Discourse, Context & Media 32 (2019) 100343

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Discourse, Context & Media

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/dcm

The commodification of women's empowerment: The case of Vagina Varsity

Shanleigh Roux *, Amiena Peck

University of the Western Cape, P.O. Box 139, Kuils River, South Africa

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 1 September 2018
Received in revised form 29 August 2019
Accepted 2 September 2019
Available online 24 October 2019

Keywords:
Mediatization
Intersectionality
Gender
Women's empowerment
Commodification
Vagina Varsity

ABSTRACT

Vagina Varsity is a South African online campaign aimed at selling Libresse sanitary products to ostensibly young women in South Africa, primarily through the medium of YouTube. In this paper, we investigate the privileging of white women's bodies over those of women of colour in the campaign. In so doing, we tease out how patriarchy is multi-layered and experienced differently by women depending on their race and class. Moreover, we see that black South African women's issues are being served by the campaign *only to the extent which they coincide with those of the dominant group*, i.e. white women in South Africa. To critically investigate this phenomenon, we use an intersectionality framework (Crenshaw, 1989) to discern latent differences in the treatment of black and white women's bodies in the campaign. Multimodality (Kress, 2010; Iedema, 2003) allows us to analyse texts, sounds and images used in the campaign. Importantly, however, we also adopt Kulick's (2003) notion of 'dual indexicality' to explore what is absent or silent in the campaign. We argue that the model of capitalism which commodifies women's empowerment serves to multimodally exclude black women's lived experience of patriarchy and pain.

© 2019 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

South Africa has always been a nation of extreme contrasts, with a great disparity between extreme wealth and debilitating poverty, and it is therefore a fair assumption that the nation's diverse citizens experience their lives (relationships, employment, access to amenities etc.) very differently. For these reasons, social struggles may vary widely for individuals based on their culture, race, geographic region, language and education. Women's issues are also experienced quite differently in South Africa. One case in point was the 2016 attempt by a government official in a predominantly black district in the Kwazulu-Natal province to offer state-funded tertiary education bursaries to women on the condition that they underwent testing to prove their virginity. While this proposal was ultimately ruled to be unconstitutional, it does index. The fact that this proposal could even been tabled shows us that a nation can be very progressive for some, while restrictive and discriminatory for others.

It is these differences in the way differently racialized women experience social life and coming of age in South Africa which this study aims to explore. For this reason, the manner in which Libresse, a brand of 'feminine hygiene' products, markets itself to a decidedly diverse set of women in South Africa is of keen interest here. In particular, we aim to investigate how new media is used to attract and engage women with regards to their lived experiences of womanhood in a country which has many persistent socioeconomic polarities.

Companies have for many years understood the power of marketing to a target group, and for all businesses, the ability to attract the 'right' kind of people to their services is what makes their ventures successful. With many people permanently connected to the Internet through smart phones and other electronic devices, it is no surprise that marketing campaigns have quickly found their way onto the Web, where they enjoy lower costs than on traditional media such as television, wider consumer reach, and the capacity for faster dissemination. Marketers have also quickly caught on to the benefits of using recognizable faces who have built up their own personal following. These online personalities are known as 'influencers' (Booth and Matic, 2011) and are often an obvious choice for companies wishing to leverage their existing 'influencer' credibility.

Added to this, it has also become *à la mode* to create campaigns which appeal to consumers' altruistic side, with an increasing number of marketers engaging with 'woke'[1] clients, or young clien-

* Corresponding author at: Linguistics Department, Robert Sobukwe Road, UWC, Private Bagx17, Bellville, 7535, South Africa.

E-mail address: shroux@uwc.ac.za (S. Roux).

[1] "[A]ware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)" (https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/woke) (Accessed 19 May 2019).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2019.100343
2211-6958/© 2019 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

tele, by tapping into existing digital activism campaigns—that is, any activist campaigns that make use of digital network infrastructure (Sivitanides and Shah, 2011)—such as #MenAreTrash and #MeToo. Companies which appear to have some activist or altruistic orientation for their products or services often spread organically (e.g. through word of mouth, sharing online, retweets), and so combining capitalist motivations with altruistic marketing is economically compelling. Here, we investigate how this dynamic marketing process is at work in Libresse's Vagina Varsity campaign, which we argue is a form of 'borrowed' or 'lazy activism' which furthers Libresse's capitalist motivations by leveraging online personalities and operating under the altruistic guise of creating products or services for the greater good of women in South Africa.

2. Libresse Vagina Varsity campaign

Libresse is an international brand that began in the 1940s and is known by different names all over the world, including Bodyform in the UK, Nana in France, Nuvenia in Italy, and Libresse in South Africa (www.libresse.com). As a brand it has been very successful (www.libresse.com). However, it is the success of the Vagina Varsity campaign, introduced in October 2016 on YouTube, which is particularly compelling.

The campaign emerged as an educational series of videos hosted on YouTube. While Libresse is an international company, the Vagina Varsity course was aimed specifically at South African audiences. The inception of Vagina Varsity marked the first time in South African history that mention of vaginas in relation to feminine hygiene products was publicly broadcast (SABC Digital News, 2016). As such, the campaign seemingly addressed a range of taboo topics within the South African context.

Libresse's decision to use the provocative name 'Vagina Varsity' for its campaign is also considered an important feature of the campaign's success. South Africa's constitution is renowned for its progressiveness, and perhaps fittingly, the combination of 'Vagina' and 'Varsity', a colloquial clipping of 'University', already sets the stage for similarly progressive content to come. The name foregrounds the campaign's explicit focus on the female body in conjunction with an imagined space of young people who aspire to learn within their online 'classes'. This invocation of a pedagogical space is quite fitting, considering that the hosts create a teacher/learner dynamic in nearly all of the videos.

