

# The Impact of Instagram in the Works of Emerging South African Artists

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## ABSTRACT

The study investigates the impact of Instagram on the works of emerging South African artists. The purpose of the study is to assist emerging South Africa in successfully using Instagram for promoting their works and mitigate the challenges they encounter. The study looks at Instagram as the proposed solution in mitigating the challenges encountered by emerging South African artists. For this study, key informant interviews were conducted where experts shared their knowledge on how to successfully utilize Instagram. These experts include two South African artists that have a huge following on their Instagram page. The study suggests that lack of interaction with the audience and lack of activity leads to failure in successfully using the platform. The study also suggests that consistent engagement and activity within the platform leads to great results. Furthermore, using hashtags, promotions, and producing more work helps in growing the platform. Both artists have illustrated that Instagram is a great platform to use for promoting works of art.

**Keywords:** *Instagram, Emerging artists, South Africa.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Instagram is an American photo and video sharing social networking service. The app allows users to upload media that can be edited with filters and organized by hashtags and geographical tagging. Posts can be shared publicly or with pre-approved followers. Users can browse other users' content by tags and locations and view trending content. Users can like photos and follow other users to add their content to a feed. Instagram has over 800 million users worldwide and is a pro-social network that is popular among the youth (Greenwood et.al, 2016). In 2010, Instagram was launched as an online photo sharing and social network service, (Jensen, 2013). It is one of the fast-growing social media networks with more than 1 billion active users worldwide (Budge and MacDowall, 2019). Instagram is an important tool for art galleries in promotion, marketing, interaction, participation, and enhancing the visitor experience, (Suess, 2018). It has generated much interest in the art gallery community, (Budge, 2017). In South Africa, it has a 9 % penetration and is still growing. The app is picture-orient and it also provides the option for users to post recent stories. Instagram has become popular amongst artists and creatives because of its visual features. Although the

literature suggests that Instagram is a good platform for artists to use, no research in South Africa looks into the impact of Instagram on the work of emerging South African artists. Instagram has the ability to reach wider audiences due to its limitless exposure and democratization of the art scene (Visone, 2015). Therefore, emerging artists who are struggling to get platforms to showcase their works can use this platform to connect to a pool of users and art patrons who might be interested in their works. Instagram can also provide the opportunity for emerging artists to promote their works and become known within the art industry. Since there hasn't been any research conducted in South Africa that looks into the impact of Instagram in the works of emerging South African artists, the author finds it necessary to investigate the impact of Instagram. Factors such as ICT tools as well as the internet need to be taken into consideration to establish the successful use of Instagram on works of emerging South African artists.'

## **2. CHALLENGES THAT EMERGING ARTISTS ENCOUNTER**

Starting an artistic career is coupled with several challenges. These challenges range from finding a space to work in, buying art-making materials, and finding a space to exhibit the works. The paper titled *Why Are Artists Poor*, (Abbing, 2002), identifies the key challenges that artists face. These are different market segments, gatekeepers, high rivalry, market inefficiency, low liquidity, high transaction costs, low income, asymmetric information, the tense economic situation for most commercial galleries, and winner-takes-all characteristics (ibid). Artists face challenges ranging from access to funding, high material costs, lack of art buyers, lack of industrial promotion from government, shortage of art exhibitions, and high fees for staging an art exhibition, (Hagg, 2010). According to (TBR, 2018), work opportunities advertised outside the artist's region require the artist to temporarily relocate. In South Africa, most artists are situated in Johannesburg and Cape Town because these are the cities that are an artistic hub. In this study, we focused on tackling issues relating to the lack of opportunities to exhibit, lack of customer reach because of geographical restrictions. The author selected artists from KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) because that is the area that contains artists who struggle to access platforms to showcase their artworks.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

The study uses a qualitative approach. Creswell (2013) states that qualitative methods include the process of collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and writing the result of the study. Furthermore, methods exist in a survey and experimental research that relate to the identification of a sample and population, specifying the type of design, collecting and analyzing data, presenting the results, making interpretation, and writing the research in a manner consistent with a survey or experimental study, (Creswell, 2013).

