

NEWS RELEASE

UP graduate's research reveals the power of social media in promoting green behaviours



UP lecturer and recent Doctor of Philosophy in Marketing Management graduate, Dr Euodia Botha.

PRETORIA – A major driver of the climate crisis is the global culture of consumerism and the consequent increase in household waste. It is this issue that sparked the research conducted by recent [Doctor of Philosophy \(PhD\) in Marketing Management](#) graduate and UP lecturer Dr Euodia Botha. Dr Botha wanted to see whether the environmental, societal and economic problems fuelled by consumerism and waste could be tackled by leveraging consumers tendency to post about their consumption on social media. “The idea for my study came to me while scrolling through my Instagram feed. I realised that we all post about our 'best lives' in an effort to belong but also to stand out and wondered whether this tendency to post about our consumption for the benefit of status could be 'hacked' for the greater environmental good”, stated Dr Botha.

This novel PhD study centred around the concept of zero waste (ZW) behaviours, a subset of sustainable or 'green' behaviours that refers to consumers' efforts to minimise their waste by engaging in the '5Rs' namely to *refuse, reduce, reuse, recycle* and *rot* (compost). “ZW behaviours might look like saying 'no thank you' to disposable plastic bags at the grocery store, buying packaging-free products, carpooling to work, donating your old belongings, using reusable coffee cups, recycling your paper and composting your kitchen scraps, among other things. Sadly, when it comes to many of these behaviours consumers often experience a gap

between what they say and what they do, and I wanted to see whether these good intentions could be turned into ZW actions by dangling the ‘status’ carrot and capitalising off the already prolific use of social media”, said Dr Botha.

The study’s findings confirmed Dr Botha’s prediction: that individuals’ tendency to post on social media to enhance their status strengthens the link between their ZW intentions and actions. “Essentially, if individuals think that they will be able to post about using a green product or practicing a green habit, and that this will show how unique they are but also that they’re doing what’s deemed socially acceptable, that person will be more likely to act on their good intentions and actually engage in that green behaviour. So yes, our habit of posting about our consumption on social media could be leveraged for the greater environmental good!”

The study also identified three unique segments of South Africans based on their ZW behaviours, each of which is driven by different factors. The *ZW rookies*, a mostly Millennial and tertiary-educated group, were mainly driven by financial-, and status-related factors. The *ZW intermediates*, a less affluent but more educated segment, were also driven by financial considerations, but more so by what is deemed as socially acceptable. Finally, the *Zero Wasters*, the least affluent and least educated of the segments, felt the most social pressure to engage in ZW behaviours, and engaged in all 5Rs frequently no matter the financial benefit or cost.

The study offers several strategies to assist marketing practitioners and governments in increasing ZW behaviours to create a better environmental, economic, and societal future. These strategies, grounded in empirical research, could play a crucial role in shaping future environmental policies and marketing practices. The identification of three distinct consumer segments based on ZW behaviours also provides a valuable framework for tailoring marketing and sustainability messages and initiatives: taking a segmented approach to promoting ZW behaviours could significantly enhance the effectiveness of environmental and marketing campaigns by allowing for more targeted and relevant communications. The impact of Dr Botha’s study does however extend far beyond academic circles: the study contributes to seven of the [United Nations’](#) (UN) 2030 [sustainable development goals](#) (SDGs) and adds to the emerging stream of transformative consumer research (TCR). The alignment with global sustainability objectives highlights the research’s potential for wide-reaching impact.

Overall, Dr Botha’s study provides evidence that by showing consumers what they can gain from going green, one can turn their good intentions into action. The study is a stepping stone for better understanding ZW behaviours, promoting it, and in so doing addressing the environmental, social and economic implications of climate change, “there are many factors that play a role in turning consumers’ good intentions into action, and I hope to continue conducting research to identify these factors and make actionable recommendations that could someday make a significant difference in South Africa and globally. For now, I hope my study generates curiosity among other academics and encourages further research on the topic.”

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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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