

# The Black Female Body as a 'Consumer and a Consumable' in Current *Drum* and *True Love* Magazines in South Africa<sup>1</sup>

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Some recent works on post-apartheid South African culture have argued that consumption significantly characterises social behaviour and may even be a defining feature of group identity. Sarah Nuttall, writing on youth cultures in the Rosebank Mall in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg, introduces the spectre of an emergent black youth and middle class in Johannesburg with their specific cultural and consumptive practices. She suggests that consumption and the presentation of the physical body in the manner of dressing, walking, talking and carriage are metaphors of what the contemporary South African society is 'becoming' (Nuttall 2004:431–452). She theorises these acts as 'stylizing' the self – what she explains as 'how people seek to transform themselves into singular beings, to make their lives into an oeuvre that carries with it certain stylistic criteria' (Nuttall 2004:432). She further explains that 'stylizing the self' may also mean 'the emergence of explicit forms of selfhood within the public domain and the rise of the first-person singular within the work of liberation' (Nuttall 2004:432). Indeed consumer, economic trends and other indices of socioeconomic progress that one reads of in the financial pages of the daily newspapers suggest that the consumption of material goods is on an upward trend in contemporary South Africa. Discussions of the potential damage to long-term prosperity prospects of South Africans runs parallel to expositions on how positive credit extension is for the economy. The new black working and middle classes are the most significant beneficiaries of the 'credit-taking community' and are increasingly the majority buyers of real estate, electronic goods, motor vehicles, clothes, and other accessories to modern urban life. Conspicuous consumption and the public display of material goods are the most prominent forms of identification for this new class of black suburbanites. These social forms of lifestyle are linked to the expansion of city spaces in post-apartheid South Africa and especially those spaces that encourage and invite consumption as Achille Mbembe, writing on contemporary Johannesburg, suggests (Mbembe 2004). Mbembe seems to suggest that the expansion of the suburban, and the growth

of shopping malls in the suburbs and townships, is not just an indicator of a rise in a culture of consumption but symbolises the conversion of the entire society into one large consumer.

This article therefore suggests that consumerism appears to circumscribe both the individual and society in contemporary South Africa. I argue that the black female body is the subject of both manipulation and an intense gaze by producers of commodities seeking advertisement space. Popular magazines such as *Drum* and *True Love* seem to have unquestionably accepted the role of purveyors of advertisements in which the black female body embodies both the value of the commodities that 'it' advertises, as well as offering itself as an object of consumption. The black female body is therefore used to promote consumption while it simultaneously becomes a consumable itself. For a society that is explicitly engaged in social transformation and the eradication of various forms of discrimination and degradation, the use of the black female body to highlight unbridled consumption through the use of sexual objectification is problematic. Such uncritical depictions of black women in the popular media undermine societal efforts to realise social transformation. The notion of consumption is therefore key to any kind of analysis that contemporary South Africa is subjected to as it highlights the various forces at play in a post-apartheid context.

Consumption generally denotes the availability of goods and the capacity of a 'buyer' to access those goods. It signifies the ability to purchase, or denote, some kind of income level on the part of the consumer. However, the expansion of a credit culture has produced illusions of wealth in most parts of the world. South Africa is no exception to this global trend in which money, the market and commodities define everyday life. Post-apartheid South Africa is possibly best described as a place of 'frantic shopping', as evidenced by the endless queues in shopping malls and retail shops throughout its cities – with the malls increasingly becoming a feature of even township life. But what kind of relationship is entered into between the individual consumer and the commodity? Or, what characterises the world of goods and purchasers? In the market, what is to be bought has to be displayed publicly, and the body provides probably the best, most conspicuous and free space for advertisement. As such, the human body has become the text on which scripts of materiality – or the illusion of materiality – are produced and reproduced. The human body is an ultimate, and ready made, marketing billboard given the social character of humanity. Literally, every item of clothing is nowadays marked with a brand name, consequently bearing witness to the wearer's fashion tastes, socio-economic status or purchasing power. The body's appeal to the marketer may depend on a number of features such as age, sex/gender or race. The black female body is important in the South African context for a number of reasons but mainly, in this case, because of their perceived role as both new consumer for a range of commodities such as household items, clothing and cosmetics, while also being a 'consumable' subject.

