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Centre for Digital Humanities

Centre for Contemporary Identity and Diversity Studies

Centre for Geopolitical Security and Strategy

3rd International Spring School 2026

HUMANISING A FRACTURED WORLD

Intersections of Identity, Digital Humanities, and Geopolitics

BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

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Khaya iBhubesi Conference Centre

KEYNOTE PRESENTATIONS

From Curiosity to Contribution: Finding Your Place in Research

Dr Neil Barnard
Senior Lecturer: School of Industrial Psychology and Human Resource Management (NWU) and Research Programme Leader: Human Flourishing in Institutions programme (Optentia Research Unit)

Research is often viewed as a means of completing a qualification, yet it also provides a way of asking meaningful questions, generating knowledge, and contributing to society. This keynote explores how curiosity has challenged long-held assumptions and led to important discoveries across fields such as sport, medicine, and psychology. It will discuss the role of research as a process of inquiry and scholarly conversation, while introducing key considerations for getting started with a research project, including asking meaningful questions, understanding one's audience, and recognising the researcher's role in contributing to knowledge. The keynote will conclude by reflecting on the importance of purpose and a growth mindset in navigating the research journey and sustaining engagement.

Five vignettes from the future

Dr Doris Viljoen
Director: Institute for Futures Research (IFR) and Programme Head: PGD and M Phil Futures Studies (Stellenbosch Business School)

This presentation takes the audience on a journey through five plausible moments from the future; not predictions, but stories designed to make emerging possibilities tangible. Each vignette explores what happens when rapidly developing technologies intersect with broader shifts in society, economics, culture, and human behaviour. From AI and robotics to synthetic biology, climate adaptation, and new forms of digital identity, the stories reveal both the opportunities and tensions that may emerge. Together, the five vignettes invite us to move beyond asking "What technology is coming?" and instead consider a more consequential question: "*What kind of world might we create when these technologies meet the forces already reshaping our lives?*"

KEYNOTE PRESENTATIONS

Weaponised Identity, Demonised Diversity

Prof. Nicky Falkof
Professor: Media Studies (Wits), Director: Wits Centre for Diversity Studies and NRF-DST SARChI Chair in Critical Diversity Studies

Identity and diversity seem, at first glance, to be two sides of the same coin. After all, diversity and difference are fundamentally about identity: they are created by our social positioning and self-making in relation to commonly recognised features like race, gender, sexuality and ability. Nonetheless, the politics of identity often treat diversity as a threat rather than a source of strength, innovation and creativity. In this anxious mode of thought, identitarian homogeneity becomes an aspirational state: the world is seen as safer and more explicable when 'we' are all the same. In this lecture I will consider some of the broader manifestations and consequences of this anxious worldview. I will show how identity is weaponised, in some instances violently, to demonise and abject diversity, often to the benefit of elite actors. I will discuss three contemporary case studies: anti-African xenophobia in South Africa, the global attack on transgender rights and the myth of white genocide. In considering how identity is used as a weapon to dismiss both the social value of diversity and the individual humanity of scapegoated people, I will argue that a deep understanding of and commitment to diversity requires an intersectional feminist perspective that places the personal within the political.

The democratic system in South Africa: is it fit for purpose?

Prof. Anthonie van Nieuwkerk
Professor: International and Diplomacy Studies (UNISA)

The presentation will address four aspects of democracy: First, an exploration of democracy as a political and social construct anchored on three ideas. These are: democracy as a value, a process, and a practice. Second, an exploration of the competing understandings of democracy: electoral, liberal pseudo and development democracies. Third, a brief examination of the democracy-inequality paradox: how much inequality (and for how long) can a democracy tolerate before its foundations erode? Fourth, how is this relevant to South Africa whether democratic consolidation can be achieved.

KEYNOTE PRESENTATIONS

Against the archive of everything: Decay and the limits of digital preservation

Dr Lizabé Lambrechts
Executive Director: Nuuseum

Contemporary digital heritage initiatives are often driven by an implicit promise of permanence: that digitisation can rescue vulnerable cultural materials from loss and make them accessible into the future. Yet this preservation imperative sits uneasily alongside emerging scholarship that recognises decay, disappearance, and forgetting as integral components of cultural life.

Drawing on my work with Nuuseum and the international research project Decay Without Mourning: Future Thinking Heritage Practices, this paper examines the conceptual and practical tensions between preservation and decay in contemporary digital heritage practice. It interrogates the assumption that digitisation constitutes an unqualified act of rescue by exploring how processes of deterioration, absence, incompleteness, and loss continue to shape archival knowledge, even within digital environments. Rather than positioning decay as the antithesis of preservation, the paper considers how both operate as intertwined modes of heritage-making. In doing so, it argues for a more critical understanding of digital archives as contested sites where questions of visibility, erasure, identity, and historical responsibility are continually negotiated.

WORKSHOP PRESENTERS

Academic Writing

Prof. Gustav Butler & Mrs Anneke Butler
(NWU)

Prof. Gustav Butler is currently the director of Language and Literature in Complex Settings (LINCS), a research entity affiliated to North-West University's School of Languages. His research falls within the Applied Language Studies sub-programme, one of the six sub-programmes within LINCS. His main research interests include the design of Academic Literacy interventions and determining the impact of such interventions on student success. His research further focuses on the development of academic writing, with specific reference to the writing difficulties experienced by post-graduate writers.

Anneke Butler is a lecturer in the School of Languages at the Vanderbijlpark Campus of the North-West University in the Subject Group: Critical and Analytical Thinking Skills (CATS). Her research straddles Descriptive Linguistics and Applied Linguistics. Within Descriptive Linguistics she is interested in cognitive linguistic approaches (especially Construction Grammar) and is currently investigating the copula and passive constructions. As an applied linguist, she regularly presents writing workshops for postgraduate students from different schools and entities at the NWU and she lectures Critical and Analytical Thinking where she also serves as the subject group leader.

Preparing for your conference presentation: An interactive workshop

Prof. Chris van Rhyn
(NWU)

Chris van Rhyn (PhD, Stellenbosch) is an Associate Professor of Music Theory and Composition at NWU and is the Director of the focus area Research and Creative Outputs in Visual Arts and Music (ViAMUS). In addition to being a music theorist and composer, Chris supervises master's and doctoral students.

WORKSHOP PRESENTERS

Workshop Topic 1: PhD article model and how to get your article published

Workshop Topic 2: Statistics

Prof. Ian Rothmann
(NWU)

Ian Rothmann is a Professor of Industrial Psychology, holding an MCom (1986) and PhD (1996) in the field. He has supervised 78 doctoral and 148 master's graduates, authored 300 peer-reviewed articles and chapters plus five books, and holds a B1 rating from the National Research Foundation.

