



A Photovoice Study Exploring the Subjective Constructions of 'Born-Free' Identities in a South African University

By Marissa Brits and Thandokazi Maseti

Abstract

The South African identity has been shaped by nation-building discourse; it remains a point of ongoing political discussion well into South Africa's democratisation. Literature suggests that 'South Africans' only exist through their creation by nationalist rhetoric; therefore, growing political discontent is reflected in a disentanglement from the 'South African' identity. This article, using photovoice, explores Black university students' constructions of their identity in contemporary South Africa. The participants viewed the South African society as a divided one. Although they described the impact of nation-building discourse as having existed in the past, they spoke of it as a disingenuous sentiment that has faded with the passing of former President Nelson Mandela. Instead, the participants turn to their ethnic

groups to establish a fluid cultural identity. The 'born-free' generation is in a state of 'in-between': born after the official end of apartheid, they are thought of as having access to opportunities unavailable to previous generations. However, they continue to grapple with the challenges and unresolved legacies of the past. This project's significant contribution lies in its emphasis on the perspectives and experiences of the 'born-frees' themselves. Existing literature shows that politicians and academics usually control discussions related to nation-building and transformation. Yet, the voices of the 'born-frees' are frequently side-lined, as they are perceived to lack firsthand experience of apartheid's challenges. This study demonstrates that, even with democratic change, there are numerous aspects of 'born-free' lives that have remained untransformed.

Introduction

Despite a South Africa's national identity has been a strongly politicised concept, undergoing significant changes since the end of apartheid (Chipkin, 2007). However, this transformation often does not correspond to the everyday experiences of Black¹ people (Ball, 2018; Mafoko, 2017). This study demonstrates how the 'born-free' generation perceives and experiences this transformation. Under apartheid, identity formation was rooted in divisive categories, defining South Africans through the politics and culture of the nationalist struggle (Marks and Trapido, 2014). In the post-apartheid era, constructing a national identity became a contentious political issue, leaving those emerging from apartheid without a distinct national characteristic. What was clear was who they were not: they were no longer the South Africans who had either committed or endured the injustices of the past (Chipkin, 2007). However, during the 1994 elections, regardless of whether the South African people constituted a nation, they were nonetheless a community of individuals eligible for citizenship, within the boundaries of a real or imagined political entity (Chipkin, 2007; Mark and Trapido, 2014).

The advent of democracy necessitated transformation and nation-building. However, many of South Africa's 'born-free' generation were born too late to fully embrace this new sense of nationalism. Born after the 1994 democratic election (Maseti, 2018), they missed the era of institutionalised racism, but still bore the social and economic scars of apartheid (Chipkin, 2007). The term 'born-free' is associated with those born after the struggle for democracy had concluded, with the hope that they would reap the rewards of the struggle generation (Maseti, 2018). This term does not describe a generation born free of racial segregation and all forms of inequality, it is an aspirational term and not always the reality of the group it wishes to describe. Transformation policies sought to bring significant changes to higher education (Cornell, 2015; Spillius, 2012) and to diversify the student body. However, the reality remains that the participation rates of Black, Coloured², and Indian students remain lower than those of their White counterparts (Jawitz, 2012; Kessi, 2013). The identities of these students are shaped by the socio-political legacies of apartheid (Vander, 2019). This study focuses on the experiences

of Black 'born-free' students who, having no living memory of apartheid, have the responsibility of an identity forged in constitutional freedom. The participants were studying at a historically White university. While transformation policies at tertiary institutions have aimed at increasing diversity, it is important to understand the experiences of Black students within historically White-only spaces. The 'born-free' generation emerged during a time when the aspiration was to move forward as one united nation, embracing diversity and accessibility in education (Mafoko, 2017). However, many come from financially struggling families and have experienced racial, gender, and ethnic discrimination (Mafoko, 2017). From their perspective, the ideal of a rainbow nation has not only failed them but the entire nation as well (Ball, 2018; Mafoko, 2017; Wa Azania, 2016).

More than half of South Africa's population, under the age of 25, was born with no living memory of apartheid, and this generation will play a central role in the nation's civic and political life (Norgaard, 2015). This generation grew up without memories of the National Party (NP), having only experienced the rule of the African National Congress (ANC), carrying an identity forged in constitutional freedom. When asked to describe their identities, South Africans will first identify themselves by racial categories, followed by subnational categories, and lastly by a national identity (Bornman, 2010). Yet, acknowledging that the South African identity has been shaped by various nation-building discourses and currently rests in the hands of President Ramaphosa, who evoked the preamble of the 1996 Constitution in his 2018 State of the Nation Address (SONA), this study aims to explore how the 'born-frees' construct their South African identity.

The construction of a South African identity

The construction of a South African identity during apartheid was deeply entrenched in exclusionary and divisive categories, grounded in an ideology of separatist development (Eaton, 2002). This inherited discriminatory system is a form of 'internal colonisation' which is characterised by the absence of a distinct separation between the colonising power

and the colonised population (Hirson, 1992). In South Africa, these features were compounded by the judicial independence of the White South African state, which laid the foundation for the apartheid government. The supremacy of the White South African state translated into the systematic and legalised discrimination that shaped the economic, social, and political structure of the entire country (Hirson, 1992). After the Anglicisation of the state, after the Second Boer War, Afrikaner nationalists started creating their own history and symbols which emphasised the importance of a unified Afrikaner Volk (Baine, 1998). Afrikaner intellectuals began creating an Afrikaner ethnic identity; it was within this context in 1946 that the NP won the general elections on the platform of 'separate development' (Chipkin, 2007). After the election win by the NP, a plethora of legislation that entrenched racial discrimination followed (Baines, 1998). The new government became increasingly aggressive with the introduction of the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, the creation of the homelands, and the promotion of the Bantu Self-Government Act (Chipkin, 2007).

