Beyond Shame Culture? Kenyan Women's Self-Representation Practices Online

Dina Adhiambo Ligaga

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

Introduction

The bulk of scholarship addressing women's self-representation is focused for the moment on postfeminist cultures and sensibilities. Within feminist discourse, postfeminism is a contested term that has largely been understood as either an epistemological entity, an indication of a historical shift in the feminist movement or as a reference to backlash politics against feminist gains (Gill, 148). However, in order to understand the specific elements of what actually constitutes postfeminism, Rosalind Gill has suggested that it be explored as a sensibility, a reference to a media culture with specific thematic characteristics. Her approach provides a method for feminist cultural scholars who want to understand contemporary representations of gender in the media. Gill, for instance, argues that postfeminism draws attention to the presentation of femininity as bodily property which emphasizes a preoccupation that women have with the body (147). The 'sexy' body is centred in media representations, often requiring disciplined attention as it aspires to attain perfection. To be the best version of oneself has become synonymous with the definition of feminine identity (148). The female celebrity's body, for instance, is always at risk of 'failing,' seen in the need for female celebrities to always appear well-toned, well-dressed and presentable when in public. Tabloids, for instance, search for loopholes in female celebrities' beauty regimes, scrutinizing clothes worn, and whether or not a celebrity has put on weight (149). Other themes include the sexualisation of culture (increasing normalization of sex talk in the media) in which women become responsible for presenting themselves as desirable subjects (previously seen as objects) and finally, an emphasis on choice, individualism, and empowerment. The argument is that women are free to do as they choose, and that it is possible,

through individual effort, to break from oppressive cultures of patriarchy, sexism, racism and so on.

It is clear in the existing scholarship on postfeminism that the self-representation of girls and young women in contemporary society has increased acutely in the age of digital media. This increase has also highlighted the need for a more critical reading of what such representations might mean. While acknowledging that girls and young women are seen as active producers of culture online, Amy Dobson has argued that they are easily judged, dismissed and shamed as being active in ways that do not conform to societal expectations. To be specific, she said they are "thought to be engaged in projects of self-representation driven by vanity, or incessant social communication driven by insecurities and trivialities" (Dobson, 2). Self-representation practices are framed negatively in the reporting, and in observations of such girls and young women's activities online, and are judged as "too public." What Dobson is really interested in, however, is investigating what it means to perform femininity online within the framework of the "dangerous" or the "problematic." Whether this entails "sexual self-representations … sexting; constructions of highly confident, 'out there' feminine selves … and video-blogs (vlogs) describing girls' pain and suffering" (Dobson, 2).

In order to elucidate the online practices of young women in the Kenyan context, I will borrow from Dobson's ideas of self-representation as edgy, "problematic" and boundary-pushing. I also draw on works on popular culture that identify the site of the everyday as enabling refusals (actions that are difficult to pin down, or categorize within dominant practices), precisely because creative productions in the everyday are attuned to people's need for survival, as well as the very idea of 'living.' Here Lauren Berlant's idea of affect in the present, in many ways, points towards this sentiment of being alive in the moment, of doing what one does in the moment, without attachment to what she refers to as "the promise of the good life" (Berlant, xx). She questions the idea of the good life, the promise and fantasy of it as organized in a neoliberal context and challenges readers to think of living outside of the scope of the 'good life' trap.

This article seeks to push two questions: is it possible to look at young women's online practices in Kenya as agentic in the sense that they could be read as conscious attempts to speak back to conservative gender cultures? And secondly, is it possible to read these practices as both part of, and apart from, neoliberal and patriarchal signifiers within which they are bound? To answer these questions, I have selected three young women's performances online in Kenya: Vera Sidika, Huddah Monroe and Esther Akoth (Akothee), and, taking into context the celebrity locations they occupy, engage with the public meanings of their performances.

Self-Making and the Digital Technology

There is a growing number of scholars concerned with the interface between self-representation and digital technology. Central to this scholarship is the idea of self-making which, according to Yasmine Abbas and Fred Dervin, has been made easier with technology, which enables the self to be engaged publicly (2). Indeed, digital media in contemporary contexts have altered practices of self-care and self-curation, from the private to the public sphere, making the art of self-making public. Based on Michel Foucault's ideas of technologies of the self as "techniques that humans use to understand themselves,"[1] Abbas and Dervin argue that the public display or sharing of the self invites others to work/help work on the self (2). Indeed, following Foucault, technologies of the self is about working on oneself towards an ideal version of oneself. With digital technologies, the possibilities of what the self can be become limitless as people are able to invent multiple selves online. As Nancy Thumim argues, this self is now intimately intertwined with digital media where the audience participates in its production (Thumim, 4). I use the ideas of self-representation or self-making that frame the production of self in the digital media in order to understand what young women's production of selves in the Kenyan online means. I am interested in the ways in which public self-representation enables or invites others to work on the selves by looking at how others participate in this process of self-making. What is being presented, and why? In what ways are these women positioning themselves as role models; figures of success; trend setters? In what ways do they symbolize defiance? What are the interfaces between self-making and capital? These questions are important in engaging the relationship between the self (private) and technological networks (public). This relationship with the public is productive in ways that offer clues concerning how self-making or technologies of the self function. In his article on subjectivity as commodity, for instance, Kopano Ratele has argued that the self is structured around a commodified culture of the look, where to be seen is just as important as seeing, and this is an important source of pleasure (92). If one returns to Abbas and Dervin, then it is possible to argue that self-representation is a performance for others to admire and to acknowledge as successful.

