the importance of considering cultural traditions and societal norms in understanding how young women navigate the digital space, thereby enriching the discourse with localised perspectives. This study's exploration of how young women negotiate feminism and femininity on Instagram challenged the notion of postfeminist empowerment and highlighted the tension between making empowered choices while also dealing with societal pressures. This critique aligns with broader discussions on the complexities of contemporary feminism. The study also illuminated the hybrid nature of feminist ideals, rejecting the idea of a singular feminist ideal. By engaging with multiple facets of identity and culture, participants navigate between embracing diverse feminist ideals and conforming to or challenging beauty norms. This dynamic illustrates how feminism can be multifaceted and nuanced. Overall, these findings enrich the understanding of beauty, feminism, and identity within the South African and African

context while addressing the research problem of the lack of diverse narratives.

## **6.2 Suggestions for Future Research**

Future research studies in this field of cultural and media studies hold the potential to further the understanding of beauty and gender identity construction on social media platforms, particularly Instagram. One area of exploration could involve examining how these constructions vary across different age groups within the young female population. In comparing the practices and attitudes of younger participants with those of older generations, insights into evolving beauty norms on social media could be uncovered. Additionally, expanding the sample group to include individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds would offer valuable perspectives on how cultural nuances influence beauty construction and gender identity negotiation on Instagram. While this study only focused on South African participants, future studies could conduct cross-cultural research that involve participants from different countries and regions to gain a comprehensive understanding of how beauty and gender identity construction vary globally. This would provide insights into the impact of cultural diversity on these constructions. Intersectionality was also an important consideration in this study but was not explored in great depth, future research could therefore explore the concept of intersectionality in the context of beauty and gender identity and investigate how individuals with intersecting identities, such as race, gender, and sexuality, navigate beauty standards and self-presentation on social media platforms.

Additionally, one of the insightful findings presented in this study was the focus on professional identity building as part of a feminine gendered identity. Therefore, further research could be conducted that focuses specifically on how participants engage with beauty and gender constructs in the context of their professional identities. Future research could also consider investigating the long-term impact of following beauty influencers on Instagram on participants' self-perception and self-expression. A longitudinal approach could reveal changes in attitudes and behaviours over time. Researchers could also explore how participants' interactions with peers on Instagram influence their beauty practices and self-expression. Exploration on whether there are patterns of peer influence in the adoption of specific beauty trends and practices could bring about new perspectives in beauty construction and negotiation on social media platforms.

Moreover, researchers could also conduct studies that explore the influence of algorithms on social media platforms. In investigating how algorithms on social media platforms such as Instagram impact the visibility and engagement of beauty content. Research could delve into how algorithms shape the

exposure of beauty ideals and whether they contribute to the reinforcement of beauty standards. Researchers could also conduct studies comparing beauty and gender identity construction on different social media platforms, such as TikTok, Pinterest, and YouTube, to understand how a unique social media platform's affordances' affect these constructions. These social media platforms also have ethical implications for users, therefore future studies could explore the ethical implications of beauty and gender identity construction on social media platforms, particularly the impact on mental health, self-esteem, and body image. Research could focus on the responsible use of beauty content and influencers.

Lastly, the media go-along method is a novel approach to digital ethnographic research therefore future research studies could enhance the depth and authenticity of insights, offering further insight into users' behaviours, motivations, and experiences on social media platforms. This method could be utilised in future research studies specifically ones focused on digital photography on social media platforms as it incorporates multimodal expressions in terms of its ability to capture the interplay between visual and textual elements on social media platforms. A common theme that should be explored in greater depth in future studies is the psychological impact of likes and comments on beauty-related content posted on social media platforms. The media go-along method could also be useful in future studies that specifically focus on participant reactions to beauty ideals, comparisons, and emotional responses to engagement (for example, likes and comments). This would allow researchers to understand the psychological dimensions of online beauty engagement on social media platforms. While this study only focused on online construction and negotiation, future studies could explore how online beauty practices translate into offline behaviour and self-presentation, including their influence on individuals' daily lives, relationships, and overall well-being.

### **6.3 Chapter Summary**

This chapter explored the dynamic intersection of Instagram affordances, gender performance, and beauty construction among young female higher education students in South Africa, thereby achieving this study's research objectives. This research study emerged in response to a shifting media landscape, the surge of female users on Instagram, and the imperative to amplify African voices in digital media research, which was previously underrepresented. This study therefore aimed to contribute further understanding of how young South African women engage in beauty construction and gender negotiation within the digital realm, particularly on Instagram, and applied a novel 'media go-along' method to reveal these unique narratives and perspectives.