Vagina Varsity is set up as a four-week course. After signing up on a dedicated website (www.vaginavarsity.co.za), the user receives an email every day from Monday to Friday for the duration of the four weeks. The course thereby replicates a school week. For four of the five weekdays, the emails contain links to YouTube videos which discuss the topic for that particular day. Along with the videos, subscribers receive additional information and educational content via email about the topics discussed the videos. On each Friday, the subscriber receives a link to a quiz about the week's content to test their newfound knowledge. In total the course is made up of 16 videos and 4 quizzes, and subscribers move from the assigned status of beginner (week 1) to novice (week 2), intermediate (week 3) and expert (week 4).

The videos were written and directed by the actor and comedian Anne Hirsch, while their educational content was informed by the psychosexual consultant Avri Spilka. The videos are presented by Nwabisa Mda and Thembe Mahlaba, two young, black women based in Cape Town, South Africa. Mda and Mahlaba are also the creators and hosts of the YouTube channel Pap Culture, which emerged in 2015. At the time of this study, the channel had a healthy following of over 10,000 subscribers (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCk4KfvYBQp6fXqQxP9ywG6w). Mda and Mahlaba use Pap Culture to bring out the humorous side of issues that people tend to shy away from and also to share their personal stories and understanding of South African youth culture (Mphure, 2018). As young black women, the presenters also have knowledge of popular cultural trends and arguably have insight into how to address young girls specifically. Moreover, they are likely to have been cast in the Vagina Varsity campaign for their knowledge of YouTube as a virtual media platform. While the aim of Vagina Varsity appears to be to create a fun, relevant and socially aware program to increase women's empowerment, this apparent purpose is critically analysed here in relation to the type of issues covered by the videos and specifically *to whom* they are addressed. Notably, by November 2017, the campaign had received fourteen awards, both local and international (Tennant, 2017), and so—at least in the domain of business—it was deemed a marketing success. Notwithstanding its many public accolades, whether the campaign was truly successful in spotlighting women's issues in South Africa is a question we return to later.

Nwabisa Mda and Thembe Mahlaba were the presenters of Vagina Varsity, and as such played a pivotal role in the success of the campaign. However, within the South African YouTube culture, they would be better known as two of three hosts (including Bongeka Masango) of the channel Pap Culture. As stated earlier, it is not uncommon for companies to draw on existing leverage of online personalities or 'influencers' within the social media platform where they exist as part of their marketing strategy. We see this is the case of Nwabisa and Thembe, who use their actual names for the Vagina Varsity campaign and are recognizable. Below is the information from Pap Culture's 'about' page which provides information about the hosts and their vision for the channel.

Pap Culture is a proudly South African entertainment hub that aims to be authentic to the story-telling of African youth culture. We want to transcend the traditional world of entertainment, to solidify our spot as credible online content producers.

With fresh/thought provoking content, we want to leave you with a smile on your face & have you all clicking pause to indulge in a good long laugh. More importantly, we want to help you interrogate our conversations in your communities, to open up dialogue about the things that matter to young people (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCk4KfvYBQp6fXqQxP9ywG6w/about).

Considering that Vagina Varsity's target audience is South African women of menstruating age, and considering that the majority of women in South Africa are black[2], it makes sense that Libresse decided to cast two young, black women who have already built a certain amount of online credibility as the presenters of the campaign.

Arguably, Nwabisa and Thembe's appeal may also stem from their own stated altruistic intentions for their channel, i.e. "to be authentic to the story-telling of African youth culture" and to create "fresh/thought provoking content". Since the campaign ended in 2016, their subscriber count has grown by nearly 3000 subscribers, which shows that their online currency was advanced, rather than diminished, by their appearance on Vagina Varsity. We will return later to the role which these presenters played in the campaign and its relation to the empowerment of women in the South African context.

We shall now consider the veracity of the campaign's claim to empower women by examining it through the lenses of intersectionality, mediatization and multimodality, which are outlined in the following sections.

[2] Approximately 51% of South Africa's population are women, of whom 80.9% are black, 8.9% are coloured, and7.9% are white (Statistics South Africa, 2018).

3. Theoretical framework

In this section, we will discuss our theoretical framework, which includes intersectionality as well as mediatization. In particular, we consider ways in which an intersectional approach allows us to engage with absences and silences in the discourses of womanhood as it is currently constructed in the Vagina Varsity campaign. We apply Kulick's (2003) notion of 'dual indexicality' to mediatization in order to move past simply theorizing *what is* and move to questioning *what is not* present in the campaign.

3.1. Intersectionality

As the Vagina Varsity campaign speaks specifically to women's bodies, common myths, as well as sex and sexuality, we draw on intersectionality to discuss the relationship between various identity markers. The intersection between body, womanhood and blackness is of particular importance to this study and we argue that intersectionality, defined as "the mutually constitutive relations among social identities" (Shields, 2008: 301), is an important theoretical lens through which to analyse elements that are more than the sum of their parts. The intersectionality framework originated with womanist and feminist scholars of colour who recognized that the majority of feminist scholarship of the time "was about middle-class, educated, white women, and that an inclusive view of women's position should substantively acknowledge the intersections of gender with other significant social identities, most notably race" (Shields, 2008: 302–303). The term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), a law scholar, who argued that "the experiences and struggles of women of colour fell between the cracks of both feminist and anti-racist discourse" (Davis, 2008: 68). Crenshaw claimed that theorists had to take both race and gender into account and illustrate how these categories interact to form the multidimensional experiences of black women (Davis, 2008). Intersectionality entails that "social identities which serve as organizing features of social relations, mutually constitute, reinforce, and naturalize one another" (Shields, 2008: 302). Therefore, "no one category (e.g., 'woman' or 'lesbian') is sufficient to account for individual experience or behavior" (Levon, 2015: 295). This point is particularly salient in the South African context, where virginity testing is still a reality for black women, while this particular 'coming-of-age' ritual or determination of 'purity' has typically not been the experience of white, Indian or coloured[3] women living in South Africa. For this reason, we are interested in the kind of women's issues targeted by this campaign.