Here I use this set of ideas to extend the argument that self-making in the digital context is a public act that invites others to participate variously in the process of representation of the self. For this task, I will look at the selected examples both in the context of agency and empowerment, as well as in the neoliberal and patriarchal contexts in which they are located. In the process of self-

representation, women selected for case study emerge as hypervisible subjects who contest stereotypical expectations of what femininity ought to be. By curating themselves in specific ways, they refuse to feel shame or to be read within the category of shame culture within which they would ordinarily be read. Instead, digital culture has made it possible for them to represent themselves in ways that symbolize "difficulty" or "defiance."

Tabloids, Shame and Hypervisible Subjects in Kenya

In Kenya, tabloids emerge from a culture that often locates women within traditional gender normative roles or minimizes/erases women's participation in public (Steeves, 56). A variety of tabloids' titles that have emerged in the recent past include titles such as *The Nairobian*, *Crazy Monday*, *Mpasho*, *Ghafla!* and *Nairobi Exposed*.[2] They carry articles about extra-marital affairs, domestic violence as 'drama,' celebrity scandals and other related topics. These stories are often presented as spectacle, but also as cautionary tales against particular kinds of behaviour. In this way, tabloids are arguably sites of gendered surveillance. Referencing Jessica Murray, I have argued elsewhere that women in Kenya now take public surveillance for granted, and act accordingly to discourage scrutiny. Women are labelled as either 'good' or 'bad' and shame is used to manipulate public sentiments (Ligaga, 81).

The tabloid is one of the sites where the shaming happens and where the sexual scandal operates as a tool for writing women who transgress (Ligaga, 81). Anthropologist Dorothy Hodgson and sociomedical scientist Sheryl McCurdy in their collection of essays show that female figures who transgress are described as 'wicked' and argue that these figures become important sites of inquiry into understanding gender relations and other aspects of social life (2). For the authors, scandals surrounding such women, whether adultery or related issues, enable an understanding of how power is contested (2). In the cases from Kenya under examination here, women are considered transgressive because they are "too visible," and because of their public practices of self-representations that draw negative attention.

These women are reported in tabloids as transgressive, difficult and hypervisible. By hypervisible, I mean what Anne Petersen has termed unruly, women who cross the boundaries of accepted femininity (x-xi). They are "difficult" subjects. Pumla Dineo Gqola's *Reflecting Rogue* (145) explores the sociology of "being difficult" as a form of refusal to work within normative confines and expectations of what it means to be "a good woman" in a heteropatriarchal context. To

be a good woman means to be a good citizen or a good national subject, as Danai Mupotsa has reminded us (7). Being difficult allows for the imaginative possibility of theorizing the digital subject in Kenyan public space in ways that signal a shift in gender and sexual debates. In the Kenyan context, being hypervisible often attracts public condemnation in the form of public shaming. Berlant's work underlines the value of indiscipline, citing shame as that which one is meant to feel if one steps out of an existing moral frame (xx). Public shaming is then a reminder that, in fact, one has stepped out. The seeming inability to feel shame is a refusal to participate in the illusion of the good wife or the good woman. Public shaming, in this case, circulates as *the* punishment. Recent scholarship on slut shaming and social media draw direct relations between one's reputation and sexual deviancy (Sweeney 1579). Likewise, activists have pointed to the violent encounters of young women who are slut shamed, and related them to negative perceptions of young women's sexuality, especially girls, around particular confined meanings. Slut shaming is indeed part of the practice of public shaming. In such a context, how might one even begin to comprehend the social media practices of Kenyan women?

One argument I present is that these women are insisting on being seen. They do this by embracing the very language of violence and re-articulating it within the context of social media. They are both present in and detached from their individuality. Mark Poster's idea of digital subjectivity best captures this contradiction. According to Poster, a digital subject exists by virtue of textual reference (389). This subject is not encumbered by territorialism, and is able to traverse borders within the broader public sphere. He then suggests that there is a freedom made possible by the Internet's affordances. It is within this location of digital subject positionality that I propose to read questions of agency among women in Kenyan online spaces.

In thinking through subjectivity and agency then, this article signals ideas of desire; to demonstrate the assertive ways of being in the world for women, where they take what they want, regardless of what others think. Patricia McFadden stresses the intellectual value of choice and pleasure for women, in which questions of sexual pleasure and choice become powerful political positions influencing how subjects locate themselves in the world. In the age of social media, while it is possible to celebrate freedoms acquired through new subject formations, one also observes that desire or choice is framed around social practice, and these social practices are caught within "aesthetic labour" (Elias *et al*, 22). Aesthetic labour in this case refers to the presentation of beauty on social media which includes the desire for a contrived perfection; micro-celebrity status; commodification of youthful beauty, digital alteration of a woman's beauty as well as

surveillance – how women acquire and display their cultural capital (30-31). It is a focus on how the self is optimized in a neoliberal context. Given the above theoretical concerns, this article proceeds to read the performances/practices of three women in online spaces, and to use this opportunity to pose questions about shame culture, defiance and feminine freedoms.

Using Instagram as the Sources for Analysing Socialites

In this article, I make use of data collected mainly between 2017 and 2020 in which Vera Sidika, Huddah Monroe and Esther Akoth (Akothee), three young Kenyan women, maintained an online presence documenting their lives across a range of social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. For the sake of manageability of focus, I draw primarily on their Instagram accounts with the occasional reference to interviews uploaded to YouTube.

