


# 'Who am I, really?' – Self-help consumption and self-identity in the age of technology

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This article offers an analytic exploration of self-disclosed accounts by consumers of self-help media with regard to how their engagement with these texts influences their self-identifying efforts. Relying on a thematic discourse analysis of data from in-depth interviews with 10 black avid self-help consumers, this article outlines in what ways, according to these individuals, their notions of self-identity are impacted by the self-help texts they consume. A relationship between self-help media consumption and self-identity, I argue, exists based on the grounds that the educational nature of the self-help text renders it a key tool of 'guidance' to these self-help consumers. It is a guidance that is intricately linked to the media's endorsement of mediated experiences – through various communication technologies – from which consumers of these distant experiences vicariously 'learn' to ultimately attribute these lessons to their own social relations. This, in turn, allows for the carving of their own identities based on the 'ideas' they have at their disposal.

**Keywords:** Self-help; Self-identity; Self-disclosure; Media; Technologies.

## Introduction

The concept 'self-help', in this article, is used to describe the process of obtaining information or advice for resolving perceived problems, particularly of a personal or psychological nature. The information is mainly provided by an expert or professional – through communication technologies such as books, videos and various other digital and audio-visual 'self-help technologies' (Rimke 2000) – without granting any direct supervision except proposing independent consumption of this information, with the said outcome being personally beneficial to the self-help seeker (Rens 2016).

Tied to the quest to self-help are intricate processes of confession and self-disclosure. The context and backdrop against which these confessional practices prevail range from self, priestly to group confession.

The idea of self-confession points to the practice of self-interrogation, usually privately so. Its counterparts, peer and priestly confessions, present a less private sense of 'coming clean', where the former typically involves the practice of confession based on shared experience and understanding, for instance, the 12-step groups and so on (Rimke 2000). With regard to the latter, priestly confessions, the Roman Catholic church's confession cabinet, for instance – characterised by a thinly veiled separating apparatus between the confessing subject and the priest – can be considered as one of varying examples. To self-help, thus, means to self-disclose and self-confess that which is deemed a 'problem' within the self (Rimke 2000).

This study focusses exclusively on black South Africans. This decision is driven by an assumption guided by how the sociopolitical history and realities of black South Africans have been – and continue to be – discursively and conceptually reflected upon by lay-persons and academic scholars alike. Noteworthy literature on South Africa's sociopolitical history references a context of segregation, and this work often follows a rhetoric situating the black South African citizen in a position indicative of an experience of suffering and oppression deemed more distinctly manifest even in the present socio-economic and sociopolitical landscape of the country (Balía 2004; Goodman 2006; Mda 2002; Nebe 2012; Reddy 1997; Van Zyl 1999). Compared to their mixed race and Indian counterparts, black South Africans are documented in ways that point to them having suffered high(er) levels of trauma as they were often subjected to direct disputes and clashes with the apartheid government that had embarked on several fatal means to safeguard a political

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system promoted and idealised by the leadership of the day (Goodman 2006; Mathabane 1986; Wilson 2001).

Tanya Goodman (2006), in her work on South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, provides some details in line with the above observation. She grants a brief citation from the Durban HRV Hearings of 1996 regarding how, usually, the chairman of the commission would wrap up a day's session of testimony as per 'ritual' in the commissions:

The overwhelming majority of people who have suffered in this country and who have borne the brunt of the resistance are black South Africans. Some times it is not a bad thing to remember that here and there were white people, Indian people, coloured people, who dared to pay the price as well in putting this together [...]. (p. 182)

Scores of black lives were lost during this segregation-based period. This has fostered an animosity continuously presenting itself through displays of sometimes-violent interracial occurrences widely trending in South African news media and on social media platforms. Thus, rendering it challenging for the promotion of a racially integrated nation across various social spheres in South Africa (Pilane 2016; Savides 2016). It is against this contextual backdrop that this article supports a plausibility in assuming that black South Africans were and still are faced with an ongoing challenge of re-identifying and navigating their way as citizens in the democratic dispensation. How, in the current liberalised sociopolitical conditions of South Africa, do black South Africans take to (re)-identify? What informs these self-, and sometimes, group-identification projects in post-apartheid? These questions underpin the core motivation behind this study's exclusive focus on black South Africans.

