

NEWS RELEASE

Are digital natives the brokers of peace?



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PRETORIA – Generation Z (Gen Z) – those born between 1997 and 2012 – was raised during uncertain times, making them socially conscious. This has opened them up to new ways of thinking about the future and doing things, as well as questioning the ways things are done, including conflict resolution. As the first true native digital generation, Gen Zs have been exposed to a wide range of perspectives and experiences, and are regarded as the most diverse generation.

Research by Dr Quraysha Ismail Sooliman – a postdoctoral researcher at the National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences, and in the [Department of Political Science](#) at the [University of Pretoria](#) (UP) – asks whether this generation holds the key to resolving the conflicts of our time, especially those forged out of hate, exploitation and greed.

Dr Sooliman explains: “In the field of peace and conflict studies, one of the most profound insights is encapsulated

in President Nelson Mandela's assertion: 'No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.' This principle underscores the malleability of human attitudes and the potential for fostering peace and coexistence through education and empathy."

Making up almost one-third of the global population and almost half of South Africa's population, the influence of Gen Z cannot be underestimated.

"These young people have the potential for transcending divisions of race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, and class, offering a new vision for humanity and social cohesion," Dr Sooliman says.

She makes reference to their expressions of solidarity with the people of Palestine, whose situation parallels the racial superiority entrenched during South African apartheid, resulting in persistent and systematic violence.

"However, the emotional impact of such violence on Palestinians and other marginalised groups, and how these emotions influence their responses, remains underexplored in humanities disciplines such as psychology, political science and international relations," Dr Sooliman says. "Additionally, the psychological and emotional ramifications of coloniality on these populations, particularly in the context of peacebuilding, are often overlooked. Herein lies the intersection and amplification of dehumanisation and privilege. Privilege manifests when the histories of entire peoples are expunged from educational curricula to avoid discomfort among supremacists."

In South Africa, critical studies on settler colonialism, white supremacy, Zionism and dehumanisation are not yet sufficiently integrated into academic curricula, despite their crucial role in understanding historical and contemporary societal impacts. The failure to systematically "unlearn" inculcated hatred necessitates an academic responsibility to rigorously interrogate these ideologies, assess their impacts and propose alternative frameworks.

"In addressing these shortcomings, my research aims to reinvigorate the decolonial narrative, emphasising the intrinsic humanity of all individuals," Dr Sooliman says. "While my primary focus has been on women leaders and social partners in nation-building and fostering social cohesion, it has become clear that social cohesion is unattainable without recognising each person's humanity and understanding the mindset and perspectives of Gen Z."

The influence of Gen Z in reshaping university policies following the #FeesMustFall protests underscores the potential for transformative change and the "unlearning" of ingrained prejudices.

"My research extensively examines the narratives and characterisations of activists, a topic thoroughly explored by young students and researchers in Western capitals," she says. "We need to be brave enough, bold enough and honest enough to acknowledge that, analogous to post-apartheid South Africa's rejection of Bantustans, ethical individuals must also reject a two-state solution for Palestine and demand one state where humans live as humans and are not categorically defined as animals. This necessitates consensus, education, emotional development, restorative justice and humility. This effort is essential for constructing inclusive, peaceful societies."

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on its Hatfield Campus in Pretoria. This 115-year-old institution is also one of the largest producers of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only university in the country with a Faculty of Veterinary Science, which is ranked the best in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

The 2024 Times Higher Education subject rankings placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of Law, Veterinary Science, Accounting and Finance; Agriculture and Forestry and Electrical and Electronic Engineering. Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranked the University among the top five in Africa, as part of their 2024 World University Rankings (WUR). UP was the only South African university featured in the 2023 World University Rankings for Innovation (WURI), falling within in the 101-200 range of innovative universities.

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