



FROM MAINSTREAM TO DIGITAL

**SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES
ON PARTICIPATORY
MEDIA CULTURES**

**EDITED BY: NATALIE LE CLUE,
CATHERINE DUNCAN & JANELLE VERMAAK-GRIESEL**

From Mainstream to Digital

DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES ON CREATING A FAIRER SOCIETY

A fair society is one that is just, inclusive and embracing of all without any barriers to participation based on sex, sexual orientation, religion or belief, ethnicity, age, class, ability or any other social difference. One where there is access to healthcare and education, technology, justice, strong institutions, peace and security, social protection, decent work and housing. But how can research truly contribute to creating global equity and diversity without showcasing diverse voices that are underrepresented in academia or paying specific attention to the Global South?

Including books addressing key challenges and issues within the social sciences which are essential to creating a fairer society for all with specific reference to the Global South, *Diverse Perspectives on Creating a Fairer Society* amplifies underrepresented voices showcasing Black, Asian and minority ethnic voices, authorship from the Global South and academics who work to amplify diverse voices.

With the primary aim of showcasing authorship and voices from beyond the Global North, the series welcomes submissions from established and junior authors on cutting-edge and high-level research on key topics that feature in global news and public debate, specifically from and about the Global South in national and international contexts. Harnessing research across a range of diversities of people and place to generate previously unheard insights, the series offers a truly global perspective on the current societal debates of the 21st century bringing contemporary debate in the social sciences from diverse voices to light.

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From Mainstream to Digital: South African Perspectives on Participatory Media Cultures

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Contents

About the Editors	<i>ix</i>
About the Contributors	<i>x</i>
Acknowledgements	<i>xii</i>
Introduction	
<i>Natalie Le Clue, Catherine Duncan and Janelle Vermaak-Griessel</i>	<i>1</i>
Section 1: Digital Connections	
Chapter 1 Visual Storytelling and Self-expression as Participation on Instagram: Negotiating and Constructing Feminine-gendered Identities	
<i>Kayley Jade Webster and Sarah Gibson</i>	<i>7</i>
Chapter 2 WhatsApp Warriors: Exploring South African Fan Engagement in Digital Communities	
<i>Janelle Vermaak-Griessel</i>	<i>29</i>
Section 2: Political Engagement	
Chapter 3 From Screen to Stream: Politicising COVID-19 Vaccination in Carte Blanche’s Online Audience	
<i>Natalie Le Clue</i>	<i>51</i>
Chapter 4 TikTok’s Influencer Culture: Impact on South African Politics During the COVID-19 Lockdown	
<i>Adelina Mbinjama</i>	<i>67</i>

Chapter 5 Expanding Audiences or Limiting Them? The Dilemma of Local Participation in an Online Global COVID-19 Prevention Campaign	
<i>Sarah Haffenden, Emma Durden and Sarah Gibson</i>	81
Section 3: Entrepreneurship and Identity	
Chapter 6 What's in It for Them? The Use of Social Media by Influencer Social Entrepreneurs	
<i>Wishes Tendayi Mututwa and Oluyinka Osunkunle</i>	103
Chapter 7 Yi Market Yama Phara: The Importance of Social Media for Small Business Development	
<i>Mvuzo Ponono</i>	119
Chapter 8 Cultivating Creativity in Fashion Design Education: A Visual–textual Design Model to Address Online Visual Overload	
<i>Mieke Janse van Rensburg and Bruce S. Cadle</i>	133
Chapter 9 Fan Participation in South Africa's Cultural Economy	
<i>Catherine Duncan</i>	153
Conclusions and Reflections	
<i>Natalie Le Clue, Catherine Duncan and Janelle Vermaak-Griessel</i>	171
Index	181

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Introduction

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This collection offers a critical exploration of participatory media cultures and addresses the lived experiences of users within South and Southern African contexts. Despite the expanding body of research on our social media usage, local audiences and their relationships to texts and each other often remain underexplored. By examining how interpretive communities and online communities of practice engage with and reshape digital cultures, we shift attention to the framework of participatory culture that moves focus from media industries to users themselves: their creative practices, collaborations, and everyday digital labour. This theoretical orientation enables the contributors to challenge conventional understandings of cultural consumption and production through qualitative inquiry and user perspectives, thereby recognising audiences not as passive recipients but as co-creators of meaning, identity, and socio-political discourse.