Identity formation under apartheid was largely defined by racial categories, which obscured differences such as language or religion (Bornman, 2010; Chipkin, 2007). While Afrikaners witnessed the development and consolidation of a full-fledged nationalist movement throughout much of the twentieth century, minority groups found themselves constructing a sense of 'newly-imagined communities' (Marks and Trapido, 1987) or multiple identities. As Mamdani (2000: 176) proposes: 'the apartheid project enforced bipolar identities of White people as racial and Black people as ethnic beings, welding together its beneficiaries into a single identity...while fragmenting its victims into...' multiple minorities. It was within this context that the quest for a unified South African identity began. Calls for a shared identity can be traced back to the early days of the struggle for African rights; organisations like Imbumba yamaNyama (1881), the Native Congress (1898), the African Political Organisation, and the Indian Congress all championed equal rights for all (Mbeki, 1992). When the ANC was founded in 1912, it explicitly called for the unity of all South Africans, proclaiming, 'We are one people' (Mbeki, 1992). In 1955, the ANC held their first national assembly and introduced the Freedom Charter (Everatt, 2009); the assembly was a collaborative

“ However, the ANC’s talk about ‘nation’ and ‘national identity’ was influenced by their response to the apartheid regime’s racialised discourse and despite their vision of a non-racial society, the very concept of ‘non-racialism’ still assumed the existence of distinct racial groups (Pieterse, 2002). ”

effort that involved individuals from various racial and social backgrounds. It strongly promoted the idea of 'non-racialism' as an ideology (Frederikse, 1990). Their message called upon South Africans, regardless of race: 'We call the people of South Africa, black and white—Let us speak together of freedom!' However, the ANC's talk about 'nation' and 'national identity' was influenced by their response to the apartheid regime's racialised discourse and despite their vision of a non-racial society, the very concept of 'non-racialism' still assumed the existence of distinct racial groups (Pieterse, 2002).

After the 1994 election and the adoption of the 1996 Constitution, the uncertainty about what post-apartheid South Africa would look like began to fade away. These two events filled the nation with hope for the future. However, the country still faced the challenging task of addressing the deep-rooted socio-economic problems inherited from the apartheid era (Chipkin, 2016). The adoption of the 1996 Constitution was not just about embracing non-racialism but also about shaping the identity of the South African nation-state (Chipkin, 2016). This approach emphasised that while racial identities might hold personal significance, they were deemed irrelevant for a functioning political democracy. It emphasised the establishment of a nation built on the allocation of individual rights, irrespective of one's beliefs or origins (Blaser, 2004). The end of apartheid necessitated

the creation of a shared sense of nationhood and a collective identity. This was accomplished through the promotion of nation-building discourse (Eaton, 2002). Thus, the metaphor of the Rainbow Nation was invoked, a term coined by Archbishop Tutu (Daniel et al., 2003). The discourse underscored the idea of 'unity in diversity,' which was further reinforced through the adoption of symbols like the national flag and anthem. The message 'unity in diversity' was enshrined in the new Constitution, which echoed the words of the Freedom Charter: 'We the people of South Africa ...' (Constitution, 1996). This legislature also helped define the identity of the citizens in the newly formed democratic nation by emphasising the shared citizenship, common symbols, the recognition of the rights and languages of all, and a commitment to equality (Ngonyama, 2012). The concept of a rainbow nation, while offering a positive framework for citizens to engage and empathise with one another, has faced criticism for concealing the brutal realities of apartheid from public discussion (Harris, 2004).

Before Thabo Mbeki's presidency, the nation building discourse shifted from non-racialism to rainbow-ism. But, starting in 1999, former President Thabo Mbeki advocated for a supra-national ideal known as the 'African Renaissance' (Eaton, 2022). The central goal of this political rhetoric became the creation of a single nation with a strong African identity. Consequently, the concept of an African-inspired South African identity gained prominence (Bornman, 2010). Former President Mbeki, in his 'I am an African' speech, defined 'African-ness' as arising from a shared territory, history, and a strong stance against oppression (Chipkin, 2007; Mbeki, 1996). In 2008, he outlined the dream of a South African national identity, focusing on principles of national reconciliation, unity in diversity, democracy, non-racism, non-sexism, shared prosperity, a better life for all, and a cadre of leaders committed to keeping their promises to the people (Ngonyama, 2012; Mbeki, 2008). Mbeki's time in office has been marked by a renewed focus on racial issues, a shift attributed to the different presidential roles: while Mandela emphasised forgiveness and reconciliation, Mbeki stressed economic inequality rooted in apartheid (Fullard, 2004). The call for 'African hegemony' can be seen as an effort to enforce a dominant African culture within South Africa's multicultural landscape. The ANC, on the other hand, has recognised the country's cultural and ethnic diversity, supporting individuals'

freedom to express their identities while working towards a united South African national identity (Pieterse, 2002). Consequently, it is not unexpected that some ethnic and cultural minority groups are critical of the ANC's nation-building initiative, viewing it as oppressive (Pieterse, 2002).

Jacob Zuma assumed the presidency in 2009, and during the Party's 2007 conference, he used his Zulu heritage to garner support, with many of his supporters wearing '100% Zulu' T-shirts (Gumede, 2016). His rise to power was marked by an ethnic and gender-based identity as he became closely linked with Zulu nationalistic discourse. This was evident in his public speeches where he frequently referenced traditional Zulu idioms and stories (Carton, 2009; Kataria, 2011). Critics of his policies were often labelled as opposing Zulu or African traditions, prompting Mondli Makhanya, the then City Press editor, to caution that Zuma was fuelling a troubling trend of tribalism (Gumede, 2016). Former President Mbeki also criticised the rise of tribalism under Zuma, highlighting what he referred to as the 'homeboy' phenomenon, where officials from a particular region often accompanied a minister appointed from that region (Gumede, 2016). According to research by Afrobarometer (2018), Zuma's approval ratings declined by almost half in the first four years of his presidency; this decline had widespread implications for both the ANC and the country. Additionally, the percentage of citizens who regarded their country as a 'full democracy' decreased from 66% to 48% in the first four years of his presidency (Afrobarometer, 2018).