Researching sensitive topics: Ethics, care, and reflexivity in marginalised contexts

Prof. Yanga Zembe
(UKZN)

Prof. Yanga Zembe is an Associate Professor in the discipline of Community Development in the School of Social Sciences at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). She holds a PhD in Public Health from Karolinska Institute (Sweden). Prof Zembe is a seasoned researcher in the social sciences. Her research examines the influence of structural factors such as poverty, gender, and wealth inequalities on development and health outcomes. In recent years, Prof. Zembe has focused on decolonial research methods, specifically participatory action research (PAR). In addition to conducting PAR studies, Prof Zembe trains, mentors, and supports universities and research organizations that use participatory research methods in South Africa and abroad. She has also developed PAR curricula that support disenfranchised community groups to engage in bottom-up critical reflection, problem-solving, and action planning. In addition to her research and teaching responsibilities, Prof. Zembe serves as the acting Head of Community Engagement at UKZN's School of Social Sciences. She also serves on two boards that provide funding to community development projects in South Africa, namely the DG Murray Trust and the Letsatsi Solar Park Trust, and on the board of Community Engagement South Africa as a board director.

WORKSHOP PRESENTERS

Workshop Topic 1: Organising and preserving your research: A hands-on introduction to metadata and digital archives and repositories

Workshop Topic 2: Holding Memory in 3D Photogrammetry and Decolonial Heritage Storytelling

Prof. Bryan Carter
(University of Arizona, USA)

Dr Bryan Carter is Professor of Africana Studies and Director of the Center for Digital Humanities at the University of Arizona, where he oversees one of the only university-based volumetric capture stages in the American Southwest. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Missouri-Columbia, and his work sits at the intersection of 20th-century African American literature, the Harlem Renaissance, Afrofuturism, and digital humanities.

He is best known for Virtual Harlem, a long-running immersive reconstruction of 1920s Jazz Age Harlem and one of the earliest sustained virtual reality projects in the humanities. At the Center for Digital Humanities, eighteen student developers from fields ranging from computer science to film, television, and media collaborate with him on projects in AR, VR, volumetric capture, 360 videography, and digital storytelling that treat Black cultural memory as something to be walked through and experienced rather than only read.

Dr Carter is the author of two books that anchor his scholarly contributions to the field. His first, Digital Humanities: Current Perspective, Practices, and Research (Emerald Group Publishing, 2013), appeared as Volume 7 of the Cutting-Edge Technologies in Higher Education series (ISBN 978-1-78190-688-0). His second, Afrofuturism and Digital Humanities: Show Me and I Will Engage Differently (Routledge, 2022), appeared in the Routledge Research in Digital Humanities series (ISBN 9781138603158) and introduces the field of Digital Africana Studies through detailed case studies of pedagogical practice. He recently served as Principal Investigator on a multi-million-dollar U.S. Department of Commerce broadband initiative, which concluded in January 2026, expanding internet access to underserved communities around the University of Arizona and its micro-campus sites.

WORKSHOP PRESENTERS

Thematic data analysis

Dr Musara Lubombo
(NWU)

Dr Musara Lubombo is a Senior Lecturer and Deputy Director in the School of Communication at North-West University. His research focuses on strategic and development communication as well as scholarship of teaching and learning. He supervises postgraduate research and regularly facilitates methodological workshops, with expertise in qualitative thematic analysis.

Storying lived experiences: Narrative, voice, and representation in inclusive research

Prof. John Ringson
(NWU)

Professor John Ringson is an award-winning academic and social scientist with more than a decade of experience in research, teaching, policy engagement, and community development across Southern Africa. He is a Research Professor in the Population and Health Research Entity within the Faculty of Humanities at North-West University, where he leads interdisciplinary research and supervises postgraduate students in governance, development, and human rights. Recognised by the South African Association of Public Administration and Management (SAAPAM), Prof Ringson is a qualitative research specialist whose expertise spans child rights governance, social development, social policy, philanthropy, community development, gender studies, public governance, and public policy. His work is grounded in decolonial and rights-based perspectives that examine the role of policy and institutions in improving the lives of vulnerable populations. Prof Ringson has an extensive publication record, with more than 80 peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters. He is the sole author of Challenges Facing Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Zimbabwe: Traditionalism Versus Contemporarism Perspectives (Springer Nature, 2025) and Rethinking Child Rights Governance and Well-Being in Southern Africa: A Decolonial Perspective (Springer Nature, 2026), and co-editor of Perspectives on Education in Zimbabwe: A Decolonial Paradigm (Cambridge Scholars, 2026). He also serves on several research governance structures at North-West University, including the Research, Innovation, Ethics and Higher Degrees Committee, BaSREC, and the Higher Degrees Executive Committee. As Principal Investigator of an internationally funded project on Dutch colonial slavery and its contemporary legacies, he continues to make significant contributions to scholarship on governance, social justice, historical memory, and sustainable development in Africa and beyond.

WORKSHOP PRESENTERS

What is a theoretical framework? Developing a new framework or model

Dr Evaristus Adesina & Prof. Abiodun Salawu
(NWU)

Dr Evaristus Adesina is a Postdoctoral Fellow at North-West University, South Africa. His research examines health communication, indigenous language media, and artificial intelligence for social impact. His work has gained international recognition, with an h-index of 15 (Google Scholar), 12 (Scopus), and 8 (Web of Science).

Abiodun Salawu is Professor and Director of the Indigenous Language Media in Africa at the North-West University, South Africa. He has enjoyed fellowships at universities in United Kingdom, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Papua New Guinea and Sweden. Abiodun is a fellow of the Nigerian Academy of Letters and a member of the Academy of Science of South Africa.

Strategies for reflecting on and writing about your creative outputs in academic texts

Dr Annemi Conradie-Chetty
(NWU)

Annemi Conradie-Chetty is a lecturer, artist and researcher. She completed her PhD degrees in Visual Studies at Stellenbosch University and is the deputy director of the research focus area, Visual Art and Research and Creative Outputs in Visual Arts and Music (ViAMUS) at North-West University. Her research focuses on art activism, practice-based research, and constructions of gender and race in visual culture.

WORKSHOP PRESENTERS

Atlas Ti

Prof. Janelize Morelli
(NWU)

Janelize Morelli is the director of the NWU Centre for Digital Humanities. As a scholar, she works at the intersection of community and participatory arts and the digital humanities. Janelize is currently interested in understanding how artists can use technology to affect social change.

Mixed Method Research

Prof. Mirna Nel
(NWU)

Prof Mirna Nel is a qualified speech therapist who worked for 15 years in the support services of the Gauteng Department of Education, South Africa. In 2006 she was appointed as senior lecturer and promoted to associate professor in 2013 and full professor in 2018 at North-West University, South-Africa. In 2016 she was appointed as a research professor in the Optentia Research Focus Area and there-after as deputy dean for research and innovation in the Faculty of Humanities in 2019 until currently. She is a C1 NRF rated researcher.

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

C

Exploring Community-Based Coping Strategies for accessing healthcare services in Dithakwaneng village, North-West province

Ciya, B.P.
(NWU)

Healthcare services refer to any kind of assistance provided to patients by healthcare practitioners, such as a medical expect performing the task of prevention, illness and treatment (Donev, 2008). Healthcare services relate to Sustainable Development Goal number 3, which aims to prioritise universal health and ensure that everyone have access to a healthy life (United Nations, 2015). Community-based coping strategies are defined as set of plans intended to address social issues that the community face and they are established on local knowledge system (Cloke et al.2009). Therefore, this study aims to explore the community-based coping strategies used by the community members of Dithakwaneng to access healthcare services.