## Popular magazines and consumption

I wish to employ the notion of consumption, in both its literal and figurative sense in this article, to suggest that contemporary popular magazines such as *Drum* and *True Love*, publications that are mainly targeted at the black audience/readership/consumer, are drivers of cultures of unbridled consumption. I also argue that to the extent to which the promotion of consumption is associated with black women, these magazines purvey gender stereotypes and prejudices about women that undermine efforts aimed at the emancipation of black women and the creation of an egalitarian society. But why are these magazines important? Why should we be concerned with publications that claim to be meant for entertainment or leisure? As Sonja Laden, in an essay on South African popular magazines, argues:

The magazine form is typically presumed to mark the emergence of modern social formations that are recognisably literate and bourgeois and inherently grounded in eighteenth-century notions that harness Western capitalist economy in articulation of social mobility, the sire of consumer culture, and transformations in lifestyle choices and socio-cultural tastes. (Laden 2004:248)

As she asks later in the same essay, how relevant are these magazines and the lifestyles they promote to the lives of their assumed black South African audiences?

Some popular magazines in contemporary South Africa have adopted representational styles that project the black female body, as a mere consumer of goods and a 'consumable' commodity. That is to say that the manner in which black women are depicted in some magazines either shows them as subjects lacking social agency or as 'retailable' objects. Yet this is not a new trend even in South Africa. For instance *Drum* magazine has had a long tradition (since its inception in 1951) of using the black female figure on its covers to promote sales. What is new with these latter day cover girls, pin-up stars and so-called 'celebrities' is the seeming proliferation of these images throughout the rest of the text of the magazine. The deluge of black female bodies seems intended to convey particular messages and propagate specific notions about women. However, the kind of discourse on and of the body that is projected in *Drum* and *True Love* is part of a wider practice by other popular magazines. The South African reader/consumer is saturated with magazines covering all aspects of life from parenting, farming, housekeeping, gardening, sex/sexuality, politics, economics, culture, art, travelling, cooking, religion, urban life and so on. These magazines do not only ruthlessly promote consumption; they are at the same time consumables themselves. By providing advertising space for commodities, they create a mutual relationship with what is being advertised. In the eyes of the reader, over time, the commodity may become unrecognisable when separated from the magazine. Recently, it has become usual to find a sample of a new product on the inside pages of a magazine such as *True Love* or *Drum* – indeed even the daily newspapers offer such freebies as incentives to readers. Because of their wide circulation, magazines offer immeasurable advert opportunities for

commodities and in turn produce and reproduce specific forms of cognition relating to consumption. This short article is based on a general reading of contemporary issues in *Drum* (weekly) and *True Love* (monthly) magazines. Both are generally intended for the black reader and, like so many other magazines in contemporary South Africa, are readily available in bookstores, supermarkets, or news-stands. *Drum* has a general readership cutting across gender and age, while *True Love* seeks the attention of (black) women.

### **The black body in popular magazines**

Post-apartheid policies of black empowerment, across a range of public social, economic, political and cultural spaces and institutions, have spectacularly stationed the black body at the centre of almost all kinds of public intercourses and activities. Whether it is on the sports field, in the classroom, the boardroom, or the dancehall, definite government policies, regulations and laws demand and impose a pronounced visibility for the black body. Transformation and empowerment are bywords for a particular positioning of the black body within public space. The media is integral to this process partly because of its capacity to reach and influence a broader audience while disseminating and circulating the multiple forms of information at its disposal.

It is the presumed capacity to influence the public that popular media exploits, in order to 'sell' itself as a product, while also marketing other products for its advertisers. To reach particular segments of the market, popular magazines need to immediately attract or 'grab' the attention of the reader. Historically, the cover-girl figures as the entry point into most popular magazines. For example, magazines such as *Playboy* have taken this editorial 'trick' to extremes with their use of sexually explicit and suggestive pictures of women on the front covers of its magazine. The nude women who appear on the covers of such magazines are meant to suggest the accessibility of these women to the public, alongside other meanings that the editors may have intended or not. In the case of *Drum* magazine in South Africa, the cover girl was initially a symbol of female presence in social and public spaces. She represented black beauty but was simultaneously an advertisement for consumables intended for black women such as clothes, body lotion or jewellery – much of which may not have been accessible to or attainable for the majority of black women at the time. Yet, in the politically charged atmosphere of South Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, black women who appeared on the covers of magazines such as *Drum* were also making important political statements, not just about the socio-cultural standing of African women, but also about the lives of Africans in general under apartheid repression.