Their stories have appeared, for different reasons, in several online tabloids. In the case of Vera Sidika, what gained her the most visibility was the story of her skin tone transformation. On 6 June 2014, for instance, Vera Sidika appeared on local television NTV's show, *The Trend*, and confirmed that she had undergone a skin-lightening procedure. The host, Larry Madowo, had asked her direct questions about her life that had been circulating as rumours on social media, including the issue of her change in skin tone. In response, Sidika, not one to shy away from controversy, confirmed that she had indeed done the procedure in the UK. She also famously commented: "Looking good is my business. My body is my business, nobody else's but mine," a comment to which I will return later.[3] This interview drew the attention of the media, both mainstream and tabloid alike, local and international. The BBC and Al Jazeera are among the international news outlets that featured stories about her.[4] Locally, the debate continued to rage on social media under the hashtag, #BleachedBeauty. Among other issues, Sidika's skin lightening fed directly into the debate about colonial and patriarchal privileging of lighter skin tones over darker ones. This is but one example of how Sidika entered into the public sphere through controversy.

Nevertheless, the three women studied here exist in a context that locates them as "excessive" subjects, to be found in tabloid pages and other similarly structured gossip columns, and thus are not to be taken too seriously. Their narratives revolve around an existing repertoire of knowledge about "socialite" lifestyles in Kenya (Ligaga, 129). Unlike the globalized understanding of the socialite as a woman of society with a large inheritance, or as having access to a lot of money with little signs of labour or talent[5], the meaning of a socialite in the Kenyan

context, where class remains a contested category, seems to refer to people, particularly women, who use their fame or visibility in the media to make money. Thus stems for these women a negative reputation from the subsequent hypervisibility; particularly in a conservative context found in Kenya. Indeed, when Monroe was interviewed in 2013 by Kenya Television Network (KTN), she openly rejected the tag "socialite" as she claimed it was used to refer to women who made money by exchanging their bodies for sex.[6] Nonetheless, during the period of data collection, Sidika and Monroe were considered two of the most well-known socialites in the East African region. Among other well-known socialites were the late Agnes Masogange of Tanzania (Nyamsenda 2014), Uganda's Zari Hassan, and Kenya's Corazon Kwamboka, to name a few "media darlings" (Suparsad, 15). A television show in Kenya called *Nairobi Diaries* showed the extent to which the socialite culture had become pervasive when, in its first season, of the eight women participating, including Vera Sidika, others such as Pendo and Ella were variously presented as socialites. *Nairobi Diaries* which seems to be modelled on the American *Real Housewives* franchise, particularly *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, brought to the limelight several of these women's desire to be publicly known as socialites.

As local celebrities, these women are visually present on social media through visual markers that include glossy images of their access to luxury goods, beautiful homes, first class travels to fancy resorts, and so on. To be a "socialite" in Kenya then is synonymous with being a celebrity. Following the framework of David Marshall, I locate this celebrity power as agentic, where interaction between digital subjects and their publics occurs (9). Sidika, Monroe and Akothee's hypervisibility is made possible because of digital media through which they manipulate their power to influence in order to circulate a message of success as defiance. Sidika's appearance in a music video catapulted her to fame[7], and she has maintained this celebrity status through an active social media presence, which led to her getting work as a plus-size model, a social event host, and as a star on reality television. She is also a business owner, having opened the Vera Sidika Beauty Parlour in 2018. Monroe's fame rose after she appeared in the 8th season of *Big Brother Africa*.[8] Since then she has hosted social events, worked as a model, and made appearances at parties. She has also secured acting jobs in industries such as Nollywood. Akothee's entry into social media is far less direct. She gained notoriety as Kenya's richest musician. She presents a rags-to-riches narrative that explains her rise to fame, narrated variously through her social media accounts.

Sidika presents herself as the ultimate neoliberal subject, offering advice on how to gain success as a young woman. Sexual freedom and

access to luxury dominates Monroe's timeline, displaying various aspects of her life as "fabulous." These female celebrities immerse themselves into the everyday, providing projections of possibility in a capitalist set-up. Joshua Gamson identifies celebrity culture as a push of "ordinariness into the cultural forefront" (1062). For him, the new celebrity is embedded in the ordinary. Like Ratele, cited earlier, Gamson argues that the idea of attention (looking and being looked at) being commodified means that a celebrity is defined by the ability to garner attention (Gamson, 1062). Nevertheless, he warns that even mundane celebrity culture remains part of the larger capitalist machinery. Can one then make the claim that these women's assertiveness, controversies and presence online necessitate a discussion about agency? One way of initiating this discussion is to consider what their location in the public space within a context of patriarchy does to disturb the hegemonic patriarchal norms. In reading Monroe, Akothee and Sidika, I am aware that arguments have been made regarding their negative influences on society. However, I am interested in engaging with their symbolic significance in the discussion about agency and gender. While I have relied on a variety of narratives circulating online either on YouTube or various tabloid newspapers, I now focus on women's Instagram accounts because through them, it becomes possible to knit together the narrative that the women want to tell the world about themselves. I build a corpus of data from all three women's Instagram accounts in order to establish a narrative of their digital lives.

Spectacular femininities

Vera Sidika, Huddah Monroe and Akothee have convincingly been able to demonstrate their success through excessive displays of their femininities, in what Simidele Dosekun has referred to elsewhere as spectacular femininities. These are femininities that embrace:

> Hyper-feminine styles characterized by the spectacular use of elements such as cascading hair extensions, long and manicured acrylic nails, heavy and immaculate make-up, false eyelashes and towering high heels (970).