Perhaps hosting the 2010 World Cup brought a moment of unity and patriotic fervour to South Africa's nation building efforts (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2011). Former President Mbeki saw it as an opportunity to send waves of confidence across the continent, and Archbishop Tutu viewed it as a chance to showcase the country's successful political transformation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2011). The nation rallied around sports as a tool for unity, building on Nelson Mandela's strategy of using sports to foster unity, as seen in the historic 1995 Rugby World Cup (Martin, 2013). Various sporting bodies continued to promote integration and development programs. However, the post-World Cup period witnessed challenges like civil servant strikes and incidents of xenophobia, raising questions about the lasting impact of the event (Ndlovu-

Gatsheni, 2011). In recent years, the ANC government has faced criticism for various issues, including the Marikana massacre and the introduction of e-tolls (Norgaard, 2015). The declining popularity of the ANC in elections has broader implications, as some argue that the concept of a 'South African people' is closely tied to the ANC's influence, whether through rhetoric or membership (Chipkin, 2007). Chipkin (2016) argues that the ANC and the nation are intertwined, and growing electoral competition may signal a looming national crisis.

These sentiments, especially among the youth, are echoed in political movements like the #FeesMustFall protests, which reflect a growing belief that the rainbow nation is more a historical concept than a current reality (Mafoko, 2017). President Ramaphosa's 2018 State of the Nation Address (SONA) aimed to address issues like corruption, youth development, and economic transformation while emphasising Mandela's vision that 'South Africa belongs to all who live in it' (Ramaphosa, 2018). Despite this, the 2019 elections showed not only a rise in rival politics but also growing support for the Freedom Front Plus, signalling a resurgence of Afrikaner nationalism. This may be a reaction to the increasing popularity of Black nationalism, as seen in the growing popularity of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) (Mkhabela, 2019).

The 'born-free' generation and nation-building discourse

The relationship between race and economic inequality has changed since apartheid. However, it continues to influence contemporary South Africa in multifaceted ways (Erasmus, 2005). Research conducted by Erasmus and De Wet (2003) with tertiary education students highlights how students tend to cluster along racial lines, restricting cross-racial interactions. This study underscores that many students find comfort in racially homogeneous settings, demonstrating new, complex facets of racial discrimination that echo apartheid-era divisions (Erasmus, 2005). An investigation conducted by the Human Science Research Council (2007), culminating in the Social Attitudes of South Africans report, sheds light on the attitudes of the youth toward the 'new' South Africa. According to this study, and a Mail & Guardian report, the born-frees 'appear to be forging a new national identity that is independent of race'

(SASA 2nd Report, 2010: 100). How young people are thinking about these new identity conundrums and the role the school plays in these processes are important; the schools and the teachers continue to struggle with the disparate messages about who they are and who they ought to be (Soudien, 2001). This sentiment is reflected by Mafoko who describes her early experiences:

'We sit in history classrooms which breed and fester animosity because as a generation, we either have parents who try not to think too hard about our history or parents who are bitter because they are still dealing with the effects of our history... these attitudes manifest themselves on us and become apparent in our open spaces' (Mafoko, 2017: 9).

Mafoko (2017: 9) further expresses the 'born-free' disillusionment with the state: 'As born-frees, we are told we can do anything, be anything and dare to dream in ways unimaginable. Because we are born free. But from where we stand, the dream is failing the nation'. This generation enjoyed the benefits of their rights being protected, but they also witnessed a decline in political effectiveness, growing corruption, political instability, and a resurgence of racial divisions in the political landscape (Ngonyama, 2012). They inhabit an 'in-between' space where the legacy of historical structures still perpetuates apartheid-like conditions in segregated townships, while also offering opportunities to explore unregulated spaces (Soudien, 2001).

The South African government promised to provide educational opportunities for the youth to help them reach their potential. However, the born-free generation is still dealing with poverty, inequality, and violence. Due to financial constraints, only 20% of them can afford higher education (De Lange, 2021). Despite having political rights, they face challenges like high unemployment and increasing poverty. The government has struggled to provide adequate education, and the expectations placed on the born-frees are often unrealistic (De Lange, 2021). The #FeesMustFall student movement protested rising university fees, demanding that education be considered a right, not a commodity. Students also called for the decolonisation of universities (De Lange, 2021). The movement revealed the gap between transformation policy goals and the actual

experiences of those within the system. Since 1994, South African educational policies have been mostly symbolic and aimed at addressing past inequalities with substantial and redistributive actions.

Growing dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the government may threaten the South African national identity (Chipkin, 2016). The born-free generation may be most affected by this as the foundations for their political support are not rooted in historical values but in perceptions of political efficacy (Kotze and Prevost, 2015). For them, the post-apartheid nation-building discourse is an inherited sentiment which conflicts with their lived experiences (Ngonyama, 2012). Wa Azania (2016), writer of the book *Memoirs of a Born Free*, describes this position:

[My mother] wanted us to have a better chance at escaping the clutches of poverty than she had had, than many children who are confined to township life ever would. And she would always tell us, "The ANC fought hard so that you would have these privileges, so that you too would have the opportunities that were only available to white children in the past..." I was terrified of revealing to her the truth about this new South Africa that she so desperately wanted us to embrace that in Melpark Primary School, rich black students and white students were treating the rest of us like inferior beings...'