### ***3.1. The Research Sample***

The study uses key informant interviews where experts were selected to be part of the sample. Key informants are perceived as providing important knowledge more than knowledge contributed by ordinary (Lokot, 2021). Furthermore, key informants are perceived as producing more valuable knowledge because of the status and expertise of the key informant, (Lokot, 2021). In this study, we selected two expert artists who have a high following on their Instagram page. More experts were approached via email and social media, however, only two experts availed themselves in participating in the study. These experts are visual artists that have successfully utilized Instagram in promoting their works. The study focused on selecting artists that have a large following as well as

artists who are very active in using the platform. These artists are representative of a population of artists that have successfully used Instagram. The questions were open-ended, allowing the artists to share more knowledge about their use of Instagram. Artists shared their perceptions, experiences, methods, challenges, benefits on utilizing Instagram and growing their platform.

### ***3.2. The Research Organization***

Experts were given open-ended questions via Instagram and were able to answer them through the platform. Because of Covid-19 restrictions, it was a challenge to physically meet participants and therefore, they felt comfortable in arranging the interview through the platform. Before carrying out the interview, experts were notified that their contribution would be shared in this paper, including the selected images in this study.

## **4. FINDINGS**

In this study, the investigation was on the impact of Instagram on the works of emerging South African artists. Furthermore, the essence of this paper was to establish whether Instagram can help emerging South African artists mitigate some of the challenges they encounter. The author interviewed South African artists that have successfully used Instagram to provide solutions that can act as a guideline for emerging South African artists to follow. Lethabo Huma and Zandile Tshabalala were selected for the interview. The following themes emerged from the unstructured interview.

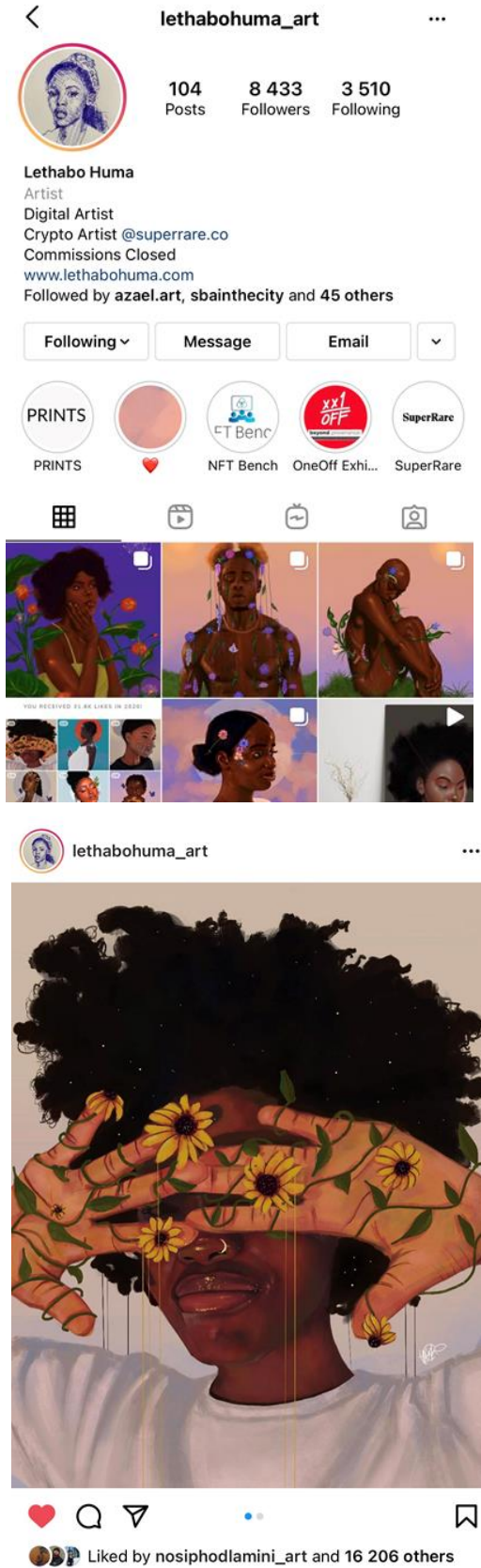


Figure 1 Lethabo Huma’s Instagram account.