Like Dosekun, I argue that these displays of hyper femininities are an embrace of class privilege that mark these women as different from ordinary working-class women. This is particularly important in the context of the global south where class differences are stark. Like their Western counterparts, these women are part of a postfeminist culture (Gill, 149). Within a postfeminist culture, the sexy body is the ultimate mark of spectacular femininity. This body, while presented as a woman's source of power, is also constantly in need of "surveillance, discipline and re-modelling'" (Gill, 149). Modern cultures had epitomized regimes of self-care that impose notions of beauty on men

and women that need maintenance through consumer spending. Its obvious problematic ties to capital notwithstanding, I focus on the spectacular ways in which Sidika, Monroe and Akothee display their femininities in ways that can be theorized as excessive. Excessive femininity exaggerates, is unapologetic, is consumerist, and completely refuses to align with the normalized versions of femininity (Asberg, 688). It calls attention to itself, refusing to conform to the norm and therefore offers an opportunity to engage with female agency. I argue for a reviewing of the feminine subject as located at the center of discourse, and therefore as possessing control over how they curate themselves.

Vera Sidika: the Selfie as Mode of Expression

Sidika is famously known for her figure: a distinctly slim waist and wide hips. She has also publicly acknowledged undergoing a skin lightening and breast augmentation procedure.[9] Indeed, she presents herself in the media as the ultimate postfeminist figure. Sidika, like most of the other celebrity socialites, carries the marks of a neoliberal postfeminist subject highly invested in technologizing the self. Different scholars and commentators argue that Sidika is problematic because she works in the service of patriarchy (Warah 2015) and capital (Nyamsenda 2014). They argue that she embraces the individualist approach to feminine success while lacking reflection on how her visibility promotes the continuation of violent cultures against women. These arguments are part of a larger body of work on postfeminism and neoliberalism that identifies elements in today's contemporary culture and its representations of femininities as problematic (Gill 150). In the hundreds of pictures of Sidika posted on Instagram she always appears in designer wear[10] in carefully curated pictures that depict glamour, gloss and luxury. Her self-representation feeds into what Mehita Iqani (160), reading Sidika and other female celebrities, terms commoditized beauty in the global south. Sidika's lightened skin and augmented breasts emphasize the "sleek, toned, controlled figure' considered 'essential for portraying success" (Gill, 150).

Through her Instagram account, @queenveebosset, one immediately finds that the selfie is the most popular genre. Here, the selfie is the ideal mechanism of expression of the possessive individual. Following the work of Lauren Smith and Jimmy Sanderson, I argue that the selfie makes it possible for subjects to have more authority in how they appear in public, as opposed to how others would want to present them, making it easier for them to interact more intimately with fans (343). An estimate of 70% of the 464 posts by Sidika on her Instagram page since September 2017 are selfies. As

Theresa Senft and Nancy Baym (1588) argue, selfies are important indices of popular culture. Sidika constructs her own public persona because she thinks of her body as a moneymaker.

One example of such a selfie is a still photograph of herself posted on 17 September 2017. The photo shows Sidika seated behind a table facing the camera, with a dinner plate in front of her. The food on the plate is visible, a fish, veggies and starch dish. There is also a jar with juice and a straw in the lower right of the frame. She is dressed all in white, with a white figure-hugging shirt. The surface of the table is also white. The colour is in the makeup she is wearing and the colourful sunglasses. Examining her surroundings, she is outdoors and the background reveals the glow of a setting sun, a body of water, and a landmark building. The location underneath her photo indicates that she is in the Burj Al Arab Hotel, an iconic hotel in Dubai. Sidika in the picture indicates that she is at home with luxury commodities. In the caption accompanying the photo, Sidika says:

> You can strip me of everything I have and tomorrow I'll go get it all again. Hate me. Shake me. Try to break me, I'll get back up, dust it off & adjust my crown like the Queen I am.
>
> I'm baaaaaaack![11]

The interaction between the picture (of familiarity with luxury) and the narrative of resilience below at first seems paradoxical. However, this is one example of how Sidika self-curates her online self. She presents herself as resilient against a world that seeks to bring her down. Her display of wealth and "the good life" is presented as a way of challenging her detractors. The caption never indicates at whom the message is targeted, but the message is clearly one of her return, or refusal to fail. This is a form of self-care or self-soothing for her; a way of encouraging herself to keep succeeding. She invites her readers to participate in her success by asking them to look at what that success means. The image of success is one that continues to feature prominently in several other posts. The relationship between the caption and the visual is one that remains of interest as it is in the relationship that one encounters Sidika's engagement with self-care. The image of the phoenix is well captured in the way she imagines herself online.

Much of what she posts is about her interaction with luxury. However, she also has posts that can be deemed provocative or wicked. As one example in a photo posted (this is actually a repost) on 28 January 2019, Sidika poses in her bikini, showing off her slim waist and her wide hips.[12] She is holding a closed fist against her left breast in a provocative manner while her right hand seems to comb through her hair. Her eyes are half opened, just as her lips are. She has immaculately applied makeup and the backdrop is plain black. This provocative picture is one of her more famous ones that showcases her

modelling abilities. This is just one example as it is not the only picture in which she seems barely dressed.

It is clear that Sidika's mode of self-expression through the selfie is one in which she presents herself as the embodiment of luxury and class. All of her posts show a beautifully curated body and space. It is a confrontation of space and context through a display of herself as an aspirational figure of success. The idea of the phoenix who keeps returning is one that runs through her self-presentation. Importantly, she is unfazed by the negative attention she seems to draw as captured by both mainstream and tabloid media. She is a confident young woman and comfortable in her skin. This confrontational mode is a consistent theme in the manner in which Sidika interacts with the world.

