



"It's about finding and knowing myself": Why Johannesburg-based South African Millennials consume self-help media

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PUBLISHED ONLINE

Volume 42 (1) July 2023
Pages
Submitted August 2022
Accepted February 2023

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.36615/jcsa.v42i1.2486>

ISSN

Online 2957-7950
Print 0259-0069

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Abstract

Using semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a group of ten middle-class, internet semi-connected, South African millennials in Johannesburg, Gauteng this analysis explores the psychosocial gratifications derived from their self-declared active sourcing and consumption of self-help media texts. Developing within the uses and gratifications theoretical framework, the article finds that self-help media texts (books, blogs, videos, etc., significantly sourced from digital platforms via the internet) are sought as tools that offer a psychological "quick fix" to the day-to-day psychosocial "problems" that push the interviewed participants to seek coping mechanisms. The article presents evidence to demonstrate that self-help media texts are consumed by the interviewees to gratify a psychosocial need for self-knowledge where they engage self-help media texts as surveillance mediums on which they rely to better "find" and "know" themselves in relation to others, as far as socially "acceptable" interpersonal behaviour is concerned. As such, these Johannesburg-based South African millennials consume self-help media texts, and the moral grammar of norms, beliefs, and values about successful living encoded therein, as tools for self-management with the goal of "mastering" the self – in relation to others – to understand how best to behave to avoid the "mistakes" that impede the smooth-sailing of what these participants describe as their life journeys.

Keywords

advisory media, media audiences, millennials, self-help media, uses and gratifications

INTRODUCTION

This article draws on the uses and gratifications theory as well as literature about self-improvement and advisory media to explore why and how a small group of middle-class South African millennials living in Johannesburg consume self-help media texts. The article was motivated by the researcher's own casual engagement with self-help materials via the online streaming platform of YouTube, which fostered a curiosity about the seeming popularity of these texts based on the high viewership numbers on YouTube. For instance, an entry of the term "self-help" into the YouTube search tab leads to a wealth of videos relating to the self-help and popular psychology environment. Many of these videos are seemingly positioned as resources to allow viewers thereof the opportunity to explore self-improvement related content and potentially adopt some of the self-help techniques to, presumably, "better" their own lives. One such YouTube search performed in line with the researcher's interest in this subject matter rendered over 9.3 million search results on this platform. Examples of randomly picked titles for these videos include, *Self-Help – How Self-Help can Revolutionize Your Entire Life* (78 588 views); *Anxiety Attacks Cure – Self Help Anxiety Treatment* (961 122 views), *Leo's list of Top 40 Self-help Books* (191 402 views); *Why You're Not Happy – Self Help #8* (57 591 views). Judging from the number of views these videos attract (in this case, a collective total of over 1.2 million views for just the above four randomly selected examples from a

list of many), it is plausible to consider the genre of self-help as possessing notable appeal and popularity among literate, internet-connected audiences. The researcher was interested in exploring whether this interest he partly developed in self-help media also existed among young South Africans, and, if so, what motivated their interest in these texts.

The self-help media texts, in this article, refer to media materials containing information and advice for resolving people's perceived socio-psychological problems/shortfalls. The advisory information is often, but not always, provided by a distant professional who does not grant direct supervision over the consumer except encouraging independent consumption of this information, with the said outcome being beneficial to the help seeker (Rimke, 2000; Rens, 2016, 2019). Essentially, self-help can be understood as "...self-guided betterment, with the intention to cope with life problems. Self-help often involves self-reliance by addressing one's problems on one's own – for example, by reading self-help books" (Watkins & Dykeman, 2022: 2). This article qualitatively explores – through ten semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the recruited participants – *how* these individuals (who all fall within the millennial market category) engage with self-help media forms. That is to say, in what ways are these texts sourced for consumption? Secondly, the article examines *why* these individuals consume this genre as actively as they admit to doing. That is, what fulfilments are sought and obtained from the consumption of self-help media texts?

Existing bodies of work in the area of self-help and popular psychology focus mainly on global North contexts and Western audiences. Some recent studies have explored, for instance, Anglo-American audiences' engagement with the genre of self-help literature in relation to gender difference and perceptions around effective time management and busyness (Holdsworth, 2020); other studies have critically studied self-help media materials as products of a Western-dominated, neo-liberal, capitalist industry that not only influences the production of human problems, but also strategically profits from them (Rimke, 2020). Yet, as Nehring and Kerrigan (2020) observe, the global production, circulation, and consumption of self-help and popular psychology-related media texts, and their impact on self-identity in the global South, still remain poorly understood. This article thus aims to contribute a perspective from the global South by focusing on the South African context through a small sample of Johannesburg-based millennials, adding to the few studies that have been carried out within the African context in relation to self-help as a popular(ising) media and literary genre. Such studies include, for instance, Newell's (2013) work on self-help literature in urban West Africa; Rens's (2016; 2019; 2020) work on self-improvement media and South African audiences in post-apartheid South Africa; and Jones's (2019) work in relation to literary writers in their 30s and their engagement with self-help literature within the context of Lagos, Nigeria.

Millennials, defined by market researchers as individuals born between 1981 and 1996 [ages 26 to 41 in 2022] (Dimock, 2019), are key drivers behind the growth of the self-improvement industry, reports Uță (2020). Globally, the self-help industry is flourishing and consumer demand for self-improvement books and similar media materials would see this genre grow to an estimated \$13.2 billion by 2022 with 5.6% average yearly gains (Uță, 2020). Global South consumer markets are contributing actively to this growth. Nehring and Kerrigan (2020), for instance, report that the sales value for self-help books between 2010 and 2015 in South Africa stood at £2,436 million (or \$2,963 million; or R50,538 million); evidencing an undeniably high market revenue share. Furthermore, in South Africa, a noteworthy interest in self-help books is arguably one of the reasons why *News24* lifestyle reporter, Nhlapo (2018), noted that "the most stolen books in South African bookstores are self-help books". These texts are evidently popular; but more interestingly, the popularity of these texts plausibly indicates a deeper issue, which is that many South African citizens turn to self-help media to tackle their perceived intra- and interpersonal challenges, given that some citizens are willing to risk jail to get their hands on books promising to solve their problems.

