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A critical exploration of YouTube texts by and about people with disabilities in South Africa

Lorenzo Dalvit
Rhodes University, South Africa

The work of intellectuals such as Marx and Gramsci has been extensively employed in the study of social inequalities across contexts and in relation to different dimensions. As one of the most unequal societies in the world, South Africa provides a number of past and recent examples of discrimination, oppression and violence on the basis of race, gender, socio-economic and migrant status, political affiliation etc. Despite their continued marginalisation during and after apartheid and despite accounting for a substantial portion (7.5%) of the population, people with disabilities appear relatively neglected in scholarly and media debates. The booming Internet and mobile penetration, which promised to give a voice to the voiceless, increasingly seems to reproduce and at times exacerbate such marginalisation. By drawing on Gramsci's notions of hegemony and public intellectuals, in this paper, I explore discursive constructions by and about South Africans with disabilities on YouTube. Videos and comments are purposively selected from three active channels based on their relevance and are quantitatively as well as qualitatively analysed. The first objective of the study is to understand disability in relation to other dimensions of diversity, e.g. race or gender. Given the intersectional nature of disability, this is particularly important in the South African context where online as well as offline experiences are still profoundly shaped by the legacy of past institutional segregation and discrimination. The second objective is to recognise disability as part of a complex and multi-faceted online persona. The digital space enables people to either hide their disability or bring it to the fore, but it remains to be understood to what extent this is an autonomous and conscious choice as opposed to a defensive strategy or an expected form of activism or awareness rising. The third objective is to recognise, as much as can be gauged from YouTube videos and comments, the extent to which people with disabilities are constructed according to established media tropes. Celebrations, compliments and praise in particular can represent covert forms of victim commiseration or hero glorification thus reproducing tragic narratives and setting low expectations.

Keywords: South Africa, (dis)ability, YouTube, cultural hegemony, organic intellectuals

South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in the world (Marais, 2011; World Bank Group, 2018). Racist, patriarchal and, to a lesser extent, ableist forms of oppression inherited from colonialism and apartheid persist today. The (dis)ability movement contributed to the liberation struggle (see Stadler, 2006) and people with disabilities account for a substantial portion (7.5%) of the population (Stats SA, 2011). However, South Africans with disabilities appear relatively neglected in scholarly and media debates. Supported by the booming penetration of mobile devices, digital media promised to give a voice to members of subaltern groups. While an estimated 72% of the population has access to the Internet (Statista, 2022), such promise has not yet materialised. On the contrary, offline inequalities risk being reproduced and entrenched online. In this article I critically explore constructions of (dis)ability on YouTube by answering three research questions: 1) How can disability be understood in relation to other dimensions of diversity? 2) What role does disability play within a complex and multi-faceted online persona? 3) To what extent are people with disabilities represented according to established media tropes?

Background

Current understandings of (dis)ability are shaped by scholarship within the critical tradition. The medical model, which focuses on (dis)ability as an individual deficit to be cured, has been critiqued and almost unconditionally discredited (Shakespeare, 2006). By contrast, the social model foregrounds the social construction of (dis)ability as a form of discrimination and oppression. Barnes and Mercer (2001) recognise how the concept of cultural hegemony, originally developed in relation to hierarchical and antagonistic relations located in race, gender and generations, also applies to (dis)ability. Discursive constructions of (dis)ability in media texts reproduce the values, worldviews and stereotypes of an ableist society. People with disabilities are thus constructed according to totalising tropes, such as that of victim, villain or hero, which further entrench the "disablement" of different or stigmatised bodies and/or minds. Pierce (2016) argues that recognising the oppressive power of stories about (dis)ability contributes to progressive legislation, accessible buildings and social awareness. At the same time, the author notes the inevitable reliance on labelling, categorisations and oversimplifications which entrench hierarchical relationships.

In an attempt to overcome the limitations of the social model, scholars such as Ellis and Goggin (2015a) highlight the potential role of participation through digital media in enabling people with disabilities to share their own experiences and have their own voices. Rather than being secondary characters in someone else's story (e.g. that of a heroic doctor, a passionate activist, a dedicated caregiver etc.), those with a direct experience of (dis)ability can shape their own narrative through social media. YouTubers with a (dis)ability can be seen as organic intellectuals who repurpose a popular platform as a site of contestation, struggle and resistance (Lydon, 2020). Within a Southern African context, however, Willems

(2012) cautions that not all forms of participation are political and argues that conviviality with power and the elites may be a more fruitful theoretical lens. De Sousa Santos (2012) also problematises the application of western theoretical concepts (e.g. that of public sphere) to Southern contexts.