Huddah Monroe: Controversy as a Mode of Self-Promotion

Huddah Monroe, like Sidika, uses her Instagram page to self-curate. Her fame rose in 2013 after she featured in the eighth season of *Big Brother Africa.* Despite being evicted in the first week, videos of her naked body during shower hour circulated online. Tabloids have also focused on her use of vulgar language and bold commentary on issues related to sexuality. Controversial headlines such as "Women let's marry each other,"[13] and "Socialite Huddah Monroe finds love and is screaming about the good sex"[14] provide a snippet of how her persona appears in tabloid stories. Born Sonie Alhuda Njoroge, she publicly adopted the name Monroe to show her admiration of Hollywood celebrity Marilyn Monroe because of her status as a sex symbol.[15] Controversy is a key element in Huddah Monroe's project of self-promotion. As Lynette Mukhongo (2014) observes, Monroe has capitalized on the initial attention she received from appearing on *Big Brother Africa* by posting controversial images of her body and sustaining interest through her body and how to use it to make money. According to information gleaned from interviews she has given, Monroe makes her money through modelling. She is also a businesswoman.[16] Like Sidika, Monroe is seemingly rich, with Instagram pictures showing off expensive cars, clothing, and a lavish lifestyle.[17]

Huddah, like Sidika , has several Instagram pages; some containing pictures of her promoting her business, others about her everyday life. There are also a number of secondary pages on Instagram that use a hashtag to earmark Huddah's life; especially

moments of scandal. One consistent narrative from Huddah's pages is that she is not shy about exposing her body. She has posted pictures of herself without underwear, pictures showing parts of her body that may be sexualized, including one with an exposed nipple. Huddah, one would argue, advocates for sexual freedom through her interaction with her public(s).

The idea of freedom cuts across her posts, whether it be sexual or otherwise. In one post, she exudes independence and freedom through her embrace of luxury and glamour. A post dated 2 September 2019, shows Monroe in a red dress, immaculate make-up, and sunglasses. She is seated next to a woman whose face is not visible, but who is also equally glamorously dressed in a yellow dress. Together they are seated inside a blue convertible car with the roof retracted. Monroe is playfully pulling at her weave and looking ahead. The caption against the picture reads: "our time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't let the noise of other's opinions drown out your own inner voice."[18] I find the caption informative in the way that Monroe frames herself here. The photo seems to indicate that she is a figure of success and happiness. Meanwhile the caption shows that Monroe imagines herself as a self-help advisor, sharing knowledge about the self in and of the world. She is offering advice to her readers, although the addressee remains open-ended. Imagining herself as a self-help advisor or guru needs context. Rebecca Jones (141) has argued that self-help texts present themselves as authorities in problem solving, lending the author the same kind of authority. For Jones, the niche of self-help texts is in responding to a gap, be it economic, social and cultural, and are asserted in these spaces. While these sites can reinforce conservative and/or neoliberal ideas, they can also be potential sites of transgression. In this example, Monroe's caption can be said to provoke action/transformation/rethinking of one's life and values.

In other posts, she is often nostalgic of a past, or rather a past she has recreated as romantic and simple. For instance, a post on 29 September 2019, shows a stained, clearly aging photo of a baby smiling at the camera. The caption indicates that this is a picture of Monroe as a child. In this post, as in other posts from her past, it is clear that a part of her returns to this past as a way of finding herself. A section of the caption to the photo reads: "little Huddah. Good on the outside as she is inside! I love you girl! I wish you long life, good health and prosperity! You are beautiful! You are the Brightest Ray of sunshine!"[19] In the caption, Monroe addresses her younger self in the second person, urging herself to "continue being you'" and to "'never change'." There is, indeed, a desire to return to an "authentic self." This is a retrospective exercise of self-reflection, much like Foucault's idea of technologies of the self, involving a knowing of oneself. Given

that she curates herself as a role model, and given that she refers to herself in the second person, I argue that Monroe is inviting her readers to participate in the formation of an ideal self through memory and remembering. Even then, it is important to note that Monroe's childhood was ripe with poverty; a fact she returns to time and again. Hers is a rags-to-riches story and this is also a significant way in which she curates herself. In the end, one can say that while Monroe presents herself as provocative and controversial, these are just some of the many personas she presents online in order to draw attention to herself as commodity, but also attention to her business, Huddah Cosmetics. The digital self can, in this case, be seen as an expansion of the body as currency.

Akothee: Instagram as Autobiography

While Huddah and Vera rely on their body aesthetics to draw attention to themselves, Akothee presents herself differently. Unlike her counterparts, she draws attention to herself as a self-made woman. She sells a rags-to-riches narrative that she sustains by juxtaposing before and after images of her life's journey. While in some ways similar to Huddah's life story, Akothee constantly returns to her past to hold her audience's attention. This also becomes a way in which she is able to model herself as an example of a woman who overcomes trials to become one of the most successful women in the country. Akothee is a single mother to five children. Her Instagram tagline is "President of single mothers." Indeed, this narrative frames her public self-presentation. Her biographical details reveal that she got married at the age of 14, and had four children in quick succession after dropping out of school, and eloping with the father of her children.[20] After the death of her second child, and betrayal by her partner, Akothee eventually left to begin her life afresh. The success of Akothee's life revolves around this history of struggle. It is apparent that life was hard for her as a young mother, particularly as she had not finished high school. She often confesses that meeting a wealthy French diplomat changed her life.[21]