The section following this introductory discussion renders a brief contextual overview of the "advisory media text" in the African context to situate this article in a broader discourse of therapeutic self-improvement media consumption. This will be followed by a discussion of the uses and gratifications theory underpinning this article's theoretical framework, as well as an overview of the methodological approach that framed this article. A discussion of the findings is then provided in the form of three

overarching themes before a comprehensive conclusion is offered to synthesise the key take-outs, limitations, and recommendations for future studies, in relation to this article.

THE ADVISORY MEDIA TEXT IN AFRICA: A BRIEF CONTEXTUAL OVERVIEW

Early traces of advisory-based African literature and print media have been documented by scholars aiming to offer historical accounts of how this genre ascended (Jones, 2019). Segmenting the history characterising the ascendance of what he coins South Africa's "alternative press", Switzer (1997: 3) provides an account outlining the birth of an advisory press. This phase is marked "the independent process press" (from the 1880s to the 1930s), during which the start of an indigenous black literary tradition was noted to have ushered in "the advice column feature: a feature now broadly characteristic of modern self-help media texts", among other forms (Rens, 2016: 9). Jones (2019) notes that advice-driven media texts, in the form of self-published books, pamphlets, and leaflets concerning religion, marriage, relationships, and personal effectiveness, among other topics, continue to grow in visibility and popularity among urban, literate citizens in Nigeria, for instance.

Mutongi (2000) has also documented traces of advisory content as a media or literary genre within the African continent by highlighting the emergence of self-help through the "agony aunt" approach in *Drum* magazine. Initially published in Cape Town, South Africa, in the year 1951, the founders of *Drum* expanded circulation to more African countries such as Ghana, Nigeria and Kenya (Jones, 2019). The publication's editors raised a vast readership through various attributions and columns, as well as a dedicated piece known as the "Dear Dolly" feature (Mutongi, 2000). Here, young readers across West, East and Southern Africa wrote to "Dolly" with many of their psychosocial and psychosexual concerns and questions to receive advice from "Dolly" on ways to deal with, and gain control over, their compulsions, be they sexual, religion-related, psychological, or related to love.

It is such literature that points to the existence of psychosocial self-help as a genre long offered by the media across Africa. Further historical traces of this genre are documented by Reuster-Jahn (2013) who writes of "advice literature" as part of a body of literature that flourished in mid-twentieth century Africa. Discourses centralised in these advisory texts revolved around the subjects of love, sexuality, and questions related to how relationships can be managed (Reuster-Jahn, 2013; Jones, 2019). As Cole and Thomas (2009: 1) note: "English-language African newspapers have [...] long carried discussions of love, including advice columns." It is such findings that render a helpful historical account of the presence and popularity of a genre closely related to modern forms of self-help media texts. Evidently, Africans with access to these media forms have been able to imagine and reimagine romance, sexuality, courtship, and happiness – among other topics – through these texts for decades (Cooper, 2013). Young urban individuals across diverse regions of Africa are noted to *still* actively engage with these kinds of advisory media texts (Rens, 2016; Nehring & Kerrigan, 2020; Rens, 2019; Jones, 2019), arguably allowing these individuals to engage subject matter about romance, sexuality, courtship, and happiness through a psychosocial lens of self-care.

The culture of therapy: "Psy" discourses and caring for the self

So popular have psychological discourses come to be, that we casually use terms such as "psycho" and "insane" in our daily conversations with others (Rimke & Brock, 2012). Human interaction, globally, is increasingly "governed" by what Heidi Rimke and Deborah Brock refer to as "psy discourses", which involve psychiatry, psychology, and psychotherapy among others (2012). Our everyday lives are largely influenced by the ever-popularising "psy" discourses that yield significant power over us, that practices such as therapy and psychological intervention have become popular cultural forms engaged in by many who are able to access these practices.

Further explaining the phenomenon of "psy" discourses, Rimke and Brock (2012: 183) highlight:

The now-pervasive presence of "psy" in our everyday lives and practices [...] can be seen in the widespread acceptance of a particular psychotherapeutic ethos that shapes

social practices, which has become known as the culture of therapy. As modern subjects, we have at our disposal an immense medicalized vocabulary for speaking about our inner selves. Modern individuals speak with ease and confidence about their thoughts, memories, beliefs, emotions, and the like through psy discourses.

The cultural pervasiveness of psychological discourses and therapeutic ethos has facilitated somewhat of a "pathological approach" to reflecting on one's experiences. The idea of being psychologically unwell or disordered is prominently deployed to refer to personal problems which are assumed to be individual, biological, and psychological in cause (Rimke, 2000; 2020).

As such, presumably objective distinctions between "normal" and anything other than normal have become partly entrenched within our cultural beliefs and practices, so that we often find ourselves seeking "expert" assistance when we are faced with experiences considered to be outside of this ideal of "normalcy" (Cherry, 2008; Rimke & Brock, 2012). Strikingly, due to the (popular) psychology-driven belief that the self (together with other psycho-biological factors) is responsible for the development of mental "sicknesses" and "disorders" which are considered abnormalities, it comes as no surprise that experts suggest that the self should, in turn, be relied upon for leading a person towards "normality" (Riessman & Banks, 2001). This view concerning human well-being has been theorised as psychocentrism; a worldview which proposes that "human problems are due to a biologically-based flaw or deficit in the bodies and/or minds of individual subjects", as Rimke (2016: 5) notes.

Rimke (2000: 61) quotes from Smiles (1859), who also suggests that help for the self is significantly reliant on the self:

Men [sic] must necessarily be the active agents of their own well-being and well-doing; and that, however much the wise and the good may owe to others, they themselves must in the very nature of things be their own best helpers.