In South Africa, digital and social media have been extensively used for what Bruns and Highfield (2015) call issue based public sphericules. Notable examples include the Treatment and Action Campaign (Loudon, 2010), the FeesMustFall movement (Bosch, 2020) and the recent social media uproar about gender-based violence (Oparinde and Matsha, 2021). As noted by Bosch (2021), social media movements and awareness campaigns tend to be leaderless and no particular voice emerges as dominant. Also, while they often deal with issues affecting the most vulnerable, social media phenomena in South Africa are generally characterised by a middle class orientation and strong support base. This is not surprising in a country where social media remains a relatively elite phenomenon (Dlamini, Malinga, Masiane and Tshiololi, 2018). Despite boasting one of the highest Internet penetration rates in Africa, most people rely on relatively expensive and sometimes erratic mobile connectivity (see Donner, Gitau and Mazden, 2011). Access to platforms such as YouTube is often limited by the high cost of data and by bandwidth constraints, particularly in peri-urban and rural areas (Venter and Daniels, 2020; Mtotywa et al., 2022).

As so much else in South Africa, social media participation depends on one's race, gender, socio-economic status, geographical location, English proficiency and, last but not least, (dis)ability. The nexus between disability and poverty is well documented (Loeb et al., 2008; Graham, Moodley and Selipsky, 2013). Henney and Tucker (2018) highlight how data cost has a negative impact on South African deaf users, who rely on visual platforms such as Youtube when using sign language. As cultural media texts, YouTube videos and comments reveal hegemonic ableist tendencies. In an analysis of South African YouTube advertisements, Khan (2022) denounces the utilisation of disability as a rhetorical device to lure customers. As a reflection of deeply entrenched patriarchal and racist attitudes, Dalvit (2022) documents the experience of a young female black youtuber who is considered unworthy of anything more than a purely sexual relationship and is expected to form romantic bonds only with other people with disabilities. These examples suggest that past and present social inequalities significantly shape to what extent and in what way people with disabilities are visible and viewed on YouTube.

Methodology

Researching (dis)ability on social media (and particularly YouTube) in South Africa poses specific methodological challenges. Representations are still profoundly shaped by past segregation and persistent power inequalities along racial, gender, age and (dis)ability lines (Bukula, 2019; Reygan, Henderson and Khan, 2022). Bosch (2022) explicitly calls for an intersectional approach in decolonising research methodology in South Africa. In a diverse and politically charged context, a person's (dis)ability as a socio-cultural construct cannot be properly understood in isolation from their race, gender etc. The very definition of (dis)ability is not unproblematic. In the nine official African languages, which the vast majority of the population speaks, the term does not have any association with one's abilities. As discussed in Dalvit (2022) this may create confusion and lead to an underestimate or misrepresentation of the (dis)ability phenomenon. In addition, social media offers the opportunity to hide one's (dis)ability (see Harris, 2020). On a primarily visual platform such as YouTube, some types of (dis)ability may be easier to identify and detect than others. In writing the present article, for instance, YouTubers who use a wheelchair were easy to identify despite accounting for a relatively small percentage of people with disabilities compared to, say, those who are blind (see Stats SA, 2011).

For the purpose of the present study, the notion of a media text refers to YouTube videos and comments in so far as they contribute to the construction of people with disabilities (see Prinsloo, 2009). The starting point for the collection of relevant material were channels and playlists rather than individual videos. While much YouTube content relates to (dis)ability in South Africa, this is too heterogeneous in topic, scope, depth and reach for meaningful analysis. Three active YouTube channels by or about South Africans with disabilities were identified based on their popularity, online presence and continuity over time. . These differ in terms of their scope, number of views, length of videos, presence and amount of comments etc. In order to cover as wide and diverse a range of experiences as possible, a deliberate attempt was made at selecting channels which provide some insights into different disabilities and which pertain to the individual, family and community level. For each channel, three videos were purposively chosen based on their relevance. Despite the limitations associated with purposive sampling (see Sibona, Walczak and White Baker, 2020), this choice was dictated by the realisation that (dis)ability was not the main or only concern in all videos. Table 1 below provides a complete list of the selected videos and relative information.