Akothee's main Instagram account, @akotheekenya, shows that she navigates social media through visuals and texts detailing her story as a young mother: a story of survival and of self-reliance. These stories are juxtaposed with others that show her as a conspicuous consumer of luxury goods, and lifestyle. An Instagram post on 22 April 2018,[22] for instance, shows a picture of a young but tired version of herself, seated on the edge of a seat. To her left are her three children,

two older girls, and a new born baby. Below the photograph is a short caption explaining the picture. The Kiswahili text denounces men who, according to her, made her pregnant and then left her to fend for herself. She then announces her new position of agency stating that should anyone want to make babies with her, they would need to sign contracts and open what she called "pregnancy bank accounts." She is specific in her demands. These accounts will vary, from "pregnant account," "post-natal account," "school fee account," "holiday account,'" and "upkeep account." She continues that anyone not willing to follow her rules is free to go look for children elsewhere. In a recent interview, she reinforces this message saying that if she is with someone who does not love her, she will leave the person, "with her uterus." This insistence on her reproductive power, and the way in which she is able to insist on speaking about it in public, are empowering and agentic. Akothee breaks a common myth held against women; especially mothers about an inability to leave a bad relationship when one has children. Yet she is an exception to the rule, and she uses social media to explore this reality.

That she has had children with more than one man is often illuminated as a sign of her immoral existence. Even worse, she is highlighted as a perfect example of a woman in a compensatory relationship, having acquired her wealth through her relationship with a rich European man. This is clouded in a discourse of shame, narratives of transactional sex, as explored in the previous section, meant to discipline women. Still, she refuses to see herself in ways that are limiting. Rather, she speaks about these same men abandoning her, and failing to meet her expectations. Her husband, for instance, cheated on her after she had had four children with him and made huge sacrifices. Rather than stay in the marriage, she chose to leave. She had three children to feed, and little money. She then met a Swiss man who promised to marry her and take her with him to Switzerland. While pregnant with his child, Akothee realized that the man had no intention of legally marrying her and, according to an interview, she packed her bags and went back to Kenya. She refuses to submit to what she sees as substandard conditions. She refuses to settle. She holds her stories as examples of her refusal to conform, and a way of showing how to navigate impossible terrains.

Akothee chooses to share her intimate stories in public. In one post, also posted on 22 April 2018, there is a picture of her with her fiancé. It is a picture taken in the outdoors. Both of them are wearing sleeping gowns over their pajamas. Their bodies are close together, with Akothee standing in front. The background shows palm trees and sand on one side, and a beach front on another. From the picture, one can conclude that the two of them are on holiday. In the accompanying text, Akothee celebrates her fiancé, stating that because of him,

"wazungu" (a Swahili word for Europeans or white men) are feeling sick with jealousy. This use of Swahili possibly refers to her two previous relationships with European men as it also means "wanderer." At this point, one commentator "polices" Akothee by stating that "these are bedroom matters" and that she (Akothee) should not announce her life thusly. The commentator adds, "Oyoo and Ojwang will see this one day" (these are the names of her two youngest sons). Akothee's response was quick: "Life is too real to pretend. Unless you are living a fantasy!" These kinds of responses are typical from Akothee, who refuses to feel cowardly about how she imagines her life. She refuses to adhere to common parameters through which women, and especially mothers, are judged.

This trait comes through in most of her posts. In one Instagram post she says in Luo (her mother tongue), "Akoth chumbi chuo, kama otuone ema otuchee," which roughly translates: "Akothee, salt of men, wherever she is not allowed to be, she will appear." The accompanying photo shows her in white attire, shoes and hand bag, standing next to a luxury car. This kind of staging reinforces the wealthy lifestyle narrative insinuated earlier. Her words, however, also hint at her desire to provoke people's moral sensibilities by shock, rather than hiding. The reference she makes to her sexual appeal to men here is obvious.

Conclusion: On Being Outrageous

Women occupy the public space in a variety of ways. The media, and specifically tabloids, are complicit in shaping how these bodies ought to be. Transgressive bodies are often punished using scandal or other forms of silencing. The three women I have discussed here, Sidika, Monroe and Akothee use the site of self-narration to present themselves online. While their lives are publicly accessible because of their celebrity status, these three women have chosen to use various social media platforms to curate selves in ways that allow them to narrate their stories on their own. In the article, I dwell on what self-representation means as theory, and how this might be applied to the digital context. Using Foucault's notion of technologies of self, I explore the idea of self among women who choose the online platform to self-curate. According to Foucault (1988), technologies of the self allow humans opportunity for self-reflection and ultimately, transformation. In the digital world, however, this process takes place in the public sphere. The public interface is both a shift from private, but also an invitation to an audience to actively participate in the making of the self through networking (Abbas and Dervin, 2009). These ideas remain productive in considering the interfaces between self-presentation by these women, and the way they interact with the public. Despite the fact that they each have millions of followers, all

three women relate to their audience intimately. This is in the way they refer to their audiences as 'you,' or in their performances and presentation of their bodies. There is often no shame or shyness. Thus the bold ways in which these interactions take place are noteworthy. Vera Sidika is, for instance, well known for posting videos of herself dancing provocatively with her bottom facing the camera. The dance she performs is a phenomenon known as twerking that has become globally popular, and which is associated with sex.