Whether or not that could motivate a turn to self-help technologies in the case of the black South Africans selected for participation in this study makes for a valuable investigation. Taking into account characteristics attributed to the self-help text: its provision of techniques on how to deal with perceived social and psychological shortfalls, is this product perhaps considered ideal in providing helpful guiding mechanisms, as well as self-identity cues to the black South Africans participating in this study?

## Grappling with the notion of identity in the age of media technologies

When it comes to issues of identity, the South African context has enjoyed wide exploration from scholars and commentators focusing on ideas of collective identity and the influence thereof on individual identity formation, as well as the media's argued role in this process. The concept of identity is defined at the level of the person as well as at the level of the collective. As an indication of both personhood and collectiveness, identity makes reference to forms of individual personhood or self-image, as well as to the collective self-image shared by the members of social

groups and communities (Rousse 1995). As an indication of personhood on the individual level, identity refers to the markers of individuality and uniqueness that differentiate the person from other people and – when looking at the notion as a collective definition – refers to the sameness or continuity of the self across space and time (Zegeye & Harris 2003).

The construction of identities, as Stuart Hall (1997) notes, relies on an interplay of discursive resources involving history, language as well as culture among others. This emphasises how identities are a process of becoming rather than being; that is to say, identity is not a given but a construction instead. Storey and Turner's (1999:210) approach supports this frame of reference in line with Hall that history, context and routines of everyday life (culture) form part of the key aspects in this 'symbolic project' that is the construction of the self. Related literature paints a picture of self-identity as multidimensional, viewing identity development as a process symbolised by a mat or scarf interwoven with various 'threads' that range from gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and many other aspects (Nebe 2012).

Along with this multifaceted veracity of identity, Krueger (2010) writes about identity as a concept which, over time within scholarship, shifted from being viewed as a product borne from a stagnant set of traditions, cultural and communal beliefs to being viewed as an impermanent, instable construct. This impermanency renders identity in a continuous state of flux (Zegeye & Harris 2003). It is David Gauntlett (2008) who reflects on the existence of several other aspects individuals deploy to aid in their construction of an identity.

These aspects, referred to as 'other axis of identity', help us understand the complex nature of identity formation and inform us of a much broader sense of imagining the process of developing and carving an individual identity. So shares Gauntlett (2008):

Identities, of course, are complex constructions, and gender is only one part of an individual's sense of self. Ethnicity is obviously an important aspect of identity, and like gender may be felt to be more or less central to self-identity by each individual, or might be made significant by external social circumstances (such as a racist regime or community). Other much discussed axes of identity include class, age, disability and sexuality. In addition, a range of other factors may contribute to a sense of identity, such as education, urban or rural residency, cultural background, access to transportation and communication, criminal record, persecution or refugee status. (p. 15)

It is helpful to think of identity as a complex, ever-changing social construct involving intricate internal and external influences. Influences which the media and media technologies – through their allowance for the dissemination of discourse-laden material – are forerunners. In modern society, to draw on Giddens (1991:3–4), the making of the self (identity development) is a constantly-influenced, reflexive process reliant on modern society's provision of 'a puzzling

diversity of options and possibilities'. He observes that in our present-day world – a setting that he refers to as 'high' or 'late' modernity – the media play a notable role in people's efforts at identity construction:

In high modernity, the influence of distant happenings on proximate events, and on intimacies of the self, becomes more and more commonplace. The media, printed and electronic, obviously play a central role in this respect. Mediated experience, since the first experience of writing, has long influenced both self-identity and the basic organisation of social relations. With the development of mass communication, particularly electronic communication, the interpenetration of self-development and social systems, up to and including global systems, becomes ever more pronounced. (Giddens 1991:3–4)

Contemporary academic commentary exploring identity in post-apartheid South Africa take on an approach bound, to a great extent, to the idea that memory (expressed also as history when considering Hall's contributions) plays a key role in facilitating identity formation. Mda (2002) argues explicitly that identity may not be constructed at the expense of memory as we are, in fact, products of the past that is carried by a memory still lingering today. Identity formation in the aftermath of apartheid, segregation and racism is said to happen in the shadow of historical trauma. This traumatic history is argued to have a hand in how identities are formed in post-apartheid. As Nebe (2012) stipulates:

The democratic transition had failed to acknowledge the full extent of the historical trauma of racism and division within the country, and that this failure had begun to have a profoundly negative impact on the identities of a new, young generation. (p. 156)