Although the WHO (2007) is advocating for universal access to healthcare, the infrastructure in Dithakwaneng village is small that it cannot provide that. The clinic only operates during the week from 08:00 to 16:00, with only two nurses. This raises a question of how people cope on weekends and after hours.

The importance of this study is to document the community-based coping strategies employed by the people of Dithakwaneng in accessing healthcare services, and to add to the existing of knowledge on the delivery of healthcare services in rural communities like Dithakwaneng.

This study will be conducted qualitatively. The data will be conducted using a case study and focus group discussion with 11 participants. The case study will include 4 people, 2 community members, a chief, and a care giver, which will last for 30 minutes, and the participants will be chosen purposively. A focus group discussion will include. Lastly random sampling will be used to select seven community members of Dithakwaneng who uses the clinic. The data will be collected using semi-structured interview questions. Thematic analysis will be used to analyse the data.

Keywords: Community-Based Coping strategies, Healthcare, Access

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

"Somewhat Less Necessary": Human Expertise, Artificial Agency, and the Quiet Commodification of the Coder

Croucamp, S. & Croupamp, P.A.
(NWU)

There is something quietly unsettling about the trajectory of human expertise in the age of artificial intelligence. Not because civilisation is ending, but because something more subtle and more interesting is happening. Drawing on Clive Thompson's observation, described by the New York Times as "deeply weird," this paper examines the evolving relationship between human coders and AI agents not as a technical chronicle but as a philosophical provocation: what does it mean for human capability to become progressively residual in a process it once wholly inhabited?

The story of the coder and the agent is, at its core, a story about the commodification of human cognition. What was once the irreducible contribution of a skilled practitioner, the judgement, the craft, the embodied understanding of how systems behave, has been disaggregated, abstracted, and progressively absorbed into machine processes. The human remains present, but their presence has been renegotiated. They have moved from maker to monitor, from architect of logic to articulator of intent, from someone who builds to someone who describes what ought to be built. This is not a doomsday narrative. The software is still being written. The products still emerge. What has changed is the locus of the labour and, with it, the meaning attached to the expertise. Grounded in interviews with software developers employed at South African companies with significant international reach and footprint, this paper situates its inquiry at a revealing intersection: practitioners operating within a globally competitive technical environment yet shaped by a distinctly local professional culture, offering a perspective on these shifts that neither purely Western nor purely emerging-market frameworks adequately capture.

The deeper philosophical question is not whether humanity will survive artificial intelligence, but what humanity loses and perhaps gains when its most sophisticated capabilities are rendered ordinary. Thompson's "deeply weird" is not a warning. It is an anthropological observation about a species in the act of making itself, quietly and without fanfare, somewhat less necessary to its own creations.

Keywords: Human-AI collaboration; Cognitive commodification; Software development identity; Technological displacement

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

D

'The Archives that Forgets': Digital Silences, Colonial Logic and a Sankofan Critique of Memory

Daniel, J. & Ojakorotu, V.
(University of Ibadan, Nigeria & NWU)

Digital archives are not neutral repositories but active sites where power, memory, and access intersect. Moving beyond a purely technical lens, true democratization requires more than digital availability, it demands the cultivation of critical competence to navigate the biases, silences, and weaponised narratives embedded within digital archival materials. Challenging the myth that the humanities and technology are incompatible, we contend that digital tools deepen rather than replace traditional scholarship, necessitating a firm grounding in disciplinary knowledge to avoid "digital forgetting." Grounded in the Akan Principle of Sankofa —which teaches that we must return to our pasts to responsibly build equitable futures—this work argues that ethical digital archiving cannot merely look forward through technological innovation; it must actively retrieve suppressed, marginalised, or fragmented memories. While digital archives have unprecedented potential to democratise access to historical sources, they have transformed a scarcity of information into a challenge of analytical skill. Researchers now face a skills and application gap, requiring both digital literacy and a skeptical, critical approach to interrogate digitised contents. Positioned at the intersection of digital humanities, archival studies, and postcolonial theory, this work calls for an ethical digital praxis, one that centers sovereignty, contextual critique, and embodied engagement. Sankofa reframes "digital forgetting" not as a technical glitch but as a failure of ethical return: a refusal to retrieve what colonialism, erasure, or technological solutionism left behind. This work aligns with the pursuit of a Digital Renaissance in Humanities Research, envisioning technology not as a neutral tool, but as a contested space for epistemological decolonization and the creation of more inclusive futures for memory.

Keywords: Digital Archives, Archival Power, Critical Heritage, Ethical Preservation, Sankofa

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

F

Exploring the role of Faith-Based Organizations in local economic development: A case study of selected church at Bodibe village

Fannie, I.P.
(NWU)

This study explores the role played by Faith-Based Organizations (FBO) in local economic development, focusing on a church as a type of Faith-Based Organization. Majority of rural areas in South Africa experience economic challenges such as poverty accompanied by poor standard of living. Regardless of FBOs specifically churches being at the central to community life and being easily accessible to the society their potential to contribute to local economic development remains latent. Huff (2020) argued that in the rural areas Faith-Based Organization, such as churches, are there closest places community members go to when the economic challenges affect them. Faith-Based Organization can directly contribute to the local economic development of the community as it plays a major part in the society through community work it does and offering assistance in the form of resources and opportunities to their local communities this can improve their living conditions that ultimately improve their economic condition. The aim of this study is to look at how Faith-Based Organizations help in achieving local economic development at Bodibe village in the Northwest province. Qualitative method will be used in this study because it was informed by the research objectives. Furthermore, Semi-structured interviews is the most relevant structure that will be utilized in this study to understand the role faith-based organizations have played or is still playing in local economic development. This study will have 16 Participants from the selected church in Bodibe village. This study further uses and is situated within the social capital theory. This study will therefore look at the church as a type of Faith-Based Organization approach to improve their local economic and living conditions using the resources that they have and the challenges they face.

Keywords: Local economic development, community development, Faith-Based Organizations, Church, community-based development initiatives

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

The dramaturgy of postcolonial tensions and nationalist anxieties: African digital wars (Twars) between Zimbabwe and South Africa

Fingson, K.W.
(UFS)

Digital platforms in Africa continue to create fascinating sociopolitical cultures, particularly because they are inhabited by different political ideologies, actors and influencers who attempt to dominate online discourses. One such product of African digital cultures is the term Twar, an amalgamation of the words Twitter and War, so called because it satirically mimics military confrontation between nations. Twars demonstrate how geographical nationhoods are transplanted into online nationhood projects, which cyber citizens create, belong to, defend or go to (online)war on behalf of. These Twars dramatise how digital performances, interactions and confrontations can function to frame (inter)national solidarity, citizenship, identity and reflect instabilities of the philosophies that inform the conception of geographical nations and national identity in Zimbabwe and South Africa in the period between 2020 to 2026. Theoretically, this paper uses the concepts of the 'cyberspace as meta-nation' (Luke, 2001) and 'nations as imagined communities' (Anderson, 2006) to discuss Zimbabwean and South African nationalist imaginaries that exist online, and the postcolonial tensions and anxieties that inform and activate them. It uses netnography methodologies to collect, arrange and analyse recurring content from dominant X accounts in the two countries as representations of nationalist sentiments that exist online and offline. The paper seeks to unpack how African Digital Wars or Twars visualise, not only the postcolonial fractured world(s), but also how they articulate, contest and assert contemporary nationhood projects in the focus nations. This paper contributes to the growing canon of digital humanities, particularly offering a close analysis of digital platforms as sites where African nations, and belonging to them is negotiated, contested and asserted.