While this collection celebrates the creativity, agency, and collaborative spirit that characterise participatory media cultures, it also engages critically with the limits and contradictions of participation in the contemporary digital landscape. The optimism that framed audiences as empowered co-creators has, in many cases, given way to more complex realities shaped by platform economies, algorithmic governance, surveillance, and structural inequalities. Several chapters in this volume include a critique of the techno-utopian narratives that once dominated discussions of participatory culture, showing how digital participation today is often uneven, commodified, and shaped by enduring socio-political hierarchies that in our context are caught up in the aftermath of Apartheid. However, rather than abandoning the framework of participation, contributors expand it by attending not only to acts of empowerment but also to experiences of precarity, exclusion, and contestation that mark contemporary participatory practices and life online.

Across the collection, a consistent emphasis emerges on the formation of interpretive communities. Although the nature of participation varies across platforms and demographics, the chapters reveal how users engage with digital platforms as

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Diverse Perspectives on Creating a Fairer Society, 1–4**

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agents shaping contemporary society and meanings, identities, and practices are negotiated in complex social exchanges. Each chapter evidences interactions that influence both personal identity formation and broader public discourse, interweaving individual digital practices and the collective meaning-making processes that characterise participatory media cultures.

These digital engagements are embedded in specific historical and cultural contexts, including the legacies of Apartheid, the philosophical underpinnings of Ubuntu, and the socio-economic realities shaping online participation, which the collection explores through its interdisciplinary approach. Contributors from educational design, digital communication studies, sociology, information technology, media studies, and performance studies employ varied qualitative methodologies, including virtual ethnography, narrative inquiry, media ‘go-along’ methods, and business ethnography, to uncover the textures of participatory engagement. This methodological diversity converges on how users adapt global platforms to local contexts, navigating tensions between global media flows and South African identity formations and material conditions. The chapters thus provide insight into the interplay between global digital technologies and local cultural practices, revealing how participatory media both reflect and reshape existing social structures while creating spaces for novel forms of expression and community.

By centring South African experiences and perspectives, these studies offer detailed, user-focussed accounts of participatory practices that contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary digital life while challenging dominant narratives of media consumption and production. Each chapter makes distinct contributions while common themes of user innovation, contextual adaptation, and self-authorship and collective capability weave through these case studies.

Section 1: Digital Connections

The collection opens by setting the theoretical and conceptual foundation for exploring participatory media cultures from a South African perspective. In the opening chapter, *Kayley Jade Webster and Sarah Gibson* extend this discussion with a focussed exploration of Instagram, examining how young South African women engage in visual storytelling to construct feminine identities. Their chapter reveals how users simultaneously reproduce and resist platform-driven aesthetics, navigating gendered expectations and South African beauty norms in the process of curating selfhood. *Janelle Vermaak-Griessel* further explores fandom traditions, rituals, and behaviours relating to WhatsApp collecting groups.

Section 2: Political Engagement

Building on the dynamics of participation, the second section turns explicitly to the political possibilities and tensions inherent in digital media use. *Natalie Le Clue’s* chapter investigates how Carte Blanche’s online audience interpreted and contested narratives around COVID-19 vaccination during South Africa’s

pandemic response. Analysing X (formerly Twitter) comment threads, she highlights how traditional journalistic authority is negotiated, and sometimes undermined, by participatory audience practices. *Adelina Mbijama's* study of TikTok's influencer culture during lockdown offers a different angle on political engagement, revealing how micro-influencers mobilised political content in ways that blurred activism, entertainment, and misinformation. Her analysis demonstrates the dual-edged nature of TikTok's participatory affordances: while they amplify less documented voices, they also create new vulnerabilities to ideological manipulation. Meanwhile, *Sarah Haffenden, Emma Durden, and Sarah Gibson* analyse a global COVID-19 public health campaign aimed at Southern African audiences, probing the tension between globalised message framing and local reception. Their findings illustrate how participation is often constrained by structural inequalities and power imbalances despite the surface-level interactivity promoted by such campaigns. Together, these chapters critique simplistic celebrations of digital democracy, highlighting the complex, often contested nature of political participation in contemporary digital landscapes.

Section 3: Entrepreneurship and Identity

The final section explores how digital participation intersects with economic aspirations, creativity, and identity formation. *Wishes Tendayi Mututwa and Oluwinka Osunkunle* examine the rise of influencer social entrepreneurs who use platforms such as Instagram and Facebook to build brands rooted in personal storytelling, community engagement, and networked marketing. Their chapter traces how entrepreneurial practices are entangled with the affective economies of influence and the ongoing negotiation between authenticity and monetisation. In a complementary study, *Mvuzo Ponono* focusses on young South African entrepreneurs in township contexts, showing how Whatsapp, Instagram, and Facebook are used not only for advertising but also as a vital tool for building trust, visibility, and entrepreneurial identity in the absence of formal business infrastructure. Addressing the challenges of digital saturation, *Mieke Janse van Rensburg and Bruce S. Cadle* shift the focus to fashion education, proposing a textual design model to help students critically navigate the overwhelming flow of visual content online, fostering creativity grounded in conscious engagement rather than passive consumption. Concluding this section, *Catherine Duncan* examines the ways fan participation feeds into South Africa's cultural economy, highlighting how fan activities – from event organising to content creation – increasingly blur the lines between leisure and labour, and offer important, if precarious, pathways for cultural and economic participation. Together, these chapters demonstrate that while digital media opens new possibilities for entrepreneurship and self-realisation, these opportunities are deeply shaped by structural inequalities and platform dynamics.