To facilitate this "healing" process, some psychology practitioners and self-proclaimed self-help gurus produce an array of "self-help" material for individuals to engage with outside of the therapist's office (Cherry, 2008; Nehring & Kerrigan, 2020; Jones, 2019). Herewith have we witnessed burgeoning varieties of self-help media texts such as, for instance, the proliferation of self-help discourses on television; the internet (through websites and webcasts); in autobiographical books; celebrity interviews (disseminated to large audiences); in magazines and newspapers; radio shows; psychology-related books, pamphlets and leaflets distributed in public spaces such as bus stops, churches, and malls; and in movies, and documentaries (Rimke & Brock, 2012; Jones, 2019). These texts – usually marketed on the basis of the solutions they claim to offer to the myriad of personal troubles humans face – attract significant consumer markets, "and their popularity means they play a significant part in shaping prevalent cultural narratives of self and social relationships" (Nehring & Kerrigan, 2020: 2). This means, as Nehring & Kerrigan (2020) argue, that these texts are influential in promoting a moral grammar of norms, beliefs, and values that become culturally entrenched and internalised as the gold standard according to which a successful life can be achieved. Therefore, should consumers of these kinds of media texts yearn for a successful intra- and interpersonal life of harmony, they are encouraged to latch onto the said moral grammar of norms, beliefs, and values perpetuated by these self-help texts.

In these media texts, a focus is taken on the individual, placing the responsibility on the individual to "take care" of the self. This is an element of individualism that Foucault's work (1976; 1990) also alludes to. Interestingly, with these self-help media texts, much of the individual's "solutions" to whatever disorder, weakness, or condition they struggle with, are derived from an expert other who is entrusted by the individual with their process of "healing":

Self-help "lessons" appear to teach a subject to rely exclusively on oneself, simultaneously to rely exclusively on an expert other, and then also to become an expert in some aspect

of one's own self-hood (Rimke, 2000: 62).

Of further interest, in this regard, is how even when the individual has become this supposed "expert" of their own selfhood, the role of the expert by no means becomes irrelevant in the self-help process. As media consumers, we find ourselves continuously at the mercy of an array of mental health experts, and self-help gurus, among others, who dispense psychological advice for our consumption (Lilienfeld, Lynn, Ruscio, & Beyerstein, 2010).

All the while, consumption of self-help material carries a strong element of "choice" and agency (Watkins & Dykeman, 2022). In some way, individuals are made to feel that they are given the autonomy to either engage with this material or not, and this places a sense of responsibility on the self to consciously make the decision to "improve" by seeking assistance from an expert other. Rimke (2000) notes thus, that self-help is an activity accepted to be voluntary and individualistic. It is the very notions of inherent choice, autonomy, and freedom that self-help relies upon to promote the principle of individuality in the process of self-modification and "improvement" (Rimke, 2000; 2016). This current article engages individual accounts from South African millennial self-help consumers regarding their active consumption of self-help media to understand the gratifications derived from this activity. It should be noted that the article does not engage the voices of audiences who are opposed to the cultural phenomenon of self-help and who prefer not to engage with self-help media materials for reasons that future studies in this area may explore. The article focuses specifically on avid consumers of this genre.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article is developed within the framework of the uses and gratifications theory, which advocates for a shift from viewing audiences as passive recipients of media messages to attributing a more agentic quality to media audiences by, for instance, forging links between Maslow's hierarchy of needs and people's media use. Herta Herzog, Paul Lazarsfeld and Frank Stanton (in the 1940s), as well as Jay Blumler, Elihu Katz, and Dennis McQuail (in the 1970s), were among a cohort of researchers who claimed that audiences are considerably active in their sourcing of, and engagement with, media types and media content. This "activeness" is evident in people's conscious sourcing of media platforms and media content, driven by several psychosocial needs that drive people to "...actively bend programmes, articles, films, and songs to [their] own purposes" (Blumler, 1979: 10).

The uses and gratifications theory proposes that people's media use is goal-directed and purposeful, as opposed to being random and aimless. That is to say, media users are intentional about the types of media they engage with to fulfil various kinds of short-term or long-term psychosocial needs (Blumler, 1979). In the context of mass communication, media users are the ones actively filtering through the different types of available media to meet their immediate or long-term psychosocial needs. Essentially, the media itself does not "look" for people; people seek out the media. Let us consider, for example, a university student carrying out research to complete a project for one of their modules; proponents of the uses and gratifications theory would suggest that the said student knows exactly what media platform(s) to source for them to fulfil their need to complete the given project. This means that the university student in question is conscious of their goal to gather the information that will help them complete the project. As such, the student will make the conscious decision to either consult an internet-based, digital media source such as *Google Scholar* which they may access through their smartphone or computer to carry out a quick search for the relevant information. Conversely, the student may want to rely on a more traditional media type – such as print media – by visiting the library for printed book sources carrying the information the student needs to complete their project. This example demonstrates the uses and gratifications theory's proposition that audiences/media users are aware of their psychosocial needs and are goal-directed when it comes to the types of media to consult for them to satisfy those needs. Below is a brief discussion of how scholars of uses and gratifications theory have categorised audiences' psychosocial needs in relation to their media use.

Broad categorisations of said psychosocial needs include: a need for information and education;

entertainment; identity/identification; integration and social interaction; as well as a need for escapism (Pitout, 2009). The first category carries a surveillance role in that media audiences actively sought content to gain information and learn more about the world. The second category relates to the use of the media in pursuit of entertainment for reasons that vary from person to person: for example, a need to humorously ponder over a subject of interest, or perhaps cry because of the contents of a fictitious media text. Audiences, then, gain emotional fulfilment and satisfaction. Regarding the third category: identity/identification, reference is made to the use of media content as a means to reinforce personal values and beliefs (Pitout, 2009). The said media content aids an individual in their efforts to discover who they are in relation to others.

The fourth category refers to when individuals sought media content to use parts of said content as means to socially interact with others by communally talking about this content after consuming it, which reinforces social integration and belonging. Lastly, media content may also be sought as a means of diversion from one's real life, so as to pass time and temporarily disconnect from actual life activities. Audiences are motivated by a goal to gratify particular needs through various kinds of media texts they may deem useful (Blumler, 1979; Pitout, 2009). In the context of this study, actively tuning into television, radio, or an online platform premised on expert intervention, or purchasing a self-help book, or a magazine to read the advice column section, for instance, is indicative of an active audience, deriving gratifications from the contents of said texts.