Keywords: Twars, nationhood, postcoloniality, Zimbabwe, South Africa

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

G

Fragmented personalities: Examining how (un)belonging influences the formation of post-colonial identities

Gambu, N.S.K
(NWU)

The logic of coloniality permeates the lived experiences of young South African people, shaping not only the formation of identities but also the performances of belonging in township spaces. Townships in post-apartheid South Africa are remnants of the segregative apartheid system that reflect the racialisation of places and space. They emerged in the late 19th century as the product of several segregationist policies and legislation implemented to monitor and control the movements of non-whites, as space was central to the exercise of power. As undeveloped spaces constructed during the apartheid regime, townships remain a manageable part of the post-colonial modernity of black identity since identities in the new South Africa are formulated through various positions and intersections of social structures and dominant discourses because race and class remain a perpetual subscript of everyday life. These historical colonial social structures socially allocate individuals based on their gender, race, and class, causing non-white people to struggle for recognition and equality in the new South Africa. In this historical context, I analyse the township as a symbolic space of change where identities and everyday behaviours project it as a site of change (and its absence) in contemporary South Africa. I deploy decolonial concepts (e.g., coloniality of power and coloniality of being) to examine how colonial political power and new policies in South Africa construct deep social inequalities, resulting in violent urban spaces where marginalised individuals prioritise survival, often leading to fractured identities. Through critical reading of South African literary text, I analyse what lies at the intersection of space and personal and group identities in fictional post-apartheid South African townships, focusing on how identity is something performed, narrated, and represented in these spaces.

Keywords: Township, identities, inequality, belonging, coloniality

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

Understanding the use of artificial intelligence in music education: A participatory action research study

Geldenhuys, G.
(NWU)

Artificial intelligence is rapidly reshaping educational practice, yet its integration into music education remains uneven, under-theorised and contextually complex, particularly within South African schooling. This research explores how AI may be understood not merely as a technological intervention, but as a pedagogical, ethical and humanising challenge for music educators working in an increasingly algorithmic age. Drawing on literature of AI in education, music pedagogy, teacher professional development, curriculum innovation and cultural responsiveness, this research identifies key opportunities and tensions associated with AI-supported music teaching and learning.

Literature suggests that AI tools can enhance personalisation, formative feedback, creative experimentation, composition, performance practice and access to musical learning. However, these opportunities are constrained by significant challenges, including uneven digital infrastructure, limited teacher AI literacy, uncertainty around authorship and academic integrity, algorithmic bias, cultural misalignment, and fears that AI may diminish the human, expressive and relational dimensions of music education. These concerns are especially significant in South Africa, where educational inequality, curriculum traditions and resource disparities shape how emerging technologies are accessed and interpreted.

In response, this research argues for a pedagogy-first and human-centred approach to AI integration in music education. Participatory action research offers a valuable methodological pathway through which music educators can become co-researchers in developing context-sensitive, ethical and culturally responsive AI practices. Rather than positioning AI as a replacement for teacher expertise or musical creativity, the research frames it as a critical tool that must be mediated through human judgement, cultural awareness, emotional intelligence and educational purpose.

This research contributes to debates in digital humanities and education by foregrounding music education as a site where identity, creativity, technology and human agency intersect. It concludes that humanising AI in music education requires sustained professional development, ethical curriculum design, collaborative teacher inquiry and a renewed commitment to preserving the expressive and cultural core of music learning.

Keywords: artificial intelligence; music education; digital humanities; participatory action research; teacher professional development; South Africa

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

Beyond Western Frameworks: An Autoethnographic Exploration of Mental Health Stigma and Support Systems Among Black Students in Higher Education Institutions

Goedi, M. & Mupambwa, G.
(NWU)

This autoethnographic study explored the role played by cultural stigma and Western-style support systems at universities to influence the mental health experiences of Black students at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). Drawing from decolonial thinking and intersectional analysis, the paper examines the tension between African cultural perspectives on mental well-being and mental health practices grounded in Western biomedical models. Through in-depth interviews with ten Black students and personal reflections, the paper examined how stigma within Black communities and obstacles within institutions affect when and how students seek help, and their mental health outcomes. Through a purposive selection of Black students at UWC, the paper interrogated the institutional health mental care practices with a view to understand the integration of indigenous knowledge practices for the comprehension and management of mental health cases at UWC. Findings from the paper reveal a consistent pattern of systemic barriers, including logistical exclusion, unresponsive communication, perceived racial bias in service delivery, inequitable and performative support system, and a stark staff-student wellness divide, which collectively exacerbate mental distress amongst Black students. The paper calls for the need to make institutional support more relevant to culture and the needs of students, and the improvisation of communication and a culture of care within institutions of higher learning.

Keywords: Black students, mental health stigma, decolonial theory, autoethnography, cultural responsiveness, awareness

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

H

Faith before Therapy: Exploring Religious Norms and the Stigma of Mental Health Help-Seeking in Christian Youth

Hadebe, B.S
(NWU)

Mental health stigma remains a significant barrier to help-seeking among young adults, particularly within some Christian communities where emotional and psychological issues are often interpreted through religious frameworks. This study explores how religious norms shape mental health stigma and influence help-seeking behaviours among Christian young adults. Drawing on ethnographic methods, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and discourse analysis, the research investigates how church teachings, leadership, peer interactions, and religious narratives influence perceptions of mental health and professional psychological support. The study is informed by Goffman's Stigma Theory and Social Constructionism, which together provide a framework for understanding how stigma is socially produced, maintained, and experienced within faith communities. Attention is also given to the tensions young adults experience when navigating between faith-based coping strategies and professional psychological mental health services. The research also examines how stigma is communicated and reinforced through religious discourse and how young people negotiate these expectations in their everyday lives. By focusing on the lived experiences of Christian young adults, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between religion, stigma, and mental health help-seeking in resource-constrained places. The findings aim to contribute to anthropological discussions on religion and health while providing insights that may help foster more supportive approaches to mental health within Christian communities.

Keywords: Mental health stigma, religious norms, Christian young adults and help-seeking behaviour

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

I

Re-interrogating the student housing crisis in contemporary Higher Education Institutions: Towards A Multidimensional Perspective

Itlhabanyeng, L.A & Mupambwa, G.
(NWU)

In South Africa, the student population has surged putting pressure on the existing housing infrastructure, delivery systems, and thus contributing to the dire shortages of student housing in institutions of higher learning. The student housing debacle has often been argued as an imprint of the historical spatial imbalances, however, the current paper endeavors to move away from this overly biased historical scapegoating towards an interpretation of the crisis drawing from post-apartheid governance and structural pitfalls. It looks at the different actors in the student housing provision systems, interrogating their varying actions and inactions which have contributed to the current student housing crisis.