3.2. Mediatization

Turning to the medium used for the dissemination of Vagina Varsity videos, we see that YouTube, like many social media platforms, caters to the desires of people across the globe. YouTube itself is listed as the second most popular site (8.74 million users in 2017) in South Africa, beaten only by Facebook (14 million in the same year) (South African Social Media Landscape Executive Summary, 2017). Unsurprisingly, the allure of this particular space is inescapable for companies wishing to extend their reach. When a campaign operates on media platforms, we say that it has been mediatized.

In particular, mediatization refers to the "meta process by which everyday practices and social relations are increasingly shaped by mediating technology and media organizations" (Livingstone, 2009: 3). In other words, the process of just how the media affects views and responses to events is what we understand to be mediatization. Clearly, mediatization occupies a powerful space in the lives of many people globally, and our task is to critically analyse the ways in which the media may have changed (or reaffirmed) the character, function and structure of social institutions and cultural processes (Hjarvard, 2008). Considering that just over half of all South Africans have access to the internet,[4] socioeconomic class may well be seen as an important intersecting factor in the analysis of womanhood, race and bodies as they are constructed in the Vagina Varsity campaign.

In our paper, we approach mediatization critically by following a line of thinking which questions not only what is happening in the campaign, but more importantly, what is not visible. These gaps or 'missed opportunities' are related specifically to the South African diverse context.

3.3. Absence/silence

The notion of researching the absence of artefacts or the silence of voices is an intriguing departure from the traditional approach to analysing data as they readily appear, that is analysing that which is *visible* and *audible* in any given space. Kulick (2005: 615) explains that there is value in analysing "what is barred from performance, what is not or cannot be performed—the not-there, or, rather, the unsaid traces, the absent presences, that structure the said and the done". We aim to investigate just how emancipatory and progressive this award-winning Vagina Varsity campaign is in relation to what is left out. As a point of departure, we venture that what is omitted (in word or form) is a materialization of a particularly pernicious mediatization of women's empowerment discourses in South Africa which advantages the minority white women in South Africa over the majority of women of colour. Following Billig (1999), we don't simply look at what is being said or done, but rather how this particular process of saying or doing is carried out. In other words, while Vagina Varsity has become a celebrated campaign touting progressive women's empowerment discourses, we critically assess the manner in which these discourses are constituted within the campaign itself in order to ascertain its utility and/or potential harm.

4. Methodology

The data collected for this paper is part of a larger study which analyses the semiotic material related to the Vagina Varsity course, including videos, emails and YouTube comments. However, in this paper we focus only on four videos, for the purpose of exploring mediatization and visual aspects of multimodality in particular. Data was collected by the first author of this paper, who registered for the four-week Vagina Varsity course from October to November 2016 in order to gain access to the course content and to experience first-hand what it feels like to participate in the course. A virtual linguistic ethnographic approach (Kelly-Holmes, 2015; Hine, 2000) was employed to gather the data, which included the downloading the videos, taking screenshots of YouTube comments left on each video, along with their number of views, upvotes and downvotes, and recording site traffic and any changes made to the pages, as well as secondary texts about Vagina Varsity.

The videos are analysed from the perspective of multimodal discourse analysis, which places emphasis on "the importance of taking into account semiotics other than language-in-use, such as image, music, gesture, and so on" (Iedema, 2003: 33) and attends

[3] In South Africa, 'coloured' is a term for people perceived to be, or self-identifying as, of mixed racial heritage, and it is not considered pejorative.

[4] In December 2017, there were 30,815,634 internet users in South Africa, which makes up 53.7% of the population (https://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm) (Accessed 8 March 2018).

to how different semiotic modes work together to make meaning (Kress, 2010). Adami (2009) notes that this concept is particularly useful when looking at videos, such as those posted on YouTube, as they incorporate images and non-verbal sounds as well as language. This study therefore investigates the interplay between these various modes and how they collectively convey meaning, with particular focus on how they work together to disseminate mediatized information about womanhood and empowerment. Moreover, we consider what is missing from the assemblage of multimodal elements and ask, 'What could have been found in place of the elements we currently find?'

5. Analysis: Multimodal Vagina Varsity

This section is a multimodal discourse analysis of specific moments within four Vagina Varsity video lessons. The first image we look at is a screenshot from Lesson 1, which serves as a general introduction to the course. Here, the viewers are introduced to the presenters, Nwabisa and Thembe. Within this lesson, they have a discussion about the naming of women's genitalia.

4. Thembe:	Did you know that more than half of women lack the basic understanding of their female genitalia? But don't worry. That's why we're here. The next four weeks, we're going to be talking everything vagina-related.
5. Nwabisa:	We can definitely be using the words Vag Minaj, Va jay-jay, Down There
6. Thembe:	Uh, no. We're going use the correct terms, because things like euphemisms: cookie, flower, enough. We need to know the correct terms so we know what we talk about.

While Nwabisa jokingly mentions different euphemisms for vagina (turn 5), Thembe rolls her eyes and lowers and shakes her head, showing that she does not agree with the use of the euphemisms. Thembe then says they will be using correct (anatomical) terms during the course (turn 6). When Thembe says that they should stop using euphemisms such as 'cookie' and 'flower', images of a cookie and a flower appear simultaneously (Fig. 1).