The media, through a popularised culture of remembrance, play a defining role in the enhancement and perpetuation of the country's historical memory which is exposed to the younger generation citizens. These citizens – descendants of individuals from various of the racial groups – were not directly present in the state of affairs under the apartheid regime, but are implicated by the historical memory of the country. It is through these moments of remembrance in the form of, for instance, television media and other technologically-advanced online video platforms' mass dissemination of documentaries and films about the 'struggle' faced, to a significant extent, by black South Africans (and those of other races who stood in solidarity with them); that the identities of the current generation are partly constructed. Television media and more contemporary digital media platforms such as YouTube and audio-visual blog sites aid this culture of remembrance, through their allowance for the widespread dissemination of content depicting the country's murky sociopolitical past. Herein, we witness, the deployment of socio-politically embedded notions such as 'previously disadvantaged' tied to black identities and – although mostly imposed through discursive 'force' – white identities being tied to ideas of 'privilege'. This is just one way in which the media (and communication technologies) are directly involved in the construction of individual and social (collective) identities in post-apartheid South Africa.

## Performing the self: 'I can be who they want me to be!'

The idea of a 'collective identity' points to an incorporation of a sense of 'us' and 'them' determined along racial, linguistic, ethnic and cultural lines, among other things. As a member of the 'us' group, an individual is likely to possess attributes that enhance this differentiation between an 'us' and a 'them'; they presumably also behave and socially carry themselves as expected and collectively affirmed by all the 'insiders'. These collective identities are also not permanent or fixed but in constant flux (Zegeye & Harris 2003). Even so, a desire to closely align the self with members of the 'inside' collective may pose as motivation to strive to always fit in. Fitting in, then, will be determined by the nature of interaction between the self and others in close proximity.

A seminal body of work by sociologist Erving Goffman offers a helpful proposition to grappling with human interaction. In essence, Goffman (1959b) argues for the world as a stage. Because humans are not passive but knowledgeable and active beings, we possess information that accounts for the decisions we make with regard to how we behave in various settings. 'Setting', as explained by Goffman (1959a:32–33), refers to the idea of a setting in the form of a performance background encompassing elements such as physical layout, décor and furnisher. Goffman (1959a) suggests:

First, there is the 'setting', involving furnisher, décor, physical layout and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it. A setting tends to stay put, geographically speaking, so that those who would use a particular setting as part of their performance cannot begin their act until they have brought themselves to the appropriate place and must terminate their performance when they leave it. (pp. 32–33)

In essence, we take on a specific performance which we deem appropriate for the 'audience' (in this case, members of a social category we wish to be accepted in) within the setting we find ourselves. This process of devising our own conduct relies on oneself. However, there is no turning a blind eye to the existence of external influences. There are external factors responsible for enhancing or, perhaps, facilitating our interactional behaviour with others. These influences vary but are inclusive of a variety of aspects such as stereotypes that drive how 'insiders' mark one another's membership in particular social categories; which, in effect, promotes the development of certain social identities.

Social identities are crucial as they provide the individual with an opportunity to 'belong' and fit in to social categories desirable to them. However, certain constraints may hinder the successful incorporation of an individual into a social category. One such constraint manifests in the form of stigma. Goffman's (1963) conceptualisation of the notion of stigma is fostered by an observation that humans draw on mental categories that allow them to attribute certain characteristics – perceived to be 'ordinary' or natural for the members of a particular social category – on to, for instance, a stranger who

initially occupies a new social collective. If the stranger in question – after being assessed by insiders using stereotypical signposts as a guide – is found to not fit the ‘natural’ or ordinary characteristics known to be carried by members of the social category; the stranger is reduced in these peoples’ minds ‘from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. Such an attribute is a stigma’ (Goffman 1963:12). As a potential to take on the role of a ‘stranger’ at some or other time in one’s life through ‘invading’ novel social groupings, human beings often strive to avoid the chances of being stigmatised by the people they initially come into contact with. In attempt to ‘dodge’ this potentially crippling effect, striving to fit in becomes a key focus point in this regard. Resulting, thus, in very subtle or obvious attempts at ‘performing’ a particular sense of self across various social contexts which, once again, impacts self-identification efforts.