Channel and Playlist	**Name of Video**	**Link**	**Date Uploaded**	**Length**	**Views**	**Comments**
MzansiMagicOfficial, Short and Sweet	Vovo wants a baby	shorturl.at/hsw09	18 July 2022a	3:45	199355	231
MzansiMagicOfficial, Short and Sweet	No dwarfism for Vovo's child	shorturl.at/dktwO	3 October 2022b	2:19	50655	17
MzansiMagicOfficial, Short and Sweet	Vovo goes to acting auditions	shorturl.at/MV357	30 September 2022c	2:58	46409	43
Somi & Msi	Baptised in fire: the book launch documentary, Part 1	shorturl.at/bRX68	26 July 2020a	36:08	49255	503
Somi & Msi	Baptised in fire: the book launch documentary, Part 2	shorturl.at/cnsBM	11 August 2020a	37:26	33504	657
Somi & Msi	Let's talk about the wheelchair	shorturl.at/choqz	13 May 2020b	19:50	111851	454
Somi & Msi	Are you guilty of these pet peeves??	shorturl.at/bcgT9	3 June 2020c	26:12	39217	378
DeafTV SA, Full Insert	DTV - Asnath Losala	shorturl.at/ghzG1	23 November 2015	8:51	1917	n/a
DeafTV SA, Full Insert	DTV – DJ Tappy	shorturl.at/ipJNQ	7 June 2016a	10:34	1017	n/a
DeafTV SA, Full Insert	DTV - Ashleigh & Nicole Bredeveldt	shorturl.at/mqVY0	15 March 2016b	11:25	888	n/a

Table 1

The overarching goal of the present study is to explore constructions of (dis)ability on YouTube in South Africa. The first objective is to understand disability in relation to other dimensions of diversity, e.g. race or gender. The second objective is to recognise disability as part of a complex and multi-faceted online persona. The third objective is to recognise the extent to which people with disabilities are constructed according to established media tropes. The selected media texts (videos, audio transcripts and comments) were subjected to inductive narrative analysis, a method often employed in research on experiences and (self)representations of disability on YouTube (Angulo-Jiménez and DeThorne, 2019; Hall, Deusdad, D'Hers Del Pozo and Martínez-Hernáez, 2022; see also Smith and Sparkes, 2008). The orientation is primarily qualitative in order to provide an emic perspective. This is complemented by a limited use of descriptive statistics, e.g. to thematically analyse a set of comments or to provide a breakdown of the racial and gender composition of profiles on a given channel. All content used in this study is available in the public domain and was posted by consenting adults. For these reasons, no special permission was required and real names are used as opposed to pseudonyms. Whenever the language used in the texts is not English, a translation is provided by the author with the assistance of a native speaker.

Analysis 1: Short and Sweet

According to the description available on its website, Short and sweet "[i]s a candid and heart-warming new reality series about three little people with big hearts and even bigger dreams" (Short and sweet, 2023). Its videos are available on a YouTube playlist associated with Mzansi Magic, a satellite channel which focuses on local stories. The playlist includes videos featuring Vuyokazi Nguqu (aka Vovo), a female entertainer in her mid-thirties. She is a speaker of isiXhosa, one of the nine official indigenous languages of South Africa, which she uses in most of her videos. This channel was chosen because Vovo is a well-known celebrity who recently received considerable media attention due to her decision to have a child as well as her love life and her work. As an African woman with a disability, her videos provide the opportunity for an intersectional investigation into the relationship between race/culture, gender and (dis)ability.

The first video selected for analysis is "Vovo wants a baby" (MzansiMagicOfficial, 2022a). It features a discussion between Vovo and her maternal aunt, who raised Vovo after her mother passed away. The central theme of the video is Vovo's intention to have a child. The aunt's first concern is that Vovo is not in a stable relationship and prefers to rely on a sperm donor. An estimated 40% of mothers in South Africa are single parents (News24, 2018)) but stigma remains rife. As a relatively senior person steeped in Xhosa tradition, the aunt is also uncomfortable with the prospect of artificial insemination. A second concern raised by the aunt is Vovo's mother's apparent wishes for her not to have children for fear she might die. Respect for elders and the perceived continuous presence of dead relatives in one's life are both very important in Xhosa culture (Bogopa, 2010). Towards the end of the video Vovo's aunt reveals her disgust for men who sleep with Vovo who, despite being a mature woman, looks and sounds like a young girl. She refers to them as sugardaddies, a derogatory term used for older men who sexually exploit young girls (see Hoss and Blokland, 2018). The video ends with Vovo reaffirming her sexuality by listing several positions she has experienced. These attracted a number of (generally positive) comments, such as "😂😂😂That's my first time to hear about helicopter style 😂😂😂" (Sibusisiwe Mpofu, 2022) and "I'm jealous that she can helicopter 🚁 she is the right size" (Thebe Ebigbo, 2022). The latter comment appears to tap into an affirmative model of (dis)ability, which foregrounds it as alternative and occasionally even superior to body/minds "normality" (Stadler, 2006).