“ This study does not claim to uncover the ultimate ‘truth’, but rather to explore individual viewpoints. Social constructionism focuses on how participants see their identity, rather than insisting on a strict match with an external reality. ”

Foster (2012) expresses a similar view and makes the argument that the ANC, a party that once fought to make South Africa ungovernable, has struggled to transition from a social movement to an effective governing body. However, the born-free generation, despite having the potential to hold the ANC leadership accountable, seem to have a socio-political identity that is as fragmented as the rest of the country (Norgaard, 2015). In the post-apartheid era, the formation of identity varies based on age, location, circumstances, and racial categories. It is an ongoing process where individual identities are continually shaped and negotiated within the broader framework of a collective national identity (Soudien, 2001).

While past national rhetoric aimed at fostering unity among all citizens through concepts like the ‘rainbow nation’ and ‘unity in diversity,’ growing dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the government now pose a threat to this national identity (Chipkin, 2016). The born-frees perceive these discourses as historical rather than a reflection of their reality (Mafoko, 2017). Therefore, this study seeks to answer the question: How do the born-frees construct a South African identity, and what are the characteristics of this identity?

Theoretical framework

This study was guided by the principle of social constructionism (Grant and Osanloo, 2014). From this perspective, reality is seen as a blend of both personal experiences and objective factors. It puts the participants in the spotlight, acknowledging that they are the best source to describe their own perceptions and experiences. This study does not claim to uncover the ultimate ‘truth’, but rather to explore individual viewpoints. Social constructionism focuses on how participants see their identity, rather than insisting on a strict match with an external reality. It recognises that people are influenced by their experiences and their social interactions. In this context, the use of photovoice, a type of participatory action research, lets participants actively engage with their social experiences. In this approach, the researcher acknowledges their own potential biases and the dynamics of their relationship with the participants during the interviews.

Methods

This study uses a qualitative research framework with a participatory action research design to investigate how participants perceive and experience nationhood and national identity in South Africa. In this approach, the researcher actively engages with the participants to understand their perspectives and experiences. The focus is on exploring the meanings that participants give to their experiences. Photovoice is well-suited for capturing the often-overlooked voices and experiences of the born-free generation. Photovoice acknowledges that reality is subjective and socially constructed and emphasises the interaction between the researchers and the research subjects. This study used the photovoice methodology for data collection, a visual participatory action research (PAR) approach that equips participants with cameras. It empowers them to capture photographs and construct 'photo stories' representing their daily experiences. The goal is to enable individuals to convey their lives, engage in critical dialogues about their experiences, and mitigate potential power imbalances between the researcher and participants (Wang, 2006).

This methodology has been applied across diverse projects, settings, populations, and age groups (Bender et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2017; Wang, 2009; Ziergierbel, 2016). Gant et al. (2009) demonstrated that photovoice can effectively mobilise youth and reshape their perceptions of civic engagement. It has been used to empower participants experiencing homelessness (Bender et al., 2018) and to facilitate discussions on emotionally challenging or socially taboo topics (Smith et al., 2012). In gender and sexual identity exploration, photovoice has been found to bolster participants' pride in their identities (Christensen et al., 2020). Multiple photovoice studies have been conducted across South Africa: ranging from HIV/AIDS stigmatisation to empowerment, the studies have demonstrated the success of this methodology when used with young people (Cornell, 2015). The strength of photovoice lies not only in the images themselves, but also in the interpretations attached to them. It assists individuals in defining their identities, their connection to the world, and what they perceive as relevant (Smith et al., 2012). Photovoice is particularly suitable for university students who may feel powerless or disconnected from decision makers. It offers them a platform to

make their voices heard and positions them as co-researchers actively engaged in instigating change (Cornell, 2015).

In doing this research, we were quite aware of our positionalities and the power dynamics involved when a White student does research with Black students. The first author is a White, Afrikaans, upper-middle class, cisgender, non-disabled, female. The first author did not have a pre-determined criterion for selecting participants of a particular race, gender, language, culture, or ethnicity. Her position undoubtedly influenced the students who were willing to participate, and what they were willing to discuss in focus groups. She endeavoured to build trust by being clear about the study's aims and objectives. During the focus group discussions, the first author positioned herself as a listener and would very rarely ask a question, allowing the participants to talk freely among themselves. The second author supervised this research project and is positioned as a Black woman invested in research on transformation in higher education. We are aware that it is impossible to maintain objectivity in doing studies such as the present one, and it would be difficult to try and be an outsider in this study, but we also know the importance of ensuring that our own biases and positionalities do not compromise the quality of the study. To do this, we constantly engaged in dialogues (usually as part of supervision) where we would reflect on such biases and we were able to expose and challenge each bias that may affect how we interpreted the findings of this study. Given the power-dynamic inherent in the researcher-participant relationship, and the sensitive political nature of the research topic, participatory action research methodology was particularly appropriate.

Participants

The study participants consisted of five full-time undergraduate and postgraduate students from the University of Johannesburg (UJ): three females and one male, drawn from the faculty of Humanities. One participant chose not to disclose their race, and has not been included in the current article. Purposive sampling was used. This involved the deliberate selection of a diverse group of participants from a university environment who met specific sampling criteria. The study was conducted at the University of

Johannesburg, selected for its practicality and the variety of its student body. Recruitment took place during scheduled class sessions. To be eligible for participation, individuals had to belong to the born-free generation, meaning they were born between 1994 and 2000. The following table provides some demographic details about the participants at the time of their participation in the study.

Table 1: Participant Details

	Year of Study	Race	Home Language	Age	Gender
Samarah (4)	4 th (postgrad.)	Indian	English	22	Female
Thato (3)	4 th (postgrad.)	African	Zulu	22	Female
Refilwe (2)	4 th (postgrad.)	African	English (& Shona)	22	Female
Bonga (5)	4 th (postgrad.)	African	English (& Xhosa)	22	Male

Data collection

The nine-step strategy proposed by Wang (2006) to mobilise community action was used in this study. These steps were incorporated into three interactions with the participants: Phase 1: Initial briefing; Phase 2: Brainstorming; and Phase 3: Photo stories.