Employing a qualitative review of literature and discourse analysis, the paper analyses existing scholarly work on the student housing issue to illustrate how contemporary student housing actors have entrenched marginalization and housing inequality for the poor Black students. The paper interrogates existing student housing policy stratagems, institutional mechanism and role players actions as key to understanding the current student housing challenge in South Africa. As such, the paper examines the deliberate, slow and systemic injury of student population through power plays that determines who gets accommodation and who is left stranded. It employs Jasbir Puar's framework of the "right to main" and reveals that institutional failure to provide safe student accommodation serve as a form of massified impairment that leaves students physically, psychologically and academically debilitated. Additionally, it applies the intersectional approach to investigate how varying factors shape the systemic marginalization and inequality in accessing safe university accommodation.

Keywords: Student Housing, South Africa, Inequality, Marginalisation, Power, Higher Education

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

K

Exploring the experiences of the youth beneficiaries of the Basic Education Employment Initiative in Bodibe village, South Africa

Kgosiemang, M.
(NWU)

Youth unemployment remains a socio-economic problem in South Africa especially in rural areas. The Basic Education Employment Initiative (BEEI) was launched in 2020 as part of the Presidential Employment Stimulus to create temporary jobs in public schools, to boost the basic education sector and to improve youth employability. This qualitative case study investigated the perspectives of BEEI youth beneficiaries in Bodibe village investigating the nature of employment experiences, the relevance of the learned skills to future career prospects and problems encountered. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with twenty Education Assistants, General School Assistants and one Department of Education official. Interpretation of findings was guided by Theory of change and Sociological Imagination of C. Wright Mills.

The study indicated that EAs acquired experience to administrative tasks, classroom support, and soft skills such as communication, confidence and teamwork. These experiences increased participants' self-esteem and generated short-term income but did not increase long-term employability. GSAs, by contrast, received limited training and performed minimal duties such as cleaning. Lack of exit plan left participants exposed to many types of unemployment upon the termination of their contracts. Key issues that were raised were lack of recognised skills, no defined transfer pathways, short-term contracts and delayed stipend payments. These problems considerably weakened the overall efficiency of the programme.

The study indicates that, while the BEEI is successful in delivering short term outcomes, yet it is not successful in equipping the youth with skills and job experience that is in demand for long term employment. Recommendations include lengthening contract length, improving quality of skills, developing formal exit channels, modernising administrative processes and stimulating rural economic development. The results add to the wider debate on youth unemployment and highlight the importance of sustainable responses to the problem beyond short-term job measures.

Keywords: Basic Education Employment Initiative, Education Assistants, General School Assistants, Youth unemployment

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

The Commodification of State-Subsidised Housing: Exploring the Drivers of RDP Rental and Backyard Dwelling

Khowa, T.
(NWU)

In the context of South Africa's persistent unemployment crisis and acute urban housing shortage, the transition of state-subsidised (RDP) housing from a social right to a commercial asset has become increasingly prevalent. This paper explores the multifaceted factors contributing to the unauthorised rental of RDP houses and the proliferation of informal backyard dwellings. Drawing on qualitative findings, the study argues that RDP rentals serve primarily as a critical socio-economic survival strategy, providing a vital second stream of income for households excluded from the formal labour market. Furthermore, the research identifies a significant structural gap created by the scarcity of affordable urban housing, which drives low-income seekers toward informal rental markets. The study further highlights systemic failures within the state apparatus, specifically citing irregularities among government officials and a profound lack of monitoring and evaluation by the Department of Human Settlements. These administrative lapses, coupled with the pressures of internal migration and the necessity of relocation for employment-seeking, have fostered an environment in which the formal housing policy is superseded by informal economic necessity. By analysing these drivers, the paper concludes that without robust regulatory oversight and a more nuanced understanding of the "house-as-an-asset" in survivalist economies, the intended goals of national housing projects will continue to be undermined by the lived realities of urban poverty.

Keywords: RDP housing, South Africa, informal rentals, socio-economic survival, Human Settlements, housing policy

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

Gendered subjectivity – Gendered the modern South African telenovela: An approach to "The Wife"

Khumalo, M.N. & Nyambi, O
(UFS)

Despite South Africa's transition and constitutional commitment to gender and racial equality, contemporary South African film and television continue to reproduce gendered stereotypes that stigmatize black women. While streaming platforms such as Netflix and Showmax have increasingly depicted women as sexually autonomous and agentic subjects, these representations often privilege individual freedom over structural empowerment of women. Consequently, women are depicted as underrepresented in positions of political, economic and institutional leadership, reinforcing patriarchal assumptions about gender roles even within narratives that appear progressive. This paper examines the telenovela, "The Wife", using the theoretical framework of decolonial feminism to explore the portrayals of colonial structure of racism, sexism and patriarchy in post-apartheid South Africa. By analysing the portrayal of black characters, such as, MaHlomu and Mandisa, particularly their agency, relations and relationalities, in social, familial and professional contexts, the paper reads gender as a historically constituted system of post/colonial domination. It argues that "The Wife" both reflects and reproduces these enduring patriarchal structures in a way that presents the question of how modern telenovelas are negotiating gendered subjectivities in contemporary South Africa.

Keywords: Women agency, coloniality, gender, contemporary telenovela

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

L

Behind the Curtain: A Preliminary Exploration of Liminality, Masculinity, and Queer Resistance in Jozi Kings and Things

Language, M.
(NWU)

This paper serves as a preliminary exploration and reflective introduction to my broader Masters research project examining the construction and performance of identity within the Johannesburg-based drag collective Jozi King and Things. Rooted in Queer theory and the concept of liminality, this research investigates how drag king and thing performers embody and express fluid identities that resist binary gender norms. As an entry point into this inquiry, this paper offers a focussed analysis of the collective's Instagram content produced around a recently attended live performance, examining how digital visual identity is constructed, curated,and circulated within Queer online spaces; read alongside the performance itself.

As a Queer researcher embedded within the LGBTQIA+ community, I adopt a reflexive ethnographic approach that foregrounds my positionality as both participant and observer in drag king spaces. This reflexivity is activated through direct engagement with a single performance event; observing the live embodiment of drag king and thing identity and analysing the collective's Instagram content produced in relation to it. Visual grounded Theory underpins the analytical framework, centering visual data as a primary site of meaning-making, with emergent themes arising organically from the visual, social and symbolic dimensions of the material.

This focused, reflexive engagement offers an early contribution to the thinking that will shape my Master's project. It considers how digital platforms become sites of identity performance and Queer visibility, extending the liminal space of the stage into the visual language of social media. It prioritises close observation and fluidity, aligning with the lived realities of performers whose identities are relational and continually evolving; positioning this paper as both a methodological rehearsal and a genuine analytical beginning.

Keywords: Digital visual identity, Liminal identity, Jozi Kings and Things, Drag identity, Queer Resistance

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

Creating sacred story worlds beyond the human: A posthuman reading of digital hierotopies

Lotz, C.
(NWU)

This conference paper reflects on artworks that Colette Lotz, the main author of this paper, produced for the Momentum Aardklop Arts Festival, Group exhibition titled: Surface Tension and Undercurrents of Being exhibition (2025). The paper is structured along the lines of a practice-led research approach that includes pre-production, production and post-production. The body of photographic artworks transforms cloudscapes and landscapes into symmetrical reflections and layered visual storyworlds. Because of this structuring of the works, the imagery becomes abstract and otherworldly, appearing like Rorschach Inkblot tests. I relate the works to sacred spaces as storyworlds, that stresses the constructive and imaginative nature of the works. While the original project investigated sacred space, liminality, and storyworld-building through digitally manipulated photography, this paper reinterprets the work through a posthumanist framework that challenges anthropocentric understandings of creativity, identity, and spirituality.