## Methodology

### Recruitment of study participants

For initial recruitment, I made use of my personal social media accounts to seek suitable research participants. Many of my connections on these platforms are of the black race. Being an active user of three widely used social media platforms – Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, I updated a detailed post on my Facebook timeline. Herein, I openly explained my research project and what it was about. I went on to post the same post on LinkedIn with the aim of attracting more potential research participants for the study. Due to the limited amount of texting space one is permitted on Twitter, it was beneficial for me to link my Facebook account to my Twitter account, and this made it possible to post a hyperlinked tweet which, when clicked on, redirected the individual to the more thoroughly detailed Facebook post.

Along herewith, I used direct email communication to seek potential participants by relying on a ‘snowball’ effect. All this happened alongside word of mouth recruitment efforts which would produce several potential participants from which to carefully select 10 suitable respondents. Following just over a month-long period of recruitment efforts, 10 suitable participants – as introduced below (Table 1) – were selected. It is important to note, at this point, that the age groups of these participants are as a result of the demographic composition of my own networks and connections on the social media and communication platforms used to recruit participants. My connections and networks are predominantly between the ages of above 20 and 30. The fact that the 10 participants, at the time, were between the ages of 21 and 27 was not a deliberate recruitment requirement, rather a consequential outcome based on my positioning as a researcher.

### Collection of data: In-depth interviews

This study made use of one-on-one interviews as a means to collect data. The interviews proceeded in the form of deep dialogues guided by semi-structured questions that accompanied more questions as these emerged within the

**TABLE 1:** The 10 study participants.

| Name†     | Age (2014 and 2015) | Gender |
|-----------|---------------------|--------|
| Ayanda    | 23                  | Female |
| Breeze    | 27                  | Female |
| Butterfly | 23                  | Female |
| Dineo     | 21                  | Female |
| Faith     | 23                  | Female |
| Mandy     | 21                  | Female |
| Mo        | 25                  | Male   |
| Muzi      | 25                  | Male   |
| Nonny     | 22                  | Female |
| Sisana    | 24                  | Female |

†, All names are referred to by self-chosen pseudonyms.

interview sessions. Interviews, as research techniques, are useful means by which we can use individuals as sources of evidence in our research (Stokes 2013:114). The interview method in social science research enables us a great deal to discover people’s ideas, opinions, and attitudes concerning certain phenomena (Stokes 2013:114). Due to its beneficial significance within this study, the interview method was an intellectually beneficial technique to deploy.

### Data analysis

A discourse analysis was deployed to analyse the data. This study embarked largely on what Gee (2014:8–10) explains to be a ‘descriptive’ approach to discourse analysis. The study was interested in exploring the ‘content’ of the language used within the interview sessions. I interrogated the data by seeking to particularly carve and depict issues and themes regarding the conversations shared between myself and the participants. This rendered my approach closely aligned with a ‘thematic’ discourse analysis which Braun and Clarke (2006:81) describe as ‘a method for identifying, analysis, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail’.

My deployment of a thematic analysis was in line with realist or essentialist approaches (Braun & Clarke 2006) in that I engaged in the reporting of experiences, meaning and realities of the study participants to elucidate deeper meaning around the social phenomenon of self-help consumption. I was particularly interested in how self-help and self-identity issues were talked about.

### Self-identity construction: A challenging task

Exploring identity in its discursive manifestations, I started off all interviews by querying participants about how they perceived their identities and from these responses emerged insights that incorporate nuanced ways in which the 10 participants reflect on constructing and reconstructing their perceptions of self-identity. Quite striking as well was a noteworthy difficulty in confidently responding to this query.

Breeze (Interview, November 2014) found it difficult to respond to the question regarding what she believes makes up her identity. She resorts to respond by mentioning that she (at the time of the interview) is in between ideas of what her

identity comprises. Relating this to the fact that she is undergoing certain undesirable personal experiences, she shares:

'Wow! (Laughing). I didn't think this was going to be about me. I thought it was going to be generally speaking. Generally about people. Self-identity? Uhhh, how would I self-identify? You know, it's difficult for me to say right now because when I met up with you I did tell you that I was going through some stuff. Some emotional, psychological changes. So, right now at this stage I'm in between ideas of who I am and who I could be and what I identify with.' (Participant 2, female, 27, Unemployed Graduate)

That Breeze, as she points out, is in between ideas of who she is and who she *could* be; is indicative of an existence of a point of reference that houses these 'ideas' of who she could be; which she consults to assist her in her quest to self-identify. This is a quest that is evidently challenging because – at the time of the interview – this respondent found it 'difficult to say' what her identity comprises. Breeze also refers to certain internal aspects (emotional and psychological changes) as hindrances towards her plight to carving a sense of who she is and 'could be'; further expressing what seems to be a challenge met with self-identifying.