I acknowledge the difficulty of claiming agency in the cases of these women, in this instance, particularly because of their immersion in a strong consumerist culture. As postfeminist subjects, they embody the ideas laid out by scholars that show an emphasis on the consumption of luxury, and in which freedom is tied to consumer goods. Likewise, I am also aware that their exercising of sexual freedom is seen by some as a sign of their own sexual immorality. Indeed, postfeminist debates do highlight the need to engage with the manner in which women who embody postfeminist culture veer off from what it means to be free, especially in contexts of inequality. These women are focused on individual notions of success; as opposed to feminist concerns regarding collective strive towards freedom.

Nonetheless, they can be seen as symbols of freedom in conservative and violent contexts. They are enabling conversations about morality and the policing of women's bodies; and about what women are allowed to say in public. An Instagram image of Huddah Monroe posing naked, and circulated on mainstream platforms, will cause outrage because it demands that the public confronts the meaning of her body as deviant. Equally, a video of Vera Sidika twerking in her bathtub is meant to provoke. Akothee posts several pictures of herself in skimpy clothing either dancing by herself or rubbing herself against her boyfriend. The kinds of comments such posts receive show the extent to which these women maintain their public personas through such kinds of controversies.

It is my contention that these provocations contribute to a broader dialogue about women's freedom in the Kenyan public. This is a context in which women's freedom of expression is still curtailed heavily. This freedom is as much physical as it is discursive. Tabloid reports on these three women indicate a closed narrative of sexual immorality. A closer look at their self-narratives shows a different story, with a focus on a much more complex interiority.

Acknowledgements

Imaginaries) project. Many thanks to Dr Lynda Spencer who is the Principle Investigator on the project.

Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*. Source: https://foucault.info/documents/foucault.technologiesOfSelf.en/. Date accessed: 25/10/2020.

2. The various tabloid websites include: *Ghafla!* Website. www.ghafla.com (Date of access 30/11/2020); *Mpasho*. www.mpasho.co.ke (Date of access: 30/11/2020); *Nairobi Exposed*. www.nairobi-exposed.com (Date of access: 30/11/2020); *The Nairobean*. www. Standardmedia.co.ke/thenairobean/ (Date of access: 30/11/2020) and *Crazy Monday*. Date accessed: 30/11/2020).

3. Pskillsable. "The Trend- Socialite Vera Sidika's New Look". Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eavjYBrYM_E&t=28s. Date accessed: 30/11/2020.

4. BBC trending. 2014. Is Kenya's Vera Sidika a #BleachedBeauty? https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-27768032. Date of access: 25/10/2020. Al Jazeera. Kenya Debates: to bleach or not to bleach. https://www.aljazeera.com/program/episode/2014/6/10/kenya-debates-to-bleach-or-not-to-bleach/. Date accessed: 25/10/2020.

5. Historically, socialites had to have wealth to sustain the expensive lifestyles that they led. In the twenty-first century, the idea of a socialite has become associated with narratives of fame and wealth as circulated through popular culture and the media. Famous socialites who have entered into the media sphere in recent years include Kim Kardashian, an American reality television star, and Paris Hilton, heiress to the Hilton Hotel empire.

6. Kenya Television Network. 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNQ010hXsBA. Date accessed: 6 May 2016.

7. KenyanPoetsLounge. P-Unit. 'You Guy' You Tube video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DE-MtRUsp9E . Date accessed 2 May 2016.

8. https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2013/05/23/is-huddah-kenyas-rep-to-big-brother_c777638 . Date accessed 25 January 2019.

9. https://www.sde.co.ke/thenairobian/article/2000129374/vera-sidika-opens-up-on-her-new-boobies, https://www.enca.com/kenyan-socialite-sparks-social-media-debate-skin-lightening

10. Vera Sidika appears in designer wear in several of her Instagram pictures. In one, she is sitting in what appears to be an airplane seat, holding a phone, wearing a Gucci T-shirt (https://www.instagram.com/p/B2jEJT3BfuF/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link). In this picture, she has Louis Vuitton bags next to her (https://www.instagram.com/p/BoU1DNzHPRt/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link); and in this picture, she shows off her Prada shoes (https://www.instagram.com/p/Be28nn3nlp-/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link). Date accessed: 30/11/2020.

11. @queenveebosset. https://www.instagram.com/p/BZGEbKDj9_-/ . Date accessed: 25 October, 2020.

12. @queenveebosset. https://www.instagram.com/p/BtK_IcVFUQ4/. Date accessed: 25 October, 2020.

13. https://mpasho.co.ke/women-lets-marry-huddah-monroe-says-bashing-black-men/. Date accessed: 25 January 2019.

14. https://nairobinews.nation.co.ke/chillax/socialite-huddah-monroe-finds-love-screaming-good-sex/ Date accessed: 25 January 2019.

15. Norma Jeane Mortenson, famously known as Marilyn Monroe, also reinvented herself in order to build her modelling and acting career in Hollywood.

16. https://informationcradle.com/kenya/huddah-monroe/

17. Both women charge a lot of money for their participation in events. Monroe reveals that she gets paid approximately $ 1,860 to attend a single event. Vera Sidika's fees are exponentially higher. In an interview for the Kenyan daily newspaper, *Daily Nation*, she reveals that she charges $ 2, 500 an hour.

18. @huddahthebosschick. https://www.instagram.com/p/B15yZBpjFyv/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link. Date accessed: 20 November, 2020.

19. @huddahthebosschick. https://www.instagram.com/p/B2_mNmiDTCI/. Date accessed: 26 October, 2020.