The unique narratives and perspectives of young female higher education students revealed how they actively engage with and negotiate female beauty on Instagram. By doing so, this research addresses the underrepresentation of South African and diverse cultural beauty standards, enriches the understanding of beauty's multifaceted nature, uncovers the intersection of beauty and professionalism, and emphasises Instagram's role in fostering diverse beauty narratives and culturally relevant discussions. This study made an innovative contribution by framing the concept of participatory culture within the context of beauty and gender performativity on Instagram, demonstrating how young female higher education students actively co-create content and challenge passive media consumption. It also illuminated the empowering aspects of beauty practices, shifting the narrative from conformity to self-expression and empowerment. These findings effectively addressed the research problem, enriching the understanding of diverse narratives and identities among young female higher education students on Instagram. This study also significantly contributed to reshaping traditional gender norms and explored role of social media in fostering diverse narratives in the digital age. It highlighted participants' empowerment through beauty practices, resonating with feminist principles. However, the tension between personal empowerment and societal pressures reflected postfeminist critiques.

Lastly, this chapter also provided future recommendations and suggestions for further research. Prospective research endeavours within the realm of social media and mobility studies demonstrate substantial potential for the advancement of knowledge pertaining to the construction of female beauty and gender identity, with particular emphasis on social media platforms such as Instagram. Encouraging research studies that encompass the examination of age-related distinctions, cross-cultural viewpoints, intersectionality, and the influence of algorithms on content pertaining to beauty. In addition, the investigation into professional identity formation, the effects of following beauty influencers, peer interactions, ethical implications, and the responsible utilisation of beauty content presents intriguing trajectories for further research inquiry. The novel digital ethnographic media go-along method positions as an innovative research approach, offering authenticity and depth in unveiling unique insights into users' conduct, underlying motivations, and immersive social media experiences. Moreover, a comprehensive exploration of the psychological dimensions surrounding the reception of likes and comments in relation to beauty-related content, both within the digital realm and its implications offline, holds the potential to consolidate the holistic understanding of these nuanced constructs within the digital era.

In conclusion, this chapter summarises the major findings, their alignment with research objectives, and the contributions they make to the field of cultural and media studies, with a specific focus on social media and mobility studies. Furthermore, it offers valuable insights into potential areas for future research, setting the stage for continued exploration of the multifaceted relationship between social media platforms, gender, and beauty construction.

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## **APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

The questions posed in the following interview schedule have been adapted based on a study conducted by (Jørgensen, 2016) who followed a media go-along method to understand how men engage with the hook-up and dating apps Grindr and Scruff. I have been inspired by this method and has adapted this method for the intended study. These questions will be asked during semi-structured interviews with all 10 participants.

### **Personal Information (Confidential)**

1. Name and Surname:
2. Age of participant:

### **Instagram Use**

*Q1: 'Can you start by opening Instagram and logging in with your credentials (if participant is not already logged in). Could you tell me briefly when did you create your Instagram profile and for what reason/s?'*

*Q2: 'Now that you are on the dashboard of your account, could you explain the main features you use the most on Instagram? Either you show me on the screen of if you'd like, you are welcome to just provide an overview. Why do you use these features? (Probe – uploading content, commenting/liking posts, watching videos, posting stories, searching accounts)'*

*Q3: 'Scroll through your feed on your dashboard. It is said that Instagram has enabled us to view and create content. This differs from the past where content was viewed in magazines and on television. How do you feel about being able to create and view unique content on Instagram?'*

### **Identity Creation and Management on Instagram**

*Q4: 'Let's have a look at the profile feature on Instagram. Can you kindly click on the 'profile' icon'. Do you mind if we talk about your self-presentation on Instagram? Either you show me on the screen or if you'd like to, keep it to yourself and explain to me how you present yourself.' This could be through a unique 'bio', 'username' or content selection on your profile.'*

Q5: *'Can you take a moment to look through your Instagram profile section. How do you think your Instagram engagement can influence your identity/self-presentation in the real world?'*

Q6: *'Let's have a look at a particular selfie/set of selfies recently uploaded on your profile. Could you tell me why did you post this selfie/s? Either you could demonstrate your answer by showing me a selfie or you can explain.'*

Q7: *'Let's have a look at the followers and following section on the top of your profile section. What kind of accounts do you enjoy interacting with on Instagram? (Probe – beauty/influencer/ celebrity)'*

Q8: *'Do you mind demonstrating an account that has influenced how you view your physical appearance? This could be a beauty/influencer/celebrity account that you engage with frequently. Can you explain how this account has influenced your view on your physical appearance?'*

Q9: *'It is believed that the stories we post on Instagram reflect unique aspects of our identity and of our everyday lives. If you post or engage with stories others have posted on Instagram. Do you agree with this sentiment? You are welcome to take a moment to focus on the stories you have posted or current stories that appear on your feed now.'*

Q10: *Can you choose a selfie uploaded or a story picture you posted that made you feel good about yourself. What physical features do you like the most in this image? Why?*