Phase 1: Initial briefing

Participants were briefed on the photovoice method, its project goals, and their expected goals. Ethical considerations, informed consent, and the responsibility of participants as photographers were discussed. Conversations revolved around the research problem, objectives, and aims. The participants received training on using cameras, including smartphones, with a focus on privacy. They were instructed to take a maximum of five photos related to the study's aims. Individual Google Drive folders were created for participants to upload their images, with privacy and anonymity maintained. Participants were educated on privacy rights, Google Drive's terms of use, and its privacy policy, along with how to use it effectively. They were given approximately one month to complete their photos.

Phase 2: Brainstorming

During the subsequent meeting, participants were provided with the opportunity to contemplate and interact with the study's objectives. They were

encouraged to reflect on these aims and generate any ideas they had. The discussions held during this meeting were recorded and later transcribed for textual data analysis.

Phase 3: Photo stories

During the third meeting, each participant had the opportunity to talk about the photos they had taken. This allowed them to highlight any themes they observed and address any concerns they might have had. The discussions from this meeting were recorded and transcribed to aid in data analysis, with the aim of identifying emerging themes expressed by the participants regarding their photographs. Participants were required to select at least one photograph for each study objective and provide a brief narrative about that image. This meeting also served as a follow-up session, where participants were encouraged to discuss the benefits and challenges that they had encountered throughout the process and to reflect on their overall experience (Zway, 2015).

Analysis

Various data types were collected for this project, including focus group transcripts, photographs, and photo stories. Thematic analysis was chosen as it is a common approach in photovoice studies (Bender et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2017; Wang, 2009; Ziergiebel, 2016). The research followed the six step guidelines proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) for thematic

analysis. The first phase, data familiarisation, involved immersing the researcher within the dataset. All data was anonymised and uploaded to qualitative analysis software (NVivo12). Photographs which could not be anonymised were removed. The analysis followed the same order as data collection, keeping in line with the way stories develop through the photovoice approach while keeping the research goals in mind. The researcher carefully went through the focus group transcripts, photo stories, and photographs. Specific words and phrases were used to label relevant sections of the data, focusing on the main themes. Codes were refined, and anything with very few references was removed as 'outliers.' Participants' photos and stories were coded separately, and similar codes from the focus group discussions were merged. New or emerging codes were collected as 'free-nodes' until the data analysis was completed. These nodes were then integrated into existing codes or removed if they did not fit.

Findings

The results, analysis and discussion are presented under each aim of the study as shown in the table below:

Theme	Subtheme	Description
Perceptions of nation-building discourse	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sense of nationhood, unity of the nation 2. Possible sense of unity through sport 3. Attitude towards the rainbow nation 	South Africa's national identity has been constructed through various nation-building discourses: the rainbow nation, ubuntu, unity through sport. The participants feel that if the rainbow nation ever existed, it no longer does. They describe South African society as divisive and disunified.
Construction of an individual identity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The importance of subnational and multiple identities 2. Real and imagined spaces of identity construction 	The South African populace is diverse. The participants spoke of not only their religion, culture, and ethnicities, but also reflected on the 'in-between' (both literal and figurative) within society.
Perceptions of government, now and in the future	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Lived experiences of participants and populace 5. Attitude towards government 	The participants demonstrated their attitude to the current government, and towards those in power, through expressing disillusionment with the past, a hopefulness towards the future, and apathy towards the current political climate.

Perceptions of nation-building discourse

Participants had mixed feelings regarding national rhetoric and nationalism. They acknowledge that there might have been nation-building discourse in the past, but they believe that the commitment to transformation from the government, society, and institutions lacked sincerity.

Refilwe:

'Yeah, so there is this divide I mean it used to be Ubuntu ... but now it's just more like a self-serving need for survival. Everybody just wants to segregate themselves and survive and be comfortable financially maybe or in terms of power.'

“ This implies that any post-apartheid nation-building discourse, if it ever existed, has now led to a fragmented society. Participants emphasised a significant concern regarding division, not only among individuals but also between the people and the government. They expressed distress over the absence of a shared identity, ”

Refilwe points out the inefficacy of previous nation-building discourses, while also implying a potential self-centred aspect to these. Her choice of terms like ‘segregated’ and ‘need for survival’ indicates her perception of division and isolation within society. This implies that any post-apartheid nation-building discourse, if it ever existed, has now led to a fragmented society. Participants emphasised a significant concern regarding division, not only among individuals but also between the people and the government. They expressed distress over the absence of a shared identity, which they believed contributed to the persistence of racism and segregation. This sentiment was articulated by Refilwe and Bonga during the focus group discussion:

Refilwe:

‘There’s just divide everywhere and we are all trying to identify with something we don’t even understand at this point.’

Bonga:

‘I think the division is amongst people, and amongst people and the government... so it is like we have multiple identities and they all clash...’

Both participants hint at the challenge of either not finding a common identity or struggling to connect with it. When a shared national identity is lacking, people tend to fall back on their ‘small identities’

(Refilwe). The students perceive the rainbow nation’s nation-building initiative not only as no longer in effect but also as a stark contrast to the current situation. Some participants believed in ‘the unity through sport’ policy sentiment of former president Nelson Mandela:

Photograph 1: No Title



Photograph 1, submitted by Thato, shows a young man in national sports attire. The image is accompanied by the following photo story:

‘Symbols such as the Protea flower or the Springbok ... does enforce National Identity. It brings South Africans together to support their national teams.’
(Thato, photo story)

Thato shares the same feelings as former President Nelson Mandela, who believed in the unifying influence of national symbols and sports. This showcases the potency of these symbols. Thato’s patriotism for her country is rekindled through her support for her national teams. However, participation in and support for these sports is not devoid of negative stereotypes. In the focus group discussions, participants spoke about the social stigmas associated with specific sports, highlighting how they can contribute to division:

Bonga:

'It's very interesting conversation, [be]cause I follow a lot of sports, and even amongst our friends it's envious of how football is followed in Europe and here. And even when we get to the TV we're like "We're not gonna watch South African football, why we wasting our time" and they're like "No we wanna support" but like nah this is trash so...'