The second video is "No dwarfism for Vovo's child" (MzansiMagicOfficial, 2022b). This represents a follow up on a previous one (MzansiMagicOfficial, 2022a), in which Vovo meets with a surrogate mother. In the present video Vovo and a friend are reading the results of a test for dwarfism on the baby. Because of her low level of education, Vovo cannot interpret the scientific jargon of the results. When her friend (who also has dwarfism) clarifies that the test is negative, Vovo erupts in joyous ululations and proudly exclaims that she "will not give birth to a child with dwarfism." (MzansiMagicOfficial, 2022b: 2.19). As remarked in one of the comments, "The other friend is not impressed at all." (John Doe, 2022). Vovo's apparently ableist remark needs to be understood in the context of negative (internalised) stigma against mothers with disabilities, rooted in socio-cultural gendered constructions (see Frederick, 2017; Porter, 2018; Shaul, Dowling and Laden, 2018). Adding to this, in Xhosa culture a child with a disability is considered retribution for the faults of the parents (Sone and Hoza, 2017). Praises to God, who defeated Vovo's supposed enemies, and affirmation of her faith and destiny take up most of the rest of the video.

The third video is "Vovo goes to acting auditions" (MzansiMagicOfficial, 2022c). In the video, Vovo introduces herself and performs a funny monologue about somebody coming to eat at her house while they have plenty of food at theirs. In some of the inserts, Vovo speaks about her passion for acting and lists the movies and commercials she performed in. By being on movie sets, she met other "little people" for the first time (MzansiMagicOfficial, 2022c: 2.58). Unlike other members of subaltern groups such as women, ethnic minorities , migrants etc., most people with disabilities are not born into a community of others like them, where they are socialised and where they can find role models. With relatively rare exceptions, theirs is typically a lonely experience. Vovo is often assigned child roles when no actual children are available. This could be interpreted as an advantage when seen through an affirmative model theoretical lens. However, one must also recognise the danger of entrenching the infantilisation of people with dwarfism and of people with disabilities in general. As noted by Swartz (2018), for historical reasons in South Africa infantilisation plays a key role in representations of (dis)ability but also of women and Africans.

Analysis 2: Somi and Msi

Somi & Msi is a YouTube channel by Somikazi and Msimelelo Boltina, an interab couple. The term interab couple refers to a stable relationship whereby only one of the partners has disabilities. Together with their son, Somi and Msi form a middle class Xhosa family. Their relatively affluent socio-economic status can be inferred from the content of the videos as well as their use of English (with occasional code-mixing with isiXhosa). As a child, Msi (the husband) suffered extensive scars on most of his body because of a fire. Later in life, he became quadriplegic as a result of a car accident. Alongside his job as a professional, he is also a motivational speaker. The Somi and Msi YouTube channel was launched in 2020 with the goal of answering recurring questions posed to the couple and of educating people about disability in general. Besides its increasing popularity, this channel was chosen because Somi and Msi received media attention at the national level where their story became known to the general public (News24, 2020). In most of the 33 videos on the YouTube channel, (dis)ability plays a relatively minor role. Three videos were selected because their focus is explicitly and almost exclusively on (dis)ability.

The first video (in two parts) is "Baptised in fire: the book launch documentary" (Somi & Msi, 2020a). It accompanies the launch of Msi's autosomatography, (i.e. a biographical account of his experience with disabilities (see Lipenga, 2014). The video features interviews with friends and relatives telling Msi's story and how they felt about it with a mix of tragic and humorous anecdotes. Msi's mother's moving account of her visit to him in hospital attracted comments like the following: “While listening to Msi's mom, I found myself pausing to wipe my tears. Thanks for sharing your story, Mr Boltina! This was such an inspirational story, I need to get my hands on your book🙏🏾❤️”(Sedi Mnguni, 2020).