The cover girl (or boy for that matter) is probably the most important marketing signpost for any popular publication intended for mass readership. For instance, global magazine brands such as *Hustler*, *Vogue* or *Cosmopolitan* pitch their products according to 'who' or what identity the female model embodies on the

front cover of their issues – in other words, the race of the model is a signifier of its target audience. The race and 'figure' of the model in question can significantly affect the sales of the magazine, especially in the European and American markets, as well as in South Africa where magazines intended for readership by members of a particular race would hardly dare use photos of women from other races (Barnard 2000). Locally, almost all publications intended for mass consumption compete to have the latest beauty/model on their front covers. The proliferation of 'beauty contests and competitions' keeps a steady supply of supposedly beautiful women for these publications. In the case of *Drum*, the black female body has been its trump card for decades. Since the first South African cover girl, Dolly Rathebe, appeared on the front page of the magazine, it was the dream of many young black women to be a *Drum* cover girl. Rathebe's own life changed dramatically in this process. She became a 'star' in her own right and a cultural icon for many black South Africans under a regime whose ideology repressed any form of aspiration by black people and attempted to disassociate blackness from beauty. Mthobi Mutloatse describes her in these words:

Dolly Rathebe was to South Africa what Marilyn Monroe was to entertainment in the USA: glamorous, cheeky, cheerful, naughty, delightful, curvaceous and the most photogenic personality in the history of arts and culture in the last half century in South Africa. She was the pin-up queen and cover girl par excellence. (Mutloatse 2005:8)

Appearance on magazine covers catapulted many young black women to instant fame and increased their chances of upward mobility, both socially and economically. These women became visible public faces for other African women, given the limited space that the apartheid regime allowed Africans, especially women. Many, including Dolly Rathebe, Dorothy Masuka and Miriam Makeba who graced the front covers of *Drum* became not only household names in South Africa, but also international African cultural figures as actors, musicians and models, as well as political activists. They were among the first Africans whose faces graced the covers of publications that circulated beyond the borders of South Africa. They represented both the 'face' and figure of a new, modern and sophisticated African woman, as well as being synonymous with the struggle against apartheid.

In contrast, the contemporary cover girl (or boy) on South African magazines need no longer be an individual aspiring to international fame or stardom. Most of the individuals who make it to the covers of magazines such as *Drum* and *True Love* have already attained some 'stardom' or 'celebrity status'; they are usually propelled to fame through other forms of mass media, especially television. But the cover page is clearly an inadequate platform for all the faces and figures of South African celebrities and stars. They also populate the centre pages. The coverage is either of an individual or group, with the photos mostly taken at events such as wedding parties, funerals, company awards ceremonies, social evenings and such other occasions. In most instances, these bodies are featured

in acts of consumption or as co-adverts for particular commodities. As easily recognisable and public figures, these black women (and men) are meant to suggest, inform about, induce or direct other black women (and men) towards specific commodities and lifestyles. But in what specific ways do these popular media – especially magazines – produce and reproduce particular images of the black female body? In what ways are these bodies characterised as ‘consumables’ or ‘commodities’ rather than as subjects? What kind of femininity and feminism is alluded to or even rejected in these representations?

### **‘Born to shop ‘til death’ generation**

This is a paraphrase of a recent advertisement in the South African print media that denotes current South African youth as constituting a ‘shopping’ generation. Encapsulated in this short marketing phrase is a set of social and economic symbolisms that characterise the socioeconomic equations of contemporary South African society. The end of the political and armed struggles for freedom introduced another set of struggles: to free a whole race from social and economic policies that had made them marginal in a society where they were the majority. Wealth redistribution, in the form of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), regulation of employment practices that favour the previously disadvantaged and relaxed access to credit, are some of the attempts by the black majority government to redress these historical inequalities in a post-apartheid context. However, consumption and the power to purchase are indeed instrumental in the way individuals in contemporary South Africa ‘style’ themselves.