Participants believed that while sports have historically united countries and their citizens, the same cannot be said for South Africa. Discrepancies in their perceptions of local and international teams underscore the lack of unity experienced by this generation within their country. This sentiment aligns with the views of Hartford (2017) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2011), who argue that the sporadic patriotism generated by international sporting events may not contribute to a lasting national identity. The participants described the rainbow nation as insincere. They referred to it in the past tense, as something that either no longer exists or that never did.

Bonga:

'I think that also that idea of the rainbow nation sort of died with Mandela... so once he died, this whole rainbow nation thing can stop now, this nationalism thing of us coming together can stop now...'

Bonga highlights the sense of disillusionment with the ruling party, stating that it was former president Mandela that held nationalism and, by extension, our national identity together. In his absence, the country will no longer be incentivised to unite. The greater ramification of this has left the South African populace without a common identity. Though Mafoko (2017) writes that the dream of the rainbow nation has failed her generation and South Africa, the participants would argue that the dream was destroyed by the state. When asked directly whether the accountability for the rainbow nation, freedom, or ubuntu could be ascribed to the ANC as well, Bonga answered:

Bonga:

'I think it is definitely him [Mandela], because after he died many people called him a sell-

out for his ideologies but it is his very same ideologies that got South Africa this far ... yet [when] they're campaigning they put Mandela, like "do it for Mandela"...'

Although the participants expressed discontent towards the ruling party and a belief that the rainbow nation rhetoric was insincere at best, they do not appear to harbour those same sentiments towards the ideology itself, or the man behind them. Thato submitted a photograph of the South African flag:



Photograph 2: *No Title*

Photograph 2 shows a mural of the South African flag. The photograph was submitted together with the following caption:

'The flag represents South Africa and what it is made up of. The flag is known to demonstrate the "Rainbow Nation" with the various colours on it.' (Thato, photo story)

The image she shared reflects two important ideas: a) the diverse nature of South African society, and b) the enduring belief in a racially inclusive South Africa. Looking at these findings alongside existing literature it is clear that the ideas of 'unity through diversity' and 'non-racialism' have been present since the early days of democracy. The born-free participants may either carry forward these ideas from past nation building efforts, or as a mirror of the social realities they've experienced.

Construction of an individual identity

When the participants were asked to talk of a South African identity, Thato said:

Thato:

'Well firstly I'd be like: "I'm a human" ... I'm human cause I don't like putting myself in a box, like I'm this and I'm that because I'm not. Like I'm part of like a whole lot of things and I can't just choose one.'

This concurs with the study published in the Mail & Guardian (SASA, 2010), which found that the born-frees not only have a fluid perception of identity and national identity but are 'forging a new national identity that is independent of race.' The participants also express the importance and centrality of subnational identities in constructing not only their own identities but those of South Africans as well. Refilwe stated that:

Refilwe:

'I honestly don't think there is this nationalistic identity as South African[s], because a few people will identify with that, some people will be against it... so it is like we have multiple identities...'

Her comments express the idea that South African society is divided along multiple lines, not simply along race, religion, or language, but along cultural and ethnic lines as well. The discourses of ethnicity dominate much of their day-to-day experiences. The exchange during the first focus-group discussion between Bonga and Refilwe demonstrates how their identity is not only dependant on context, but how it is influenced by their own ethnicity and decisions regarding identity:

Bonga:

'And I think that, me personally, I find it very difficult considering that my father is Kenyan, and my mother is South African so sometimes I find myself identifying with the one side more than the other depending on context. For example, when I first came to Joburg, not many people are fond of Xhosa people, so I was, I did not openly tell people I was Xhosa...'

Refilwe:

'Me too, yeah, I can agree with that cause I'm Shona and Zulu at the same time, my dad is Zulu, and my mom is Shona, but because of the lack of presence from my dad I tend to identify more with Shona.'

For Bonga, it is the context of space that determines which aspect of his identity he chooses to identify with. He expressed that his experience of Johannesburg was one filled with stereotypes and intolerance. As a result, he often chose to identify as Kenyan rather than Xhosa, as he felt it held less of a stigma. Refilwe, on the other hand, describes her identity as belonging to both a Shona and Zulu heritage; however, she attributes her identification with one more than the other because of her mother. The participants have multiple identities and they fluctuate between them of their own accord, depending on the given context or influences that are in play at any given moment. For this generation, identity is a fluid construct, rather than a fixed definition.

Real and imagined spaces of identity construction

The participants navigate a complex process of identity construction: not only do they willingly and purposefully switch between their multiple cultures, but they also navigate a complex space within which to do so. Refilwe referred to this space as an 'in-between' space:

Refilwe:

'In sort of... an in-between session with... being a born-free and then moving onward to decolonisation and stuff like that. So, I'm right in the middle of trying to navigate the sort of context, trying to figure it out having... the background of... my parents struggling with the past apartheid era to me now trying to figure it out and establish myself in this new context...'