20. https://informationcradle.com/kenya/akothee/. Date accessed: 25 January 2019.

21. *Ibid*.

22. https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/evewoman/article/2001267213/akothee-and-her-baby-daddy-fight-over-custodial-rights-for-their-son

Works Cited

Abbas, Yasmine and Fred Dervin, eds. *Digital Technologies of The Self*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019.

Ahmed, Sara. *Wilful Subjects*. Duke UP, 2014.

—. *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke UP, 2010.

Åsberg, Cecilia. "Spectacular Queens and the Morals of Excessive Femininity: A Feminist Approach to Public History." *Linköping Electronic Conference Proceedings,* Linköping U Electronic P, 2007.

Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism,* Duke UP, 2011.

Dobson, Amy Shields. *Postfeminist Digital Cultures: Femininity, Social Media, and Self-Representation*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2016.

Dosekun, Simidele. "For Western Girls Only?", *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 15, no. 6, pp. 960-975, 2015, DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2015.1062991

Foucault, Michel. "Technologies of the Self." Lectures at the University of Vermont Oct. 1982, *Technologies of the Self*, pp. 16-49. U of Massachusets P, 1988.

Gamson, Joshua. 2011. "The Unwatched Life is Not Worth Living: The Elevation of the Ordinary in Celebrity Culture." *PMLA*, vol. 126, no. 4, 2011, pp. 1061–1069. http://dx.doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.4.1061

Gill, Rosalind, and Christina Scharff, eds. Introduction. *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/9780230294523

Gill, Rosalind. "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2007, pp. 147-166. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1367549407075898

Gqola, Pumla, D. *Reflecting Rogue: Inside the Mind of a Feminist*. MF Books, 2017.

—. "When a Good Black Woman is Your Weekend Special: Brenda Fassie, Sexuality and Performance." *Under Construction: 'Race' and Identity in South Africa Today*, edited by Natasha Distiller and Melissa E Steyn, Heinemann, 2004.

Keller, Jessalynn Marie. "Fiercely Real?: Tyra Banks and the Making of New Media Celebrity."*Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2012, pp. 147-164. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2012.740490

Hodgson, Dorothy, and Sheryl McCurdy. *Wicked Women and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa.* Heinemann, 2001.

Jones, Rebecca. "How to Be a Writer in Your 30s in Lagos.", Moradewun, Adejunmobi and Carli Coetzee, eds. *Routledge Handbook of African Literature*. Routledge, 2019.

Ligaga, Dina. *Women, Visibility and Morality in Kenyan Popular Media*. NISC (Pty) Ltd, 2020.

Marshall, David, P. *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*. U of Minnesota P, 1997.

Mukhongo, L. L. "Reconstructing Gendered Narratives Online: Nudity for Popularity on Digital Platforms."*Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, vol. 5, 2014. http://dx.doi.org/10.7264/N3K64GB3

Mupotsa, Danai. *White* W*eddings*. Unpublished Phd thesis. University of the Witwatersrand, 2014.

Murray, Jessica. "Disciplining Women: South African Literary Representations of Gendered Surveillance and Violence." *English Academy Review*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2018, pp.71-82. DOI: 10.1080/10131752.2018.1519922.

Noble, S. Umoja. Google Search: Hyper−visibility as a Means of Rendering Black Women and Girls Invisible. *InVisible Culture* 19 (Blind Spots) – Fall, 2013. http://ivc.lib.rochester.edu

Nyamsenda, Sabatho. "Ubidhaishaji wa maumbile ya binadamu: toka Sarah Baartman mpaka Agnes 'Masogange'." Unpublished paper, 2014.

Phillips, Lynn, M. *Flirting with Danger: Young Women's Reflections on Sexuality and Domination*. New York UP, 2000.

Petersen, Anne Helen. *Too Fat, Too Slutty, Too Loud: The Rise and Reign of the Unruly Woman*. Penguin, 2017.

Poster, Mark. 2007. "Postcolonial Theory in the Age of Planetary Communications," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2007, pp. 379-393, DOI: 10.1080/10509200500526810

Rasul A. Mowatt, Bryana H. French and Dominique A. Malebranche. "Black/Female/Body Hypervisibility and Invisibility", *Journal of*

Leisure Research, vol. 45, no. 5, 2013, pp. 644-660, DOI: 10.18666/jlr-2013-v45-i5-4367

Ratele, Kopano. "Looks: Subjectivity as Commodity." *Agenda*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2011, pp. 92-103.

Roberts, I. D. 2010. "China's Internet Celebrity: Furong Jiejie." *Celebrity in China*, edited by Elaine Jeffreys and Louise Edwards. Hong Kong UP, 2010, pp. 217-236.

Sweeney, Brian. "Slut Shaming," edited by Kevin Nadal, *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Psychology and Gender*. Thousand Oaks, SAGE Publications, Inc., 2017, pp. 1579-1580. doi: 10.4135/9781483384269.n530.

Suparsad, Viraj. "Lessons from Media Darlings: Gender, Context and Celebrity Culture." MA dissertation. University of the Witwatersrand, 2015.

Thumim, Nancy. *Self-Representation and Digital Culture*. Springer, 2012.

Zoonen, L. van. "Desire and Resistance: Big Brother and the Recognition of Everyday Life." *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 23, no. 5, 2001, pp. 669–677. https://doi.org/10.1177/016344301023005007

Zoonen, L. van. "The Personal, the Political and the Popular: A Woman's Guide to Celebrity Politics." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2006, pp. 287–301. https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494060660747