Situated at the intersection of digital humanities, environmental humanities, and visual arts practice, the study argues that sacred meaning emerges not solely from human intention but through the entanglement of human, technological, and environmental agencies. The artworks are understood as digital hierotopies: sacred spaces produced through the collaborative interactions of artist, camera, software, atmosphere, cloud formations, landscape, and viewer. In this sense, digital technologies function not merely as tools but as active participants in the creation of meaning.

Drawing on storyworld theory and postclassical narratology, the paper examines how the manipulated images generate immersive fictional worlds that exist between reality and imagination. These storyworlds occupy liminal spaces where conventional binaries, including human and non-human, nature and culture, material and spiritual, physical and digital become destabilised. The resulting visual environments open spaces (liminal digital hierotopies) for reflection on spirituality, ecological belonging, and the interconnected relationships between humans, technologies, and the more-than-human world.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Digital Hierotopies, Storyworlds, Liminality, Sacred Space

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

M

Studentification and student wellbeing: Exploring student's perceptions on university outsourced accommodation

Mangwedi, P.
(NWU)

The massification of South African higher education has created a national student housing shortfall exceeding 500,000 beds, prompting Department of higher education and training and universities to approach public-private partnerships to outsource accommodation. This study explores student's well-being and perceptions on university's outsourced accommodation. Despite mitigating measures to address studentification and student housing crisis in South African universities, students continue to face significant challenges, including exorbitant rental costs, financial strain from long communes, unsafe and overcrowding living conditions and the risk of homelessness, which disrupts student's ability to focus and their well-being. This review investigates how these outsourced, commercialized residential spaces influence the daily-lived realities, mental health, and holistic wellbeing of the students residing within them. This study will employ a mixed method design, online surveys will be conducted to explore how students construct their perceptions and identity in outsourced accommodations, explore the implications for their social and psychological well-being while in-depth interviews will be conducted with the property owners of the outsourced residences. While the student-housing crisis is global, this study seeks to contribute a sustainable framework policy for outsourced student housing, contextual contribution on studentification and outsourcing in the global south and contribute to the growing global body on student housing, well-being and marketization of higher education.

Keywords: studentification, outsourced accommodation, well-being, North-West University, Public-private partnerships

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

The Contemporary Cyborg: An 'Individual-Dividual'

Marais, S.
(NWU)

In this presentation I will analyse some conceptualisations of a 'cyborg', especially as it pertains to the work of Don Ihde, Peter-Paul Verbeek, and Donna Haraway. Whilst many theorists think of cyborgs as augmented specifically at the level of immediate corporeal ability — usually relegated to postphenomenological relations of 'embodiment', some theorists, such as Haraway consider an abstract conceptualisation of being a cyborg as related to identity, moving farther away from the naturalist understanding of what constitutes an apriori human subject.

Corporeally co-constituted 'embodied' cyborgs have gained a lot of attention due to the emergence of technologies that replace lost limbs, or other brain/biological/corporeal functions that can hamper individuals' capacity for subjective self-forming activities.

However, if we consider Haraway's account of what makes a cyborg, then we have also been augmented and rendered capable of traversing both the digital and corporeal world. Social media and the online world of record keeping have generated digital 'dividuals' that co-constitute contemporary subjects along with their corporeal individual body. The aggregate of markers that constitute the digital dividual have direct influence on the conditions of possibility available to the corporeal individual.

I will argue that contemporary subjects are co-constituted 'individual-dividuals' that consist of cyborg identities made up of both corporeal 'embodied' components as well as digital abstract markers that mutually influence and co-constitute their counterpoints. Given the necessity for medical, banking, and criminal records (among others), as well as the increasing prevalence of digital spaces for social activities and recreation; contemporary subjects are cyborgs that have been cyborgs since their inception, and are not capable of a 'return' to a natural state of pure corporeality, because they have never been purely corporeal.

Keywords: Cyborg identity; Postphenomenology; Digital dividuals; Human–technology relations; Corporeality; Digital identity

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

The influence of social factors on the North-West University Potchefstroom campus undergraduate students' self-perceived employability in the South African labour market

Matemana, A.S.
(NWU)

South Africa suffers from persistently high unemployment, and youth unemployment is seen as one of South Africa's greatest socio-economic threats. The country's economy is doing badly, and the country has had persistently high unemployment and underemployment rates. The education system lacked job skills in schools and universities, leaving graduates unprepared for a tougher market. Graduate students lack the employability to engage in proactive work behaviours that would improve their future employability. Considering SA's high unemployment rate, testing students self-perceived employability are needed. It becomes clear there is a need to address this gap in literature and contribute to a better understanding of the factors that shape students' perceptions of employability and help in contributing to the body of knowledge on undergraduate students' self-perceived employability in South Africa.

This study aimed to investigate how certain social factors influence students' self-perceived employability in the South African labour market among undergraduate students at the North-West University (NWU), Potchefstroom campus. Three hypotheses were formulated and tested. The dependent variable was Students' self-perceived employability in the South African labour market. The independent variables were: faculty of study, race, and gender This study used a quantitative research approach informed by an objectivist ontology and empiricist epistemology. A positivist paradigm informed the study relying on statistical evidence to verify the hypotheses stated. The target population of the study comprised the undergraduate students studying at the Potchefstroom campus of the North-West University. The sample of this study included undergraduate students from different categories based on the students' race, gender, and their fields of study. The realised sample included 240 respondents. The data was collected using face-to-face structured interviews using a questionnaire as an instrument.

The data was analysed using factor analysis, descriptive statistics, factor analysis independent sample t-tests, and ANOVAs. The result of the hypothesis testing showed that there is no significant association between one independent variable (race) and the dependent variable (NWU Potchefstroom undergraduate students' perception of their employability in the South African labour market. However, the results of the ANOVA analysis revealed a statistically significant association between NWU students and their perceptions of employability in the South African labour market. Their field of study influenced this association, and in addition, the t-test also showed a significant association by gender.

Keywords: employability, South Africa, labour market, self-perceived employability, undergraduate students

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

Digital Witnessing: The representation of the DRC conflict on social media platforms

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(UFS)

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is currently experiencing armed conflict, especially in places such as North and South Kivu, Ituri and Tanganyika. This ongoing conflict has attracted interventions of reporting on Social Media platforms by news outlets and personal pages. Content creators such as Popi Sibiya her handles (The Popi Show | Travel) are using Instagram and TikTok to advocate, increase visibility and coverage of the DRC conflict. The paper examines how Popi Sibiya uses language and digital methods of storytelling to humanise the experiences of the victims of the conflict. This paper will deploy the Human Rights and Ethnography frameworks to explore the representation of the DRC conflict in Popi Sibiya's TikTok and Instagram pages. This paper explores how the content fosters empathy, document atrocities and challenges the existing power dynamics by providing a platform for marginalised voices. This paper shows that as a content creator, Popi Sibiya challenges the traditional mainstream media through participation-observation to capture and archive war affected people in the DRC. This ethnographical witnessing challenges the reproduction of broader global news by mainstream media based on hierarchies and popularity within the global media spaces. This paper contributes to the steady growth of digital studies and digital activism in documenting and understanding present-day conflicts.