For Refilwe, this is not a literal space but a generational gap. Her generation is forced to navigate the circumstances created by apartheid in an era of freedom. She describes the experience as 'trying to figure it out,' thereby acknowledging the difficulty she faces in trying to establish herself in the climate of a free and fair South Africa, while at the same

time trying to maintain her cultural and traditional position within her family. The participants appeared to be caught between the identities they wanted and those imposed by tradition. Being the first generation with newfound freedoms, they felt the weight of societal norms. To cope with this, some born-frees have started swapping out aspects of their identity to fit in with different expectations. But these aren't just physical spaces; they refer to the idea of an 'imagined community' that, despite the democratic changes, still lingers in the shadow of apartheid. For some, this 'in-between' state affects how they navigate their identities, but for others, it is a tangible consequence of apartheid's legacy. The participants spoke of their experiences of having to travel to the University during semesters and having to travel home during the holidays. They described this as not unique, but rather a common situation for many people living, working, and studying in Johannesburg's central districts. Bonga emphasises the differences not only in the experiences of these 'home towns', but in their structural, social, and educational development as well:

Bonga:

'Well think about it, I didn't grow up in the city, I grew up in a town, so the CBD, there is much more difference. Like a round circle, that's what they [Participant 5's home town] call the CBD, but you get round circles all over Jo'burg [Johannesburg], so just looking at the architecture, the history, the buildings, all those kinds of things, is things I do for fun.'

Bonga's thoughts shed light on how the apartheid government disproportionately invested in predominantly white areas. His comment suggests that smaller towns received little to no further investments, pushing young people in search of opportunities towards the cities. This migration widens the generational gap that the born-frees grapple with, which in turn shapes their identities. Later, Bonga lamented how his hometown, once the cleanest in South Africa, had deteriorated, becoming more materialistic as it gained access to luxuries like McDonald's. National identity involves both the external definition of a social space and the internal establishment of shared values among its

members. When Bonga talked about his hometown's transformation, it suggested a shift in these shared values. He observed these changes as an outsider and found it challenging to reconcile his nostalgic memories with the current reality. In an earlier statement, Bonga compared himself to a tourist in Johannesburg's CBD. His feelings of displacement mirror this generation's struggle to fit into the existing discourse on identity.

Perceptions of government, now and in the future

The prevailing viewpoint suggests that the rainbow nation ideology was not highly regarded, and its implementation lacked sincerity. This has negative implications for the born free generation, leaving them without an internal framework to guide their perception of nationality.

Photograph 3: No Title



Photograph 3 shows a busy street in Johannesburg's CBD. The photograph was accompanied by the following photo story:

'This picture aims to depict the lack of jobs in South Africa...' (Refilwe, photo story)

In her photo, Refilwe captured a busy and cluttered street in Johannesburg's CBD. Her aim was to highlight the scarcity of job opportunities. The participants shared their personal experiences and

discussed what they considered to be the ‘realities encountered by South Africans.’

Photograph 4: No Title



Photograph 4 shows a crowded intersection in Johannesburg. The photograph was submitted together with the following photo story:

‘This picture depicts the nature of poverty in our country... It is overcrowded, dirty, and unsafe.’ (Refilwe, photo story)

When requested to share images representing their perceptions of trust in governance and their understanding of South African identity, Refilwe submitted the two photos shown above. In the first image, she addresses the issue of high unemployment rates, while in the second image, she illustrates the prevalent poverty in the country. Bonga extends this perspective to encompass the broader population, saying:

Bonga:

‘...On Friday I was in Sandton I had to do my visa and I did not even think about taking pictures, and I saw so many beautiful buildings it was so nice and clean, but it did not come across because I felt like that’s not really what South Africa is like, it’s only that part of the world so like, I was like, I’m not gonna take pictures of this cause it’s not how everybody really lives, like yes, the people there, that’s how they live, but, the rest of the country...’

Bonga pointed out the disparities in how the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ live, highlighting the enduring impact

of apartheid on a society divided by wealth. Affluent areas are progressing rapidly, while impoverished regions lag behind, widening the gap between the contrasting realities experienced by the born-frees. Refilwe demonstrated, at best, a sense of apathy towards the democratic process in South Africa, stating: ‘I feel like, they’re [politicians] are all selling the same BS, but it’s packaged differently.’ Refilwe no longer believes that real change will come or is attainable. Despite her sentiments, which seem both apathetic and helpless, Refilwe continues:

Refilwe:

‘I told myself that if I’m this confused, I’m not gonna cast a reckless vote in the sense that if I cast this vote recklessly, I might tip the scales...’

In the absence of real change or any means by which to affect change, Refilwe decided to withhold her vote. She is afraid that in the absence of an informed choice, or any politician with whom she can identify, she will invariably continue to vote for the ANC. This, according to her, is a common occurrence in South Africa. However, her feelings towards governance are not limited to apathy as she describes below:

Photograph 5: No Title



Photograph 5 shows an intersection in Johannesburg, displaying campaign posters of the three most popular political parties in South Africa. The image was submitted with the following photo story:

'I chose to take a picture of this area because at that time it was election season. The picture captures the three popular parties currently in South Africa. These parties advocate for "change" in cities and towns overrun by poverty. I just think this is an interesting juxtaposition of "wealthy and greedy" politicians seeking the poor man's vote under the impression that they are "voting for change".' (Refilwe, photo story)

Her comments reveal not just dissatisfaction with the ruling party, but also with those in positions of power in general. She strongly condemns their campaigning, which she sees as originating from privileged positions and targeting impoverished communities. This disillusionment with the ruling party might be shaping more flexible notions of nationhood. Similar discontent has previously sparked student-led protests, so it is not far-fetched to consider that these sentiments could also affect how the born-frees view ANC policies. According to Norgaard (2015), institutional failures, voter dissatisfaction, rise in rival politics, and blunders in national governance help explain why South Africa's transition has not created a synthesised perspective among the born-free generation. Despite this, the participants demonstrate an overwhelming sense of hope in the future of governance:

Bonga:

'I think in certain fields, and aspects we're moving forwards, and certain things we're moving backwards...'