This collection emerges from a shared commitment to the spirit of collaboration. By foregrounding diverse experiences and creative practices from South and Southern Africa, the chapters are the result of work by established and emerging scholars, often working closely together, and chart promising directions for future

scholarship. The thoughtful work of each contributor has opened up avenues for understanding of how digital technologies are reimagined within our specific cultural landscapes. We are grateful for the work that went into this conversation, and we look forward to the new questions, dialogues, and possibilities these contributions will inspire.

Section 1

Digital Connections

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Chapter 1

Visual Storytelling and Self-expression as Participation on Instagram: Negotiating and Constructing Feminine-gendered Identities

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Abstract

The use of social media platforms, especially Instagram, cannot be over-emphasised as it constitutes a significant part of a young woman's daily life in South Africa (Statista, 2022). Instagram stands out among visual social media platforms for its emphasis on curated aesthetics, fostering a culture of visual storytelling and self-expression (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 7). This chapter explores how young South African women navigate and participate in constructing beauty ideals on Instagram. The study utilises the theory of Henry Jenkins' 'participatory culture' (Jenkins, 2006, p. 3). In utilising a novel approach to ethnographic research, the Walk-Through Approach (Light et al., 2016), this chapter discusses the nuanced narratives of university-aged female students regarding the performance of feminine beauty construction and negotiation. Identified themes revealed diverse modes of participation, showcasing how participants curate their Instagram experiences to reflect personal preferences and values, and integrate beauty ideals into professional spheres. Participants' performative practices on Instagram reflected both conformity to and resistance against traditional beauty norms, highlighting the fluidity of gender expression. The act of young female university students as both creators and producers of content highlights Instagram's role as a dynamic and participative space for self-expression and identity exploration. Instagram's

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participatory affordances play a crucial role in facilitating the negotiation and construction of beauty ideals within the South African context, contributing to the ongoing dialogue surrounding femininity, feminism, and digital culture. This chapter contributes to the ongoing discourse surrounding participatory media culture.

Keywords: Instagram; beauty; feminism; femininity; identity; App studies; participatory culture; gender performances

Introduction

Over the past decade, South Africa's media landscape has undergone a seismic shift, marked by the rise of digital platforms that have redefined how people connect, communicate, and construct their identities. Social media has emerged as a cornerstone of daily life, with 30 million South Africans engaging on these platforms in 2019 with this number expected to increase to 40.77 million by 2026 (Statista, 2022). This digital transformation has not only facilitated social connectivity but has also become a powerful catalyst for the creation and expression of online identities, relationships, and communities (Bosch, 2020). Central to this evolution is 'participatory culture' (Jenkins, 2006, 2012, 2013), which reimagines social media users as both consumers and creators of content, shifting the traditional roles associated with media engagement (Bruns, 2008; Serafinelli, 2018). Within the cultural studies field, the participatory culture framework extends Hall (1993)'s encoding/decoding model by situating audiences not only as interpreters of media texts but also as active producers within digital environments. Hall's model, which identifies the processes of encoding meaning by producers and its decoding by audiences into dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings, laid the groundwork for understanding media audiences as active participants. This conceptual foundation is elaborated in *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman* (du Gay et al., 2013, pp. 9–14), where the Walkman is described as a cultural artefact inscribed into shared 'maps of meaning'. The authors argue that cultural objects acquire significance through the social practices and interpretative frameworks of audiences, enabling them to become embedded in everyday life (du Gay et al., 2013). Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok exemplify this process in digital contexts, where users actively encode, decode, and circulate meanings, creating new participatory spaces that blur the boundaries between producers and consumers. By building on Hall's insights and incorporating the symbolic dimensions of cultural artefacts outlined by du Gay et al. (2013), participatory culture demonstrates how digital media can amplify and transform the dynamics of meaning-making central to Hall's encoding/decoding model.

This chapter presents a case study grounded in recent research that employs a theoretical framework based on the principles of participatory culture. Through this lens, the research explored how young South African women engage with