The goal of an autosomatography is at least in part raising awareness and achieving wide circulation. However, this comment raises some concern about what disability scholars refer to as "inspiration porn" (Haller and Preston, 2016; Grue, 2016). This entails superficial representations of disability which fit the imaginary and serve to reaffirm the normality of able bodies and minds. In the video, friends and family also comment on Msi's track record of partnering with beautiful women, pointing to Somi as an example. A discussion of the male gaze enforcing aesthetic canons of female beauty in a largely patriarchal society like South Africa goes beyond the scope of the present study. However, in this context such comments could be interpreted as suggesting that it is exceptional and noteworthy for a man with disabilities to attract beautiful partners. On the contrary, Msi's partner choices are consistent with Shuttleworth's (2004) findings that some men with disabilities tend to display hypermasculinity, possibly as a form of overcompensation.

The second video is "Let's talk about the wheelchair" (Somi & Msi, 2020b). The format is that of an interview, with Somi asking Msi about his condition, whether any improvement is possible, how he felt about it etc. Some of the information, e.g. that Msi's brother is a medical doctor and that he was referred to a specialised clinic suggest a relatively wealthy socio-economic status compared to most South Africans, with or without disabilities. A context and culture specific question pertains to people recommending traditional or religious healers, hoping Msi could regain the use of his lower torso and legs. Msi stresses that, although it was a painful journey, he has come to accept the situation and prefers to focus on how to live a full and independent life. As pointed out by Shuttleworth (2004), independence is part of the expectations dictated by hegemonic forms of masculinity alongside self-control and assertiveness. Msimelelo appears reticent to acknowledge his emotional response at first, pragmatically stating that when one has to cry they cry and then move on. The video ends with both Msi and Somi stating that self-confidence is one of Msi's defining characteristics.

The third video is "Are you guilty of these pet peeves??" (Somi & Msi, 2020c). In it, Somi and Msi take viewers through ten annoying things able-bodied people do around people with disabilities. They are at pains to acknowledge the fact that people often mean well and that, consistent with the social model of disability, the cause is to be found in the way we are socialised. For the purpose of the present study, the most relevant ones are those relating to the relationship between husband and wife. First of all, people tend to speak to Msi through Somi or to assume Somi is Msi's daughter. These are examples of how people with disabilities are constructed as absent, inferior and dependent. Somi was particularly annoyed by the idea that her husband, who is just five years her senior, would have to explain she is not his daughter, as if he were some kind of sugardaddy. The second issue pertains to buildings which are only partially accessible. As an example, applying for a new electronic ID entailed accessing a photo booth into which Msi would have had to be lifted by security guards. As a result, Msi decided to keep his old identity book, which he jokingly referred to as *dompas* (i.e. the Afrikaans word for the document people classified as Blacks were required to have to enter White-only areas under apartheid). Somi's angry reaction can be explained by the fact that these aspects are reminiscent of different forms of violence (physical and structural) Africans were subjected to in the past. The third issue relates to questions about their sexuality. Gerschick and Miller (2013) note how stereotypical view of people with spinal injuries as a-sexual are countered by hypermasculine and hypersexualised attitudes. As an example, Msi ask Somi to comment on this matter and points to her giggles as "all the proof you need" (Somi & Msi, 2020c: 17.43).

Unlike the other two channels, the amount of comments to Somi and Msi's videos allow for a small-scale investigation. A total of 100 comments were selected and thematically analysed. A relative majority of comments (41%) are praises for the channel or the couple (e.g. "I love you guys. Very informative" (Maria Malephoto Moletsane Gasenna, 2020), "Thank you Somi and Msi for sharing your lives with us. This has been my favorite channel during the lockdown" (Tseke Kgaphola, 2020) or "There is something so special about this couple love you so much"). A partly related theme, accounting for 15% of the comments, relates specifically to inspiration. Posts like "Watching from Kenya and I'm touched... Msi you are an inspiration. No room for despair in life. God bless you😍" (Eleanor O, 2020) and "You are my hero,,, together with your wife and the cute baby and the whole family. You've given hope to many" (nd, 2020) reflect established tropes of people with disabilities as either victims or heros, discussed above. The videos elicited sharing of personal experiences in 14% of cases (e.g. "Just saw this video yhooo goodness, i can relate here as im Paraplegic but yhaa thanks to you brother and more to your wife keep up the spirit" (Masibulele Silinga, 2020).