Lethabo Huma is a digital artist born and raised in Pretoria, South Africa. She is currently attending the

University of South Africa where she is pursuing her degree in visual multimedia arts. In her Instagram account, she has over 8000 followers and has seen a lot of success in using the platform. Furthermore, she believes that having more followers gives you more opportunities and adds value to your name or the brand.



Figure 2 Zandile Tshabalala’s account.

Zandile Tshabalala was born in Soweto, South Africa. She is a visual artist and is currently completing her BA(FINA) at the University of the Witwatersrand. She uses acrylic and oil paint in her work. She has over 10 000 followers. Important information such as the website and the email address are listed in her bio. She believes that you don't get successful if you haven't taken the first step.

#### ***4.1. Perception About Instagram***

The selected participants gave different responses regarding their perception of Instagram. Both participants affirmed that Instagram is a great platform to connect globally, access information, and promote artworks. One of the participants stated that: "I believe Instagram can work for you and/or against you as an artist". Furthermore, constantly being online and witnessing other artists put out work can create unnecessary pressure to constantly release new content. The other participant stated that: "I think of Instagram as a work tool, I admire it for its ability to connect people from around the world, how quickly information can be shared, and accessibility of that information". The respondents outline important points regarding Instagram that can be positive and negative. The positive being able to connect with people and the negative being pressurized as an artist to consistently release new content. As an artist using Instagram, it can be draining to consistently produce work because not producing work can lead to some followers unfollowing you, and it can shift your focus from producing art that is meaningful to you as an artist to producing art for the audience. You can lose yourself. It is important to be aware of this to not get lost in trying to impress the audience. Those that value your art are more likely to continue following you.

#### ***4.2. The Experience of Utilizing Instagram***

Both participants gave their individual experiences about using Instagram. One participant stated that: "My experiences vary from day to day". Sometimes she gets inspired when witnessing other works produced by artists and sometimes, she feels her days are wasted when she spends too much time online. The other respondent stated that: "Thus far, I have no problem with it and I am enjoying its efficiency and convenience quite a lot". Witnessing other artists producing art can be helpful especially when you run out of ideas. It helps to reflect on your art and think deeply of what you want to integrate into your work. Spending too much time on the platform can waste time that could have been used to create new work.

#### ***4.3. Ways of Growing Your Audience/Followers on Instagram***

Participants gave various responses. One participant stated that: "I use hashtags, tried to create art as much as I could, I sometimes engage with my followers through QnAs". The other participant stated that: "To be honest it is the audience that has assisted greatly in growing of my page and of course I have contributed also by giving the audience something that they can engage with as consistently as I can". Literature affirms that using hashtags grows your audience and consistently creating and sharing work helps in building your audience. The audience is your biggest supporters and they are always looking forward to new work being produced and shared. People can see the amount of time you put into your work by your consistent engagement with them in sharing your work. Some experts on YouTube postulate that consistency in sharing your work on Instagram help in growing your audience.

#### ***4.4. Methods Used in Growing the Audience***

One respondent stated that she uses three methods. "Following artists, I find cool, using hashtags under my work, and paying for promotional ads on Instagram (I try to do this monthly)". The other participant stated that: "Consistent posting and also doing it in an authentic and enjoyable manner I'd like to think". Following artists that are producing work that is good and that has a huge following helps in growing your content. It helps when you consistently engage with their work, once they see that you are appreciating their work, they may follow you and support your work. Secondly, paying for promotional ads is the most effective in gaining more following. As an artist who uses Instagram, I have seen people following my page after promoting my work. The promotion depends on how much you are willing to spend. Spending money on promotional ads helps in reaching a wide audience.

#### ***4.5. Challenges Encountered in Using Instagram***

The participants shared the challenges they have encountered in using Instagram. The challenges vary with each participant. One participant reiterated that: "Sometimes my explore page is filled with content I don't even enjoy or very repetitive content which can be frustrating at times". Furthermore, the participant stated that the algorithm on Instagram is strange and that she can't see the content of the majority of people she follows. The other participant stated that: "I'd say the downside is too much engagement and information". Furthermore, mental illness is real and Instagram can contribute to that. Instagram's algorithm is unpredictable, at times it can be favorable and at times it can go against you. Too much engagement can also be

negative because it can divert you from doing other important things. This is more apparent when you get more likes, you end up being obsessed with producing work for the sake of likes which can divert your attention from producing work that is meaningful and appealing to you.