If there is a space where allusions to female empowerment, gender equality and women’s emancipation are retailed alongside a most blatant call to consumerism in South Africa today, then that space is the popular magazines. Magazines such as *Drum* and *True Love* simulate an emancipatory space that should enable their readers to dream, aspire and hope. Yet such ideals are circumscribed by a globalised culture of shopping and credit-taking, the two most significant markers of consumerism. *True Love*’s subtitle ‘All a Woman Needs’ may be too self-congratulatory, but it is also a striking marketing byword. For the women reader, at whom the title is directed, is also on sale herself. Buying the magazine means endorsing the intentions of the advertisers and therefore making oneself available to other advertisers. Even though *True Love* offers a range of educative and informative articles in sections such as ‘Mind, Body and Spirit’, ‘Life Skills’, ‘Relationships’, and ‘Advice Centre’ for instance, in a typical copy of *True Love* one has to flip through about ten pages of advertisements before reaching the ‘contents page’. But even such utilitarian content, as mentioned above, diminishes in significance in relation to the quantity of advertisements for material goods in the rest of *True Love*. A similar scenario applies in *Drum*. Almost every second page of *Drum* or *True Love* is an advert space for consumables. Accompanying the adverts for consumables are several stories, scripts and dramatisations of the

'lifestyles' of those women whose indices of success are denoted by their extravagant consumption and public displays of such consumption. Whether simulated or depicted in real-life photo shoots, the intention is clearly to emphasise that a 'good life' for women is measured in terms of wealth, which has to be ostentatiously dramatised or 'performed'.

Beyond such depictions of a good life, the gossip columns, for instance, 'reveal' who is romantically involved with whom, who has ended their relationships, who is desirable, who is single and marriageable, who is driving the latest model (of an expensive car), who lives in what suburb, who eats where (and what does the food cost), and so on. This enumeration of 'success', affluence, and the flaunting of that material wealth are meant to project the illusion of a modern, sophisticated, worldly and emancipated black woman; and such an emancipated woman apparently has enormous purchasing power through her access to money, credit or wealth.

Statements such as 'Cash, Car and Cellphone' in *True Love* define, in the most unmistakable words, the character of (and the characters in) such magazines. In this magazine world, '[b]lack economic empowerment means that there are a lot more rich young men up for grabs these days' (*True Love* 2006). This statement appears below a picture of a young black woman sitting on the frontage of an expensive looking car model, in a section entitled 'relationship'. The message seems to be that young black women can only chase after successful young black men; or rather, as suggested by the woman and the car in the advertisement, that these women are in the marketplace, to be purchased and owned, just like the car.

However, in a society that is still characterised by socioeconomic inequalities that are rooted in the racialised policies of the past, as Michael MacDonald notes in his book *Why Race Matters in South Africa* (2006), it is important to examine the 'illusions of wealth and material comfort' associated with the women on the pages of magazines such as *Drum* and *True Love*. The reality for many black South African women seems to contradict the kind of utopianism of consumption, the 'happy lifestyles' of urban and suburban life that *Drum*, *True Love* and related publications offer to the public. Even in the case of the successful and newly rich black population, evidence in the 'financial' sections of daily newspapers suggests that most of them are mired in debt, incurred from wanton use of credit facilities.

### **Women's bodies as accessories**

Even though *Drum*, historically, gave black women the opportunity to appear on its covers and in its pages, the magazine does not have a record of being particularly interested in questions of gender equality and female emancipation. The earlier version of *Drum* projected instrumentalist ideas of womanhood,

motherhood and femininity. In an article entitled '*Drum* magazine (1951–99) and the spatial configurations of gender', Dorothy Driver argues that *Drum* sought to produce particular idealised notions of the black woman. She writes,

*Drum's* domestic ideal bore virtually no relation to material reality. For instance, its demarcation of a certain kind of home as the 'proper place' for modern black South African women and as economically accessible to the men who wished to marry them, ignored the crippling conditions of apartheid, which forced both women and men to work long hours for little pay. (Driver 1996:232)