Approximately 20% of the comments praise Somi for her supportive role. Comments like "somi deserves a trophy" (Rachel Mogale, 2020), "I love how she looks at him, she really is a loving woman..." (The Waterless Shower, 2020) and "Somi I salute you ....you are an amazing person, you are teaching a lot of us what it really means when we say “in sickness and in health” only a few can do what you have done" (nd, 2020) suggest that loving and supporting one's partner with a disability should be seen as exceptional and praise worthy. With a specific South African and intersectional focus, Swartz (2020) problematises the invisibility of care for people with disabilities by family members. However, a clear distinction needs to be drawn between recognising the challenges and (often gendered) free labour an interab marriage entails and the danger of refocusing attention to able bodies and minds as reference points. The rest of the comments include praises to God, reflections on appropriate language choices etc.

Analysis 3: DTV SA

The Deaf TV South Africa YouTube channel is a spin-off of a student magazine. It was chosen because it served as a model for similar initiatives in Europe and Britain. It started in 2014 but most videos were posted five years ago. Voiceover narration and a pleasant soundtrack signals that envisaged viewers include people who can hear. Unlike many other people with disabilities, whose experience is often an individual one, people who are deaf can be said to form a community, with its own institutions, culture and language (Akach, Demey, Matabane, Van Herreweghe and Vermeerbergen, 2009; Storbeck and Martin, 2010). The channel features a series of South African Sign Language (SASL) lessons as well as inserts featuring both events and individual profiles. Videos in the SASL category are by far the most popular and account for 8 of the ten most watched videos. Inserts about deaf schools and events attest to the existence of a vibrant offline and online community. However, the present study focuses on individual profiles as these reflect personal experiences and voices. Out of 64 such profiles, Table 2 provides a breakdown according to race and gender. It should be noted that these percentages reflect the gender composition of the South African population but that Whites (who account for roughly 8%) are overrepresented.

	Black	**White**
Female	20	15
Male	16	13

Table 2

The first selected video is about Asnath Losala, an African female athlete who competes at international level competitions reserved to people who are deaf (DeafTV SA, 2015). The link between sport and (dis)ability in South Africa has been extensively researched, in no small measure due to Oscar Pistorius' achievements and murder trial (Ellis and Goggin, 2015b). Asnath is originally from Congo but her family moved to South Africa when she was a child. She studied at a college for the deaf and later moved to England to complete her studies. She claims that the main reason is that England offers better support and education for people who are deaf. Grech (2015) recognises such view of Global South contexts as inherently deficient with respect to (dis)ability rights and opportunities as part of the colonial legacy. The video revolves mainly around her academic and sporting achievements as well as some banter and competitive activities with the interviewer, who is a former classmate. Asnath concludes the video with her wish to become a role model for children who are deaf and an encouragement to pursue their dreams, no matter how out of reach they may seem.

The second video is about DJ Tappy, an African male who is a professional DJ and who is also deaf. Besides being very competitive, professional DJ-ing relies on hearing (DeafTV SA, 2016a). Holmes (2017) challenges such assumption by problematising the link between music and hearing through the concept of expert listening and by proposing a cultural model of deafness to mirror the social model of disability. Alongside DJ Tappy the video features DJ Mati, who is also deaf. DJ Tappy estimates that there are between 6 and 10 DJs who are deaf in South Africa, though not all of them are equally good. This comment attests to a community or at least a network of people who are deaf across the country. DJ Tappy selects his music by watching TV to identify popular songs, which he then tests on the dancing crowd to see their reaction. When asked if meeting DJ Tappy changed her views on people who are deaf, a customer remarked that "they are normal people, they can do everything we can do. We are the same". Such compliments often mask a tendency to normalise people with disabilities, a way to invisibilise difference. DJ Tappy's manager describes him as hard working. While this is meant as a compliment, research conducted in South Africa (Coetzee, Ximba and Potgieter, 2017) suggests that people (and particularly women) with disabilities feel they have to work harder than their able bodied counterparts to prove themselves professionally.