Asked to share the things she believes influences her identity, Ayanda (Interview, February 2015) provides the following explanation:

'I think hardships in life; things that I've been through. I think pure coincidence; me posting a picture [on social media platforms] of me doing something and someone commenting and referring me to something. Reading and exposing myself to new things, I think. Sometimes you grow overnight and I wake up and I'm like, I don't like this anymore and I don't want to put up with this anymore – I would change and that's where the spiritual aspect comes in.' (Participant 1, female, 23, Media Strategist)

Ayanda speaks to a deployment of other people's 'referrals' to things that she is motivated to explore and, in turn, carve a clearer sense of who she ultimately identifies as from these points of reference, which, as it becomes apparent, are external. Through her reading and use of social media technologies, Ayanda exposes herself to external elements that she claims have an effect on her identity formation. One would deduce that it is with external and internal reference points at their disposal that these individuals would generally be confident in their sense of self-identity. Even so, self-identity development is evidently not a straight-forward and easy-to-accomplish process. Participants were notably taken aback by this query and struggled, to some extent, to grant a confident response in this regard.

Take, for instance, this response from Dineo (Interview, February 2015) who, before attempting to answer, acknowledges a sense of discomfort in that she finds my query into who she identifies as, as an 'awkward' question:

'Awkward question (giggles). Okay, how do I identify myself? I think I'm a bit more of a progressive individual; so nothing is

ever standing still for me. There's always something that's challenging me, that's making me grow; something I discover about myself every day, you know, that I want to enhance. So, yeah, those are the key attributes to myself.' (Participant 4, female, 21, Advertising Intern)

In the interview session, this participant expressed this sense of discomfort in that she took a considerable pause right after this sentence: 'Awkward question (giggles). Okay, how do I identify myself?' demonstrating this sense of difficulty in the process of identity formation. Preceding her attempt at an explanation of her identity, Butterfly (Interview, December 2014) had a particular expression of surprise at the fact that I asked about identity. She started off her response in this manner: 'Oh my goodness, Simphiwe! How do I self-identify?'

Faith's response (Interview, December 2014) to the question I posed regarding her identity, further highlights this difficulty. She says:

'I'm Faith. Zulu-speaking, outspoken, social, very friendly, but yeah I'm ... this is so weird. I've never really had to think about it, but yeah, I'm a strong-willed person and I'm quite dominating sometimes. My nature's a bit dominating; I try not to be but yeah, I'm just there – an out there person.' (Participant 5, female, 23, Pharmacy Student)

Although confidently listing certain attributes she regards as making up her identity, Faith also had discomfort in having to respond to this query as she, mid-sentence, utters the following words: '[...] this is so weird. I've never really had to think about it, but yeah'. Reference to feeling 'weird' due to the fact that self-identity is seemingly not something top of mind for her captures this discomfort. The adjective 'weird' as defined in the Macmillan online dictionary refers to anything 'strange and unusual, sometimes in a way that upsets you' (Macmillan online dictionary 2018). Considering this definition of the term and its deployment in Faith's sentence, it is plausible to claim this participant found it strange and unusual to be asked who she identifies as.

Self-identifying seems evidently challenging for the individuals participating in this research. It appears there are various reasons for this, including the fact that perceptions of identity are not actively kept top of mind by these participants. In addition, internal (emotional and psychological) and external (exposure to information sources such as book or 'advice' from other people) influences render these individuals in a constant state of flux which makes it difficult to develop a consistent sense of self. This inconsistency in self-identity highlighted by these participants re-emphasises scholarly observations that identities are impermanent, instable constructs in continuous flux (Krueger 2010; Zegeye & Harris 2003). This observation notably aligns with arguments by scholars such as Stuart Hall (1997) who underlines that identity construction is reliant on an interplay of discursive and cultural resources. These may be internally and externally sustained. Thus, as Nebe (2012) proposes, identity development symbolises a scarf or mat-carrying

interwoven threads ranging from gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and – as evidenced by responses from Breeze, Ayanda and Faith, for instance – psychologically driven aspects (personality, ‘head space’, emotions) as well.