Even in English we see that euphemisms such as 'cookie' and 'flower' position the vagina as passive, with a cookie being consumable and a flower decorative. We consider these euphemisms as largely universal or mainstream as they are English and recognizable in many parts of the world – definitely not restricted to the South African context.

Other modes come together with these euphemisms of vagina and the accompanying picture, specifically that of the soft background music. We observe that it is playing softly in the background, but when Thembe says 'enough', the music becomes louder and could index the end of a particular culmination of a line of thinking or a changed mindset. Notably, Thembe's statement also sets the tone for this episode as well as the following episode, where Thembe is consistently correcting Nwabisa when she uses euphemisms.

Although Thembe's criticism of calling the vagina by infantilizing or objectifying terms may be seen as empowering, it is important to note that while these words are used by South African English speakers across racial groups, the absence of any reference to African equivalents privileges the already dominant and powerful English language. We argue that by failing to include any reference to, for example, *usisi*, the isiXhosa term for 'vagina', which also

Fig. 1. Two presenters discussing euphemisms, Nwabisa (left) and Thembe (right): Lesson 1.

means 'sister'/'female member of tribe'/'female confidante', black female experiences are addressed only so far as they mirror a white English-speaking woman's experience. Although the campaign mentioned *usisi* once in an email, it nevertheless missed an opportunity to address black women's experiences in reference to their bodies. Also, the different materialities—i.e. multimodal video versus text email—have different affordances and degrees of centrality to the campaign. The video, by only referencing 'cookie' and 'flower', could have just as easily been addressed to an all-white, English-speaking audience. By opting to use English as the medium of instruction throughout the Vagina Varsity campaign, the discourse of women's empowerment is encoded in a language which is not the mother tongue of most of the South African population, with only 9.6 per cent speaking English as a home language (Statistics South Africa, 2011). By positioning English words as the only 'correct terms' for discussing female genitalia and other difficult or challenge subjects, the videos normalize English as the sole language of women's empowerment.

The clothing of the two presenters, as the focal figures of the campaign, is also an important non-verbal accompaniment to their verbal expression. Nwabisa (left) is wearing a loose black and white kaftan-like top, and her hair is short and natural. Thembe's bright pink shirt with an African trim on the pocket and collar is consistent with a pan-African style and her hair is worn in braids. We argue that their attire is part of the assemblage of modes used to package women's empowerment in the campaign and they appear to embody a relaxed and confident attitude towards the subject matter. This particular narrative is in alignment with the way they wish to present themselves on their own channel, i.e. as 'authentic' young Africans providing 'fresh' content to their viewers.

The presenters state from the onset of this video series that they are not experts in the field of healthcare, but that they have an expert on board instructing them. The actual 'expert' appears in Lesson 4, but only her voice is heard; in Lesson 5, she is depicted as an antelope (see Fig. 2). The 'expert voice' appears to be that of a woman speaking English with a 'white' South African accent (see Bekker and Eley, 2007; Bobda, 2000). The fact that she is anthropomorphized as an antelope does to some degree minimize the impact of the authoritative voice being that of a white woman. Nevertheless, by assigning an expert role on 'women's' issues to the voice of white women, knowledge structures and power are ascribed to the already privileged white group.

What is interesting is that the creators of Vagina Varsity use an animal, and not a woman, to depict the 'expert'. The inclusion of a *gogo* (black grandmother) would have greatly increased the sociocultural value for the South African black female viewers and

Fig. 2. Presenters pictured with the antelope (expert voice): Lesson 5.

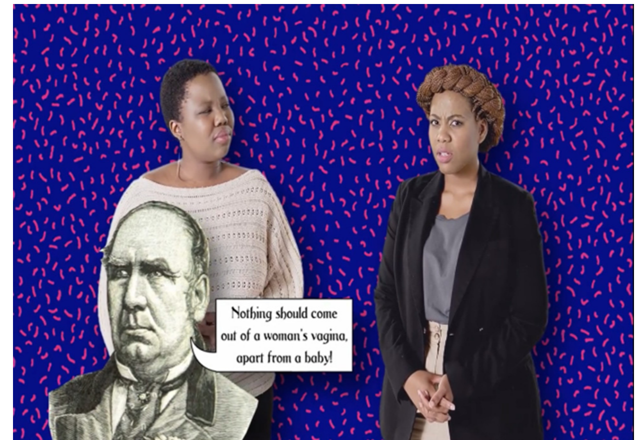

Fig. 3. Two presenters with black and white antagonist figure: Lesson 6.

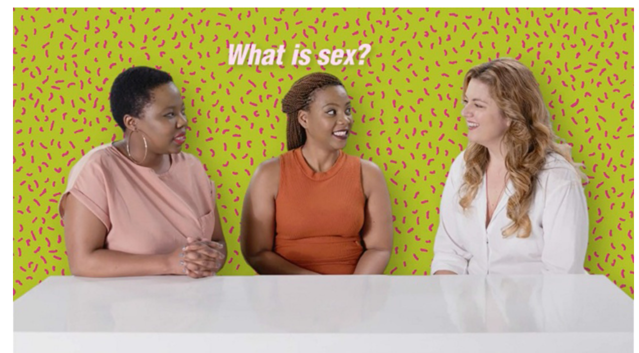

Fig. 4. Nwabisa, Thembe and Dorothy Black (sexpert): Lesson 15.

would arguably have grounded the campaign squarely within the South African context.