The third video is about Ashley and Nicole Bredeveldt, two twin sisters of European ancestry who are deaf (DeafTV SA, 2016b). They are in their mid-twenties and both work in graphics design, although with different specialisations. They have been using cochlear implants since the age of four. The use of such hearing devices, especially by young children, is the object of heated controversy as it is compared to assimilation into the hearing world and a form of ethnocide (Sparrow, 2010). The twins, however, claim this helped them take every opportunity to interact with hearing people. They practice numerous sports and outdoor activities, including surfing which forces them to remove their implants. This makes them feel strange, hyper-aware of their surroundings and in some instances more brave. Ashely mentions some challenges in communicating at work, e.g. when answering the phone or if somebody turns their back on her while speaking (so she cannot lip read) but emphasises that these can always be overcome. In terms of their race, professions and lifestyle as well as the attitudes they express, Ashley and Nicole reflect their belonging to an urban, middle class and hearing mainstream. The video ends with a view of Nicole's family, which includes two twin boys. Unlike Vovo's case, no concerns are expressed about whether the two boys are also deaf, on the appropriateness of a woman who is deaf becoming a mother or on the presence or absence of a father.

Conclusions

The present paper seeks to contribute to a growing but still relatively limited body of literature on YouTube (self)representations of people with disabilities in South Africa. The channels considered in this article reflect the diversity of South African society at different levels. The focus is on a particular individual on Short and Sweet, on couple and family dynamics on Somi and Msi and on members of a community on DTVSA. Voices range from traditional Xhosa to middle class white and include males as well as females. Consistent with the relatively elitist nature of social media - particularly data-intensive ones such as YouTube - in the South African context, the protagonists appear almost invariably as middle class. Past and present social inequalities significantly shape to what extent and in what way people with disabilities are visible and viewed online. For example, the reference to sugar daddies on both Short and Sweet and Somi and Msi points towards culturally and socially constructed gender roles as well as profoundly unequal gender relationships within the Xhosa culture. Infantilisation, a primary tool of patriarchal and colonial oppression, is worth exploring in more depth in relation to perceptions of sexual relationships with people who have dwarfism as child abuse and of readings of interab couples as intrinsically degrading for the able-bodied partner.

YouTube enables to either push (dis)ability into the background by providing a holistic representation of a complex person living a full life or bring it to the fore by providing inspiration and stepping into the role of an online activist. To different extents, both elements can be identified on the three channels. All videos present people with disabilities as living full, independent and successful lives. This is consistent with a need to be the protagonists of their own story, recognised at the theoretical level in the shift from a social to an experiential and affirmative model of disability. At the same time, elements of activism if not militancy are evident and at times explicit, e.g. in Somi and Msi's video on pet peeves or in Asnath's aspiration to be a role model. Protagonists appear to be aware of their role as organic intellectuals and their responsibilities in shaping public understandings of disability. DTVSA offers an interesting contrast between unapologetic defiance of expectations in the case of a DJ who is deaf and a deliberate attempt at drawing on one's strengths by two graphic designers. These two cases also offer an interesting contrast in terms of grounding within deaf culture vs assimilation into the hearing World, which is worth exploring in more depth.

Despite progressive policies and a vibrant civil society preventing overt discrimination, as cultural media texts YouTube videos and comments reveal hegemonic racist, patriarchal and ableist tendencies as well as internalised forms of oppression. The intersection of the three is epitomised in the case of Vovo as an African woman with a disability being happy that her baby is able-bodied. More subtle forms of internalised stigma could be evinced from the emphasis on independence, confidence and competitiveness as attempts to conform to hegemonic masculinity by the two male protagonists. Elements such as an explicit or implicit focus on awareness raising in channel descriptions, reference to inspiration in the comments, presence of voiceover etc suggest that the intended target of these videos are primarily able-bodied users. Furthermore, the protagonists are members of a relatively small group of people with disabilities who possess the necessary socio-cultural and technological capital to attain visibility on YouTube. Both considerations suggest a possible class bias which, in the South African context, often coincides with a Eurocentric orientation. This points towards the need of considering a decolonial perspective (see Dalvit, 2022) as an alternative theoretical lens in future research on disability and digital inclusion in South Africa.

Biographical statement

Lorenzo Dalvit is Full Professor of Digital Media and Cultural Studies at Rhodes University in Makhanda, South Africa. His areas of academic interest include digital inequalities, online discourses and mobile communication from critical and decolonial perspectives. He (co) authored over 150 publications. He is a National Research Foundation (NRF) rated researcher and has been involved in numerous international collaborations.

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