#### ***4.6. The Benefits Experienced in Utilizing Instagram***

Both participants affirmed that Instagram has assisted in establishing a connection with people and incredible artists. One participant stated that: "I have grown a wide audience and I've connected with some incredible artists" and the other stated that: "Again I'd say it's being connected with people from all around the globe, creating relationships which can at times connect with the business aspect of my art". Instagram is great for emerging artists who have been finding it hard to showcase their works. It is a platform that can allow people from all over the globe to see your work. Unlike galleries which decide which work can be displayed, Instagram allows artists to share works without being restricted by gatekeepers (curators, gallerists). Instagram connects you to the global art community and helps in making your work discoverable.

#### ***4.7. Things that Make one Unsuccessful in Utilizing Instagram***

Both participants made it clear that lack of engagement and inconsistency in posting work can lead to lack of success. Furthermore, catering to the wrong market can be a factor that leads to one being unsuccessful. Lack of engagement generally leads to people losing interest in you. This can harm your growth as an artist who aspires to create bonds with people. It is therefore imperative to develop consistency with sharing your work on Instagram in order to be taken seriously as an artist as well as to have potential customers that may buy or promote your work to other people. Engaging with the audience makes your portfolio to be credible as people can see that you take your work seriously. It also demonstrates that you are a professional.

#### ***4.8. Recommend Instagram to Emerging and Upcoming South African Artists***

A question was asked if they would recommend Instagram to emerging South African artists. Both participants stated that they would recommend it to emerging South African artists because of its ability to promote and market the work produced by an artist. One participant stated that: "Yes, Instagram is a great way to promote yourself and network with people on a global range and this can open a lot of opportunities for you". The other respondent stated that: "Definitely, Instagram

really is the easiest to use tool, especially with regards to marketing yourself and creating a portfolio". Furthermore, the participant always advises artists to do some inner research and familiarize themselves with the spaces and people they want to associate with and try and position themselves using that information. Instagram is a great platform for artists who want to be discoverable. Emerging South African artists who are struggling to access platforms that can allow them to showcase their works can use Instagram to be discoverable. The author does not advocate for emerging South African artists to neglect exhibiting their works on galleries. On the contrary, the author suggests that emerging South African artists should use Instagram as a tool that allows them to be discoverable. Furthermore, galleries and art institutions are also on Instagram. This means that artists can eventually be seen by galleries that might have an interest in exhibiting their works.

### **5. CONCLUSIONS**

The study has illustrated that indeed Instagram is an effective platform to use for emerging South African artists. The purpose of the study was to help emerging South African artists to know how to use Instagram successfully. Based on the conducted interviews, the participants reiterated the effectiveness of Instagram as well as ways to use the platform effectively. Artists shared their insights on how to use Instagram as well as challenges that occur in using the platform. In a paper titled "The Impact of the 4IR technologies in the works of emerging South African artists" Xaba et al. (2021) states that Instagram is the most favorable platform to use compared to Facebook and Online Art Gallery. In this study, 250 participants were selected and majority of the participants recommended Instagram as the platform to use for promoting art. It is clear that emerging South African artists must utilize Instagram if they intend to promote their art. Based on this study and on previous studies conducted, (Xaba, et al., 2021), it is clear there is great value in utilizing this platform, particularly when emerging artists are active within the platform. It is important to note that just like any other technology, there are some negatives that can occur when using the platform such as pressure to constantly produce new work and spending too much time in the platform. Therefore, emerging South African artists must be conscious when using the platform and must try by all means to only use the platform as means of promoting their work of art.

### **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION**

Siyanda Xaba used both secondary and primary data to undertake the study. Research articles were used in the literature. Furthermore, the author arranged and interviewed two successful artists that use Instagram. The findings were then presented in the paper.

Xing Fang supervised me in writing the paper.

Dhaneshwar Shah proof read my work and suggested areas that needed to be revised.

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