Lesson 6, 'Honourable Discharge', is about vaginal discharge, and it is here we first encounter an antagonistic figure in the form of a particularly ignorant white man with an American accent. Based on his Southern drawl, his old-fashioned apparel, and the 'saloon' music that plays in the background when he speaks, one could imagine him as a slave owner on a nineteenth-century American plantation. During the videos, he makes statements which satirize outdated conceptions of the female body which may still persist today. Importantly, the antagonist is quite expressive and can be seen rolling his eyes, shouting nasty comments and behaving in a decidedly sarcastic and contemptuous fashion. For example, when Thembe and Nwabisa talk about vaginal discharge, he comments, "Nothing should come out of woman's vagina apart from a baby!" (Fig. 3).

This plantation-owner-like figure is a strange inclusion. For one thing, there is a complete omission of any race-specific antagonism which this figure could evoke for black viewers; for another, the anachronistic choice of a white American male has little salience to the current prevailing patriarchy in South Africa, especially for black women, which has been missed completely by Vagina Varsity. For example, if the present antagonist were replaced with the voice and image of a black male elder, this would have had much more cultural relevance. As such, while it appears at face value that women's empowerment is an important aspect of Vagina Varsity, the bottom line is that the campaign exists to sell a product and misses opportunities to address real issues women (in particular, black women) face in South Africa. By using the plantation owner character, the Vagina Varsity producers have missed an opportunity to draw on real black South African experiences, such as virginity testing and corrective rape (for which, see below).

Up until this point, viewers had only seen Nwabisa and Thembe, and Nwabisa had taken a learner role while Thembe often played the role of a teacher or instructor. However, in Lesson 15, they participate in an interview-style conversation with a 'sexpert' named Dorothy Black wherein they both occupy a 'learner' role (Fig. 4).

Dorothy Black appears in Lesson 15, 'Sexy Time', as an expert guest. With 2277 YouTube views, this lesson ranked as the fifth most popular of the 16 lessons; by comparison, Lessons 14 and 16 had 988 and 820 views respectively. The high number of views might be due to people's interest in its particular subject matter: sex. While the sexpert might be described as Caucasian, she may well identify with another racial group. Nevertheless, her phenotype is noted as part of the analysis regarding her position as an authority figure. In particular we are interested in a discourse of 'conservative culture and religion' and how this relates to a broader dominant white culture.

The arrangement of the two presenters requesting information from the sexpert does visually support the idea that this single (white) woman is the bearer of information, a corporeal perpetuation of the multimodal signs we have previously analysed.

One could argue that this sexpert (added to the voice of the 'expert' antelope) compounds the black women's experience of not having a legitimate black female authority figure to aspire to. Even the question "What is sex?" presents its own concerns as it implies that women across all races experience sex in the same way. But we know this is not true, because chastity and purity are not viewed the same way by or for black and white women. A case in point is 'virginity testing', which only affects black women in South Africa, due to its anchoring in cultural traditions not found amongst other racial groups. We argue that there is a danger of creating the illusion of all women facing the same challenges (cf. Crenshaw, 1989), which becomes problematic if it then suggests that a solution for one group would serve all other groups, which is clearly not the case.

A conversation ensues in which the presenters and sexpert discuss the definition of sex (emphases added).

5. Nwabisa:	Nwabisa: So when you say uhm sex obviously, what does that actually mean? What is sex?
6. Dorothy:	I love that question and I love that question because uhm for the longest time we've thought of sex as PIV sex. When there is a penis inserted into a vagina. **That's how we've always thought about sex**. That's **how society** has promoted it as being, and yet sex is so much more than that.
7. Nwabisa:	Mmm.
8. Dorothy:	It is every physical sexual consensual engagement that we have with someone, where we get sexy, whether it is with our mouths or our genitals or our hands, or even just our bodies.
9. Nwabisa:	How do men and women or young girls kind of prepare themselves for that? Because I think it's quite a big- uh it's not as easy as just saying "when you're ready" you know what I mean? So how do you get into that?
10. Dorothy:	Ideally, you want somebody that feels that she is in the position to choose the moment, and to want the moment and to desire the moment, and not to just simply be, you know, an object of somebody else's pleasure, that she feels she just has to do this, and **certainly not if it's not consensual**.

In turn 6 we see the sexpert making claims which imply some sort of universality regarding sex. When she explains that PIV is "how we've always thought about sex", she is referencing the dominant patriarchal view that a women's role in sex is to submit to the desires of a man. She's also referring to the dominant heterosexual discourse related to sex. While we cannot refute the fact that there is an overwhelming patriarchal view that exists across the world, we argue that patriarchy itself is something that needs to be critically examined in order to ensure that less-dominant groups are not marginalized in the process of campaigns aimed at women's empowerment.

When the sexpert says "that's how society has promoted it as being", she may be trying to create common ground between herself, the presenters and, most importantly, the viewers. However, ideologies are often created to benefit those in power, and when Dorothy lays the blame of a PIV view of sex at the feet of 'society', we argue that she is subconsciously referring to heterosexual men in particular. Here we cannot distinguish between racial groups of men, but race does become clearer later on in the interview.

In turn 10, the sexpert talks about the fact that sex should be chosen by the woman, and she declares that sex should "certainly not [occur] if it's not consensual". While the sentiment in and of itself is completely valid and beyond refute, the issue of what is deemed as 'consensual' may differ from culture to culture. We question whether black and white women have been objectified in the same way. Dorothy's declaration that sex is 'certainly not' supposed to occur without permission gives the impression that there is a shared consensus on who should have power over a woman's body.