Important to note is that the uses and gratification theory is not devoid of criticism (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973). Some audience and mass communication scholars "have contended that uses and gratifications is not a rigorous social science theory" (Ruggiero, 2000: 3). Parts of said critiques have, at times, reflected on the theory as "crassly atheoretical", writes Blumler (1979: 9). The uses and gratifications approach has been criticised for crediting audiences with too much selectivity which tends to fail at acknowledging that some individuals may consume media without a particular conscious drive but merely out of habit, ritual or due to their social circumstances based on the household they reside in. That said, the theory continues to offer a valuable lens through which to navigate changing audience behaviour toward continuously transforming media platforms and content (Ruggiero, 2000).

METHODOLOGY

This study undertook in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with 10 millennials who, at the time of data collection, were between the ages of 20 and 30 years and residing in Johannesburg, South Africa. The in-depth interview, as a qualitative research method, is noted by Stokes (2003) to be a useful means by which researchers can use individuals as sources of evidence in their research. The interview method in media and cultural studies research enables researchers to discover people's ideas, opinions, and attitudes concerning various phenomena (Stokes, 2003). It is noted to be a strong and reliable method that it is possible to deploy as the primary research method of a study; this present study similarly deployed the interview method as its primary data collection method.

The decision to focus on the area of Johannesburg was largely motivated by the logistical elements of time and financial resources. At the time of data collection, the author was carrying out a bigger research project in accordance with the requirements for a master's qualification; the present article is a product of this master's research project. Due to limited time and funding, the author's recruitment of interview participants was restricted to the Johannesburg region where the researcher resided. As a result, the arguments and conclusions presented in this article offer a deeper understanding of self-help media consumption as a sociocultural phenomenon participated in by a small group of South African millennials residing in Johannesburg. It is not a goal of this article to generalise its findings to a population beyond the sampled participants. That said, the study's methodological orientation is classified as qualitative, given the reliance on the method of interviews (du Plooy, 2021). These participants were recruited via a non-probability, purposive sampling approach where the researcher recruited a sample of individuals that did not necessarily "have a probable chance of representing the target population" (du Plooy, 2021: 123). This was the case mainly because, as mentioned, this qualitative study had no ambition to generalise any of

its findings to a broader population.

For participant recruitment, the researcher relied on a three-pronged recruitment approach which involved the use of his personal social media accounts (as phase one). Secondly, the use of email communication was relied upon as an additional participant recruitment phase, while word-of-mouth became a third phase in participant recruitment. Given the researcher's active use of three social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn) at the time of participant recruitment, a post was shared on the researcher's Facebook timeline, explaining the research project and the purposive search for young individuals in Johannesburg who considered themselves as devoted self-help media consumers. The same post was shared on LinkedIn to attract more potential participants for the study. Having linked his Facebook account to his Twitter account, the researcher was able to post a hyperlink on Twitter which, when clicked on, automatically redirected the person to the more detailed Facebook post. This concluded phase one of the participant recruitment process; this phase yielded just over 30 responses from individuals interested in participating in the study.

In addition, direct email communication became a useful second phase to pursue potential participants. The information used on the researcher's social media call for participants was repurposed into an email that was sent to a small network of individuals on the researcher's Yahoo email contact list. The individuals that were blind copied in the participant recruitment email were purposively targeted based on the researcher's prior knowledge and judgement about the said individuals' demographic information (du Plooy, 2021); that is to say, the email was sent to young South African contacts in the researcher's network of friends, colleagues, and acquaintances in Johannesburg, with access to the internet. This participant recruitment phase yielded fewer than 20 responses. Phases one and two of the participant recruitment techniques happened alongside word-of-mouth as a third and additional participant recruitment technique. During social interactions, the researcher requested friends and colleagues in his immediate circles to share details about the study with their own networks to help increase the number of potential study participants.

Eventually, ten suitable interview participants – as introduced in Table 1 – were recruited from the pool of responses sent by individuals who expressed interest in participating in the study. These ten individuals' ultimate selection was based on their self-proclaimed devoted engagement with self-help media texts; their consistent access to the internet; their age group; and the fact that they resided within a 30km radius from the author's place of residence and place of work at the time. As a final step to ensuring participant suitability, each of the ten identified candidates informed the researcher (in person, via email or direct message on Facebook) about their keen consumption of self-help media materials. They also provided the researcher with titles of books, television, radio, and internet-based platforms that they habitually consulted for self-help, self-improvement advice. This recruitment strategy allowed for easy and affordable (in terms of transportation costs) access to the most suitable individuals for the face-to-face interviews.

Table 1: The study participants (*all participants are herein referred to by the use of pseudonyms)

Name	Age	Gender	2021
Ayanda	23	Female	At the time of participation in this study, she was a young professional in the media and advertising industry, employed as a media strategist for several global brands. Interviewed 2 February 2015, Albury Office Park, Johannesburg.
Breeze	27	Female	At the time of interview, she was in between jobs and seeking employment. Interviewed 17 November 2014, International House, Wits University Main Campus, Johannesburg.
Butterfly	23	Female	At the time of participation, Butterfly was working as a strategic planner at a creative advertising agency in Sandton, South Africa. Interviewed 12 December 2014, McCann Worldgroup Offices, Johannesburg.
Dineo	21	Female	Dineo, at the time of interview, had just landed her first internship within the media industry at one of South Africa's well-known media agencies. Interviewed 2 February 2015 at Albury Office Park, Hyde Park, Johannesburg.
Faith	23	Female	Faith, at the time of interview, was in the process of completing her degree in Pharmacy while working part-time as a Pharmacist's Assistant at a local hospital in central Johannesburg. Interviewed 12 December 2014, Braamfontein Centre, Johannesburg.
Mandy	21	Female	At the time of participation, Mandy was completing an honours degree in Journalism studies. Interviewed 17 November 2014, International House, Wits University Main Campus, Johannesburg.
Mo	25	Male	Mo, at the time of interview, worked as a middle school Educator at a private school in a Johannesburg suburb. Interviewed 12 January 2015, First National Bank Building, Wits University West Campus, Johannesburg.
Muzi	25	Male	Muzi described himself as an aspiring musician, film director and writer who finds joy in the performing arts sphere. Interviewed 12 January 2015 at Brisk Place Residence, Johannesburg.
Nonny	22	Female	At the time of interviews, Nonny was completing a BSc in Town and Regional Planning at a Johannesburg-based university. Interviewed 17 November 2014, International House, Wits University Main Campus, Johannesburg.
Sisana	24	Female	At the time of participation, this postgraduate candidate in Business Management, enjoyed being healthy and in charge of her fitness and body. Interviewed 17 November 2014, International House, Wits University Main Campus, Johannesburg.