Coupled with this 'domestication' of the female, was the emphasis on material consumption within the pages of *Drum*, in which a "'universal" figure with "universal" desires: shiny pots, fresh armpits, tidy houses, polished shoes' (Driver 1996:233) was promoted. What Driver refers to as the 'universal figure' is metaphorically called 'Lifebuoy men' and 'Lux women' by Timothy Burke (1996) in his study of the relationship between colonialism, capitalism, consumption and modernity in Zimbabwe. Likewise, early *Drum* was interested in, and partially pursued, the project of 'civilizing and modernizing' the African. In alliance with predatory capitalism in the form of advertisers, the magazine was a vehicle for the promotion of what was deemed as the ideal life of an educated, westernised and middle class African – an ideal whose foundation was based on consumption. However, at that time, even though the female figure was associated with the public space of the magazine, the ideal space occupied by women was restricted to the private domain of the home. This was true even in those instances when women were used to promote certain products.

In *Drum* and *True Love* today, women are depicted as having crossed from the domestic to the public arena. This social leap is projected as marking successful integration into modern life. Yet to succeed in modern life, it is suggested by the magazines, one needs the additional accessories that make life 'easy'. These trappings of modern life need their own accessories in order to capture the attention of the buyer or reader. The black female body ideally provides such a space. In a world where sex and a particular kind of femininity – one that projects women as weaker, softer and desirable rather than as human beings – 'sells', and *Drum* and *True Love* fully exploit such resources. Bodies of black females are therefore spread throughout the pages of these magazines in different kinds of postures, advertising a range of products from cosmetics, clothes, cars, household goods, jewellery, to tourism products such as game lodges and hotels. The reader is invited to ponder the possibilities of consuming both the woman's body and the product that she is exhibiting. The visual imagery casts female bodies as nothing but accessories to the products, which they can only enjoy for as long as they are bound to that market-driven relationship. These women are not only ciphers of a modern commodity and consumption culture but they are 'commoditised' themselves and retailed as 'products' to society, especially to male consumer society. By associating these women with particular commodities, a market condition is invoked. But because they are aids to the item being sold or

advertised, their own identities get dissolved in the relationship between the person and the object.

## **Conclusion**

There is no doubt that the media forms discussed objectify women and literally 'sell' their bodies on news-stands and pavements to any willing buyer. Given that the media reaches thousands of readers – as evidenced by the continued publication of numerous magazines directed at the mass market – it seems safe to assume that they have a significant influence on readers. Magazines, as Sonja Laden (2004) in paraphrasing Margaret Beetham (1996) points out, 'are both concrete, material objects and embodiments or carriers of meanings and social relations, both commodities in themselves and vehicles for the dissemination of a range of other cultural commodities, practices and beliefs'. In other words, magazines have the potential to instrumentally impact on people's perceptions and experiences; they can be tools of socialisation and acculturation too. If we accept that the media can and does influence behaviour, then one wonders if the depiction of the black female body as we have discussed above can contribute in any way to the kind of political and social emancipation project that informed liberation struggles by South African women in the past, as scholars such as Shireen Hassim (2006) have described. Arjun Appadurai (1986) has argued forcefully that commodities have a social life and do produce knowledge; the lingering question then is what kind of knowledge do these popular media produce and to what end? Magazines like *Drum* and *True Love* are themselves commodities because, rather than merely being media for the circulation of other commodities, they also have the power to generate a life of their own. For a society in transition like South Africa, such media are therefore crucial in shaping how society transforms. This is why it is necessary to understand what influence popular magazines like *Drum* and *True Love*, among others, may have on societal perceptions and behaviour. It is necessary to question the values of slogans such as 'All a Woman Needs' (*True Love*) and 'The Beat Goes On' (*Drum*), to assess whether the claims implied in those phrases are instructive, as suggested, or rather socially misleading to their readers. What I seek to suggest in this short article is what Sean Jacobs (2003:30-53) argues when he writes that 'debates about mass media in South Africa are simultaneously debates about the nature of social change, and that they refer back to the still-unresolved questions about the transition ...' Indeed, the form and style of the mass media offers insights into the nature of social transformation that society may be experiencing or even engineering.

## **Note**

1. I am interested in the South African versions of *Drum* and *True Love* only. Both magazines are also published in East Africa (Kenya) and are owned by the South African parent company. A different version of *Drum* (for men) is published in England – it is independently owned.

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