### Self-help consumption and self-identity

In an interview session with Sisana (November 2014), in her attempt at accounting for her identity, she shares that ‘the main attributions that identify me, basically, is my strong jaw line (laughing); I would say for one. I have a very strong jaw line, and I’m a fun person. People associate me with, “whooop whooop, let’s have fun!” because of my personality, really, that’s me – I’m a sanguine, my personality. And, yeah, that’s basically me; I’m a person who’s always saying ‘Yes, let’s do it! We can’. Faith, as earlier stated, (Interview, December 2014) provides this response:

‘I’m Faith. Zulu-speaking, outspoken, social, very friendly [...] I’m a strong-willed person and I’m quite dominating sometimes. My nature’s a bit dominating; I try not to be but yeah, I’m just there – an out there person.’ (Participant 5, female, 23, Pharmacy Student)

An inclination in the patterns of self-identity formation for the individuals interviewed is that, to a significant extent, self-identity takes on characteristics based on certain socio-cultural aspects such as tradition, ethnicity, belief systems, feelings and experiences. Participants point to a number of such factors when sharing their perceptions of their identity. In less significant terms, at times, do physical body features also make the list of characteristics deployed in the self-identification process, as is evident in Sisana’s response.

For Butterfly (Interview, December 2014), it is her compassionate nature that she says makes up a core aspect of who she believes she is:

‘I think with my compassion and with my ... well, I think my compassions makes up a good part of my life. I’m the type of person like it’s very easy for me to show empathy towards the next person.’ (Participant 3, female, 23, Strategic Communication Planner)

Reference to ‘other axes’ (Gauntlett 2008) of identity surface when analysing these participants’ responses. According to Gauntlett (2008), the notion of identity is multidimensional as it incorporates ‘other axes’ that often go beyond the obvious markers of ethnicity and gender:

Identities, of course, are complex constructions, and gender is only one part of an individual’s sense of self. Ethnicity is obviously an important aspect of identity, and like gender may be felt to be more or less central to self-identity by each individual, or might be made significant by external social circumstances (such as a racist regime or community). Other much discussed axes of identity include class, age, disability and sexuality. In addition, a range of other factors may contribute to a sense of identity, such as education, urban or rural residency, cultural background, access to transportation and communication, criminal record, persecution or refugee status (p. 15)

Mo (Interview, January 2015) identifies by his:

‘[S]truggles, the challenges I’m going through. I think they are part and parcel of who I am. My successes, my do’s and my don’ts, my ways of doing things; the way I perceive life and my commitment to situations [...]’. (Participant 7, male, 25, Educator)

These features, notably internal and psychological, make reference to the role of experience as an axis in self-identity. This is an approach Ayanda (Interview, February 2015) also deploys when she points out that she ‘think[s] hardships in life; things that I’ve been through’ play a key role in how she self-identifies.

Seemingly the case here is that participants demonstrate a tendency to refer to internal, psychological attributions linked to personality and express these as elements of their identities. As an indication of personhood on the individual level, identity can be understood to refer to the markers of individuality and uniqueness that differentiates the person from other people; as well as at the same time – when looking at the notion as a collective definition – refers to the sameness or continuity of the self across space and time (Zegeye & Harris 2003).

On the level of the person, the ‘markers’ deployed by quoted participants to express their uniqueness highlights a conflation of personality traits and experience (psychology) with other socio-cultural aspects as in the case of Faith who includes her ethnic group in the same expression of her perceived personality traits of, for instance, ‘dominating’ and ‘strong-willed’. These expressions render an intersectionality in the idea of identity where it seems to develop not only on social grounds but involving an attachment of more psychological axes through personality traits.

A crucial objective of this article is to explore the ways in which self-identities are influenced by engagement with self-help as made available through mass and new media technologies. Consumption of self-help media is motivated by various reasons on the part of the participants; reasons I thoroughly unpack in my master’s dissertation (Rens 2016) from which this article is inspired. Does what these individuals consume have any influence on their perceptions of identity?; it is a question which this article deems valuable to explore.