Keywords: Digital Activism, Human Rights, Ethnography, Conflicts and Social Media

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

Spider-Man: An investigation of fetishised grief and commodified nostalgia

Mfeka, S.N.
(NWU)

This study sets out to investigate how death and bereavement are used as thematic devices in the three Spider-Man movies which are: Spider-Man (2002), The Amazing Spider-Man 2 (2014) and Spider-Man: No Way Home (2021) to attract and sustain audience engagement. Focusing on Peter Parker's loss and grief, separate from his alter ego Spider-Man, the study explores how grief is placed as an emotional narrative device to bring in audiences. In conjunction with the death and bereavement in the movies, the study further investigates the role of nostalgia and how it's presented as a commodity, introducing the working concept of commodified nostalgia.

Commodified nostalgia, in this study, highlight how nostalgia plays a role in the profitability and success of Spider-Man franchise. In discussing the grief in the Spider-Man films, the working concept of fetishised grief argues how the grief in the films is portrayed in a distorted and intensified way so that people have an emotional investment for the films. Both live action adaptations movies and the comic books of the Spider-Man franchise have the recurring theme of death and grief, which have been a defining characteristic of the Spider-Man character. This study is rooted into wanting to understand why there a sudden proliferation of live action adaptations by using a successful franchise such as Spider-Man and using the concepts of commodified nostalgia and fetishised grief to inevitably bring in profit.

Keywords: comic book, commodification, commodity fetishism, commodified nostalgia, fetishised grief

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

Global coloniality, economic (in)justice and epistemic reconstruction in Niq Mhlongo's Dog Eat Dog (2004)

Moopi, P.
(NWU)

In this study, I read Nig Mhlongo's novel Dog Eat Dog (2004) through the theoretical frameworks of Grosfoguel's global coloniality and Mbembe's postcolony and necropolitics to analyse the complexities of decolonisation in post-apartheid South Africa. The study focuses on how the novel depicts economic empowerment and epistemic reconstruction as decolonial practices while interrogating the limitations of Nelson Mandela's rainbowist and inclusive decolonial agenda after 1994. The analysis demonstrates how Mhlongo portrays the continuation of colonial matrices of power through the experiences of black students, particularly the protagonist Dingamanzi "Dingz" Njomane, at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). The article argues that Dog Eat Dog reveals the persistent legacies of apartheid — including spatial segregation between Soweto and Johannesburg, financial exclusion, institutional racism, and epistemic violence — that continue to undermine South Africa's decolonial initiatives.

The novel exposes how post-apartheid universities function as sites of neo-colonial knowledge production, maintaining Eurocentric epistemic traditions while excluding black students through prohibitively expensive fees and hostile institutional cultures. Through its examination of characters' struggles with poverty, unemployment, and educational barriers, the article illustrates how the logic of coloniality pervades contemporary South African society, creating conditions that Mbembe describes as conferring upon vast populations "the status of the living dead." The study concludes that Mhlongo's work serves as a critical intervention that foregrounds the paradoxes and incompleteness of South Africa's decolonisation project, highlighting the gap between constitutional promises of equality and the lived realities of formerly marginalised communities in the post-1994 dispensation.

Keywords: global coloniality, decolonization, post-apartheid South Africa, epistemic violence, economic empowerment

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

O

Effectiveness of international law in resolving modern geopolitical conflicts: challenges and opportunities in the 21st century

Ojem, O.B.
(NWU)

The growing complexity of 21st-century geopolitical conflicts has intensified debates on the effectiveness of International Law in maintaining global peace and security. Unlike traditional interstate wars, contemporary conflicts are increasingly shaped by territorial disputes, terrorism, cyber warfare, resource competition, and renewed great-power rivalry, exposing weaknesses in global governance systems. This study examines the role of international law in addressing these modern conflicts through key instruments such as the United Nations Charter and International Humanitarian Law. The study is anchored on Realism and Liberal Institutionalism. Realism explains how states prioritise national interests and power over legal obligations, while Liberal Institutionalism emphasises the role of international institutions and cooperation in conflict resolution. Using a qualitative methodology, the study adopts a case study approach focusing on conflicts in Ukraine, the South China Sea, and the Middle East to assess the practical application of international legal mechanisms. Findings reveal that international law remains essential for diplomacy, accountability, and peaceful dispute resolution by establishing global norms and legitimacy. However, its effectiveness is limited by selective enforcement, unequal power relations, weak compliance, and institutional constraints. The study concludes that while international law remains indispensable, its effectiveness depends on stronger institutions, improved enforcement mechanisms, and greater political commitment to multilateralism. It recommends institutional reforms, stronger international cooperation, and enhanced authority of international legal bodies to ensure sustainable global peace and justice.

Keywords: International Law; Geopolitical Conflicts; Global Security; International Cooperation; Conflict Resolution

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

Negotiating Religion and Secularism in Nigeria: Youth Identity and The Politics of Belonging

Olomitutu, A.K. & Ojakorotu, V.
(NWU)

Nigeria as a multi-religious country is dominated by Islam and Christianity and indigenous belief systems. These believe have influenced national identity, governance debates, and social cohesion. However, this paper examines the relationship between religion and secularism in Nigeria, focusing specifically on how young people navigate identity and belonging within a polarized socio-political environment. It analyzes the role of religious identity in influencing youth perceptions of belonging, inclusion, and exclusion within the Nigerian state. It also explores the impact of political and institutional frameworks on youth identity formation, particularly in relation to constitutional secularism and religious pluralism. The paper adopts a qualitative research design, relying on information generated from academic journal, books, Magazines, and policy documents. However, the selection is based on recency, relevance and credibility.The data are analyzed through thematic content analysis. The paper is anchored in Social identity theory and Secularization theory. The paper argues that religion remains a primary marker of identity and belonging, often superseding national identity, youth align themselves strongly along religious lines (e.g., Muslim or Christian), which influences their perceptions of trust, solidarity, and exclusion. The political elites utilise religion for power, patronage, and electoral gain, as against governance based on competence, accountability, and inclusivity. The paper affirms that constitutional secularism is widely perceived as weak, inconsistent, or selectively applied, as state engages in practices such as public funding of religious activities, faith-based appointments, or uneven policy enforcement. The paper further reveals that economic disparity and governance failures intensify identity politics since access to jobs, education, and political inclusion is limited, religious identity becomes a fallback mechanism for social security, networking, and political mobilization. This reinforces the instrumental value of religion beyond spirituality. The study therefore concludes that youth hold significant potential as agents of social cohesion, but this potential remains underutilised.