Q11: *Can you choose a selfie uploaded or a story picture you posted that made you feel bad about yourself. Or Perhaps you may have removed this image or archived it. What physical features do you dislike the most in this image? Why?*

### **Female Beauty on Instagram:**

Q12: *'Let's have a look again at the accounts you follow and the accounts that follow you on Instagram. You can also engage with current images and videos posted on your feed for this question. Do you think Instagram promotes a specific beauty standard? Please discuss. (Probe – American beauty, African beauty etc.)'*

*Q13: Have a look at the images you have posted and the accounts you follow. Do you feel that Instagram provides the ability for its users to uniquely represent beauty? Discuss.*

*Q14: 'Do you mind clicking on your profile again and selecting a recent selfie you have posted. Do you feel beautiful in this selfie? Discuss.'*

*Q15: 'We are still looking at your selfies uploaded on your profile. Did you feel empowered, as a woman, when uploading this selfie/s? Discuss.'*

*Q16: 'Can you now please click on 'add' button on the top right side of your home screen' and select 'post'. Do you mind discussing whether you make use of filters and other in-app photo editing tools or third-party apps (probe: FaceTune, Photoshop, YouCam Make Up) before uploading a selfie? And for what reasons? If you don't use any of these tools, could you provide an explanation?'*

*Q17: 'Let's have a look at the comments and likes received on a selfie you have uploaded it. Do you mind explaining how the type of comments you usually receive once you have posted these selfies make you feel?' You are welcome to use an example of a few comments to elaborate on your answer.'*

*Q18: 'Take a moment to reflect on the amount of comments and likes you have received on your posts. Have you ever felt the need to remove a post because it did not receive enough attention. Discuss.'*

*Q19: 'It is believed that women engage in a number of beauty practices (such as wearing expensive clothing, styling hair, wearing make-up, excessive dieting, waist trainers, intensive workouts, cosmetic surgery). Women can engage in these beauty practices before creating and uploading selfies on Instagram? Can you discuss whether you engage in any of these practices and for what reasons? You are welcome to use a selfie to demonstrate your answer.'*

*Q20: 'One of the popular features on Instagram is scrolling through other users' feeds and viewing the content these users post. Do you mind explaining if you ever felt the need to compare yourself to another women based on their physical appearance? If not, could you please elaborate.'*

*Q21: 'Earlier we discussed how women may engage in a number of beauty practices before creating and uploading selfies on Instagram. Once you have viewed these women's' accounts. Do you feel the need to engage in these beauty practices to achieve the desired look? Elaborate on your answer.' You can refer to a specific image uploaded on your account or another user's account in your discussion.*

*Q22: Let's have a look at your followers and following section. Do you feel compelled to post images of yourself specifically for your male followers? If yes, you may demonstrate a selfie that received a lot of male attention and discuss why you think this is the case?' If no, discuss.*

*Q23: 'Can you now click on the magnifying glass icon that represents the 'search' feature on Instagram. Do you use this feature to search and engage with beauty/fitness/celebrity/influencer accounts on Instagram? Discuss why.*

*Q24: The 'search' feature can also be used to search for trends on Instagram. Do follow any beauty trends (probe 'fitspiration, influencer promoting non-toxic beauty products, clothing hauls by influencers, make-up tutorials, dieting tips). Provide reasons for this engagement. Or if you don't engage with beauty trends, why is this the case?*

*Q25: Take a moment to think about your Instagram feed currently and over time. Popular beauty and fitness movements such as #bodypositivity and #fatacceptance have become popular among women on Instagram. How do you feel about these movements in relation to women's beauty?'*

## APPENDIX B: ETHICAL CLEARANCE LETTER



17 August 2022

Kayley Jade Webster (222120267)  
School of Applied Human Sc  
Howard College

Dear KJ Webster,

**Protocol reference number:** HSSREC/00004426/2022

**Project title:** 'Beauty is in the eye of the Instagrammer': A walk-through approach exploring narratives of female beauty on Instagram among Durban University students

**Degree:** Masters

### Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 01 July 2022 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

**Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.**

This approval is valid until 17 August 2023.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

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### Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 8350/4557/3587 Email: [hssrec@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:hssrec@ukzn.ac.za) Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics>

Founding Campuses:  Edgewood  Howard College  Medical School  Pietermaritzburg  Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