Aiding in shedding some light towards a possible response to this enquiry is an utterance from Ayanda (Interview, February 2015) in response to her thoughts about self-help media:

‘I absolutely love them, I depend on them. I think who I am is because of that. [...] For me, I’ve always felt like unguided for the kind of person I wanted to be. I don’t believe in role models so that’s why I feel unguided like you can like a certain characteristic in someone but nobody is who I want to be. So, for different things I always refer to self-help books.’ (Participant 1, female, 23, Media Strategist)

Ayanda's admittance to using self-help books as means of guidance in moments when she feels guidance is lacking in her pursuit to the kind of person she desires to be illustrated, I argue, that a relationship exists between her consumption of these texts and her patterns of carving an identity.

Although pointing to a non-believe in role models, this participant's active consumption of the self-help media text intricately connects her to an element of self-help that possesses laden traces of an involvement of a role model. For insight into defining this notion, see Gauntlett's (2008:223–254) discussion in his chapter entitled 'Directions for Living: Role Models and Self-Help Discourses'. Texts of a self-help nature, at their core, present the consumer with information around how to behave by directing the individual towards a state of being 'inspired' and 'motivated' to want to alter behaviour and assume certain roles considered to be in line with what is taught by these texts as socially desirable. 'Inspiration' and 'motivation' are concepts often referred to in discourses pertaining to what makes a person regard someone else as a role model. If the self-help text can achieve this, it could, then, be considered as a role model. Even though not human, these texts embody a form of a role model in how they are constructed for consumption.

Rendering further evidence for the existence of a relationship between self-identity and self-help consumption is a response from Nonny (Interview, November 2014) who makes a direct link to who she identifies as and how self-help consumption has been intertwined into this identity. She self-identifies as:

'[...] black, first of all. That's the first thing that you identify yourself with. Colour because colour is very much important. It links you with your background; it links you with your ethnicity as well. So, yeah, a black person who grew up in ... who is a Swazi; yes, where I come from is very much important and whose parents are very much conservative in how they raised me, you know.' (Participant 9, female, 22, BSc Student)

Media consumption, and in this case, media texts of a self-help nature is something Nonny actively does (thus her being selected to participate in this dissertation), and it is this fact that she believes accounts for a 'semi-modern' element of her identity.

For this respondent:

'[S]elf-help media [is] sort of kind of out of that boundary on who ... how Nonny should grow up; what she should do and all of that. So, yeah, I'm a black Swazi girl who is semi-modernised because there's still some things that I still believe in that are very much traditional that I will never lose [...].' (Participant 9, female, 22, BSc Student)

Although her active engagement with media texts of a self-help form admittedly oversteps the behavioural 'boundary' her 'conservative' parents set for her, she attempts at negotiating a co-existence of the modern and the traditional.

This, I wish to argue, accounts for a duality in identity and, in extension, connotes an intersectionality with regard to identity. An intersectionality evidently informed by a negotiation between what is taught and memorised culturally in the sphere of the home or birthplace and what is independently consumed and deployed as 'modern' forms of reference to aid in self-identity. What this further points to is the existence of a tension that arises when having to negotiate an evidently multi-layered identity incorporating the personal (thoughts, perceptions), the psychological (emotions) and the socio-cultural (experiences, memory-driven signposts, domestic traditions and cultures) aspects of influence.

Incorporating the 'modern' into her 'traditional' customs which she claims she will never forsake, Nonny's response to this tension sees her adopting 'modernism' as part of the identity she has carved thus far in her life which, as she stipulates, is based on a socio-cultural foundation of tradition (specifically, Swazi tradition). It is here where I will deploy an argument put forward by Giddens (1991) about modernity and the ultimately influential role the media play in their transportation of this philosophical movement. In what Giddens (1991:4) terms 'high modernity', occurrences distant to the self are notably influential on intimacies of the self and events proximate to the self. By endorsing the mediation of experiences, the media, through fostering the prevalence of self-help technologies, not only influence people's attempts at organising social relations but they also influence self-identity as a personal process of self-knowledge by promoting 'a puzzling diversity of options and possibilities' (Giddens 1991:3) of identity cues, in the world as we know it.