Keywords: Negotiating Religion, Secularism, Youth Identity, Politics of Belonging, Nigeria

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

S

Navigating Digital Selves: identity fragmentation and human experience in the age of Hyperconnectivity

Siaga, L.L.
(NWU)

The proliferation of digital technology has transformed how individuals construct, perform, and negotiate identities across multiple social spaces. This conceptual paper explores the growing fragmentation of identity in an era characterised by hyperconnectivity, globalisation, and rapid social change. Drawing on theories of identity embodiment and digital culture, the paper argues that individuals increasingly navigate multiple overlapping and sometimes conflicting selves across online and offline environments. While digital platforms offer opportunities for self-expression and belonging, they also contribute to identity tension, social pressure, and feelings of dislocation. The paper further examines how embodied experiences remain central to identity formation despite the expansion of virtual interaction. By connecting digital identity practices with lived realities, the study provides insights into the challenges and possibilities of selfhood and a fractured world. The paper contributes to contemporary debates on identity, agency and human experience in technologically mediated societies.

Keywords: Digital identity, identity fragmentation, social media, hyperconnectivity, and selfhood

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

Exploring beneficiary perceptions of the First Home Finance subsidy programme in Mahikeng Local Municipality

Sibiya, A.S. & Khowa, T.K.
(NWU)

Reimagining inclusion in a historically unequal society requires confronting the structural inequalities and economic arrangements that continue to marginalise South Africa's "missing middle". The First Home Finance (FHF) was introduced to address the housing gap affecting households that earn too much to qualify for RDP housing but too little to access a mortgage. While existing research has predominantly focused on low-income housing subsidies limited attention has been given to the missing middle, particularly within Mahikeng Local Municipality. This study explores beneficiaries' perceptions of the FHF subsidy programme and examines its successes, shortcomings, and potential strategies to promote inclusive housing.

Adopting a qualitative research methodology, the study employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques to recruit FHF beneficiaries and FHF key informants. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis approach to identify themes. Drawing on contemporary Marxist perspective and Spatial Justice Theory, the findings reveal a significant disconnect between policy intentions and beneficiaries lived realities. Although FHF offers both mortgage and non-mortgage options, issues such as administrative inefficiencies, bureaucratic delays, and market-related barriers undermine its effectiveness. For non-mortgage beneficiaries, limited affordability of urban land and, upfront payments forced beneficiaries to acquire property in peripheral areas, thereby reproducing spatial exclusion rather than advancing spatial justice. On the contrary, mortgage beneficiaries gained access to urban housing markets but subjected to long-term indebtedness, trapping beneficiaries in cycles of debt. In the same light, vulnerable middle-class groups who cannot afford upfront payments when applying for the FHF subsidy are systematically excluded. The findings suggest that the reproduce the very forms of exclusion the policy seeks to overcome. By prioritizing beneficiary experiences, this study argues for a reimagined housing policy approach that prioritises spatial justice for South Africa's missing middle.

Keywords: Spatial justice, Middle class, First Home Finance, Affordable housing

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

T

A critical analysis of the representation of black lived experiences in Rosie Motene's Reclaiming the Soil; A Black Girl's Struggle to find Her African Self

Thebeetsile, G.
(NWU)

This paper explores the representation of the black lived experience in Rosie Motene's autobiographical novel, Reclaiming the Soil: A black girl's struggle to find her African self, focusing specifically on how the protagonist, a black child raised in a white family, negotiates her identity and sense of belonging in a racially segregated society. The study is guided by four objectives. Firstly, it explores how the protagonist, Rosie, negotiates the challenges of growing up in a white family against the backdrop of apartheid's racist laws. Secondly, it explores how the white family that adopts her negotiates the racial bias and discrimination of the society in which they raise her. Thirdly, it examines how Rosie resists white saviourism to embrace her African cultural identity. Lastly, it explores Rosie's gendered experience of interracial adoption. I draw on Steve Biko's notion of black consciousness and his views on white liberalism to explore firstly the development of Rosie's racial consciousness and the hypocrisy of white liberals who claim to sympathise with the plight of black people while benefitting from the injustices of apartheid. I argue that Rosie's interracial adoption is not only complicated by apartheid's laws of racial segregation but also the hypocrisy of the white liberal family that adopts her.

Keywords: Interracial Adoption, Gendered Experiences, Resilience, Black Identity, and Black Pain

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

Sonic Bridges in a Fractured World: Music, Digital Humanities, and the Politics of Human Connection

Twala, T.A.
(NWU)

The pursuit of human connection has emerged as a pressing intellectual and societal necessity due to the current era characterised by digital disruption, cultural division, geopolitical strains, and disputed identities. This presentation examines how music, performance, and digitally mediated cultural practices serve as essential spaces where identity, belonging, and resistance are navigated amidst a progressively fragmented global environment. Situated at the crossroads of digital humanities, identity research, and geopolitics, the study posits that music provides a human-centered framework through which communities can traverse division, preserve cultural memory, and nurture social cohesion.

Drawing on interdisciplinary insights from musicology, performance studies, digital humanities, and critical cultural theory, the paper highlights how digital platforms (such as social media, streaming services, virtual performance spaces, digital archives, and emerging artificial intelligence technologies) concurrently facilitate and limit cultural expression. While these technologies open up unparalleled avenues for participation, cultural conservation, and transnational cooperation, they also perpetuate inequities, amplify prevailing geopolitical narratives, and marginalise diverse knowledge systems, especially in the Global South.

Through illustrations from African musical traditions, online activism, digital heritage initiatives, and cross-border artistic partnerships, the paper illustrates how music transcends political, cultural, and geographical limitations by fostering spaces of empathy, dialogue, and collective meaning-making. It argues that musical expression is not just an artistic endeavour but a mode of cultural diplomacy and epistemic resistance capable of contesting exclusionary frameworks and reimagining more inclusive futures.Ultimately, the paper advocates for a human-centered approach to digital humanities that prioritizes creativity, cultural diversity, and lived experiences at the heart of technological and societal transformation in a fractured world.

Keywords: Music; Digital Humanities; Cultural Heritage; Identity; Artificial Intelligence; Geopolitics

PAPER PRESENTATIONS

X

Integration Rural Female Scrap Collectors into Formal Waste Management Systems through Extended producer responsibility in the Eastern Cape, South Africa

Xweso, M.
(NWU)

The growing demand for sustainable waste management systems continues to draw attention to the role of informal waste workers, particularly women operating within rural communities. In the rural Eastern Cape, women who sell scrap contribute significantly to environmental sustainability and household livelihoods through the collection, sorting, and selling of recyclable materials, yet they remain largely excluded from formal waste management systems. Their work is often characterised by poor working conditions, unstable income, lack of protective resources, and limited recognition within municipal and environmental governance structures. Against the backdrop of reimagining inclusion in a contemporary world, the enforcement of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) presents an opportunity to promote the inclusion of rural female scrap collectors into formal waste management systems. Through stronger producer accountability for post-consumer waste, EPR may facilitate the establishment of inclusive recycling networks, accessible buy-back centres, skills development initiatives, infrastructure support, and fair compensation mechanisms that recognise women as important environmental actors within the circular economy. Integrating rural female scrap collectors into formal waste management structures may not only strengthen environmental outcomes but also contribute towards poverty reduction, gender inclusion, livelihood sustainability, and social justice within marginalised rural communities of the Eastern Cape.

Keywords: Rural female scrap collectors, Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR), formal waste management systems, circular economy, Eastern Cape South Africa