However, considering the attempt at sanctioning virginity testing, we strongly argue for a reconsideration of just how patriarchy may unfold for different groups of women depending on race and social class. This is also true of the different ways patriarchy may affect women's ideas of consent. Our aim here is not to provide answers, but rather to tease out the possibility that patriarchy is experienced disparately, and so statements referring to 'society' actually move us away from understanding the struggles of black women in South Africa; 'society' can therefore be seen as an erasing term, or, as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) would say, a "faceless abstraction". This abstraction is particularly pernicious as it sets up unproblematic and seemingly homogeneous male and female subjectivities. Not unlike Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992: 462), we argue that:

"[T]hese constructions are different at different times and places, and the constructors are people, not faceless abstractions like 'society.' It is the mutual engagement of human agents in a wide range of activities that creates, sustains, challenges, and sometimes changes society and its institutions, including gender and language."

However, we see that the very many different ways in which diverse stakeholders (in this case black women in South Africa) may experience their worlds are sidelined or effectively erased altogether in this campaign.

Later in the interview they address the issue of masturbation (emphasis added).

13. Thembe:	But I also wanna find out about masturbation. How do you advise or suggest that we kind of get ourselves either ready or mentally prepared? Try maybe have a conversation with someone, to kind of try it out, you know? Because I think it might be something important.
14. Dorothy:	Oh, it's absolutely something important, and what's so difficult about this is that uhm you know, when somebody has to- or approaches the idea of- of self-love, of touching themselves, masturbation, uhm quite a lot of the times, they have to deal with uh their entire lifetimes worth of shame and guilt that's been plastered on them, either from **well-meaning parents or from uhm really conservative culture or religion,** and so most people who have to learn to masturbate, still have to start moving through the shame and guilt around it. We talk about orgasm, or what feels good and uhm a lot of our media is- focuses on what the other person needs to learn in order to make you feel good, but if you do not know how to touch yourself and to bring yourself to orgasm, why do you expect somebody else to know what to do with your body?

When looking at the questions that were addressed to the sexpert, we can see that they were broad and general, and not related to black women specifically. We note that the sexpert can only talk about these issues as far as she is being questioned. She may have more information on the topic of black women's experience, but as she is not asked pointed questions regarding race. While at first glance it may appear that she sidesteps the topic of ancestors, traditions, and customs, this may be a deliberate marketing or executive decision which is out of the hands of the presenters and guest. Although she might personally have a broad knowledge of the issues around sex and sexuality, in the video, we only see her draw on mainstream knowledge, which is decidedly in favour of the dominant racial group.

When discussing the shame and guilt associated with masturbation, Dorothy mentions "conservative culture" and "religion" (turn 20) as potential influences. However, it is unclear which cul-

ture(s) and religion(s) she is referring to, seeing as South Africa has multiple cultures and religions. We also know that, historically, the belief in religion has been pitted again the belief in the ancestors within the African context (Bae and van der Merwe, 2008), and so tension exists here. We cannot, therefore, talk about religion and conservative culture as unproblematic categories.

Finally, reference to sex toys and props was made by Dorothy when talking about sex. In a previous lesson, Thembe described dental dams as "latex sheets [that are] used and placed over the whole vulva during oral sex" (Lesson 13). Notably, 'dental dams' are used for oral sex (and are often associated with gay female or lesbian communities), and while the approach Vagina Varsity uses is indicative of the inclusion of same-sex relationships, we argue that the way black gay women in South Africa experience their sexuality may also be very different; for instance, black lesbians in South Africa are often victims of "corrective rape" (see Milani, 2015), while white and coloured women are not. We argue that the discourses of sexual experiences by gay and lesbian people of different races should be viewed more critically. Clearly, in South Africa, having the same sexual orientation does not dictate that women experience their sexuality in the same way. So again, Vagina Varsity is presenting sexuality as a white female (largely uncontroversial) subject, while the black lesbian/gay female experience is only addressed so far as it is similar to what white women are affected by. Crenshaw (1989: 151) sums up this point succinctly when she states that "Race and sex, moreover, become significant only when they operate to explicitly disadvantage the victims; because the privileging of whiteness or maleness is implicit, it is generally not perceived at all". Added to this, the implicit 'equality' amongst gay women is another way that black women's struggles in this domain are overlooked and even erased. When the sexpert talks about toys as if it is unproblematic, it does, in fact, implicitly reinforce the belief that, for example, black and white women experience their sexuality the same way.

6. Discussion

The Vagina Varsity campaign was apropos a South African viewership for a number of reasons. Firstly, South Africa is reputed to have one of the highest rates of gender-based violence in the world (Segalo, 2015). Often, black women in particular are doubly discriminated against due to their race and gender, and are treated as second-class citizens (Segalo, 2015). Emblematic of this situation is the 2016 controversial 'maiden bursary', which was designed for young women who vowed to remain virgins throughout their studies (Stander, 2016). Although this proposal ultimately failed, its very appearance in the media as a bona fide approach to *motivating* young girls to remain 'pure' through virginity testing reveals a pervasive patriarchal *power* directed at young, black women. Notably, virginity testing is traditionally part of the Zulu culture, as part of the reed dance festival, but was abandoned as a growing number of Zulus converted to Christianity (Stander, 2016). However, the proposal of the maiden bursary in 2016 proves that this practice still held currency for prominent figures such as the mayor of the uThukela district in KwaZulu-Natal.

The requirements of the maiden bursary centred on inspection and monitoring of the vagina in order to ensure that purity had been retained. This type of touching is completely missed by the Vagina Varsity sexpert, who addressed touching only in terms of (notably, consensual) sex with another person or masturbation. By leaving virginity testing unaddressed, the campaign erases black women's lived experiences. It is this very racially-biased patriarchal approach to black women's bodies that leads us to believe that patriarchy exists on multiple levels and cannot simply be encompassed to by some homogeneous reference to 'society'.