All of the interviews were voice recorded and later transcribed to develop interview transcripts for analysis. All collected interview data were digitally stored on a password-protected laptop to which only the researcher had the unlocking password. Two documents of informed consent were developed: an audio-recording consent form, and a general consent form, documenting participants' voluntary participation in the study. Prior to each individual interview session, participants were requested to read and sign these documents. The interview sessions proceeded in the form of one-on-one, private sessions between researcher and participant over a five-month period. All participants were assured anonymity and informed that they would be referred to using pseudonyms of their choosing. The researcher made sure to reiterate to each of the selected participants that they had the right to drop out of the study at any

point without having to face any consequences. The interview sessions were guided by semi-structured questions. This was so that the researcher's line of questioning remained within the broad subject matter of the study based on its aim to elucidate useful information from the participants regarding why and how they consumed self-help media. Care was taken to remain as open-ended and general in the phrasing of the questions as possible, to avoid posing leading questions that may have directed the participants' responses in a direction desirable to the researcher.

In line with research standards and regulations, the researcher applied for ethical clearance from the relevant department at the university under which the broader master's research project was carried out. An application was made to the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC Non-Medical) to secure an ethics clearance certificate. Since this research project involved human participants, the researcher had to demonstrate that this research project would not jeopardise any of the potential participants.

To analyse the collected data, the researcher familiarised himself with the data by, firstly, reading through the interview transcripts several times to deductively establish patterns and themes regarding what the participants expressed as the gratifications they obtained from sourcing and consuming self-help media materials. Secondly, the researcher began coding the data in line with prominent patterns in the form of keywords and themes in the data regarding the participants' motivations behind self-help consumption. Thereafter, the researcher was able to, thirdly, name and define the themes so as to organise the analysis in a structured manner that captures the main ideas emerging from interviewee responses regarding why and how they engage with self-help media materials. This rendered the analysis approach closely aligned with a thematic content 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".

DISCUSSION

The "quick fix": Internet-based psychosocial self-help at one's fingertips

Reasons for sourcing and consuming self-help media texts take a noteworthy pattern for the participants interviewed for this study. There are two mediums through which access to self-help content is prevalently gained. When queried about their preferred media platforms through which to access self-help texts, the participants point to the internet as well as, to a notable extent, books themed around the practice of self-help. It is the internet that is more strongly lauded as it is said to allow "easy" and quick access to the array of self-help media materials that these participants may require at particular points in their day-to-day lives.

Butterfly (female, 23, Strategic Communications Planner) who admits to having subscribed to an online platform called *Goodreads*, shares that this has allowed her access to various self-help topics which she sources when the need arises. She describes *Goodreads* as,

... an online platform. It's like they take quotes from books and movies so there you'd literally go on a search tab and if you want to read about something on a certain topic like you'd search about, I don't know, health, you'd get all these quotes about health. So, it's all those books and Goodreads, and also conversations with my friends.

Similarly, for Ayanda (female, 23, Media Strategist), the internet's allowance for broad accessibility renders it a preferential media platform from which to source self-help themed material. She shares that this opportunity of easy and anytime access,

... gives me access to amazing people; Maya Angelou, Joyce Meyer, all these different people. Even normal everyday people who write for Huffington Post or Tiny Buddha; that's a spiritual blog I used to read a lot, yeah. So, it [the internet] makes everything accessible which is what I appreciate.

Sisana (female, 24, Postgraduate Student) expresses the same appreciation for the online media platform of Google, which in her opinion is a platform that carries anything a person may find themselves in need of. She shares her viewpoint in the following words:

... there's anything on Google, like how to keep yourself interested in whatnot. In Cosmo [Cosmopolitan magazine] we had a how to hook a guy, you know; getting close...so, I'm thinking if you can Google that line, you can also find it, yeah. Like, there's a lot of self-help.

Ayanda reaffirms this viewpoint: "You can almost find anything; I'm not joking, anything on Google. Anything about what to do when in certain situations"

For Breeze (female, 27, Unemployed Graduate), alongside books, the internet similarly comes up as one of the preferred platforms of access to self-help content. She shares:

Information is vast. So, being able to access the internet readily on your cell phone is one of the ways, and I read a lot. I read a lot of books so I'm more inclined, actually, to reading self-help and developmental books as opposed to novels.

Having information readily available for anytime consumption places the internet in a favourable position with the interviewed participants. Being able to engage in anytime, unscheduled consumption of self-help media materials – through a mobile device such as a cell phone, via the internet – renders the internet a platform that, arguably, results in a situation where self-help is perceived to be at the user's fingertips. It is with the use of one's fingers that a person can type into an online "search tab", as Butterfly refers to it, the kinds of self-help media material required at a certain point in time. This capability is what attracts these participants to the internet as a platform of access to media texts of a self-help form. Ayanda goes as far as referring to the online search engine, Google, as a doctor:

In moments when I don't know what to do, I refer to Doctor Google; I Google everything. I know so many blogs for self-help. There are so many resources available. I hate being helpless, and you can almost find anything; I'm not joking, anything on Google.

Ayanda's comparison of the Google platform to a doctor connotes a viewpoint that this online tool – much like a medical doctor – is able to bring about "healing" to its consumers. This, then, not only places the self-help text at one's fingertips – as argued above – but also constructs it as a tool to grant a "quick fix" to the "issues" that often lead individuals to seek self-help advice.