## APPENDIX C – GATEKEEPER’S LETTER



**Reference:** R. 15666 / RPGS015  
**Enquiries:** [research@iie.ac.za](mailto:research@iie.ac.za)

21 June 2022



**Re: Gatekeepers Letter (Institutional Consent Form)**



**Dear K Webster**



<b>Consent form to conduct research at company/organisation/association</b>	
I, Dr Willy Engelbrecht, in my capacity as Dean: Research and Postgraduate Studies of The Independent Institute of Education, grant permission to Kayley Webster to conduct research at the The IIE.	
This research has been explained to me and I understand what participation in this research will involve for the people I represent. I also reserve the right to remind the people I represent that their participation in this study is completely voluntary and that this permission does not imply their participation. I reserve the right to withdraw this permission at any time.	
I also understand that research reports are made available in IIE Libraries as well as on the IIE Repository. I indicate the conditions below.	
<b>Conditions concerning the anonymity of the company/organisation/association:</b>	
The company/organisation/association must be kept <u>anonymous</u> in the research report. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
The company/organisation/association may be <u>identified</u> in the research report. <input type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Conditions concerning the publication of the research report:</b>	
The research report will be made available on the IIE Repository... <u>Immediately</u> after completion. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
<u>After</u> a specified number of months has elapsed. <input type="checkbox"/>	
Number of months, if selected:	
	21 June 2022
<b>Date</b>	

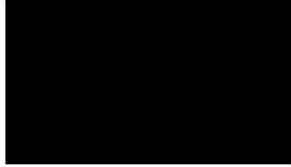


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Yours sincerely,



Dr WH Engelbrecht  
Dean: Research and Postgraduate Studies  
The Independent Institute of Education



## APPENDIX D – INFORMED CONSENT FORM

### UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HSSREC)

#### APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL

For research with human participants

#### Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Kayley Webster, a Master of Social Science candidate in the Centre for Communication, Media and Society under the School of Applied Human Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal. Below are the detailed information of the researcher and the institution of research:

Researcher	Kayley J. Webster	+ [REDACTED]	<a href="mailto:[REDACTED]_and/or_222120267@stu.ukzn.ac.za">[REDACTED]</a> [REDACTED]_and/or <a href="mailto:222120267@stu.ukzn.ac.za">222120267@stu.ukzn.ac.za</a>
Department	Centre for Communication, Media and Society (CCMS)	+27-31-2602505	<a href="http://ccms.ukzn.ac.za">http://ccms.ukzn.ac.za</a>
Institution	University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN)	Howard College Campus, Masizi Kunene Ave, Glenwood, Durban, South Africa	<a href="http://www.ukzn.ac.za">http://www.ukzn.ac.za</a>

Supervisor	Prof. Sarah Gibson	+27-31-2602367	<a href="mailto:gibsons@ukzn.ac.za">gibsons@ukzn.ac.za</a>
Ethics Committee	Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee	+27-31-260- 3587/4557/8350	<a href="mailto:HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za">HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za</a>

You are being invited to consider participating in a study that involves research on exploring narratives that will enhance understandings of young female university student's experiences in the construction of feminine beauty on Instagram. The purpose of this study is to understand how young female students construct and negotiate feminine beauty on Instagram. The participants in the study are expected to be interviewed and interviews will be recorded for the purpose of analysis. The duration of your participation, if you choose to enrol and remain in the study, is expected to be between 50-60 minutes.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC/00004424/2022).

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact the researcher at + [REDACTED] and email address: [REDACTED] or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

**HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION**

**Research Office, Westville Campus**

**Govan Mbeki Building**

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: [HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za)

Participation in this study is voluntary. As a participant, you may withdraw from the research at any time without negative consequences or incur penalty or loss of treatment. The interview will not be paid for in money. Responses will be treated in a confidential manner. Confidential information will not be used without your permission. If you agree to be interviewed, we will request that you choose a pseudonym for the purposes of this research, so your real identity will not be revealed in the final report. As a participant, you will be treated with respect and dignity. The data will be kept securely for five years for purposes of verification by the University of KwaZulu-Natal, after that it will be destroyed. At your request, an electronic copy of the final project will be sent to you on completion.

Your willingness to participate in this study will greatly be appreciated.

-----

## **CONSENT**

I ( \_\_\_\_\_ ) have been informed about the study entitled ‘Beauty is in the eye of the Instagrammer’: A Walk-through Approach Exploring Narratives of Female Beauty on Instagram among Durban University Students, by Kayley Jade Webster,

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study is to understanding how young women negotiate and construct feminine beauty on Instagram.

I have been given an opportunity to answer questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I usually am entitled to.

I have been informed about any available compensation or medical treatment if injury occurs to me as a result of study-related procedures.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher at + [REDACTED] and email address: [REDACTED]

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

**HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION**

**Research Office, Westville Campus**

**Govan Mbeki Building**

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: [HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za)

Additional consent, where applicable

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview / focus group discussion                      YES / NO

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Witness**  
**(Where applicable)**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Translator**  
**(Where applicable)**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

# Interested in participating in Instagram research?

🌟🌟 COME AND JOIN THE STUDY!



## 🌟🌟 The Requirements:

18-24

You are between the ages of 18-24



You identify as a female



You are an Instagram user with an active account



Interested?



📱 SCAN ME