Crenshaw (1989) reminds us that because ideological and descriptive definitions of patriarchy are usually premised upon white female experiences, black women are seen as somehow exempt from patriarchal norms. That erasure or overlooking of real black female experiences shows a privileging of white female experiences. In this way, the "focus on the most privileged group members marginalizes those who are multiply-burdened and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination" (Crenshaw, 1989: 140). The campaign ignores the fact that black women may need to experience sex education differently because they have different experiences or pain, a point epitomized by the attempt at sanctioning virginity testing for black girls wishing to pursue their academic career.

Implicit privileging of whiteness in the campaign can be seen with the near-complete omission of African references to vagina, so while Vagina Varsity addresses many issues regarding women *generally,* it is essentially seeing all women as the same and all of their problems as shared and homogeneous. Crenshaw (1989:152) explains the problematic nature of these assumptions when she states that "This adoption of a single-issue framework for discrimination not only marginalizes Black women within the very movements that claim them as part of their constituency but it also makes the illusive goal of ending racism and patriarchy even more difficult to attain". By not addressing the fact that black women suffer differently, the Vagina Varsity campaign makes the goal of ending racism and patriarchy even more elusive and in fact offers up a model of black exclusion and a resurgence of white privilege.

Specifically, the missed opportunities occurred here through the inclusion of an antelope with a white South African English voice providing 'expert information', the acontextual antagonistic plantation owner, and the only guest on the campaign being a white sexpert espousing ostensibly universal issues facing 'all women'.

Within the entire 16 videos, there were numerous allusions to women in the phrases "women need", "women are", and "women believe", all of which index the idea that the analysis of 'women' is unproblematic. And since the only authoritative voices emerge as a white sexpert and the antelope we argue that an implicit privileging of a particular discourse on womanhood which favours the dominant white group is foregrounded. This is to say that black women's experiences were only met insofar as they were the same as the issues facing white women. Therefore, while the Vagina Varsity campaign appears altruistic at first glance, we argue that it reinforces white feminist discourse and does nothing to help the plight of black women. There is no expansion or engagement with the black feminist struggle.

Evidently, the Vagina Varsity campaign was not specifically meant to be a response to the socio-cultural problems in South Africa, but by steering clear of **all** black traditional discourse, the campaign has effectively denied black women's experiences and has led to the continued support of the dominant patriarchal structures. We argue that being white produces an unproblematic and unchallenged mediatized subject on women's empowerment, while black women are reduced to the role of learners, assistants or comedic relief. By asking what (and who) is not found in the Vagina Varsity campaign we see how the dominant ideology of race is played out multi-semiotically in the campaign by stylized performances of white authority. We argue that these factors perpetuate and sustain a particular mediatized view of womanhood which sees discourses of empowerment as salient (and in need of voicing and activism), but does so through a capitalist model which appears uncontroversial and acultural. By commodifying discourses of women's empowerment in this way we see that the pursuit of increasing capital gains is conducted in a manner which privileges white women in an already fractured society. More

specifically, white women, their voices and lived experiences are salient to the campaign and their authority is not questioned, while black women, their voices, languages and lived experiences are summarily excluded. This highly problematic hierarchization, legislated during apartheid, continues to be a "cultural grammar" – an unsaid but recognizable mode of representation - that undergirds an online campaign in democratic South Africa.

7. Conclusion

By critically analysing what is missing from this 'successful' campaign, we are able to find invaluable empirical evidence about the ways in which particularly marginalizing sociocultural ideologies are sustained. Overall our critique of the manner in which women's empowerment was mediated is that it creates what intersectionality theory describes as the perpetuation of a single-issue approach to gender and discrimination in South Africa. Although one may (at surface level) perceive the campaign as espousing 'social media activism', 'sex education' and 'women's empowerment discourses', we see that in fact, many black female struggles continue to pass unaddressed. The construction of this campaign is especially problematic as it involves the inclusion of two South African black female presenters who have their 'social online capital' exploited for capital gains. The predicament that the Vagina Varsity campaign has created by casting presenters which intersect black race and gender can be summed up by Crenshaw (1989: 160) when she rightly points out that "Black women are caught between ideological and political currents that combine first to create and then to bury Black women's experience". The marketing campaign is a case in point here, as it used black female presenters (with online credibility) to be the 'face' and 'voice' of women's empowerment and sex education without coming anywhere near to any black female issues, and for this reason we argue that the presenters both create and bury black female South African experiences of sexual discrimination. As such, Pap Culture's credibility, which they have created themselves, is simply commodified. Their online activism is leveraged by Libresse in order to sell products and, despite the casting of two creative African women determined to tell their black lived experiences (as seen in their channel's about page), no space for actual engagement with these experiences is given to them in the campaign. This is a particularly interesting quagmire, as the presenters first create what we hope to be an authentic presence online, only to have that credibility used for capitalist gains. However, they are then able to leverage that themselves on their own channel.

While the transactional benefits may appear necessary for growth on both ends, it is the potential desensitizing or erasure of real issues in the pursuit of increasing the bottom line which may index a growing trend in the mediatized commercial space. Mediatization in the online space holds a lot more danger for those that are marginalized. While it offers a lot more reach for marketers, the reality is that people who work hard to be in the social media space, like influencers, are actually then commodified and used for the marketers' own capitalist motivations. However, despite the deleterious effects discussed thus far, for us the most egregious offence is that of the invisible effect it may have on the viewers of the campaign. By creating a mediatized form of discourse of women's empowerment which favours a privileged white minority through the use of English we see a continuation of an imperial colonial project (Stoler, 2010) in the contemporary social media space. Importantly, it is through an analysis of what is left out or silenced that we uncover the passive and mute role of black women's pain in online marketing campaigns. We argue that this capitalist model of commodifying women's empowerment through dominant white feminist discourses anchors deep-rooted feelings of unworthiness and unimportance amongst already over-burdened black women in South Africa. Left unchecked, this model may be more pervasive and harmful than the overt discrimination which this 'progressive' campaign arguably purports to rail against.