Faith (female, 23, Pharmacy Student), for instance, manages to capture this observation that due to the internet's capability of providing platforms such as Google, anytime self-help consumption can provide a speedy resolution to one's psychosocial difficulties or feelings of an undesirable nature. It is this elaborate response from Faith that encapsulates this article's argument in this regard:

I don't know if this counts but every time I'm feeling off-ish, I literally go on Google and type motivational quotes. Yes, it counts, hey. I don't know, like you can see here on my wall there's printed quotes that make up not to say the person that I am but the person that I'd like to be and sometimes I put them on my wall because I want to wake up ... Sometimes a Bible verse even, from friends ... I was lucky enough that I had a friend that walked in and out and so I'd have days when I'm feeling off and she'd just throw in a nice verse for me.

Faith's reference to feeling off-ish is what this article regards as feelings of an undesirable nature that are most often difficult to overcome. It is during such "helpless" times, to borrow from Ayanda, that self-help consumption via the internet – at one's fingertips – can step in and provide the self-helper with instant psychosocial assistance. This is something that Nonny (female, 22, BSc Student) also affirms:

I was getting depressed sometimes because of schoolwork so a friend of mine had said "No, I've been watching this and it's helping me cope with the amount of schoolwork that I have. How about you go and just type in online, like, how to be able to use your time efficiently?" So, for me it was one of those things whereby it was "Okay, now I'm panicking, how can I deal with this?"

At the onset of "panic", Nonny was advised to source helpful media material online which evidently is utilised as guidance on how to cope. We can see, then, how the internet is perceived to render psychosocial self-help at these participants' fingertips; thereby aiding them with the means to instantly gratify a psychosocial need for assistance to "cope" with feelings of panic, helplessness and "off-ishness", for instance. This is consistent with the central line of argumentation taken by uses and gratifications theorists: that media users are intentional about the types of media they engage with to fulfil various kinds of short-term or long-term psychosocial needs (Blumler, 1979). It is evident that the quoted participants – who are Johannesburg-based South African millennials and are undeniably different to the kinds of audience demographics initially studied by scholars such as Blumler, Katz and McQuail – are aware of their psychosocial need for assistance with coping mechanisms against what these participants describe as feelings of panic, helplessness, and "off-ishness"; and, in line with the arguments proposed by the uses and gratifications theory, these quoted research participants are goal-directed when it comes to the types of media they consult for them to satisfy their needs (Blumler, 1979; Ruggiero, 2000; Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011). In the context of this present article, the participants intentionally source self-help related information from digital platforms via the Internet as tools that offer a psychological "quick fix" to the day-to-day psychosocial "problems"/challenges they admit to be experiencing.

Self-help media - the ideal teachers: "They help me with finding and knowing myself"

Probing the participants' motivations behind consuming self-help media material rendered insightful information, useful in shedding light with respect to self-help consumption by the ten study participants. Queried about their reasons for actively consuming self-help media, participants responded with a strikingly similar discursive thread of reasoning. Among these similarities and in addition to getting a "quick fix" as is outlined in the sub-section above, are a bespoke need by these participants to "learn" and "know" the self so as to understand how best to behave – in relation to others – to ensure harmonious social interactions that will help negate the "mistakes" that impede on the smooth-sailing of what these participants describe as their life journeys.

Breeze is of the opinion that life should be understood as an ever-evolving "journey" that presents certain milestones and challenges which need to be tackled as effectively as possible because "you don't just go through life thinking you'll be the same person that you were twenty years ago". Highlighting the reasons behind her consumption of self-help media, this participant stipulates that self-help media texts are a key element of assistance in her plight to undergo life's challenges and experiences while, at the same time, understanding and "accommodating" other people's journeys and experiences:

... Things happen, experiences; you come across different types of experiences. So, it's all a journey. You're trying to find yourself as you're trying to find and accommodate those that are around you as well.

A striking aspect of this response lies in the notion of "finding" oneself and, to an extent, others. The act of "finding" or coming to grips with something, at a basic level, involves the ability to perceive and make sense of the intended meaning of something (and in this case, someone). This presents the impression that, as human beings, we do not inherently possess the capability of deciphering our sense of self and who we are as members of the diverse societies we find ourselves in. As such, we are in constant need of assistance to acquire the appropriate language and insights, or the "moral grammar", as Nehring and Kerrigan (2020: 2) put it, that we need to internalise should we yearn for a harmonious and

"successful" life. Breeze pointing out that through the consumption of self-help themed media she can begin to carve an understanding of herself and others, makes for a thought-provoking point of inquiry. What about the self-help text allows for this possibility?

The idea of having to find and understand oneself gains further prevalence when it comes to why the study participants actively source and consume self-help media texts. Sisana shares that for her, "the main driving force [...] was just like, to understand myself and to understand other people to get an advantage in...be *that* girl; understand that people don't think like me..." Similarly, for Butterfly, "the motivation comes from that need to know". She, also, is driven by the urge to want to "know" herself in the best way possible. Butterfly finds that the self-help text allows her to "tackle all avenues" which includes finding and understanding herself as well as effectively tackling life experiences and challenges:

... Also being like at my age I'm going through a phase where I'm just trying to get to know myself and I'm trying to tackle all avenues. Like, just to do that in the best way possible, I'm trying to get to know myself so that pushes me to buy more of these books and then read. And I've found that most of the time when I read something it's...like with the book I'm currently reading, more especially, and I'm struggling to finish it because it's just like every time I read a chapter, and suddenly it's just like it is speaking to me right now. It's speaking to what I'm going through at the current moment. So, it's just those things sometimes I feel like I'm going through something; I've literally like gotten to a point where I believe that okay, I'm going through something, let me open a book.

For these participants, the self-help text seems to be consumed as a form of a "teacher" outside of a classroom in that it is deployed as a tool for empowering the self to become, not only an "expert" of oneself, but also learn how to gain expert knowledge towards successfully comprehending others around you. It is a general belief that a teacher's main role, among the many, is to provide their students with the understanding of certain concepts/issues, problems, or ideas. The self-help text becomes, in the minds of these participants, a non-human teacher responsible for facilitating on-going lessons to its students (self-help consumers) to ultimately make out of these individuals experts in their own rights. This notably supports part of Nehring and Kerrigan's (2020) observation that self-help materials develop significant consumer appeal because they are usually marketed on the basis of the solutions they claim to offer to the myriad of personal troubles that humans face. The more widely consumed these texts become, the more significant role they play in "shaping prevalent cultural narratives of self and social relationships" (Nehring & Kerrigan, 2020: 2). These texts, then, are influential in their promotion of moral grammars that become culturally entrenched and internalised as the gold standard according to which a successful, harmonious life can be achieved.