The participants displayed disillusionment not only with the government, politics, and the state of South Africa but they also expressed deep dissatisfaction with their current living conditions. They believed these concerns were not a top priority for those in power and saw limited prospects for meaningful change in the future. Despite this, they remained hopeful about the country's future and even the politicians themselves. They saw the increasing political competition as a positive sign of a functioning democracy. Just as

they become disillusioned with the rhetoric of the rainbow nation, the born-free generation has grown disillusioned with the ruling party. However, they still hold onto their belief in a non-racial ideology, just as they maintain hope in South Africa's governance and future. Perhaps the fluidity in their national identity is a result of these sentiments.

Discussion

Kotze and Prevost (2015) emphasise that the born-free generation's national identity is not rooted in historical values, but in political efficacy. Therefore, it is little surprise that this generation is critical not only of the ruling party and their transformation policies, but also of their nation-building discourse. The participants felt that transformation was primarily a homage to former President Mandela. While they recognise the inherited sentiment of patriotism (Ngonyama, 2012), they believed that these elements still carried an undercurrent of separation and division. The born-frees are critical of the government's efforts, which they view as token loyalty to Nelson Mandela. The participants reported confronting significant challenges, like inadequate education and high unemployment rates. They felt that government's efforts to address these issues have fallen short. The participants felt as though they have been left to fend for themselves; Refilwe describes this as a 'self-serving need for survival'. Widespread disillusionment with the ruling party can have a significant impact on how a national South African identity is perceived (Chipkin, 2007); when the population, responsible for upholding the ideals of a particular political community, begin to question and lose faith in these ideals, it can lead to a decline in the nation itself (Chipkin, 2007). In particular, the born-frees, who do not have a historically rooted national identity, experience this as an absence of a national identity.

For the participants, widespread disillusionment manifests as a divided nation, one in which there is 'division everywhere'. South African born-frees feel excluded from the democratic process (De Lange, 2021) and disenchanted with politics and, as a result, many of them choose not to vote. This emphasises the importance of addressing the born-free identity beyond just the political history, as they form an integral part of the democratic future of South Africa. The transformation policies of the ANC

appear to diverge from the daily experiences of many participants in this study, who highlighted many shortcomings of the ANC government. This concurs with accounts from prominent born-free writers Wa Azania (2016) and Mafoko (2017). The born-frees' lives are marked by a lack of transformation. They value the legal freedoms they have, but are constrained by economic, social, and political challenges. In response, they are increasingly seeking self-fulfilment and showing more anti-government leanings. Born-frees painted a picture of a society that hasn't entirely shed its oppressive and apartheid-inspired attitudes (Mafoko, 2017; Wa Azania, 2016). The participants emphasised the idealistic nature of transformation, portraying it as a state where they are expected to thrive. They bear the weight of transformation's high expectations and the complexities of a society where problems like poverty, inequality, discrimination, and corruption persist despite the end of apartheid. They perceived the notion of transformation as an idealised utopia that doesn't align with the actual situation. They feel pressured to conform to this transformation ideal. Refilwe described this as an 'in-between' state; she describes herself as being 'in the middle' and reflects on the pressure of not only having parents who are struggling with the past, but also trying to establish herself in a 'new context'. Soudien (2001) remarks that born-frees inhabit these 'in-between' spaces. They are studying in historically segregated institutions or living in apartheid-like townships, but they are simultaneously exposed to unregulated spaces that present them with new opportunities. For the born-frees, this juxtaposition results in a greater disillusionment with the transformation narrative.

In the absence of a national identity, the participants defined their identities as fluid and multiple. A SASA study from 2010 highlighted that the born-free generation is actively shaping a new national identity. In this study, the participants echoed this sentiment, expressing their disconnection from current definitions of a national identity. Some questioned the existence of a singular national identity, instead seeing themselves as a blend of various identities that come to the forefront depending on the context. They also noted a similar trend in the broader South African population, where people tend to identify more with their individual ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Aligning with Soudien's (2001) insights, the youth

in South Africa construct their identities within unregulated spaces.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated that the participants perceived South African society as deeply divided. They acknowledge the influence of past nation-building discourses, but they regarded these as insincere sentiments that have waned since the time of former President Mandela. They described a persistently divisive culture based on ethnic and cultural identity that has remained largely unchanged. While these participants could effectively share their experiences and insights as experts on the subject, they did not seem to develop a critical awareness, propose potential solutions, or significantly alter their perspectives on civic engagement. As a result, it is the researcher's opinion that these study participants may not have been fully prepared for specific public actions. Therefore, it is recommended that future studies consider involving a larger and more diverse photovoice group to encourage deeper dialogue, reflection, and engagement. Additionally, having a Black facilitator conduct focus group discussions might also enhance the overall process. To achieve a more diverse sample in terms of race and gender, it is important to note that this study had limited diversity, with only one participant who identified as male and a single undergraduate student participating. Most participants identified as African, while one participant identified as Indian, and another opted not to disclose their race. To enhance the diversity of perspectives, it is advisable to seek a broader sample. South Africa's diverse social-economic backgrounds, languages, cultures, religions, and racial identities all contribute to unique experiences and viewpoints regarding the South African identity and national policies.

Declarations and Ethics Statements

Before commencing, the study was reviewed by the University of Johannesburg Faculty Committee for Academic Ethics (Code of Academic and Research Ethics, 2007) in an endeavour to ensure that the researcher conducted herself and the study with the highest regard and consideration for ethical values.

Notes

6. We acknowledge the complexity of the use of the term 'Black'. In this paper, we use Bantu Biko's definition of Black to include all groups that were known as non-white in South Africa under the apartheid regime. We therefore use this term to refer to Africans, Asians, Indians, and Coloured people (South Africans of mixed race, including African, Asian and/or European origin).
7. In this paper, the term 'Coloured' is used to refer to an ethnic group composed primarily of persons of mixed race within South Africa.

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