Funding

This work was funded by VLIR-OUS (ZEIN2016RIP36) and the National Research Foundation (Project number 107534).

References

Adami, E., 2009. Do You Tube? When communication turns into video e-nteraction. In: Torretta, D., Dossena, M., Sportelli, A. (Eds.), Migration of Forms, Forms of Migration. Proceedings of the 23rd AIA Conference. Progedit, Bari, pp. 371–386.
Bae, C.S., van der Merwe, P.J., 2008. Ancestor worship – is it Biblical? HTS Theol. Studies 64 (3), 1299–1325. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v64i3.63.
Bekker, I., Eley, G., 2007. An acoustic analysis of White South African English (WSAfE) monophthongs. Southern African Linguistics Appl. Language Studies 25 (1), 107–114. https://doi.org/10.2989/16073610709486449.
Billig, M., 1999. Freudian Repression: Conversation Creating the Unconscious. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
Bobda, A.S., 2000. Comparing some phonological features across African accents of English. Engl. Studies 81 (3), 249–266. https://doi.org/10.1076/0013-838X(200005)81:3;1-M;FT249.
Booth, N., Matic, J., 2011. Mapping and leveraging influencers in social media to shape corporate brand perceptions. Corporate Commun.: Int. J. 16 (3), 184–191. https://doi.org/10.1108/13563281111156853.
Crenshaw, K., 1989. Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. Univ. Chicago Legal Forum 1989, 139–168. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.21.100192.002333.
Davis, K., 2008. Intersectionality as buzzword: a sociology of science perspective on what makes a feminist theory successful. Feminist Theory 9 (1), 67–85. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700108086364.
Eckert, P., McConnell-Ginet, S., 1992. Think practically and look locally: language and gender as community-based practice. Annu. Rev. Anthropol. 21, 461–490.
Hine, C., 2000. Virtual Ethnography. Sage, London.
Hjarvard, S., 2008. The mediatization of society: a theory of the media as agents of social and cultural change. Nordicom Rev. 29 (2), 105–134.
Iedema, R., 2003. Multimodality, resemiotization: extending the analysis of discourse as multi-semiotic practice. Vis. Commun. 2 (1), 29–57. https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357203002001751.
Internet World Stats: Usage and Population Statistics. (2018). Retrieved from https://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm.
Kelly-Holmes, H., 2015. Analysing language policies in new media. In: Hult, F., Johnson, D. (Eds.), Research Methods in Language Policy and Planning: A Practical Guide. (1st edition). John Wiley & Sons, pp. 130–139. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118340349.ch12.
Kress, G., 2010. Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication. Routledge, London.
Kulick, D. 2003. 'No', Language and communication, special issue on 'Language and desire', In: Cameron, D., Kulick, D. (Eds.), vol. 23(2), pp. 139–151.
Kulick, D., 2005. The importance of what gets left out. Discourse Studies 7 (4–5), 615–624. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445605054408.
Levon, E., 2015. Integrating intersectionality in language, gender, and sexuality research. Language Linguistics Compass 9 (7), 295–308. https://doi.org/10.1111/lnc3.12147.
Livingstone, S., 2009. On the mediation of everything: ICA presidential address 2008. J. Commun. 59 (1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2008.01401.x.
Merriam-Webster. 2019. Definition of woke. Retrieved from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/woke.
Milani, T., 2015. Sexual cityzenship: discourses, spaces and bodies at Joburg Pride 2012. J. Language Politics 14 (3), 431–454.
SABC Digital News. 2016, 31 October. Avri Spilka on the world's first Vagina Varsity [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vUUgkF93phw.
Mphure, I., 2018. Pap Culture: the Youtube channel giving a face to South African youth culture Retrieved from https://sheleadsafrica.org/pap-culture/, .
Pap Culture YouTube 'About' Page. 2019. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCk4KfvYBQp6fXqQxP9ywG6w/about.
Segalo, P., 2015. Gender, social cohesion and everyday struggles in South Africa. Psychol. Soc. 49, 70–82. https://doi.org/10.17159/2309-8708/2015/n49a6.
Shields, S., 2008. Gender: an intersectionality perspective. Sex Roles 59, 301–311. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-008-9501-8.
Sivitanides, M., Shah, V., 2011. The era of digital activism. In: Conference for Information Systems Applied Research (CONISAR) Proceedings, Wilmington North Carolina, pp. 1–8.

South African Social Media Landscape Executive Summary. 2017. World Wide Worx. Retrieved from http://www.worldwideworx.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Social-Media-2017-Executive-Summary.pdf.
Stander, S., 2016. Subordination vs. agency/resistance in South Africa: Virgins bargaining their way through higher education. Stellenbosch Theol. J. 2 (2), 431–445. https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2016.v2n2.a20.
Statistics South Africa. 2011. Census in brief. Pretoria: South Africa.
Statistics South Africa. 2018. Mid-year population estimates. Pretoria: South Africa.
Stoler, A.L., 2010. Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule. University of California Press, California.
Tennant, J., 2017. #Newsmaker: Net#work's Brad Reilly on the multiple award-winning Vagina Varsity campaign Retrieved from https://www.bizcommunity.com/Article/196/16/170864.html, .
www.libresse.com