Ayanda, who goes as far as calling herself a "junkie" of self-help media, captures this observation that the self-help text is imagined to embody a "teacher" responsible for guiding its students (the active consumers) – through a moral grammar of culturally entrenched norms, beliefs, and values about self-improvement – towards positions of being well-informed about the subject matter involving human beings. She says that she has:

... learnt of so many terms and ... I'm naturally like an analytical person and I've learnt of so many disorders and terms for ... because I read so much about things, you know. I mean I Google all the relationship dysfunctional stuff or whatever because you go through things or people around you go through things and you learn to decipher what everything is so I'm definitely a junkie because I bookmark a lot of inspirational things, a lot of I mean ... the last what, three, four books that I read are all not direct self-help but are all aligned with like bettering myself.

This teacher/guidance aspect attached to the self-help text by these participants renders it a key

choice of consumption because, as Butterfly emphasises, "I know something will speak to what's going on in my world right now. So, it will give me some sort of light or some sort of guideline as to best go about tackling whatever it is. So, I think that's like the biggest motivation"

It is, arguably, the fact that these materials are often offered to consumers with endorsement from individuals said to be "experts" in their respective fields and, often times, arenas related to human psychology (Rimke, 2000; Lilienfeld et al. 2010; Nehring & Kerrigan, 2020), that these participants so actively cling to the contents thereof. Based partly on this underlying principle, self-help texts (books, online videos, magazine features etc) can, then, be assumed to carry this potential to disseminate content in the name of "education" and "guidance" to be exploited by those that consume them in order to "learn" about themselves and others, with the hope of attaining a successful life.

It is, seemingly, with this acquired knowledge of the self and others that a person can spare themselves the risk of falling into perceived flawed behavioural patterns that may hinder any form of harmony in their lives. Certain "mistakes" in life can be avoided and it is through the knowledge or moral grammars gained from consuming self-help media that interviewee Faith believes this is a possibility. She argues that the popular idiom pertaining to not reinventing the wheel holds a certain truth in life and she lives by this knowledge. This English saying, loosely phrased: "do not reinvent the wheel" stands as a form of advice to avoid wasting time indulging in what are deemed pointless behaviours or tasks of which the consequences are perhaps already known (Dictionary. Reference, 2022). Faith shares:

It's like basically there's a saying that says you cannot reinvent the wheel twice. You know, if somebody has travelled that path, sometimes it's better to just see what they did and avoid those things because as much as you want to do things by yourself, there are people who have travelled that road and they know what's there so you can avoid their mistakes and maybe you can get to your destination faster.

That aspect of "learning" again emerges and further demonstrates how the self-help text has developed an identity of a "teacher", though outside of the traditional classroom setting. The widespread dissemination of these texts (on TV, radio, digital or print media), renders these programmes/publications, etc. – symbolically speaking – as forms of national lecture rooms packed with students (self-help consumers) seeking ways to steer clear of "mistakes" that others have committed, as is evidently the case with Faith. This participant explains that one of her main reasons for consuming self-help media is to be able to "learn" from other people's mistakes so as to avoid repeating them as she goes through life. It is evident here that the self-help media text is positioned in the minds of the study participants as possessing the capability to act as a scaffold between a person's plight to self-understanding as well as self-guidance in terms of knowing what type of behaviours to engage in and what type to avoid in order not to make "mistakes" that may impede on the smooth sailing of a person's life journey (Nehring & Kerrigan, 2020). It is evident, furthermore, that the self-help media text is sourced and consumed by these participants as a means to gratify their psychosocial need for information and education (Pitout, 2009), where these participants engage self-help media texts as surveillance media relied on to gain information and learn more about themselves in relation to others as it relates to human behaviour.

Tackling the "voices" within: Self-help media as psychological armours against negative thoughts

Further to their perceived role as "educators", the self-help text is interestingly positioned as a strong contender in a psychological "fight" in which the mind is the battleground. The main opposition in this fight is the "voices" and thoughts inside a person's head that are often regarded as possessing negative influences on the self as a conscious subjectivity. It is argued by Beaumont (2015) that, as human beings, "we all carry a voice inside our head, an internalisation of the adults and carers who brought us up". These voices seemingly engender a destructive element able to do little good for the individual's psychological well-being. The self-help text, in this battle with the voices and, in extension, the thoughts inside an individual's mind, is argued as having a crucial role to play as it is expected to be victorious over the

negative thoughts and voices.

Mandy (female, 21, Journalism Student), when queried about her reasons behind actively consuming self-help media, grants a response that, upon closer analysis, speaks to this internal “battle” between the voices and ideas in the head, and the self-help media text:

In attempting to carve my own space in the world, you're often met with ideas of being imperfect and it's trying to deal with being imperfect that's forced ... well not forced but has led me to consuming self-help. So, in my efforts to try and reach that perfection, again, like I said, that really doesn't exist but we all want it, I started consuming self-help to make me feel like "I can do it!"

From Mandy's description of what motivates her to consume self-help texts, it is apparent that these texts are considered “powerful” as sources of positive reinforcement for the person with respect to his/her mental well-being. A similar line of reasoning emerges from Faith's statements. Reflecting on her experience with the perceived lessons drawn from her engagement with self-help media, she states:

I remember this other book; they were talking about negative thinking and things like replacing your negative thoughts with ... So, I've tried it. I know I have this, like how basically they were talking about how your life is a garden and you don't want weeds to grow in your garden – you want to nurture your garden, you want it to grow. So, the same way you'll take care of your garden, you want to take care of your brain. Filter things that go inside.

The brain, which is here compared to a garden, needs to be “filtered” with respect to input in order to ensure positive output, which will potentially render desirable mental well-being.