A response from Ayanda (Interview, February 2015) helpfully captures this observation. Ayanda expresses that her engagement with self-help media has been exposing her to 'amazing' people whose wisdom she 'taps' into to guide her in her own experiences:

'[...]You're reading something that someone wrote two years ago but they are leaders in their opinions or, I don't know, fields. So, you know like listening to Oprah videos, you know; someone who's been there, done that and has the wisdom and you can just tap into that. You don't have to know them personally. So, I feel like it gives me access to amazing people; Maya Angelou, Joyce Maya, all these different people. Even normal everyday people who write for Huffington Post or Tiny Buudha; that's a spiritual blog I used to read a lot, yeah. So, it makes everything accessible which is what I appreciate.' (Participant 1, female, 23, Media Strategist)

The exposure of these study participants – in the current age of technology – to media texts themed along the practice of self-help, places them in a position that exposes them to being influenced by the experiences of distant others through these texts they so actively consume. Whether they are experts who have 'been there, done that' or ordinary people who use mass media platforms to disseminate details about their private experiences; the accessibility to these mediated experiences is value-laden.

The self-help text, availed through mass media technologies such as television and radio via talk shows, blogsites and YouTube channels, fosters widespread mediation of self-confessed experiences; illustrating how the often distant and vicariously witnessed experiences of 'imperfection', unhappiness, disappointment, fear – among many others – inform how these participants carve their own social relations and use these as reference points to determine how *they* want to be perceived within these social relations which, ultimately, informs who they believe they are relative to or even in opposition to the people in their social spaces.

Witnessing, through the self-help media text, how 'confessors' of imperfection are 'guided' by experts to deal with their issues, makes it easier for the consumer of these texts to decide how, personally, they will incorporate such guidance into their own behavioural patterns to be able to adopt a desired role in society. I wish to align this to propositions by Irving Goffman (1959) around the presentation or dramatisation of a certain sense of self in pursuit of self- or group acceptance. Participants, I argue, find cues from distant mediated experiences to inform their own 'scripts' so as to play out these socially-desirable characters across various societal 'stages'/contexts.

These 'roles' often vary but are ultimately acting as a behavioural foundation for the 'type' of person these participants desire to be identified as. This article, relying on this discovery, thus argues for a relationship between self-identity and self-help consumption in that the consumers of self-help media texts participating in this study cling on to the pedagogical nature entrenched within these texts to 'learn' from distant experiences that are then used to, firstly, compare as well as determine how to behave 'appropriately' to be the best 'you' (identity) that you are capable of.

## Conclusion

In line with an attempt to draw a connection between perceptions of identity and consumption of, specifically, media texts of a self-help nature, this article explored sub-themes related to insights on self-help and self-identity. Drawing on interview data from the individuals participating in this research project, it is apparent that identity formation is a complex process which takes on nuanced routes for these participants.

This complexity in the construction of a self-identity fosters an element of difficulty and/or discomfort when it comes to the task of verbally expressing their identity. When ultimately expressed, these identities present an intersectionality driven, I argue, by a tension between personal, psychological and socio-cultural indicators of self-identity. What is resorted to, instead, is an adoption of various aspects which result in dualistic, often multi-layered expressions of identity that intricately bring in personality-driven traits.

A relationship between self-help media consumption and self-identity, I argue in this article, exists based on the grounds that the educational nature of the self-help text renders it a key tool of 'guidance' to these self-help consumers. It is a guidance that is intricately linked to the media's endorsement of mediated experiences from which consumers of these distant experiences 'learn' to ultimately attribute these lessons to their own social relations. This, in turn, allows for the carving of their own identities based on the 'ideas' they have at their disposal.

History-driven ideas of what constitutes socio-cultural discourses pertaining to being black are being re-imagined and reconstructed in ways that incorporate the usage of 'modernist' ideals that are adopted to carve what I argue are dualistic, multifaceted identities that deploy both the modern and still attempt to 'stay true' to the traditional, cultural principles entrenched in the ideals (residing in memory) around being black.

Knowledge into self-identity provides a 'strong' foundation on which to draw insights as to how this process is influenced by the consumption of, specifically, media texts of a self-help nature in the age of technology.

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### Competing interest

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

### Author contributions

I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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### Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

### Ethical consideration

In line with research standards and regulations, it was vital that I applied for ethical clearance from the relevant department in the university. In this instance, the application was made to the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC Non-Medical) at the University of the Witwatersrand. As this research project involved a number of human



participants, I was expected to submit an ethics clearance application to ensure this research project does not jeopardise any of the potential participants. Once an ethics clearance certificate was granted, I could start with the actual recruitment of participants, which ultimately lead to the data collection process.

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