With “ideas” of imperfection flowing within society through various interactions between human beings, individuals find themselves in a culture where presumably objective distinctions between “normal” and “abnormal” (or imperfect) have become entrenched within their daily practices and this, more often than not, drives them to consider “expert” assistance when faced with experiences deemed to be outside of this ideal of “normalcy” (Cherry 2008; Rimke & Brock, 2012; Rimke, 2020). This “expert” comes in the form of the self-help text and is in constant battle with the internal voices that say “no, you can't!” because, as Mandy says, “The one thing self-help media does is make you believe that you can do anything and ... so, sometimes we don't think of it as a drug but it is a drug. It makes you believe you can do anything.” Being able to do “anything” may, arguably, then also mean being able to silence those destructive voices in the head. Interestingly, Mandy's response illuminates a key aspect in the growing number of oppositional studies around self-help and popular psychology: the notion of “toxic positivity”. Scholarly opposition to ideas of positive self-motivation and self-drive can be seen in literature about “toxic positivity”. Toxic positivity is described as “the overgeneralization of a positive state of mind that encourages using positivity to suppress and displace any acknowledgement of stress and negativity” (Upadhyay, Srivatsa, & Mamidi, 2022: 64). Individuals subscribing to toxic positivity, whether intentionally or not, often minimise their own negative feelings and suppress what they deem negativity, instead of acknowledging, processing, and actively working through it. Mandy, in this instance, seems aware of the potential “toxic” nature of self-help materials, thus aptly referring to them as “drugs”.

Even so, the “motivational” element attached to the self-help text is highly sought after and it is part of the main reason why self-help media are constantly sourced in modern society (Rimke, 2000; Rimke and Brock, 2012); but with this popularity comes a significant share of opposition in that the self-help text or, more broadly, the act of self-help consumption is often described as an ineffective practice that is of little help to the individual (Rodger, 2009). Personal development researcher, Dr Symeon Rodger's analysis argues that “although self-help material and their authors/creators of ‘high integrity’ yield ‘fantastic’ techniques, the problem with these self-help texts lies with the fact that they often succeed in tackling

the 'symptoms' instead of the 'root cause,' which Rodger argues is human beings themselves" (Rens, 2016: 12). This opposing viewpoint appears to resonate with Faith, as she is aware that some individuals might find it "stupid", but she is staunch in her stance that these texts do indeed help as she takes to defend the self-help text in this response: "You know, you think it's stupid reading about someone motivating you. Sometimes there's days where you actually have to, I don't know, read it somewhere that you are a powerful person. You need that reassurance, that ... mental power".

The "mental power" that Faith refers to emphasises this article's argument that the self-help media text is seen as a key role player in standing as a strong contender against the negative thoughts and voices a person may be faced with internally. This, furthermore, attributes particularly strong positive characteristics to self-help media material. Driving the point home with his response is Mo (male, 25, Educator) who explains that he consumes self-help media by "read[ing] these things, read on them ... something that would kind of uplift my spirit, make me feel good". Depending on how "strong" the self-help text is in the battle against the negative voices in a person's head, it is placed in high regard as a trusted element to make you "feel good"; whether about yourself or people around you and this stands as a key driving force behind why these texts are so staunchly consumed by the participants in question.

CONCLUSION

This article, framed by the uses and gratifications theory and literature about self-improvement and advisory media, explored why and how a small group of middle-class South African millennials residing in Johannesburg consume self-help media texts. It is found that the participants engage these texts to seek solutions to a myriad of questions and concerns with respect to the self for reasons such as establishing who they are in relation to others. By so doing, they partly gratify a need for relational identification while finding ways to "better" themselves. There appears to exist a belief among these participants that, as humans, it is vital that we find and remain in tune with ourselves to be able to effectively manage our experiences to the benefit of our socio-emotional well-being in an ever-challenging society. As themselves active, middle-class and educated South African millennials, these participants construct their citizenry as somewhat embroiled in discourses of psychological strain that require active self-management believed to thrive on an intricately woven relationship between the self and an expert other deemed to have all the "tips" and answers in this regard. As such, self-help consumption is also undertaken as a psychological "quick fix" to the day-to-day psychosocial "problems" that push the interviewed participants to seek coping mechanisms. These findings resonate with existing studies that have argued that self-help media materials enjoy growing audience consumption by being successfully marketed as the solution to the myriad of personal troubles humans face, and that these texts offer a moral grammar of norms, beliefs, and values towards the attainment of a "successful" life which their consumers latch onto.

It is also evident that the media are trusted with ensuring the flow of "educational" material required for the enhancement of this ongoing project between the "self" as a connection to an expert other. It is the Internet, especially, that is lauded by these participants as a key site for open and instant access to these kinds of self-management media material and their moral grammars. In their attempts at active self-management, these individuals gratify a psychosocial need for information and education, where they engage self-help media texts as surveillance media relied on to learn more about themselves in relation to others as it relates to "acceptable" and harmonious human behaviour. According to these participants, then, the media (by rendering the self-help text widely accessible) aid them in the smoother navigating of their everyday social relations in these participants' various roles as, for instance, employees, students, and middle-class youth in contemporary South Africa.

While these findings help us gain a helpful, yet ungeneralisable, understanding of the relationship between self-help media and the audiences engaging with them, a study of this nature is not without its limitations. A significant part of the participant recruitment call occurred on online platforms; such a strategy carries the potential to exclude the individuals who have very little to no access to the internet and any of the online communication platforms that were used. As such, additional voices that may have had a potentially influential effect on the findings made by a study of this nature were excluded.

This article, as a result, is skewed to middle-class voices, viewpoints, and experiences of a group of Johannesburg-based black South Africans.

In its goal to explore the consumption of self-help media texts by a small group of young South Africans, this article only looked into the viewpoints held by individuals who are avid consumers/ audiences of self-help media and highlighted where (media types), why, and how they engage with this genre. Future research could explore both sides of this avenue of inquiry: investigate both the approval and disapproval of self-help media as popular cultural texts. Future research could explore the reasons why certain individuals potentially disagree with the said "benefits" that the consumption of self-help media possesses. This would make for an interesting comparison of voices on either side of this popular cultural phenomenon.

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